Wild For To Hold

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Wild For To Hold

by InCeruleanInk

Summary

At the age of 6, Henry Tudor and his family are exiled from England by the triumphant return of the so-called Richard of Shrewsbury. Forced to seek a life and support abroad, the Tudor family is thrust about the globe as they attempt to reclaim their birthright. When Henry
chances to meet Anne Boleyn at the French court, however, his life is turned topsy turvy as duty, honor, and the fate of England duel with love, desire, and passion.

Notes

Note: I do not own any of these characters or their worlds. I seek only to imagine what might have happened to these figures in another life. Additionally, this is only for fun and, while I hope to remain as true as possible to these figures, I do imagine them as though they have lived very different lives, which may lead to certain differing characteristics (which is how I'm choosing to explain away anything inconsistent with history because, while I've studied the period deeply, I'm also prone to flights of fancy ;D). In this same vein, I do not in any way mean to suggest I somehow know that Richard of Shrewsbury and Perkin Warbeck were one in the same. In fact, I tend to think they were not. However, in fiction I seek as much drama as possible, so what unfolds here relates to that drive. I hope very much that you enjoy this little work, solely for the delight of recasting these captivating people in another sphere!
“Tell me true,” began Cecily of York, tilting her head as she drank him in. “How did it happen?”

He paused, the pregnant sort that speaks of deep thought, of turmoil. He hardly knew where to begin. Often, he’d thought back on his colorful past, his childhood in England, his youth in Portugal, his coming of age in Burgundy, and at last, now, his manhood, beginning anew in England. “Did you not believe in me from the start, sister?” Richard’s breath clouded in the frigid late-autumn chill.

Another pregnant pause. It’s meaning was clear. Richard formed a smile he did not feel, save as a stabbing jolt in his gut. “We all thought you dead,” supplied the princess-turned-viscountess, belatedly. She cast hazel-green orbs away, searching he supposed in some clouded past for an answer that might explain it all away. Richard studied her face, searching for the link that united them. Once, their mother, Elizabeth Woodville, had been called the most beautiful woman in the land, and Richard thought he could still see traces of that in her. Certainly, her dragon-lidded eyes gave weight to her active intelligence, those windows to a mind still, he hoped, clear, despite all the heavy cares she’d known.

“Aye,” agreed Richard, forcing another smile he’d hoped would not be forced. “I suppose our uncle was as closed-lipped with all of you as with anyone.”

“Which uncle?” queried Cecily, arching a withering brow. “I don’t imagine either was particular forthcoming.” But Richard felt confident she knew which. After all, only Richard III had taken her brothers away and stored them, (for a time, for their own safety, he’d said) in the Tower.

“My namesake, of course,” commented Richard. “My Lord the Duke of Gloucester that was: Uncle Richard.” Oh, she knew the start of course. But after the birth of Richard of Shrewsbury, Duke of York, after his child marriage to a child bride, after his father’s death, and after the rise of Richard III, all grew cloudy. In truth, Richard hardly knew the whole of it, himself. It was as if, like Aphrodite of myth, he’d arisen in a cloud of sea foam upon a foreign shore, born whole from ichor and blood and semen and saltwater.

Richard remembered the Tower as a hulking shadow that ruled over his childhood. He recalled the laughter of his older brother, Edward, whom they called the King, and more faintly still, he recalled how that laugh echoed the deeper one of their father, the mighty warrior King of England, Edward IV. Richard had been 10 when he and Edward V had been sent to the Tower by their powerful uncle, Richard. “‘Tis only for Your Graces’ safety,” he’d assured. He’d used the same smile he’d always used, and the boys had trusted him. But, once safely ensconced, they were declared illegitimate and Uncle Richard was declared King Richard III of England. To this day, the younger Richard did not know what to think of that. And he most certainly did not know what to think of what followed.

The princes (as they had been, in any case: now illegitimate perhaps they were not so) remained in the Tower. In the summer, Edward died. Richard remembered the look on Uncle Richard’s face, the last time he had seen him, stooped over as his crooked spine made him, he’d touched his namesake’s boyish face. “I fear this is no safe place, indeed.” And, another thing he recalled, the last thing he ever said to him: “Forgive me.”
Richard swallowed. His sister – his own sister – awaited an explanation. A thousand times he had
told it to his followers, his friends, the curious, and the unsure. A thousand, thousand times the words
had tripped from his lips, woven into a tapestry of adventure and longing, but now the words died on
his tongue. The tapestry unraveled. “I hardly know where to begin.”

Cecily stepped forward, her robes swishing with costly elegance. Reaching up, she touched his face:
the scar behind his right eye that formed an ugly divot on an otherwise fine face, the strong chin and
high brow, luxurious locks in the same chocolate tone…Large, bold eyes, and a similar hue as well,
height and that same handsome look…In Richard’s case, one eye was now slightly wider than the
other, due to his injury, but the resemblance remained despite the blemish.

“You look so very like him,” Cecily said, dropping her hands to her side slowly, then all at once,
suddenly self-conscious of liberties taken.

Richard watched her asking herself the question they all asked themselves: certainly this is a son of
Edward IV, but who could be the mother? Richard released a held-in breath. It had not proven his
good fortune that his father had been so promiscuous, as it dulled the shock of their close
resemblance. His enemies, unable to deny the possibility of kinship with the late King, had often
spread the rumor that Richard was the bastard son of some poor, forgotten woman Edward had once
seduced, but Richard knew the truth. He was the trueborn second son of Edward and his Queen
Elizabeth.

“Uncle Richard took me from the Tower,” began Richard. He felt tongue-tied and nervous, but the
truth goaded him on. He wanted her to believe, his own sister, who had once wrapped him in her
arms and kissed him and called him, ‘my own sweet one.’ It could never be as once it had been, but
at least he could make her believe. “After our brother’s death. I, too, was marked for death, but
spared at the last. Uncle trundled me off abroad, under the sometime protection of Sir Edward
Brampton. I traveled through sundry countries, eventually arriving in Portugal where I spent some
time and learned much.” How to bring Portugal to life, in all its color, or his period as a squire when,
at one time, he and his master traveled into distant jungles and saw fighting. “Aunt Margaret in
Burgundy."

“Yes,” said the Viscountess of Welles. “I know the rest. She recognized you, kept you about her for
a time, and eventually saw to it that you went to Ireland to begin your assault. Then you fought our
sister, Elizabeth’s, husband for the crown. You won. Elizabeth and her family fled and now you, in
turn, have come to reclaim your birthright, as the true King of England.”

“You don’t believe me,” sighed Richard. He forced yet another smile.

“Only yesterday to me you were Perkin Warbeck. Today you are my long-lost brother. Do you not
own that it must be difficult for me?”

Richard nodded. “I own it, sweet sister. But give it time. You will come to remember me as your
brother.”

“Sooner rather than later, I pray,” she replied, forming a smile of her own. “Come, drink some
mulberry wine with me. We will talk it all through. Tell me of Portugal. I have never been, myself.”

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HENRY TUDOR, PRINCE OF ENGLAND

Duchy of Brittany

November 1497
Harry opened one eye, squinting into the light. The ship had heaved horrifically all through the night and he had come to rue his excitement to at least leave the barricade of the Tower. “When will Father join us?” Harry asked his mother, who was counting heads to assure all her ladies and children and knights were in order.

Hearing her son’s question, Elizabeth of York formed a smile. That uncertain thing Harry misliked wrestled behind her eyes, but her mouth was cheerful and so he chose to focus on it. Kneeling before him, Elizabeth ran her fingers through Harry’s red-gold curls. “Very soon, my sweet boy. Very soon.” She looked half as though she would cry, but she made bold her face again and stood.

Scrunching up his six-year-old face, Harry glanced away over the sandy shores of Brittany. He felt now as though he would cry, too, but he did as his mother did. He made bold his face and turned to make their way towards the carts that awaited them. He still felt sick from the ship and stumbled a bit as he walked, his body half expecting all the world to turn and tumble as the waves had. He felt his mother’s hand on his back and it steadied him. Harry walked on.

“We start again here,” Elizabeth was saying. “We start fresh, just as your father once did, and my father before him. We start again, and we survive, we live. We win.”

Harry glanced up towards his mother, his lip quavered but he stilled it to a smile. He thought of all they’d heard from Spain and Portugal of new lands and wilds and he thought of it as a fresh thing, a hopeful thing, though scary. Like this. It was a grand adventure, he supposed, and his smile brightened. “It’s our new world.”
A Strand of Pearls

Chapter Summary

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“Nonsense,” she retorted, sudden primness belied by her dancing brown eyes. “It makes me perfectly charming.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

FRANÇOIS I, KING OF FRANCE
Chateau d’Amboise, France
June 1519

François flicked uselessly at a half-imagined mote of dust. He formed a sultry smile, molded largely of petty anger. Petty, oh yes, he knew it. What was the purpose of the throne, if not advancement? Yes, yes, petty anger was justified, and he felt it just now: the misbegotten offspring of presumption and decorum, born in the heat of disappointed hopes and a regal desire to remain unmoved. “So, this is the Emperor, then?” François stroked at his beard.

François himself had stood to be elected Holy Roman Emperor, and had imagined himself to have a good chance at it, indeed. He drummed his fingers, thinking of that Spaniard, Carlos, upon an imperial throne that might well have been his own, gathering his powers and his princely rights and sitting in judgment of all the rest. Carlos, sitting in judgment of François, himself. The King of France rankled.

“Well,” announced François, rising suddenly. Those gathered about him looked up in shock at his sudden, energetic speech. “Shall we sit idle here? I think not.” François processed towards the door, with all regal pomp and burst out into the corridor beyond. “I feel rather like a party,” he added, addressing his assembly, who stumbled over themselves to follow him. “Dancing! Drinking! A tournament! New friends! Long enough we have written to the King of England. Let us meet, at last.”

The counselors gawked first towards one another, then towards him. “Your Grace, this seems rather rushed…”

“Well,” announced François, rising suddenly. Those gathered about him looked up in shock at his sudden, energetic speech. “Shall we sit idle here? I think not.” François processed towards the door, with all regal pomp and burst out into the corridor beyond. “I feel rather like a party,” he added, addressing his assembly, who stumbled over themselves to follow him. “Dancing! Drinking! A tournament! New friends! Long enough we have written to the King of England. Let us meet, at last.”

The counselors gawked first towards one another, then towards him. “Your Grace, this seems rather rushed…”

“Nothing is rushed. It has only begun, monsieur. We will write the English ourselves. We’ve rather a mind, just now, to do something grand.” Unfortunately, the English King Richard was rather dull for François’s tastes, but what with Carlos V so blatantly circling the surrounding countries – Spain to the South, Germany to the North – François turned his gaze towards the grand territories to the West.

“There is much and more to be done!” announced the King, waving a bejeweled hand in the air.

“See to it, now. I shall have a dance, tonight,” François mused, a half-crescent smile widening his full lips. “And on the morrow, I shall dream of meeting England.”

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“So King Richard will come here?” inquired Mary, sipping at her drink.

“Balinghem,” Thomas corrected his daughter. “Between Ardres and Guînes. It shall be a grand event, I assure you.”

England was not so rich as France, but François was in the mood to put on a display, having been overlooked for Holy Roman Emperor. Though King Richard was less interested in that event – having displayed a disinclination towards the high office of Emperor, himself – his letters had proven that he was well disposed towards a meeting with France. The King had rather a taste for travel and exploration, both of which he credited to his youth in Portugal. Before his bid for the throne of England, after all, Richard – then known as Perkin Warbeck – had shown himself to be an adventurer. This love of excitement could be no real surprise, Thomas supposed, though one might perhaps have hoped otherwise. But then, perhaps that only stood as all the more evidence of his paternity.

Rather than invest in bids towards an Empire, Richard preferred to finance missions across the seas. Thomas privately supposed the King had a fancy to discover a new world for himself, but so far all he’d managed was to cripple coffers already taxed by the previous wars. Granted, those coffers had begun stronger from the prudent expenditures of the so-called Henry VII, but Henry had taken some share of that with him into exile and Richard IV had spent through what was left long ago. There would be little enough, he feared, to impress a pompous French King.

Still, Thomas considered, it was the world François now looked to impress, more so than a king from across the water of whom François thought very seldom. A display there would most certainly be, regardless of Richard’s contributions.

“I can’t imagine the summit is set to be terribly soon,” supplied Mary, clearly trying to coax her father back into the present.

“The summer of next year, darling,” replied Thomas, sipping at his wine. “Everyone of importance will be there.” His lips twisted into a sour expression and his belly ached.

“Oh, Papa,” said Mary, reaching out to put a hand over hers. “Why do you look so ill at ease? Is it not a marvelous thing that our two nations should meet?”

Thomas glanced between his daughters: Anne who drank her wine in poised contemplation as he spoke, Mary whose eyes were animated as she, quite clearly, pictured the event. Mary’s emotions had a tendency to run away with her, and this was something that Thomas loved about her as a child, but concerned him in adulthood. Anne, too, was passionate, but she reigned in her own nature with a steely will, at times, (when it suited her). She had, Thomas thought, greatly benefitted from her princely education in the Netherlands. Both girls were warm, intelligent, charming, and amiable. Both were attractive enough: Anne merely pretty; Mary, beautiful enough to catch the eye of most any man who beheld her. For all that, he wondered which of his girls was better off.

“Marvelous,” acknowledged Thomas. “But weighty also. As the ambassador between England and France, I will be very much involved and it will be up to me to please both nations simultaneously – a difficult feat, I may assure you. But no matter, I will do it, and all for the good, too. Kings do not often go wanting in generosity, my dears.” Still, he glanced off, away into the fire, and thought of the great cost of cloth of gold.
“And what diversions, this year, Papa?” asked Anne. The younger of his two daughters, she was this year eighteen, but already she had lived much of her life in foreign service, first in the Netherlands where her princely education was completed, and later – to now – in France, as a lady to peerless Queen Claude. “Surely there are nearer occasions to delight?” Anne looked half as though she were laughing at them, or else at all the world. She often wore such an expression: endearing if you felt you were in on the joke, and maddening when – inevitably, even after sharing many a joke – you were not. Her chocolate eyes, always so expressive, were happy just now and Thomas watched carefully the effect they had on Mary (who was apparently in on the joke) as she broke into a wide grin.

“Does the future not interest you, Nan?” asked her father.

“It does, immensely, Papa, but the trouble with such contemplation is that the future never arrives. I have heard it said, dear Papa, that it is the present which is most like eternity.” So, she was laughing at him. Despite himself, the corners of Thomas’ lips turned up, and he watched her own smile broaden with them. “There, a smile,” commented Anne, affectionately. “It has been nearly a week since last I saw one that was truly meant.”

“You so love to tease, Anne,” responded her father. “I fear some day it will do you poorly.”

“Nonsense,” she retorted, sudden primness belied by her dancing brown eyes. “It makes me perfectly charming.”

“Aha,” said Thomas, arching his brows and exchanging a bemused glance with Mary. “Very well, then, my delightful daughter. I do have one very…interesting item for this year to report, but it is a delicate one, as well.” Both girls’ countenances sobered as they listened intently. “Word, apparently, has spread about the forthcoming summit between France and England – and, specifically, it has spread to the Lancastrian Tudors.” Anne and Mary exchanged a serious glance before turning to their father. “They have asked to visit His Majesty the King of France…and His Majesty the King of France has accepted these proposals. Already, preparations are being made for their imminent arrival here at court.”

“Why?” asked Anne. “He stands only to loose from such a proposition. If he means to make an ally of King Richard, to entertain his would-be rival is…folly.”

“A delaying tactic, my love, I would guess,” Thomas speculated. “I very much doubt he wants Henry Tudor seeking out the Emperor instead…but then, I am not technically supposed to know of this. It is a great secret.”

“We will not breathe a word, of course, Papa,” assured Mary.

“I know. I would not have told you if I hadn’t trusted in your confidence, my girl,” he said, touching her chin with affection. Mary smiled brightly at him. She was a sweet girl, rising to any inkling of love.

“When will they come?” inquired Anne.

“I’m not altogether sure, but I don’t know what to expect, in any case. Since the King Henry that was has died, no one seems to know much about them at all.”

“What will King Richard say when he hears King François is entertaining his enemies?” wondered Anne. “You will, of course, tell him.”

“I have already written. So, I suppose, we will know his feelings on the matter soon enough. For all
our sakes, I pray God they may be positive.”

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RICHARD IV, KING OF ENGLAND
Palace of Placentia, England
July 1519

The King dreamt of his Queen. Catherine Gordon’s soft lips on his, her voice a tickling whisper against his ear. He dreamt of their first night together and the warmth of her touch. When he was a boy, Richard had been married for the first time. Anne de Mowbray was five and Richard had been four. He did not remember the wedding, but he remembered the gardens they would run through, laughing together, and he remembered the day she died, when she was eight. His mother came to him with his favorite sweets and a puppy, and she told him in her dulcet tones what had become of little Anne. Better still, thought Richard bitterly, than what became of my own brother.

Richard was now forty-six years old, but still he missed his mother. He still remembered the last time he had ever seen her: Elizabeth Woodville kneeling on the cold floor of the abbey to look into her two sons’ eyes, a hand on each of them. “My darling boys,” she said, fierce with love. Richard felt her brushing her hand through his curls. “My darling boys. Be brave. I will see you again, soon. Be brave,” she said. “Be brave.”

It was a lie. After that very moment, Richard never saw her again. But they had all made promises they didn’t keep: Uncle Richard promised to keep them safe, his brother promised to come play with him again, Brampton promised to protect him, Aunt Margaret and James of Scotland promised to help him…Only his own Queen, Catherine, was true. She held him and cared for him through it all, she loved him even when he was weak and laughed with him when he was strong. Many in the nation complained of his lack of legitimate children, but Richard was not willing to put Catherine aside. She had stayed by his side when he had nothing to offer but hope: he would not abandon her when things were finally golden.

After all, wasn’t his wife’s condition his own fault? It was he who had taken her, pregnant, out of Scotland with him to fight against Henry Tudor. Left to wonder and to fear in a fortress on the coast, Catherine had lost their son…and the complications of the miscarriage had so far prevented further conception. Oh, they both still held out hope – after all, they were assured, there was still a chance – but both knew it was unlikely they would ever have a child.

Besides, Richard had heirs enough. Though the Tudor line had been attained by Richard’s father (a sentiment Richard had renewed upon seizing back his throne), thus dispensing with his eldest sister’s heirs, his other sisters were wed (Anne and Catherine had three sons between them) and, more to the point, there were the children of Richard’s Uncle George, as well, united with Richard’s sister, Cecily.

George’s son, Edward of Warwick, was Richard’s immediate heir, but in that he was so close in age to the king – and so inexperienced, besides, having spent much of his life in the Tower – there was concern regarding the succession of Edward of Warwick to the throne. Richard could not discount these worries. After all, it was this issue that had plunged England, so recently, into what felt like endless war, and had claimed the lives of nearly all Richard’s own family. Richard spent a tedious amount of time arguing with Parliament and councilors. They prattled on about what was best for England, but Richard would not budge. Already, they’d reversed the Act of Attainder against Edward of Warwick and his heirs. There was little to do but wait.

Years ago, upon riding into London, Richard had released his cousin, Warwick, from the Tower. He’d ridden, himself, up to the very gates and given the orders, but he hadn’t gone in. The cloving
terror had swaddled him that, should he go in, they might once again shut the great gates and he might die there just as his brother had done.

Richard had Warwick brought out to him, and he came, casting uncertain glances around himself, skulking like a child as near the gates as he could come. It was strange, watching him, knowing the feeling of freedom he’d once experienced, whisked out of the fortress in the dead of night. He hadn’t seen the relief he’d hoped for in Edward, but he’d heard of it, later. What he’d seen, that day, was fear.

“Do you remember me?” Richard had asked, dismounting.

He remembered still his cousin’s searching grey eyes roving his face, before at last the smile he knew so well broke out. “Dickon,” he replied. “Where did you go?”

“I’ve come back,” Richard had said, and embraced him.

It had quickly become clear that Warwick’s education was severely lacking, and Richard had appointed him a tutor – a man to both instruct Warwick and to brush Richard up on the finer points, himself. Years on the run had not proven as conducive to his education as he might have liked, despite their solid basis from boyhood. Friendship with Warwick was easy, just as it had been when they were boys together in the Tower. Of all those in the king’s acquaintance, only Warwick could truly understand him. Only Warwick shared a horror of bumps in the night and, though Warwick loved an enclosed space where the king abhorred them, both were a result of the same experience. Both truly understood what it was to be trapped and to be afraid.

Following the disheartening realization that he would most likely have no legitimate children, Richard began making plans. With his sister, Cecily, widowed, Richard had arranged for her to wed Warwick. The couple had produced a bundle of children, including the young man, Richard of Warwick (called Dickon), that Richard imagined would ultimately be King of England, and groomed accordingly.

Stirring in his bed, Richard IV sat up. They dressed him with all the usual pomp and ceremony, and he went out to hear Mass and to read his correspondence.

Cardinal Wolsey, he found, awaited him. A butcher’s son from Ipswich, Thomas Wolsey had set about making himself indispensible to the country and Richard, much in need of assistance in his early reign, had been only too happy to reward him for his service. Some frowned upon Wolsey’s position, having not a drop of noble blood in him, but Richard had brooked greater complaints, and he liked Wolsey. He would not budge on that, either.

Sweeping a low obeisance, Lord Chancellor Wolsey proffered a document bearing a red seal. “A letter, Your Grace, from Master Boleyn in France.”

“What does it say?” inquired the King.

The cardinal hesitated. He offered the slightest hint of a smile, a wan thing that sloped his mouth half to a grimace while still remaining half a smile. “Your Grace, Master Boleyn reports that His Majesty the King of France means to entertain the sons of your old enemy, Henry Tudor.”

“What?!” Snatching the paper away from the cardinal, Richard yanked at the folds, opening it. Laid out clearly in Boleyn’s meticulous hand was the very report. “Before even I greet him, myself. What on earth is France thinking?”

“Good my lord, I believe it is merely a response to the pressure he may feel, given the recent election
of Carlos of Spain as Holy Roman Emperor.”

“That I know,” replied the king. Below, at the altar, the priest raised his arms in prayer, but all those in attendance had swiveled their heads at the sound of the king’s outburst. Richard rubbed his temple with one hand, while continuing to peruse the letter he clutched in the other. “Does he want also to make an enemy of England and have himself surrounded?”

“I daresay, Your Grace,” responded the Cardinal. “Should Your Grace react in a…negative fashion, His Majesty of France may throw his might behind this Arthur Tudor.”

“Yes,” mused the king. He dropped the paper on the desk before him and rubbed his chin.

The man who had once called himself Henry VII was dead. There were those in England who liked to believe that some wound he’d suffered in the fighting had ultimately shortened his life, but Richard believed that he had simply died, as any man might. He had died three years ago at age 59, leaving his son, Arthur, as a viable contender for the throne of England…a contender whom, apparently, François meant to court.

“My guess,” supplied Wolsey. “Is that, at present, His Majesty wishes to keep young Tudor out of the hands of the Spanish. And, if I may,” he added, softly. “Perhaps to help force a friendship with your royal self, given England’s attentions to Spain.”

Richard nodded slowly. Oh, yes, he had had relations with Spain, in the past. His time in Portugal had captured Richard’s imagination, filling him with a longing for the sea, for new worlds. He longed to explore every inch of the good earth God had given them. As king, he was somewhat restrained, but Richard wished to see and experience everything. He wanted to travel to the New World and gaze at its wild splendor, he wished to climb the tallest mountains and swim the deepest seas. Though he could not do these things, himself, he could help others do so and read the detailed reports they brought back, ask a thousand lively questions on the subject, and form a vivid picture in his own mind. These desires had closely linked him to those who had possessions in the New World: Spain and Portugal and, in fact, for some time there had been tentative discussions of a more formal alliance.

Before the death of Isabella of Spain (and after Richard had formally named Warwick his intended heir), there had been talks of wedding her daughter, Catherine of Aragon, to Richard of Warwick. The death of the Castilian queen had halted these discussions, but their possibilities hovered in the background of the mind. Given the rise of Spain, Richard understood that this possibility must make François quite nervous.

“This cannot stand,” growled Richard, pawing at Boleyn’s letter. “It is intolerable.” But he knew very well there was little enough to be done, unless it was to make an overture to either France, himself – or to his own sister, Elizabeth of York, the mother of Arthur Tudor. Wolsey knew it, too, Richard could see well enough. “Perhaps François will hand them over as a gesture of friendship.”

“Your Grace, it may be so, but I fear there are other plans at play. Perhaps he may sell them to Your Grace, but I do imagine he means to keep them. There are, however, other options.”

“My sister? Elizabeth?” inquired Richard with an arched brow. “No, I doubt as she shall ever relinquish her family.”

“If we offered their safety, wed young Arthur to my lord of Warwick’s daughter, for example…”

“You think they would accept such an offer? They would, of course, have to relinquish their claim to the throne. I know my sister, she is practical, but she is proud. I doubt as she shall support such
designs.”

“An appeal to Princess Elizabeth may indeed begin a conversation,” responded Wolsey. “But I feel that Master Arthur shall end it. As it is he who is regarded as heir, a bid cannot be made for the throne without him. So, without knowing something of his character, it remains difficult to say what such a reply may entail. Which brings us, good my lord, to other routes.”

“Name them,” demanded the king.

“Your Grace will recall Master Boleyn remains in the trust of His Majesty, the King of France. It is possible that he could collect information about these Tudors and send it to us. Little is known of this new generation. An understanding of them may well prove beneficial. Once we know more, judging the best may become an easier task. His Majesty of France may not know it, but it is just possible he has handed England a great opportunity for perpetual peace.”

“Peace,” responded the king, blandly. “Or war.”

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HENRY TUDOR, PRINCE OF ENGLAND

Chateau d’Amboise, France

September 1519

“Somewhat intimidating, is it not?” Arthur’s face tilted upwards as he took in the great palace that bordered the Loire. Perched on a hill, it dominated the landscape. Even its lovely gardens spoke such volumes of grandeur as to amaze. It had been twenty-two years since either Arthur or Henry had been this close to so grand an estate, and it seemed a thing belonging to a different life altogether.

Harry rankled. He misliked his brother’s words and he misliked the look of the place. “Perhaps to some,” he intimated. “But you’re the King of England.” Harry smiled a stiff smile, arching his brows. “There are some who would argue that this palace belongs to you, not to François.”

“Henry V,” Arthur sighed. He shook his head. Harry knew somewhere in the back of his mind that Arthur did not enjoy such sentiments as these, but to Harry they brought comfort. If he thought of it as his brother’s palace, not as that of some self-satisfied foreign monarch, well, it was a surer thing. “I am not Henry V,” said Arthur, turning to him. His face was stony, as sometimes their father’s face used to grow – often when Harry said such ‘fanciful’ things as that. “Neither are you.”

Harry soured, watching that expression, and turned away to glance, disgruntled, towards the palace again. He liked the look of it less and less with each passing moment. “Why do we tarry here? Best bring this off quickly.”

Quickly was not to be. Once brought inside the palace, they were made to wait. To wait and to wait and to wait upon the King of France’s leisure. Harry paced. He walked this way and that and, occasionally made some complaint to his brother, but Arthur remained just where he was and waited in all patience. Rather than calming Harry, however, this only served to rankle him further.

“How is it you sit there so calm and abiding while we are paid with clear disrespect? Were you acknowledged King in England, we would not be compelled so long to wait!”

“That is true, I believe, Henry, but I am not the acknowledged king in England. There, I am called a pretender at best and a traitor at worst. I have nothing to offer and, therefore, can afford to wait.” Harry replied with a rude gesture. Arthur’s expression grew cross. “You do understand, my brother, that even this is a part of our negotiations? We must behave with the decorum due our offices.”
Shooting his brother a glare, Harry resumed his pacing. He suppressed the urge to swear and thought on the dignity of his office. *Prince of England, Duke of York.* Harry didn’t know if he’d ever been to York, but if he had, he certainly didn’t remember it. He knew, however, of its walled city, built to fend off aggressors in centuries past, and its grand cathedral, the Minster, whose windows were said to be amongst the most glorious in all of Christendom.

There was a steam of titles which were once said to belong to him: *Prince of England, Duke of York, Constable of Dover Castle, Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports, Earl Marshal of England, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, Knight of the Bath, Warden of the Scottish Marches, Knight of the Garter*…all grand offices to be sure, but ones whose duties remained cloaked in mystery to him, having gone twenty-two years without performing a single duty in their upkeep. No, this was his duty now: to wait upon the pleasure of those who had not known the pain of being cast down, themselves. Harry felt like kicking something. He paced, instead.

It seemed a whole day before they were finally admitted into the glorious presence of the French monarch. About him were strewn a few officials, but none of the greater court. Harry worried at that notion in his mind – was it a greater display, for the intimacy, or a more humbling experience for want of an audience?

Arthur did not hesitate. Going to the foot of François’ throne, Arthur swept a low obeisance, Harry following in his wake to do the same.

“Arthur of England, son of Henry, King of England, and Elizabeth of York! His brother, Henry of England!” announced a liveried individual by the magnificent door. Harry gave the fellow a heavy glance before turning his gaze towards the crown.

François was dressed in sumptuous robes, brocades and silks. His velvet hat was plumed with two magnificent feathers, and his hose were the brightest color of orange. His wore, too, an expression, almost of leniency, his head tilted as he listened. Regal, yes; patronizing, too. “Well met, my friends,” he greeted with extended hands, adorned with glittering rings. In short, he looked every inch what a king ought to be.

*I hate him,* thought Harry, hotly. *I loathe this King of France.*


François smiled a smile was that almost a snarl and inclined his head. “I imagine you must be exhausted from your journey,” said the King. “Will your mother and sisters also attend upon us?”

“If Your Majesty should wish it, we will summon them forthwith.”

“I have heard your younger sister called the most exquisite creature on earth. Is that so?”

Arthur’s brow contorted, his mouth opened to gape like an air-drowned fish.

“It is, good my lord,” supplied Harry. “Mary is all good things in and upon this fair earth.” He smiled towards his brother and then back towards the king. “She was well blessed with the beauty made so famous by our grandmother, Queen Elizabeth, and mingles it with the handsomeness that came from our grandfather, King Edward.”

“Indeed,” responded the King, breaking into a grin. “I am full glad to hear it. I hope soon to greet both your sisters and mother to my court. Is it possible?”

“Your Majesty, it is,” responded Arthur, promptly. “We will send for them at once.”
“Very good,” supplied the king, nodding affably. “I look forward to meeting the ladies.”

“I am certain,” replied Harry. “They feel the same towards your majestic self, Majesty.”

“We are pleased to welcome you both to this, our court. We pray that you will be very comfortable here and look forward to a better acquaintance.” He snapped to one of his attendants who jumped to, instantly.

“If Your Graces will follow me,” said the attendant. “I will show you to your rooms.” As they approached the doors, Harry, Arthur, and the page were forced to stop in their tracks as the doors open as though of their own accord. A most gorgeously dressed woman, whom Harry recognized as Queen Claude, entered, followed by a train of ladies. Impressed, Harry watched them float by in succession…

One caught his eye.

Her dark hair was caught beneath a hood in the French style, and she wore a bright green gown that seemed to make her skin glow. Around her neck wound a strand of pearls, strung with a golden ‘B’ pendant, and her small neck rose in swanlike grace from her shoulders. Yet it was not these things, no, which caught Harry’s attention with a wild ferocity: it was the weight of her eyes. Black and steely they were, like embers still scorching within a fireplace, and their powers seemed to defy, like a star that brightens the moon. Harry couldn’t rip his eyes away from her gaze, and he didn’t care to. He felt as though he were suddenly stripped bear in the center of court, but he cared for nothing of the eyes of others while her gaze was locked with his.

Her black eyes burned.

Chapter End Notes

Two things to note: I slid both Thomas Boleyn and Thomas Wolsey into slots they occupied in the historical timeline, because they were both ambitious and hardworking men who rose up - albeit with the help of the ruler(s) - by their own merit. As a result, I chose to assume for our purposes that they still would have made as much of themselves in this verse.

You may also be wondering why I gave Richard succession problems, seeing as that clearly impacted the Tudors. I did it simply because, to the best of my knowledge, that is what would have happened. Catherine Gordon was married to four different men and only once noted as possibly pregnant - during Perkin Warbeck's 1497 campaign. Whether the child was ever born or not is unclear, but certainly the child was lost, and Catherine appears never to have conceived again.
“You have hungry eyes, Mistress Boleyn. Will there ever be enough for you?”

ANNE BOLEYN, LADY TO QUEEN CLAUDE OF FRANCE
Chateau d'Amboise, France
September 1519

The two would-be princes occupied Anne’s attention as soon as they entered the chamber. Her father had instructed both his daughters to find out as much about them as they could, of course (by order of King Richard), but it was not simply his strictures that arrested her attention. Little as she liked to admit it, the Tudors were handsome young men.

Arthur was of average height, with lithe, sinewy limbs. His eyes were burnished amber, set deeply in a long oval face. His brows were noble and arched, his hair the lustrous red-gold so renowned in his family and came almost to his shoulders in length. He had a prominent nose, in pleasing proportion to the wide eyes. His chin was strong, though his jaws perhaps not so, and his lips were very full, if somewhat narrow beneath the aquiline nose. He was possessed of the wiry swiftness that made some men lean, while still able-armed.

The true physical paragon of the pair was the younger brother. Henry was…beautiful. Towering over most men, he clocked in somewhere over six feet – when most men did not breach much over 5’10. He was muscular and well-proportioned, alarmingly like Hercules as depicted in a statue or two Anne had seen. Like Arthur, Henry’s hair was famously red-gold. Unlike his brother, Henry kept his hair trimmed close to his head, but had allowed an equally close-trimmed beard to cover his...
face (clearly, Anne noted, he spent not inconsiderable time before a looking glass). His eyes were alert, and active in his face – measuring, measuring – and similar to his brother’s in shape, the color being, by and large, a deep shade of green-blue, like the ocean, and just as roiling. Henry had strong cheekbones and full lips. Where his brother’s face was long and lean, Henry’s was broad enough to support his features. His bearing also suggested his beauty…and his own certainty in it.

An arrogant man, then, thought Anne. Eyes trailing, Anne exchanged a knowing look with her sister, watching with pleasure as Mary suppressed a grin of her own.

Upon their arrival, François had endeavored to keep the presence of the Tudors quiet but, apparently divining that his secret was widely known, the pretense was up. Openly now, they came and went where they would. Still, an opportunity had not presented itself for Mary and Anne to do any sort of mingling, as most often Queen Claude retired to Chateau de Blois with her ladies, preventing much interaction. Anne prayed her father’s whiles had proven more effective in the gathering of information, but she feared the English ambassador would be one the pretender princes might avoid and knew François would continue to keep them parted.

The young men had arrived at court on the first day of September and though, now, nearly a week and a half had passed, still summer’s heat attended them. Many ladies beat little fans before them, but there was little enough even so that could be done in their voluminous dresses and exquisite veils.

Upon his throne, François stood abruptly. “It is hot,” he announced. “I detest this heat. We must do something! A masque, I think. Refreshments and dancing and diversion!”

Anne smiled softly, knowing that – as unstudied as his air was – if he was announcing this to his court, the plans were already long in progress, and she realized that soon, very soon, an opportunity would be upon them. The whole court was lively with the announcement, a rumble of approval percolating the wealth of France. Anne couldn’t deny her own excitement. Of course, there was her duty to England in interacting with the Tudors – but she did love to dance. Duty, yes, and pleasure too.

Anne watched as the King of France descended his dais and strolled towards the Tudor pretenders. The brothers were talking, as well, looking at each other, gesturing broadly, as though they were players upon a stage and all the world were gazing upon their grandness. All attention must be cast towards Arthur, would-be King of England, but Anne couldn’t tear her eyes away from Henry. He was laughing, boisterous, so in love with life. His smiles were glorious, streaming things that made Anne tingle from head to toe – and most especially at her center. Yes, he had been made to be seen: seemed to revel in it, even. And as much as she disliked the thought, Anne enjoyed looking at him.

Suddenly, his head turned – tilted towards her, locking gaze for gaze. His eyes were storm-tossed oceans, blue pools that stirred with the deep greens of fathomless leagues. God in Heaven, thought Anne, prayed Anne, wished Anne.

And then Henry smiled.

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HENRY TUDOR, PRINCE OF ENGLAND
Chateau d’Amboise, France
September 1519

And just as soon she looked away.

The lady – again adorned with the pearl “B” necklace (B, he now knew, for Boleyn) – had a gaze
made to wound, but Henry smiled on, watching her. She knew he watched: oh, she looked away but too late to fool him. Absently, he wondered if she courted his gaze.

He’d felt her eyes on him, and basking in the haze of her black stare, he’d turned and looked just in time to see her watching him. He smiled to see her, those deep eyes of hers scattering all other cares, till he thought only of them, blacking out all other impulses. Still he smiled towards her turned head, watching her in close conversation with another lovely lady, beside her.

Beside him, Harry’s brother spoke with François of France, but Harry spared hardly a glance. Blackly, he thought of the King of France – that King of France and this Mistress Boleyn. Oh, he felt he knew how she could so easily catch the eye of a king – but he couldn’t help resent that François had seen her first – and seemed to have the first of everything. Harry had asked, after first he’d spotted her. As soon as she walked away, out of sight, Harry had demanded of the page – in his most casual air, of course – after the lady. He understood well enough what the page had meant. Mistress Boleyn was the mistress of the French king.

Boleyn, Harry turned over the name in his mind time and again, winding it through his brain like a wildfire. English and Boleyn and the French king’s own lover: these were the things he knew about her, beyond the power of her piercing glance.

François was speaking to them quite animatedly about something – Harry wasn’t listening – and Harry smiled as though he heard. “Will you take to the lists, my English friends?” François was asking, and Harry turned back to him, hastily.

He had missed something, certainly. Quickly, Harry cast an inquiring glance towards Arthur, who caught his eye.

“We should be most honored, Your Majesty,” responded Arthur. “To take part in the forthcoming joust – as well as the masque – at the celebrations.”

Harry nodded, both in thanksgiving to his brother for explaining, and in acknowledgement of his words. Oh, yes, Harry would like very much, just now, to swing a lance. “Honored and proud, indeed, Majesty.”

When the king was gone, Arthur pulled Harry to the side. “What were you thinking?” he demanded. “Your behavior was intolerably rude!”

“What on earth do you mean? I was civil!”

“Civil, ha!” Arthur shook his head. “You spent nearly the entire interview staring – quite blatantly, I may add – at the Queen’s ladies!”

“That girl, Arthur – Mistress Boleyn – I have never seen her like.”

Passing a hand across his face, Arthur shook his head. “There is her like, Harry, in every court in the entire world. A thousand, thousand Mistresses Boleyn litter the good green earth. There is only one King of France.”

Harry knew very well that his brother loved him, but he knew equally that he did not always like him. Oh, on occasion he did; on occasion they were the best of friends, but perhaps Harry had not been built to be friends with anyone all the time.

“We need him, Harry. If we are ever to go home, we need François’s support. What were you thinking?” Arthur asked, but Harry didn’t respond. They both knew perfectly well that he asked the sky, and not Harry.
“They’re the daughters of the English ambassador, Arthur,” said Harry, playing off his misbehavior as coolly as he could. “Surely there is much we could glean from a conversation with them, since François is so adept at hiding away the father.” Carefully, he did not mention Mistress Boleyn’s relation directly to the King of France. “And if you may inquire by what right we should approach the ladies – all but strangers to us – why, they are English! And you, therefore, are their King.”

Arthur’s eyes gleamed like golden flakes: harsh and glorious and half-gaudy in a way at once illustrious and false. But his eyes were harder than gold and Harry knew very well that Arthur was still reproving him, internally, and perhaps doubting his sincerity (Harry knew he had reason to do so – after all, that was not at all the reason for his staring in truth), but he bent to the rationale. “Such an undertaking would require a great deal of tact,” he pointed out, eyeing his brother.

The corner of Harry’s lips turned upward. “Fortunately, dear brother, I am here and you need not concern yourself with this particular duty.”

Arthur scoffed, but still humor hovered just behind his amber-hazel eyes. “You know very well I did not mean you.”

“Perhaps not,” retorted Harry. “But you ought to have intended me.”

“Of course not, my impetuous little brother. Sending you into so delicate a political situation is practically an invitation to war.”

“Have faith, Arthur! I can be tactful,” he said. “And besides, you should never be trusted in the making of conversation with a stranger – and certainly not a lady.”

Arthur’s brows leapt upwards. “Oh?”

“You are much too stiff and formal. Remember, brother mine, when first we met with François, as soon as he asked something you did not expect, you instantly ran into a bout of silence!”

“Silence! Harry-“

“I speak words of truth, Arthur. Recall – when he asked after Mary.”

Arthur’s eyes darted away in consideration, and Harry watched his profile, saw the recognition take hold of his face. “I…did not anticipate such a question.”

“I know,” replied Harry, laying a hand upon his heart. “Which is why, in matters of spontaneity, the impetuous thrive.”

“Go on, then,” began Arthur. “But I will go with you.”

“Yes,” replied Harry, softly. “I suspect, between the two of us, we make a well-rounded individual.”

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ANNE BOLEYN, LADY TO QUEEN CLAUDE OF FRANCE
Chateau d’Amboise, France
September 1519

“They’re coming this way!” Mary Boleyn hissed, tugging at her sister’s sleeve. Exchanging glances, both ladies silently steeled themselves for whatever was to come.

“Mistress Boleyn!” rang out golden Henry’s voice, as they approached. He formed a welcoming
grin, half-charming, half-cheeky, and all warmth. Anne glanced towards her sister before looking back to him. Yet she respected that he made no secret of his approach – he had made certain that all the court would turn and see. A bold move, she thought, considering the pains François had been to in keeping her father away from them – and considering England’s own consternation over their very existence.

Both Boleyns swept a polite curtsey of recognition as they approached: Arthur and Henry Tudor. The former opened his mouth to speak, but the latter walked straight up to Anne, taking her lithe, tapering her fingers in his broader ones, and brought them to his lips. Soft they were against her knuckles, soft and warm. And his eyes were hazy oceans that met hers, the deepest of cobalts married to a green like deep forests. His very eyes, she thought ludicrously, encompassed all of England. Anne wanted to snatch her hand away (his touch inspired sensations deep inside her that were other than polite) but she resisted the impulse, forming a smile.

“Well met, Master Tudor,” said Anne, smiling still as she withdrew her hand (politely, yes, she managed it), which he still clutched, stilled by she knew not what impulse.

Something started in his cobalt orbs, and Anne did not much like their expression, now half-vexed, half-petulant. Childish. She arched a brow.

“Master Tudor?” he replied. “Certainly even by Perkin Warbeck’s calculation, I am due some title. My mother is the daughter of King Edward IV, and of that there can be no doubt.”

“You are mistaken, sir,” answered Anne. “While the King remembers well his beloved sister, he has attainted your father’s entire line. Unless you should lay down your claim, you are all assigned only the title of traitor.”

He did not like that much, she could see. His mouth drew into a furious scowl and he looked away, then looked to his brother, and Anne wondered how he could not know – or how he could possibly be surprised.

“His Grace, King Richard, is not however unreasonable and, should you renew the sentiments of obedient and loyal subjects, His Grace may well recall the ties of blood betwixt you and welcome home his dear sister’s family.”

Finally, Henry turned back, mouth toying with a smile she believed most sincerely he did not mean. “Yet, I do not believe he is my uncle,” replied the would-be prince. “And you, Mistress Boleyn? What do you believe?” he arched his brows in an expression of his own disbelief. “Can you truly feel any certainty in his birth?”

In truth, Anne felt little one way or another, but she did not like this line of speech. Henry, she thought, meant to lure her into saying something she did not mean, herself. Whomsoever may have fathered or mothered the self-proclaimed Richard IV, this man was certainly now the King. The details of how he came to be there had ceased to be relevant to her some time ago. “England is no longer at war,” responded Anne, carefully. “I believe that is enough for me.”

“Is it?” inquired Henry. “You have hungry eyes, Mistress Boleyn. Will there ever be enough for you?”

Anne sucked in a breath, but she said nothing. There was anger in his face, yes, but something else too, something she couldn’t discern. She thought, perhaps, there was a war already inside of him. The elder brother was clearing his throat, speaking quickly and with some sternness, but Anne was not listening. Henry’s flinty eyes locked on hers and she rose to the occasion, flushed with her own irritation. If it was to be a clash of wills between them, Anne meant to win. “You ask such strange
questions,” she responded, at last. There was a bite in her clipped tone she made no effort to conceal. Let him listen; let him hear. “Perhaps you would do better, sir, to ask that of a mirror.”

Henry took a step closer, too close, too close, but it would not be Anne who backed down. She leaned in, herself, black eyes blazing. She had the better of him, she knew, and so she smiled fiercely and arched her brow. She felt almost like laughing, suddenly, madly, but she resisted the impulse as best she could. He was not difficult to read, she thought. One need only see him to know his vanity.

“Do you imagine you know me already, Mistress Boleyn?”

“It was not I, sir, who commented on the qualities of your eyes.”

He laughed, suddenly, surprisingly, and she felt the tingling resurge. No, not now, she thought, crossly.

“I do believe, madam, we have gotten off to the wrong start.”

“Perhaps, sir, but it occurs to me that we were born on the opposite sides of history. How were we ever to remedy so great a divide?”

“Like Our Lord Himself in the Garden of Gethsemane, Mistress Boleyn,” says he with an impetuous grin. “With a kiss.”

“I believe you are mistaken,” responded Anne, softly. “Was it not Iscariot who betrayed Our Lord… with a kiss?”

“Then the duty is all mine, madam. It is I you have already named traitor.” Extending his hand, Henry offered it, palm-up.

Dubiously Anne regarded the gesture. It was a strong hand, broad and capable, but hesitantly did she put her own hand into it. Turning her face up to his, she met his oceanic gaze. Oh, she longed to swim, but never to drown. Amusement struck her at the thought and she smiled along the way to a laugh that never came. He smiled back, raising her little hand once more to his lips. Henry did not break her gaze, focused entirely on her face as he brought her knuckles again to his lips – so full and rich. Perhaps to drown would not be so harrowing a thing after all. Sea air tasted pleasant, after all, why not seawater?

Queen Claude was clapping, and Anne turned quickly to look towards her. The ladies began to file away, but Henry had not released her hand. Anne turned quickly back towards him. “I must go-”

“I must exact a promise. At the masque – will you not dance with me, Mistress Boleyn?”

“I will,” her smile turned wicked. “Or shall endeavor so to do. Will I know you at a masque?”

Henry’s eyes glinted with mischief. “Will you know me, Mistress Boleyn?”

Anne pulled away, following the Queen and her ladies out. As the door closed behind them, she cast a glance back. Henry was still watching her walk away. He flashed her a smile, again, and then the door between them shut.
Autre Ne Cherche

Chapter Summary

Mary shook her head. “It is nothing,” she replied with a wave of her hand, and she reached up to brush away her tears.

“Don’t,” said Harry. “A true sensitivity of heart is never a cause for shame.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

ANNE BOLEYN, LADY TO QUEEN CLAUDE OF FRANCE
Chateau d’Amboise, France
September 1519

All the world seemed most to glitter. Golden streamers hung from the ceiling and from the pillars that held it aloft. Great torches and biers belched gold flame that glistened in afterglow against the reflective windowpanes. Music wafted mysteriously from every corner, gilding her senses as well, and Anne grinned in wonder beneath her mask.

“All isn’t it wonderful?” whispered Mary, by her side, as the sisters peaked around a curtain into the room.

Guests milled about, chatting and eating, and Anne found herself, unthinkingly, searching for Henry Tudor. “Will you know me?” his phantom voice asked her. Anne shook the notion away. “It is wonderful,” she responded, truthfully, and took her sister’s hands. “Are you nervous?”

“Nonsense!” exclaimed Mary softly which, Anne knew very well, meant she was.

“You are a vision, my dear sister,” supplied Anne, squeezing Mary’s hands.

All the ladies were dressed elaborately, but special care had been put into Mary’s wardrobe (just after the Queen’s own, of course: mistress or not, the Queen must always be first in appearance), pairing her identically with the King’s own sister and the Queen’s sister as well, in array. Mary had insisted that equal care to her own go also into Anne’s gown, such that they four all matched.

The Boleyn girls were dressed in cloth-of-silver underdress, laced with gold, heavy, but gleaming with every movement. Over the silver they wore surcoats of midnight blue satin. The masks themselves were wrought in the same sapphire satin, slashed under the eyes to show through with cloth of gold. The masks covered their foreheads, and upon their brows were scrawled in gold thread the name of the virtue they represented. These masks met mantles of the same blue that discreetly covered their hair, and atop the mantles, they wore tiny silver coronets, formed in the shape of stars.

As the sisters were of a height (both diminutive in stature), they looked rather the same, unless one stood terribly close. Anne smiled to think it. Let that show him, she thought, forming a smirk. Perhaps it is he who does not know me.
“Will you know me?” his words tickled still against her ear like a whisper and Anne bit her lip, turning her attention towards the other ladies.

The Queen was dressed in the same way as the Boleyn girls, save that instead of silver, she wore gold, and her headpiece was a crown depicting the moon, rather than its attendant stars. As for the rest of the ladies, instead of diadems, they wore becoming French hoods trimmed with ropes of braided cloth-of-silver and cloth-of-gold, but were otherwise attired exactly as the Boleyns were. Anne felt like royalty, attired thus, and she let the feeling, glorious and golden, rush across her like gilded armor.

Soon the pageant would begin.

A great fortress had been built in the great hall, crenellated with one great tower and one small one. It was to be the allegory of Faith they played out. Each lady had selected her own virtue, and Anne – the fifth to choose – had selected one she held close: Perseverance. Her sister was Kindness, the Queen was Piety, and the other ladies represented Charity, Temperance, Hope, Prudence, and Truth. There were to be eight gentlemen as well: François, playing Nobility (though all pretended not to know it was he), with his retinue: Fortitude, Courage, Honor, Reverence, Wisdom, Liberty, and Justice. Nobility would be faced with many challenges in his journey to Heaven, where at last, through Faith, he would at last rescue and be united with Piety and her attendant ladies.

Anne scanned the crowd that would watch the allegory unfold, knowing the Tudor would-be princes would be there somewhere, and hoping their great height would betray them to her notice, but she did not see them, and the Queen was calling her away.

The masque was begun.

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ARTHUR TUDOR, KING OF ENGLAND
Chateau d’Amboise, France
September 1519

“Ridiculous,” complained Arthur, as a servant tied on his mask. “That all the guests should be obliged to appear in visors. We’re not part of the pageant, are we?”

Harry arched playful brows at his brother. “Ridiculous,” he replied. “That you should be so put out by a bit of fun. Have no fear, brother. You and I shall be the most ferocious beasts in attendance, I assure you."

It had been Harry’s idea, these costumes, and already Arthur rued allowing him to make such a selection (though, in truth, Arthur hadn’t had any ideas and it was a thematically pleasing choice). Harry, however, was beaming. Standing with his legs apart and his hands on his hips, he struck the very figure of a man in charge. If Arthur were less confident, he might feel more irritated to know Harry was in his element. Instead, he was amused. He wished he could be as at ease as his brother appeared to be.

“How do I look?” demanded Harry.

Sighing, Arthur stood back. Harry wore a white satin dublet, embroidered in crimson and gold, the Welsh dragon – the standard their father had raised at the Battle of Bosworth Field. His hose were red, as well, and he wore a crimson satin cloak, pinned between his arms and torso in the shape of wings. Upon his head he wore a mask painted with white scales, that covered his head to his nose: a mask that sported dragon’s horns. Arthur, himself, wore the same outfit, save in reverse, for where
Harry wore Yorkist white, Arthur wore Lancastrian red and where Harry wore the red, Arthur wore the white.

Arthur’s lips quirked upwards as he remembered what Harry had first said: “Don’t you remember the tales? Beneath the castle raged the war of the red dragon with the white, until Uther Pendragon slew Vortigern and put an end to the wars, an end cemented only by the rise of King Arthur. What story could better suit the sons of the seventh Henry of England and Elizabeth of York?”

It sounded like a suggestion their mother would make: the colors of their two houses; the tales of his namesake. Like her father before her, Arthur’s mother had always been most adept at winding the public image as it needed to be wound. Harry wasn’t always so far-sighted – and Arthur wondered if perhaps he’d been misguided in thinking he saw clearly, now that he was dressed like a red dragon – but it had had a touch of that brilliancy to it that had appealed to Arthur at the time.

“Well?” asked Harry, his tone a bit more cautious, now.

“You look ready to spit fire,” responded Arthur, dryly. Harry’s blue eyes regarded him measuringly for a moment, but Arthur saw them light up when Harry recognized the glib tone of a tease.

“And I reckon I shall,” replied Harry, laughing as he came forward to clap his brother on the shoulder. “Now, let’s see how they get on with pageants in France. I’ve a hunger for diversion, just now.”

Casting a dubious glance towards his brother, Arthur arched his brows and thought of the way Harry looked at little Mistress Boleyn. “I’ll wager you have,” he muttered.

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HENRY TUDOR, PRINCE OF ENGLAND
Chateau d’Amboise, France
September 1519

Splendour was the only word that came to mind. Marching into the great hall, Harry cast his eyes towards the ceiling and back. Everywhere gold glistened and a kaleidoscope of color flashed before his eyes as richly clad courtiers sashayed to and fro all around him. Beyond them a curtain hid a vast portion of the hall and Harry cast curious eyes towards it, knowing that something wonderful lay concealed behind it.

He knew it was beginning when the music stopped abruptly – only to begin again, a mingling of instruments and vocals. Closing his eyes, Harry let the melody flow through him for a few moments before blinking open his eyes again. The curtain was rising and Harry feasted his eyes on a magnificent castle, built in miniature, before him, rising to the ceiling of the room with two turrets. At its base were real trees and a bridge and shrubs that had been brought inside and the castle, itself, was complete with a working portcullis and drawbridge. Harry’s lips parted as he drank it all in, the music mingling sublimely with the pageantry. In each of the towers four ladies were held – heavenly virtues arrayed with stars, save the Queen of Stars, herself: the Moon, arrayed as Piety.

That lady, Harry knew very well, was the Queen. Her attire made her status quite obvious but, more than that, her hunched back absolved him of any queries on that score. He moved on to the next ladies. Harry had managed to ferret out of a page that the Mistresses Boleyn would be in this pageant and he scanned each distant face, hoping for a sign of the black eyes that transfixed him – but from so far a distance it was nearly impossible to say.

All around him, the throng gasped and whispered in amazement at the display, but it was not yet
played out. Almost at once a troupe of gentlemen rushed into the mix, dressed in midnight doublets, threaded with silver, and starry caps. Across the brows of their blue visors were written the virtues they represented.

Harry was grateful for his height, as he and his brother were to the back of the throng, but as almost everyone else was about six inches shorter, he could clearly see. He peered with great interest as the crowd of gentlemen rushed forward, only to be confronted with ghastly creatures (in fact, players clad in wild costumes).

The beasts came oozing out of trees like a mudslide, baring teeth and claws. Upon their bellies were embroidered their identities: Gluttony, Lust, Avarice, Hubris, Wrath, Vainglory, Envy, and Sloth. Each of the worthy gentlemen confronted one of the loathsome creatures beneath the green canopy of trees. Leaning forward upon the parapets, the ladies in the towers gazed down in keen interest to see whether they might soon be freed. Unsheathing their dummy swords, the gallants nobly assailed their foes, only to watch them whirl away before returning again. It was a dance betwixt them: the gentlemen rushing in time and again to fend off their adversaries, only to once again be confronted with the menace.

Round and round they whirled to the rhythm of the music, cloaks lapping with their motions. Finally, the king – for, standing over six feet in height himself, it could only be François – raised an arm and the beasts cowered in fear. All around him, the king’s attendants began to pelt their nemeses with goodly things: candied and exotic fruits, tiny embroidered cushions, decadent tassels made with cloth-of-gold or cloth-of-silver. François raised his arm again and, at once, a canon shot off, filling the room with smoke and what seemed a thunderclap. Withering away, the creatures oozed back into the trees, cowed, and the King led his attendants to the foot of the castle.

“Fair ladies!” called François, exuberant. “Long and far have we travelled to meet with your like! From these your binding chains, we free you!” With that, François struck the cord that kept the drawbridge up and suddenly it came crashing down. As soon as it was level, the portcullis rose and the gentlemen alighted to gently help their ladies from the high towers and out into the open. Carefully, Harry examined each of the ladies. He knew that Mistress Boleyn was the mistress of the King and so he sought out the more richly clad ladies. Recalling the stature of the little Boleyn, he was able to conclude which two ladies were Anne and her sister (Kindness and Perseverance, their masks read), and he watched them with great intent, hoping for some sign that might reveal the identity of each.

The audience cheered as the virtues were freed from bondage, but Harry found his own exhilaration dying on his tongue. François made a point of kissing the Queen’s hand but no sooner had he done so than he handed her off to a gentleman…and went to assist one of the little, finely clad ladies. Anne, thought Henry, with a stab of envy. It must be. Kindness, her virtue read. Harry chewed on his lip.

François bent low to kiss her little hand, and then he led her out of the castle and into a dance. Their eyes met, drawn in – oh, Harry knew their power well enough – and arrested, they seemed to forget all else. Anne dipped her curtsy, François his bow, and Harry balled his hands into tight-clenched fists. As they whirled in unison with the other couples, their gaze did not break, lost to the world in one another. Harry turned away in disdain. There could be no more public display of the fact that this lady was his. Harry felt ill to think of François in full pleasure of her, himself denied all. A throne, a realm, a home, a wife, a lover, evend his damned height: François had it all and Harry…Harry had nothing but his precious pride.

Though the others danced more cordially, there was something breathtakingly familiar in the way
François touched his mistress – as though Harry required further evidence that the rumors were true – his hands took every opportunity to explore, his eyes were locked upon hers, faces bent close to touching…It was the lavolta and, one hand beneath her busk and the other on her far hip, François lifted her high.

Turning away, Harry pushed his way through the crowd, ambivalent to his brother calling after him. He had to get out, away from this cloying throng, away from this grand hall, he had to breathe…

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MARY BOLEYN, LADY TO QUEEN CLAUDE OF FRANCE
Chateau d'Amboise, France
September 1519

As, at last, the breathless dance came to an end, François reached out to pluck the mask of Kindness from Mary’s face, as all the others did, but he paused. His steel-grey eyes melted with hers, breathing matched. His hand strayed. He did not reach for the mask, but stretched out his arm and touched her face. It was warm, comforting, and Mary’s heart was pounding. His face drew near to hers but he did not break off staring at her. Mary thrilled internally, she wanted to draw him closer, closer, desperately she wanted him, but at last he broke away. He laughed, glancing around, to those who now – unmasked – were all watching.

“Why,” he quipped. “Whoever might this captivating stranger be?”

“Unmask me, my Noble lord,” replied Mary, softly, knowing full well he knew as much as she did. “And you will learn.”

“The very soul of Kindness,” he said raising her hands to his lips. “Indeed.” Kissing each hand in turn, he released them to reach behind her head and unfasten her mask. Carefully, he removed it from her face and Mary turned once more to gaze up at him, a towering man over six feet in height.

“Why,” he mused, without a trace of surprise. “‘Tis Mistress Boleyn!”

Everyone clapped, as the pageant had come to an end, and Mary gazed up towards him, holding her hands out to applaud him. Laughing eagerly, François bowed to her. “Well played, Mistress Boleyn,” he said and Mary laughed with him.

“And you, my sweet lord,” she replied.

Glancing up as a figure approached, Mary spotted Queen Claude. She swept a quick curtsy. “A most excellent performance, Your Majesty,” observed Mary, gently.

She was very fond of kind Queen Claude, but felt sorry for her husband. As pious and genteel as the Queen certainly was, she was hardly exciting and it was that which François craved. Besides, with her twisted back, movements which came with ease to others did not always suit her. François was a young and vital man. He wanted an equally suited partner. Still, Mary felt slightly perturbed at her own behavior: she had no doubts Queen Claude would also have preferred a man better suited, but this was the one God had given her. The fact that she bore his wildness so patiently almost made Mary feel worse. Mary wondered if it was her place to interfere.

“Mistress Boleyn,” responded the Queen. “Perhaps you should go partake of the wine. It is very fine.”

Knowing she was being dismissed, Mary swept a low curtsy and strode away to find her sister. The query of her rightness in being with the King only managed to dampen her excitement momentarily.
When she no longer saw the Queen, and recalled the heat of François’ eyes upon her, she felt the bloom of desire once again.

“He loves me!” Mary exclaimed, when she found Anne. She took both her sister’s hands. “Oh, Anne! The King loves me, I am quite sure of it!”

Anne squeezed her hands affectionately, but her face was far from a picture of delight. “Who could not,” she began diplomatically, but her voice was tight, controlled, and Mary tensed. “But he lacks the liberty to give his heart away. He is a married man, Mary.”

Snatching her hands away, Mary colored with displeasure. “The Queen…is not all to him that she could be.”

“No,” responded Anne, guardedly. “But she is all that she must be. She is good and gracious and she has given him sons. She is also the late King’s daughter. Besides, I do believe…in their own way…they are well suited. Perhaps not in the ways one most wishes to love a spouse but…They rely upon one another. I fear one could not rule well without the other for very long at all. Their foundation is a firm one, Mary. One that shall not be shaken.”

“This is all very easy for you to say,” growled Mary. “You have never loved a King.” Gathering her skirts, Mary stormed away through the crowd, leaving her sister to her thoughts. Mary was much in need of a cry away from the public eye.

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HENRY TUDOR, PRINCE OF ENGLAND
Chateau d’Amboise, France
September 1519

Harry stalked like a bear, this way and that. From within the music still flowed, but for once in his life, Harry wished it did not. He wished for silence or perhaps a thunderstorm to rake the heavens with the pagan fury of Zeus. Coming to live as guests upon the charity of a pompous king, Harry wanted to hurl something great and powerful or strike at something with all the might in him. Ripping off his mask, he hurled it away. Curse the King of France, curse Bosworth Field, he thought. And curse both Richards, too! Arthur deserved to be King of England, and if not Arthur, he himself would suit very nicely. Oh, yes, he could rule, he imagined. Good King Harry, they would call him and well would he make them love him. For centuries, they would remember King Henry VIII.

But that was foolish, and disloyal too, and Harry banished the thought with a pang of guilt. He did not want to be King, really, for if he were, his brother would be dead, and Henry knew he would trade all the power in the world for one he loved. Heaven forgive me, he thought. For the things I have imagined in anger.

Striding to the battlements, Harry settled his hands upon the cool stone. From here, beneath the light of the moon, he could see all the river and the valley that stretched out beyond. Somewhere bells were ringing merrily and, for half a moment, he allowed himself to imagine the glorious feeling of returning, triumphant, to England. Closing his eyes, he reveled in the half-imagined majesty of the streaming sun glowing down upon him, the cheering crowds, the tolling bells, and the long-lost sense of belonging.

It was gone as soon as it had arrived, that beatific vision, and Harry breathed out his restlessness. Just the Loire, again, a foreign river in a foreign land and himself, a cast-off alien prince far from all he’d once loved. Will I ever go home, again? he wondered, wistful. Even in his own mind, he dared not
entertain an answer. He returned to pacing, again, instead.

Turning away from the parapet, he saw a lady burst out onto the walkway.

“Oh!” she exclaimed in surprise, shrinking back towards the corridor from which she had come. “I… did not think anyone would be here.”

“Mistress Boleyn,” greeted Harry, recognizing the voice of the elder sister. “I apologize most heartily. I did not mean to startle you.”

She seemed to waver, standing there, and Harry realized that she was shivering. Quickly, he plucked out the pins that had transmuted his crimson cape into dragon wings, and pulled the thing off. Approaching, he smiled a warm smile in the darkness. “May I?” he inquired, holding the garment out to her.

Raising her face to his, obscured in the darkness, he detected a small nod, and Harry wrapped the crimson cape around her shoulders. “It seems the cold of September arrives at last,” he commented, forming a smile.

He felt gentle, as if a poke or prod would be too much to bear, and he wanted peace, he craved peace. Oh, he wanted adventure and success and greatness, too, but he did not wish to suffer anymore, and he found in that moment he much liked Mary’s quietness. Harry turned back to put his hands on the battlements again and gaze out to the river which, he knew, ran out to sea, sea, yes, the sea, that would eventually bear him home. “Would you do me a great favor, Mistress Boleyn?”

He heard her approach, coming to stand by his shoulder. “If I may, sir, I shall do my utmost.” There was something strangled in her voice and Harry turned quickly towards her. The light of the moon cast enough upon her face to see that something shone beneath her eyes, sparkling like diamonds. Impulsively, he reached out his hand to touch – but pulled back at the last moment.

“Forgive me,” he said. She was crying, he realized, and he felt suddenly a wide panicking gape in his chest. Had he been selfish?

Mary shook her head. “It is nothing,” she replied with a wave of her hand, and she reached up to brush away her tears.

“Heard her approach, coming to stand by his shoulder. “If I may, sir, I shall do my utmost.” There was something strangled in her voice and Harry turned quickly towards her. The light of the moon cast enough upon her face to see that something shone beneath her eyes, sparkling like diamonds. Impulsively, he reached out his hand to touch – but pulled back at the last moment.

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Mary shook her head. “It is nothing,” she replied with a wave of her hand, and she reached up to brush away her tears.

“Don’t,” said Harry. “A true sensitivity of heart is never a cause for shame.”

He could not discern her expression, but he saw her turn and stare up at him for a time. They shared the silence and he thought, I wish I would weep, too, rather than rage. Still, her distress made him feel so, and he reached out to wrap the cape more securely about her. “Do you prefer to be alone, Mistress Boleyn?”

“No,” she said with great suddenness and paused, bowing her head. “I thought I would but…I find I do not.” She paused and looked back to him. “You spoke of a favor I might do you…”

Harry laughed, not a true laugh, but the laugh of recollection, of discomfiture. He had not meant to impose when she was suffering. “I…only meant to ask you, Mistress Boleyn. Have you been lately to England?”

A silence. She gazed at him and then turned to look out to the river, to the sea – to the sea. “I am sorry to say, I have not been in years. My father was able to secure places for us in the Queen’s household when the late King was wed to…” she paused, apparently ruing something.

Harry leaned against the ramparts. “Yes, I know. You can say it. He wed an English princess – one
of the daughters of the Duke of Clarence – Earl of Warwick as was, I believe.”

“He is King Richard’s heir,” she supplied.

Harry nodded. “In any case, you have still been much more lately to England than have I.”

It was Mary’s turn to nod. “Yes,” she mused. “I suppose I have been.”

“The favor I meant to ask…” he turned towards her slowly. “Would—would you tell me of it, of the things you think of when you think of England? It is a strange request, I suppose, but perhaps not so strange for an exile.” He offered a wan smile and she turned to gaze at him in the darkness once again.

“England…” Mary whispered. “I think of, of Hever: our house, of my family all together at long last. My brother’s laugh, my sister’s teasing, the moat around our little hall, and all that glistening green bathed in sunlight. That is what I think of when I imagine England.” She paused. “And you…if I might make so bold…what do you think when you think of England?”

Harry arched a brow as he lifted his gaze towards the sea. “I think…” he swallowed hard and shook his head as though he should laugh. “Mistress Boleyn, I think of home.”

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ANNE BOLEYN, LADY TO QUEEN CLAUDE OF FRANCE
Chateau d’Amboise, France
September 1519

She felt a pang of guilt. After all, Mary knew that whatever she might feel for François was naturally doomed, didn’t she? Anne wanted only to guard her sister’s heart and expectations, as she doubted François meant to install her as his permanent mistress, but her intent was never to wound.

Anne had the impulse to pursue her sister, but she halted. No sooner had Mary fled, than François approached. Anne could only assume that his pursuit had been Mary, but when he drew near and only Anne remained, he smiled and bowed politely enough. “Might I beg of my lady the next dance?” inquired the King.

Sweeping a curtsy, Anne smiled accommodatingly. “I would be most honored, Your Majesty.”

Taking her hand, the King led her to where the dancing was. “I did not see your sister,” said the King as they began to dance.

“She went for a stroll out on the ramparts, I believe,” supplied Anne. “The press of people was most stifling for her, I fear.”

“I am most sorry to hear it,” he replied. “I hope she will return soon.”

Anne’s smile did not quite reach her eyes. “I hope so, as well, Your Majesty.” She paused, searching for another topic – any other. “I believe the pageant was most successful.”

“Ah, it was a glamorous event, was it not?” he responded, clearly suffused with pleasure. Anne congratulated herself on having alit upon an appropriate alternate tack. “I think our Princes were most diverted,” he added, careful eyes resting on her.

Anne smiled towards him. She knew well and good his measuring regard, wished to see the impact harboring the Tudors would have upon the English. Anne met his curious stare with her most
disarming smile. “Who could help but be delighted?”

The King smiled, too, though he had been at this turn thwarted. He sallied back a response, quickly enough. “They are most lively youths. You know, I did observe them speaking with your good self on another occasion.”

“Will you know me?” Anne heard Henry’s voice and, discreetly, she scanned the attendees for his figure. “It is always most diverting to speak with a countryman when far from home,” replied Anne.

“Yet I can’t help wondering…was it diversion of which you spoke?”

She could hardly evade so direct a question while still maintaining the equanimity so necessary in discourse with a king. “We did speak of the masque,” she replied. “We also spoke of King Richard.”

“Ah, King Richard,” François nodded agreeably and Anne knew well enough they had at last touched upon the subject which most interested him. “How does the English king fare?”

“Your Majesty, my father would be much better abreast of such subjects…I have only direct contact with members of my own family in England.”

Unperturbed, François continued on. “I do hope King Richard remains as dedicated to the longevity of peace with France as ever. It is always best when two sovereigns can most agree.”

Anne paused, catching his eye. His brow was probing as he sought, she knew, to read her expression. He meant to catch her out and, just now, she thought perhaps he even threatened. Yes, indeed, he viewed the House of Tudor as a most formidable weapon. Anne swallowed. “Your Majesty knows that I am but a young girl, far from home,” she said, finally, in her most innocent tones. “I cannot pretend to know of such lofty matters. I know only that His Grace the King of England plans still to meet with Your Majesty, which I can only imagine means he feels no animosity towards France.”

François’s smile was a tight thing, shriveled and lean, and Anne could not help but wonder: was Mary, daughter of the English ambassador, just another weapon in his arsenal? And where he collected so many weapons, were his intentions towards England really so amicable as he claimed? An alliance between France and Spain, Anne meditated, could prove disastrous for their little isle.

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HENRY TUDOR, PRINCE OF ENGLAND
Chateau d’Amboise, France
September 1519

Oh, heady gaze. As Harry and Mary returned together to the Great Hall, Harry spotted François and Anne dancing once more, gazes locked intensely. Stopping dead, he glared at them. Beside him, Mary stopped as well, turning to look up at him, still wrapped in his cloak.

“Is something amiss?” she inquired.

Shaking his head, Harry smiled towards her and offered her his hand. “Would you care to dance, Mistress Boleyn?”

Her brows were drawn together in some concern, but forming a half-smile of her own, she placed her hand in his. “I would be most honored.”

Leading her to the dancing, Harry realized that François’ glance was now fixed on them. Harry’s
attention was recaptured when she turned back to him, offering his cloak. “Thank you for the use of
this garment in the cold. I don’t think I can manage it during a dance.”

“It was my pleasure to be of service,” responded Harry, reclaiming the cape, only to place it aside as
he led her to the vacant spot in the dance beside François – who still openly contemplated them – and
Anne, who most carefully was not looking at them.

Though he was dancing with Anne, François glanced over to them, to Mary. “Mistress Boleyn, here,
says it is most diverting to speak with a countryman. Would you agree?”

The elder Boleyn offered a small smile, first towards Harry and then back to the French king. “Most
assuredly, Your Majesty. I have not spoken so of England in a very long time.”

François turned his attention back to Anne, drawing her in with a great smile and laughter. Harry and
Mary both grimaced.

Mary’s skirts swept Harry’s boots as they whirled about in a grand galliard, and he chose to make the
most of the situation, though neither Anne nor François would now look towards them.

Mary was a beautiful lady, indeed, blond and fair, with full lips and handsome cheeks. The whole of
her face was proportioned for grace, an oval set with large emeralds for eyes, and thin, rounded
brows that set them off to best advantage. Her eyelashes were thick, a black sweep that emphasized
the eyes, and Harry thought Mary was one of the most gorgeous ladies he had ever met.

As the pace of the music quickened (another galliard), Harry grinned, springing alongside her, faster
and faster till she laughing and grasping him tightly, lest she be swept away. Her lively face lit up
with joy and Harry responded to it genuinely, laughing. And then the lavolta. His eyes met hers with
a quirk of his brows and she grinned towards him. Poising for a leap, Harry acted swiftly, lifting her
up, his thigh supporting hers, as she leapt, his hands around her waist, hers on his shoulder, and she
was smiling, smiling, smiling through it all.

“Excellent exercise,” she said breathlessly, as he set her down. Her face held a becoming pink blush.

“I should say so,” responded Harry, grinning. “Excellent, indeed.” He felt eyes burning into his back
and turned to the couple beside him. Both François and Anne stared and, laughing, Harry leaned
close to Mary. “I’d wager,” he whispered. “We’re having rather a better time than they are.”

Giggling, Mary shot a glance towards them and arched a brow towards him. “That should teach
them to neglect us,” she responded coquettishly, in the same hushed tone, and they laughed together.
Pointedly, both François and Anne looked away again.

He laughed, but, blackly, Harry imaged the King of France touching Anne as Harry had touched the
sister. He pictured again how he’d lifted her during the pageant and, as this dance came to a close, he
realized he had no more taste for dancing at all tonight.

Bowing to Mary, he was about to make his excuses, when her sister approached. Beseechingly,
Anne gazed at her sister. There was something open, disarming in the deep brown of her orbs,
something so intimate he half felt as though he should look away, though he stood transfixed.
Stubbornly, Mary glanced away from Anne, she said: “Good evening, my lord,” to Harry and turned
on her heel to walk away.

Dropping her head, Anne focused her pleading expression on the floor before her, unseeing. Harry
felt clumsy and helpless, left standing by her, watching her forlorn features form a tragedy upon her
face. *Diversion, perhaps*, he thought. And he turned towards her.
“I do believe I promised you a dance tonight,” he pointed out.

Startled, she looked up at him, her face momentarily unguarded. She was a picture of vulnerability, one brow half-quirked, deep eyes formed into upheaval, her high forehead wrinkled with hurt and anxiety, but quickly she mastered herself. Quickly, she formed her usual courtly smile. “So you did,” she responded, softly.

Anne’s hand was small in his own, warm and comfortable, as though it were built to fit just where it was. Her eyes were electric, burning out all else, and he found himself smiling down at her. Her own expression was a thing of uncertainty, as they went out to the dance floor.

“One dance,” she said.

“One dance,” he agreed.

“Slow,” she added, quickly. “Sedate.”

“Slow and sedate.” He nodded. “This pavane should suit.”

Anne nodded, too, absently, as though she were far away or hardly heard him, and she shot glances everywhere away: towards her sister, towards François, towards the general crowd. “Did you enjoy dancing with my sister?” she inquired, suddenly, brow fanning into a frown.

“I did,” he replied. “Though no doubt less than you enjoyed dancing with the King of France.”

She frowned, eyes darting away again. “He is an excellent dancer.”

“And the galliard is a most…exciting dance.”

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ANNE BOLEYN, LADY TO QUEEN CLAUDE OF FRANCE
Chateau d’Amboise, France
September 1519

He had arrested her attention. Anne darted her gaze towards him, eyes narrowing with vexation. “What do you imply, Master Tudor?”

“Master Tudor,?” Henry made a small sound of annoyance deep in his throat. “Back to this, are we?”

“I did not anticipate rudeness,” she continued. “If I had, I might not have agreed to a dance.”

“Am I to take as your meaning that…you did not enjoy dancing with the King of France?”

Anne regarded him with narrowed eyes. “I enjoy dancing, but I should not consider it worth making much over.”

“Is that altogether a charitable comment, Mistress Boleyn?” inquired Henry. Anne frowned deeply. Was he teasing her or truly trying to catch her out? “I can’t imagine His Majesty would thank you for that comment.”

“And indeed I did not mean to court his gratitude,” responded Anne, carefully.

“What do you seek, Mistress Boleyn?” His voice was soft as he leaned close, blue eyes bright spheres of curiosity. His face was close as he bowed to her, as part of the dance, and Anne tilted her
head.

“At this moment, to divine your meaning,” she replied, guardedly. “One moment you seem to imply one thing, the next something entirely other. I cannot make you out.”

“Then,” he said. “In this moment our purposes are united. I want better to understand your character.”

“Perhaps, then, I ought to hint: I do not enjoy this manner of probing.”

Henry nodded, pausing as they both stopped to salute the King and Queen. “Then how better to comprehend you?”

“Seek not to entrap me, sir,” she responded. “I have no fondness for a cage.”

There was something cheeky in his grin and she exhaled slowly. “I will free you, then, Mistress Boleyn, if you will allow me.”

“And how, sir, do you plan to do this?”

“Daily, Mistress Boleyn, with your consent. I will endeavor to make you laugh.”

Despite herself, she grinned, biting back a laugh. How ridiculous, she thought, but her smile only widened. “If it is to be challenge, sir, I will rise to it. I shall try not to laugh.”

Henry arched his brows. “Uncharitable,” he commented, but his lips twitched into bemusement.

“Tell me what you like best, Mistress Boleyn. Your eyes hold many secrets, methinks. I wish to puzzle them out. Where may I begin in catering to your pleasure?”

“No secrets, sir, that are not easily divined. Do you ask about my passions?”

“I do,” he said. “Where better to start?”

“Books,” stated Anne. “I dearly love to read. Letters, poetry. I want to know, to think, to learn, always.”

“Hungry eyes,” commented Henry. “It is as I said.” And he smiled, that broad golden grin Anne had come half to hate for how it effected her, radiant like sunshine. He knows it, too, she considered, catching her breath. Well he knows it.

“What do you know of my eyes, sir?”

“More than you do, I daresay, for I have occasion often to see them. They are lustrous things, half-perplexing, half-tormenting. But most of all, Mistress Boleyn, they fascinate.”

“Fascinate?” asked Anne, arching a brow. “At last you say something of them I think I could like. I find I enjoy the notion of fascinating.”

He smiled, then, and she smiled, too. “As you should,” he replied. “I am not easily captivated.”

I sincerely doubt that, thought Anne, glancing towards all the other glittering ladies of the court, and picturing how easily he had lifted her sister. She arched a dubious brow. “We will see,” she retorted, chuckling, and he smirked.

“And there,” proclaimed Henry, triumphantly. “You see: I have succeeded.” Anne’s glance was a question. “You laughed.”
Anne arched a gentle brow towards him, bemusement clear to read upon her upturned face. “For all the mystery you implied there would be, you are not difficult to recognize, this evening,” she teased. “Without a mask.”

“I left my mask…” Harry remembered. “When Mistress Boleyn and I…”

Anne cleared her throat. “No matter,” she said. “I do know you, and easily.”

Bitterly, Henry, recollected how intimately François lifted Kindness above him... “And I knew you.”

Chapter End Notes

The title of the chapter comes from one of Henry VIII's love letters to Anne Boleyn, where he signs his name with the motto "autre ne cherche" appended, meaning Henry "looks for no other," which seemed thematically appropriate to this chapter.

Anne's virtue "Perseverance" and Mary's virtue "Kindness" were picked in a nod to a pageant in which they performed soon after Anne returned to England from France.

If you're looking for a visual version of lavolta performed accurately, Sir Walter Raleigh and Bess Throckmorton do one in Elizabeth: The Golden Age. Fun fact: it was also said to be one of Elizabeth's favorite dances.
Chapter Summary

“Everything, everything we use is his!” declared Harry, blackly.

Chapter Notes

The title of this piece is from Thomas Wyatt's poem about Anne Boleyn, Whoso List to Hunt. It means, "Do not touch me." The entire line reads, "Noli me tangere, for Caesar's I am."

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

CATHERINE OF YORK, COUNTESS OF DEVON
Palace of Placentia, England
September 1519

Wrapping fingers across the time-polished tabletop, Catherine regarded her brother. In his mid-forties, he now looked much as her father had at a similar age. In a dream, she might easily have mistaken one for the other. Now, though, with his restless pacing – this way, that way – she felt as though she’d strayed into a memory.

“Why with such splendor does he entertain these wretched fugitives?” demanded Richard, the King of England, and Catherine gnawed her lip thoughtfully. Having once been a wretched fugitive, herself, she reflected, he no doubt had a better answer ready than she.

“François is testing you,” said Catherine. She watched her own drumming fingers listlessly, as though they did not belong to her. “He will find you equal to the challenge.”

“More the fool he,” commented Richard, savagely.

Great of temper was he, and great of heart, much like their father, but there was something in him always clawing towards the surface – something Catherine scarcely trusted. Yet, now, it was only they two and Elizabeth – scattered to the continent – left of all their siblings. Whatever else may be, Catherine could not leave Richard. Saving her children, she now had little else left to love.

The King continued to rant: “If he means to make war against us, we shall not sit idle.”

“I doubt war with England is his goal,” pointed out Catherine, a tad bit cross.

Round and round this conversation went, reeling like a drunken sailor, and she wished she herself might pluck the Tudors out of France simply to relieve the tedium. Compassion, Cecily had always counseled: compassion and care in dealing with their long-lost brother. Through much Richard had come and it was natural he should fear, she would say, but Catherine felt little of that patience now. Certainly, Cecily had displayed little enough of it, herself.
Catherine tilted her head. “What says the Queen?” she inquired, hoping to alter the subject slightly.

“The same as Cecily used to tell me,” responded Richard, turning back towards her. “She advises me to unite Dickon with a Spanish princess.”

“And Cardinal Wolsey advises the same,” coaxed Catherine. She did her best to sound more encouraging than cross.

She considered Dickon. Son of Edward of Warwick who had been so long imprisoned in the Tower (now Duke of Clarence, as once his father had been) and Cecily of York, Dickon would one day be the King of England. He was willful and boastful and untested, but a goodly youth: lively, fair, and intelligent. Oh, yes, the Kingmaker had made a king, there, indeed, even if he had never lived to see him.

“Do not seek to defend what already has been lost,” said Catherine. “Fight! Fight and fight and fight and win it back, else lose it you most assuredly shall.”

Richard’s eyes were cool, then, as he stood silhouetted against the windows. The sun peaked from behind a cloud, washing him in heat, and Catherine thought of her father.

*The sun in splendor* she thought. Golden rays streamed all around Richard’s darkened form like a nimbus and Catherine felt a chill. “I heard François was in talks to wed Catherine of Aragon to one of his own,” he pointed out.

“Then, I think,” observed Catherine, softly. “You’ve found already a battleground from which to commence.”

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**ANNE BOLEYN, LADY TO QUEEN CLAUDE OF FRANCE**

Chateau de Blois, France

*September 1519*

*Insufferable man!* thought Anne for the umpteenth time that day, and again, sweetly: *Gentle soul.* She thought she hated that about him: Henry was at once everything and nothing, a maddening frenzy of haphazard traits, shuttled into a becoming package and tied up with a bow that read *Prince.* Even he seemed to suffer from his own personality, plagued by its eddies and currents. And most of all, his brother suffered. How many times in her own experience had Henry blatantly ignored the man he thought his king to pursue his own will? No reliable loyalty was Henry’s.

Mary plucked at the strings on Anne’s gown determinedly, tightening and tying, chatting away about the tourney. A hand struck across her abdomen, Anne nodded, though she only half-listened.

“Mary,” began Anne, slowly. “What shall we tell father of the Tudors?”

Her hands ceased in their rhythm, chatter dying on her tongue. When she spoke, her tenor was hesitant, as though the words pained her. “They’re very kind, Anne,” she supplied, slowly. “And, if I didn’t know better, I might even say the younger one fancies you.”

Turning to look her sister in the eye, Anne nodded. “He essentially told me so, himself, on many occasions – though never in so many words. I can’t banish the thought…that his attentions may be based more in an attempt to glean information than anything.”

Mary was silent, sucking in her lips as she gazed at Anne in a way she had done from childhood. Anne knew what it meant.

“You want to say something,” sighed Anne, sinking down onto the bed they shared.
Slowly, Mary sat down beside her. “Nan, is our want of information the reason you endure his attentions? Or…”

Abruptly, Anne stood again. The dormitory was empty, save for them, and it seemed now suddenly eerie, as though they were ghosts that haunted a half-forgotten memory. Anne waved her hand and said, “Of course,” in a tone that convinced neither of them. She grasped the back of her neck with both her hands and absently peered upwards. All she could think of was his broad grin, so intent, so greedy for treasure that would never be his.

“Have you wondered if he merely wants information for long?” asked Mary, softly, unobtrusively.

Anne stood unmoved as the question bounced through her mind. “I think not,” she began slowly, and slowly she let down her hands. Slowly she turned back to her sister. “I don’t believe it occurred to me, as it should have, till after the masque. You both went out and…returned together.” Anne flattened a hand against her abdomen. “Mary, what happened out on the parapets, that night?” Anne paused. “Did he try to charm you?” she asked. Did he succeed? she wondered.

His eyes were a quagmire into which one could too easily trip, never to find a way out. His smile was all that was needed to disarm. He must, she was sure, have practiced this priceless art. Charm, she imagined, must be necessary to afford comforts for a landless prince.

Mary was shifting, then she was standing. Both her hands were flattened against her abdomen and she gazed, green-eyed, onward. “Nan,” she began. “I love François.”

Pressing her eyes shut, Anne turned away once again. François does not deserve you, thought Anne. Busily she brushed her fingers through her brunette hair and reached for her hood, in the French style.

“How?” demanded Anne. “In what way did he console?”

“He spoke of home.”

“What does he know of home?” growled Anne, irritably. “He has none!”

“Nan,” Mary’s voice was soft, half-pleading. “That is the issue.”

“Why do you pity him? We are very far from home, as well!”

“But, Anne, don’t you see? We can go back!”

Anne did see, but it didn’t suit her, just then, and she chose to focus on adjusting the final elements of her dress. “He was asking about England, I see. All this time, all he wanted from us was a little information. Beware of Henry Tudor, Mary,” warned Anne, eyeing her sister over her shoulder. “He is not to be trusted.”

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HENRY TUDOR, PRINCE OF ENGLAND
Chateau d’Amboise, France
September 1519

“At the end of the week is to be the great tourney,” Arthur was saying. “Are you quite in readiness?”
Harry was staring at the borrowed armor hollowly. It seemed to mock him, laughing from its height down upon him. “We have our own armor,” he said.

“Yes,” replied Arthur, tone weary with all the world’s patience. “But, as I have said endlessly before now, it comes slowly with our mother and sisters. It will not be here in time.”

“Other men have armor from whom we might borrow.”

“But not of the right proportions. His Majesty, François, is the closest to us in height.”

“Everything, everything we use is his!” declared Harry, blackly. “I don’t like it!”

Arthur’s expression was blank with irritation. “Shocking,” he commented, tone clipped. Harry wished fervently that Arthur would hit him, rather than mocking him, but this had always been so. It grated. On both of them. Harry heard Arthur approaching from behind. “If there’s anything else you need for the tournament, I suggest you see to it, today.”

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FRANÇOIS I, KING OF FRANCE
Chateau d’Amboise, France
September 1519

The King of France paced first one way, then back the other. “The nerve!” he exclaimed. The pages scattered about him exchanged glances. Out of the corner of his eye, François noted them, half-cowered, and he waved an impatient hand towards them. “Out, out!”

He tried to sit, drumming his fingers against the table, but almost at once burst up out of his seat, again. Reports of secret meetings between England and Spain streamed from across the continent and back. That fool, Richard, was once again entertaining Spanish ministers when François held his rival in his very palm. Yes, and that, itself, had unforeseen repercussions!

It seemed too much to imagine the rumors were true: could it be that this young Tudor – his own guest! plucked by François out of hopeless obscurity! – truly had designs on François’ own mistress? Yet, he’d seen them at the masque with his own eyes, traipsing along, alone, together from the darkened corners. And Mary wearing Henry’s cloak, no less! François could hardly imagine a greater act of impudence, after all François had done for him! For Henry Tudor to have designs on his own mistress…François quaked with anger.

Rubbing the bridge of his nose, François meditated upon the future. The exact action he had meant to forestall had somehow gone forward. François asked himself if it could it be that Richard simply did not care an inkling about the Tudors. How could an upstart king be so careless?

People chose now to believe that he was, indeed, the son of Edward IV because he was in power, which made the belief convenient. Yet, as soon as Arthur displayed any real chance of success, the old questions would certainly resurface. Arthur, whose youth made the succession so much certain – and even in absence of a son, had a clear successor in his brother, rather than a nephew from a previously attainted line with still other nephews still waiting in the wings. Arthur was the surer choice, which the English would certainly appreciate, having emerged so lately from civil wars. François wondered - was this Richard so blind or naïve as to neglect those facts? François did not think it possible that he may not realize his followers may someday turn on him. François, himself, didn’t believe in Richard’s supposed heritage – though he frankly did not care. If Richard had not succeeded in assuring his fellow monarchs, how could he possibly have secured the faith of his people?
Now, François could not possibly dispel the Tudors, given the precarious political situation. He had two options, as he saw it. Either he could sell the Tudors to Richard in exchange for a cessation of talks with Spain (something to which he did not imagine so careless a king would agree) and perhaps a little money, as soon as the mother and sisters arrived in France. Or, if the talks continued, François could launch an invasion, backing Arthur, and thus strike at both Spain and England, at once.

“My God,” he muttered, dispiritedly. What was it to be? Who would his ultimate English ally be? Richard, or Arthur?

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HENRY TUDOR, PRINCE OF ENGLAND
Chateau de Blois, France
September 1519

“Mistress Boleyn!” His shout rang out across the courtyard as Harry jogged forward. All of the ladies stopped. Two turned and stared. Slowing to a halt, Harry flashed a smile. “Mistress Anne Boleyn,” he specified. “Might I claim a privy word?”

The two ladies exchanged glances and slowly, one came forward. Anne dropped a curtsy when she stood before him and Harry bowed in return. “How did you come to be here?” she inquired, shaking her head.

“I took one of the King’s horses, by his leave, and begged the Queen’s permission to speak to yourself.”

“And what did you cite as the purpose of this errand?” she inquired, tilting her head. Her brown eyes sparkled as she arched a brow and Harry smiled. A challenge she was, not easy to crack.

“My mission, Mistress Boleyn, is twofold.” Harry offered a smile, the inviting sort, and extracted a tiny book from the pouch slung across his belt. “For you,” he said. “You told me you loved to read. It’s a gift.”

Brow wrinkled, Anne accepted the book, turning it over with her delicate fingers, and running an admiring hand across the leather-and-gilt cover. “This is a costly volume,” she began, softly, holding it back out to him. “I cannot accept such a gift.”

“At least read it,” he said. “I told you: I mean to make you out. Tell me if you like it, then you can decide whether to keep it or whether to return it.”

Her expression was unreadable, save for the blazing eyes that studied him, intent and resolute. At last she nodded. “I will read it,” she said, and folded it into her own pouch. “What was the other item of business to which you alluded?”

He laughed, a self-conscious sort, and looked her in the eye. His heart hammered against his ribs and he wished, fervently, it would stop. He needed, now, to focus. “To make you laugh, again, perhaps. Mistress Boleyn, I wonder if at the tournament tomorrow I might wear your favor. But know, if you should refuse me, I shall be most dejected.”

Anne did laugh, her brows shooting upwards as she looked away and back again. “I cannot work out, Master Tudor-“ he exhaled sharply just then. “What you can be thinking in asking me this after you made such a spectacle with my sister out alone upon the ramparts! All the court is gossiping about it.” Anne shook her head. “Do not imagine I am that sort of woman.”

“Do you think so little of your sister as to entertain suspicions against us?”
“My suspicions are entirely against you, sir, I assure you! What are your designs against my sister?”

Harry shook his head. “None! Mistress Boleyn, you misinterpret what happened. We only talked…”


“Then already you know all,” responded Harry, frostily, stepping forward. She did not back away. Her eyes were a blaze, locked with his, and Harry could not make out if he wished to shout or to kiss her, full and lustily, on the lips.

“You say so, yet was it not you who invited her to dance lavolta with you? Lavolta!”

“Mistress Boleyn, if I did not know better, I might imagine you to be…” his lips curled into a smile. “Jealous. Besides, how can you think to blame me what you, yourself, did? I might’ve asked you to dance, had you not already found a very agreeable partner in the King of France!”

“One does not refuse a king,” replied Anne.

“But you would, I think,” Harry nodded. “Yes, you would, if it suited you or your conscience.”

“What do you pretend to know of my conscience?”

“Only that it is strong enough to chastise me for dancing lavolta with your sister, while releasing you from any blame in having done just the same.”

“You mistake me, sir,” objected Anne, hastily. “It is not the dance that offends me. It is your conduct, in pursuing first one sister and then the other, as though we had no mind to see it, as though we did not see your true intent!”

“Are you so shameless,” he demanded. “As to say this to me when you so freely give your heart first one way then the other?”

Anne shook her head. “I do not understand you. Explain, sir!”

Harry took a step back, shaking his own head. The image of her held so intimately by François was indelibly stamped upon his mind, replaying again and again and again behind his eyes. “I am neither blind nor deaf, Mistress Boleyn.”

Scoffing, she too took a step back. “I do not consent, sir, to give you my favor. Good day.”

Whirling, she sped away, leaving Harry to watch her go.

_I will win this tourney_, swore Henry. _And every other battle after that. Let us see then who the champion shall be: England or France._

Chapter End Notes

Not to fear, my friends! This jealousy/mistaken identity subplot is about to climax and end, but it has a few important ramifications to play out first... ;D

Also, I know it might have been a little confusing, so if you were wondering: Catherine of York was the last surviving child of Edward IV and Elizabeth Woodville in history, dying in 1527. This makes her the sibling of both Richard of Shrewsbury and Elizabeth
of York and, since the rest of Catherine's siblings were historically all dead by this time, these three are the only ones left.

The reference to the Kingmaker (Richard Neville) is made because he was the father-in-law of George Plantagenet and therefore the Kingmaker is the great-grandfather of Dickon of Warwick (a fictitious personage).
Elle Mon Coeur a Navera

Chapter Summary

“A little less pride might do you good, Harry,” replied his brother, watching as a page buckled on his armor. “But I wish you luck all the same.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

ANNE BOLEYN, LADY TO QUEEN CLAUDE OF FRANCE
Chateau d’Amboise, France
September 1519

The lists were an exciting spectacle, rigged up with wooden pillars and draped with cloth to shade those who watched. Queen Claude sat in judgment of the event with the senior courtiers, for the King himself had chosen to take part in the joust. Arrayed around the Queen, her ladies sat fanning themselves in the unseasonable heat. Anne listened absently to the buzz of conversation, faintly aware that she was being addressed.

The lists loomed, marked by a single pole running down the center of a long track, all around which a ring of high walls had been constructed to seat the eager audience. The hum of conversation was long and loud, buzzing around Anne like an irritating gnat. However excited everyone else was, Anne felt as though it were all happening to someone else. In her mind, she was still living out the conversation she’d had with Henry Tudor.

It had been most impolitic, she too late realized, to fly into such a fury. Rather, she ought to have forborne, to have witnessed, perhaps even to have accepted – what wrong could it have wrought to have given him a favor and asked no more of it? Her only impetus, she reminded herself, had always been to come to an understanding of his character and that of his brother. Yet, she had forborne on account of the more important piece – that very brother – in seeking out the younger sibling. Already, she had hampered her purpose – ruin, then, to cast away the one expertise she had left in sorting out Henry.

Feeling a hand on her shoulder, Anne jumped and turned quickly to see Mary smiling indulgently. “I did not mean to startle you,” she informed. “I only wanted to ask…what was the book?”

Anne’s expression was momentarily blank, “The book…”

“The book that Henry Tudor gave you to read – what was it?”

Reaching into her pouch, she drew out the leather bound volume and passed it to Mary. “There it is,” she supplied, softly. “I confess… I forgot about it after our… encounter. I was most cross and…”

“Yet,” replied her sister, arching her brow. “You put it on today and made no remark of the weight.” Mary’s expression was indulgent and she smiled towards her sister. Gently, Mary opened the little tome, leafing through the exquisite pages. “This is a book fit for a king,” she breathed.

Leaning over her sister’s shoulder, Anne peered at the volume. The words were scrawled in a most
neat and beautiful hand across the page, whose borders were decorated with fine drawings and letters. Anne touched its corners gently. They were worn, crinkled here and there, but carefully repaired. “This book has been read many times.”

“This book,” responded Mary. “Is well-loved, yet it was given away.” Closing it, Mary passed it back to Anne. “Is it indeed the gift of someone who meant only to experience political gain?”

Anne placed the book into her lap and folded her hands over it. No, the answer came into her mind unbidden, but she thought that senseless. “Perhaps he…was tired of it.”

“Anne,” Mary’s tone was gentle, coaxing. “Do you imagine Henry Tudor could now realistically replace this volume? It is a costly thing and he must put all of value he has left into an effort to survive or to return home. Not into commissioning books. I daresay this gift cost him more, for all that, than it might have cost most anyone else to give the same gift. Whether he has read it recently or no, this volume is to him and to his family a treasure, and God knows he has few enough of those left to him. Ask yourself, then, sister, why he should give such a thing to you.”

“He didn’t give it to me,” objected Anne.

“Ah, but that was his intent, was it not?”

Anne did not respond, peering off towards the list yard absently. Tightly she clutched the precious volume, but dared offer no response. There was none left to give, and there was blessed distraction on the field.

The tournament was begun.

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ARTHUR TUDOR, KING OF ENGLAND
Chateau d’Amboise, France
September 1519

“You best get into your armor,” advised Arthur. “I doubt as this shall take very long.”

“Later,” said Harry, waving a careless hand. He peered at his brother. “You look…testy,” pointed out Harry, narrowing his eyes. His face was a broad, measuring stare as he stood, arms folded over his chest, like Cerberus guarding the mouth of hell.

Arthur sighed, casting an expression towards the back of the tent. “I’m up against François.”

Harry shrugged. He was moody, and had been in a mood for some days, but Arthur wasn’t particularly surprised. With Harry, it was always a matter of time before a good mood became foul and Arthur had learned long ago to navigate the eddies and currents of his personality.

“He is our host,” pointed out Arthur. “And, at the moment, much of our hope rests upon his shoulders.”

“Oh, yes,” growled Harry. “We owe our knighted French King all honor and glory. Tell me, once you are installed upon your throne, shall you still kiss his foot? The Conqueror did not perform such obeisance to the French King after the Conquest.”

“King William’s position hardly resembled ours at all,” replied Arthur. He beckoned pages to buckle the remainder of his armor.
“So you intend to throw the list?” Harry furrowed his brows thoughtfully and — Arthur thought — angrily. “Strike true,” advised Harry. “Hit François dead in the chest and throw him from his horse. If I were a king, I should not like to be treated falsely.”

“If you were a king,” observed Arthur, putting on his helmet. “You should like to win.”

With his armor on, Arthur turned and walked out of the tent. Attendant pages helped him mount his horse and Arthur rode towards the starting point. Across the path, he was faced with the glinting form of a knight, tall as himself, mounted upon a white charger. The horse pawed at the raw earth as Arthur’s own mount did.

Leaning forward in his seat, Arthur accepted the lance the pages handed up to him and settled his arm against his weight. In the stands, the Queen lifted a fleur-de-lis embroidered kerchief…and let it flutter to the ground.

Arthur was off. His steed took its head, ramming forward. Wind zipped past, buzzing through his helmet. Lance ready, Arthur leaned forward, ready to greet his kingly opponent. It was a heavy thing, that lance, and unwieldy, but he was ready. Arthur felt every beat of the horse’s hooves jolting him, rattling his armor. Across the yard, François neared, lance bared. Arthur angled his own in response. Harry’s words whispered in the back of his head, _If I were a king, I should not like to be treated falsely._ Arthur gritted his teeth. He hovered, ready to stab at the king; ready to flinch away at the last moment. The king was upon him.

Lifting his heavy lance, Arthur aimed it for François’s shoulder — as the French king’s lance slammed into him. It was a black crash, that for an instant spattered Arthur’s vision with blackness and motes of strange color, and then he was falling, rolling over his horse, crashing. His head hit the ground with a thud. Arthur heard the roar of the crowd, the scream of his horse…and then he heard nothing.

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FRANÇOIS I, KING OF FRANCE
Chateau d’Amboise, France
September 1519

Henry Tudor was off with a running start. Darting past the gasping pages, François watched as he raced out onto the field, vaulting over the pole that ran across the center, and came to his knees at his brother’s side.

“Arthur!” he cried, pushing hovering pages aside, and tugging at the straps that held on his brother’s helm. Unfastening these, he yanked the helmet off. His brother’s eyes were closed; he did not stir. “Arthur! Arthur!” Harry grasped his face in both hands. “He’s clammy,” he muttered, and suddenly pulled one away. It was red. “There’s blood!” Fear — cold and hard — scrawled the younger Tudor’s face. “There’s _blood_!”

François rode up to the scene, dismounting quickly as he came close. Slamming his visor upwards, he peered down at the prone form of the would-be King of England. Physicians speckled the field, now, kneeling all around the fallen knight. François watched as Henry cradled his brother’s head on his lap and barked instructions to those who tended him, as though he himself were either king or physician. But they were shooing him and Henry backed away. His expression had turned distant, a mask of horrified disbelief.

François felt suddenly heavy, a listlessness akin to fainting, and he stretched out a conciliatory hand to touch Henry’s shoulder…only to watch him start and feel him jerk away. The prince turned to see who had touched him. His stare was a brand, burning away sinews, his face transformed from horror.
to scowl, and Henry turned to stare hard towards the limp form of his brother.

François’ hand felt hot through the padding and the armor, as though it had been scalded, and he dropped it to his side. His cheeks were heated and his whole face seemed to go up, fanned into flame. He wanted to reprimand the prince; he wanted to offer him Christian charity in recompense for striking his king – his brother – into the ground.

“God will rescue him, one way or another,” said François, searching limply for words of comfort, and when Henry turned his blue eyes back upon him, François saw that tears stood out in them. He said, “God’s will be done.”

“No,” whispered Henry, turning once more towards his brother. His expression was a black thing, and forbidding. “God and my will.”

***

HENRY TUDOR, PRINCE OF ENGLAND
Chateau d’Amboise, France
September 1519

“Tell me something!” demanded Harry. “Quickly!”

The physicians hovered around Arthur like loathsome moths, whispering and counter-whispering, their furtive words covered by the too-loud murmur of the crowd. In the stands, onlookers jockeyed for position, hoping to see. Some even came down, gathering for a better view, but Harry knew well enough they would still see nothing. He, himself, saw nothing and he stood just beside his brother.

“He is alive,” said one of the physicians, finally.

Dropping to his knees, Harry folded his hands in prayer, gazing towards heaven. “Thank you,” he said to God. “Thank you.”

“But, clearly, he has sustained an injury.” Harry dropped his hands to stare irritably at the doctors.

“That,” he growled, getting back to his feet and pushing one of them aside. “Was never in question. Tell me of this injury! Assess it!”

“He is bleeding,” said another of the doctors. “But only from the head, not from the chest – though, no doubt, he is bruised.”

Harry buried his head in his hands. He wanted very much to scream. Turning back to them, he threw his arms up. “Will he recover? When? Can you tell me anything of use?” Kneeling once more at his brother’s side, Harry seized up one of his hands, kneading it in his own. “Arthur!” he exclaimed. “Arthur, rise! Speak to me! Arthur!”

He stirred. Moving his head ever so slightly, Arthur made a low moan that might have been a word.

“What?” whispered Harry. His throat was closed, choked. Arthur’s hand was leathery, and not warm enough. “Of course I’m all right! You-“
“I heard you calling…” Arthur grunted as he tried to move. Harry threw out a stabilizing hand, touching his brother’s shoulder. “I thought… I thought you were hurt.”

Arthur struggled to sit up and Harry pulled him close, wrapping him into a warm embrace. Harry buried his head against his brother’s shoulder, and wept.

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Arthur took one look at Harry’s badge and rolled his eyes. Despite everything, Harry chuckled and clapped his brother’s shoulder. “Wish me success out there, brother. God knows I’ve lost all I care to loose this fortnight. I’ve no desire to loose my pride, too.”

“A little less pride might do you good, Harry,” replied his brother, watching as a page buckled on his armor. “But I wish you luck all the same.” His smile was rueful, rendered all the more pathetic by the white swaddling bandage wrapped around his head. He licked his lips. “But…” he winced, touched his head gingerly. “You remember what we discussed, before? You remember… how to treat a king. It’s just you against François out there, now. You remember…” There was a frustrated look on Arthur’s face, born of something Harry could not guess.

Touching his brother’s shoulder, Harry grinned. “I’ve no intention of leaving the lists quite so dramatically as you did, brother,” he replied. “But if I treat François as he treated a king this afternoon, France will be left the more sorrowful for it.”

Arthur shook his head. “I cannot hope, in my muddled state, to make out whatever that means, but I pray you take the wiser route, Harry. We need him.”

“We need you,” replied Harry, squeezing Arthur’s shoulder. He rested his brow against Arthur’s for a moment before pulling away. “Nothing more.”

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ANNE BOLEYN, LADY TO QUEEN CLAUDE OF FRANCE
Chateau de Blois, France
September 1519

After Arthur had been cleared away, it was declared that the joust would continue. The final contestants were to be Henry Tudor and François. The book Henry had given Anne had sunk in her lap amongst the folds of her dress, but she felt it there, still, resting hard against her thigh. Anne clutched it tightly, knuckles white, as the horses were led out and the knights mounted up.

Over his armor, Henry wore a simple white tunic; on it the words had been picked out in almost-sloppy embroidery – faintly, Anne wondered if he’d done it, himself – She Has Wounded My Heart where a badge out to be. When she felt Mary’s hand on her own, she knew her sister had read it, too. Around them, whispers sprang up everywhere, and Anne knew all the court had read the motto. She flattened her hands over the cover of the book and gazed on.

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HENRY TUDOR, PRINCE OF ENGLAND
Chateau d’Amboise, France
September 1519

His stallion – the very same Arthur had ridden just before – was a tall horse, gleaming coat black, and marked by a shock of white across his brow. The creature tossed its head, whinnying hollowly and Harry patted his neck.
“I know,” he said, softly. “I feel the same.”

Mounting up, Harry adjusted himself in the saddle, testing the way the horse moved beneath him. He scarcely felt so alive as when matched with a spirited horse and Harry grinned, despite it all, to feel the steed’s power beneath him. They had given him charge over such a horse as could take him far indeed, armored or not.

Across the field, François was mounting up, himself selecting a white charger, and Harry found himself chuckling humorlessly. Harry felt the horse beneath him pawing eagerly at the ground and Harry reached up to close his visor.

François wore a lofty, tufted helm, *Fit for a king*, thought Harry, clenching his jaw. He flashed in blue and white and gold, a beacon of French pride. Harry himself looked, he thought, more like a crusader, a thought which might have bothered him at another moment, but just now he felt more that François was being ostentatious and he, himself, were on a righteous mission.

Pages hastened to offer Harry a lance. Grasping its handle, Harry felt the weight with a grateful laugh. No boyish toys for him: this was a weapon that might serve him true.

Harry moved his horse to the edge of the list, awaiting the signal. Breezily, the Queen’s kerchief fell, twittering in a breeze like a small bird, and Harry dug his ankles into his horse’s side with all the force in him. Eagerly, his mount responded, and as one horse and rider flew forward. Powerful hooves struck unforgiving earth. Each blow was a victory, carrying him forward. The baking sun shone down overhead, boiling and hot, and Harry thought of his borrowed armor, he thought of François’s hands on Mistress Boleyn’s legs, he thought of Arthur hitting the ground like a sack of flour, and he thought of pounding François into the ground.

Raising his lance, Harry grasped tight his horse’s reins with one hand and aimed with the other. The hefty lance did not waver. His horse charged onward. Harry clenched his teeth, steeling for impact. Glory-strewn François drew ever nearer. Harry aimed for his heart.

The clangor jolted through Harry’s arm, lancing up his side and through his chest as he struck François. He felt his lance shatter in his grip, the blow reverberating through him to the saddle. And he watched François collapse. Feet flying over his head, François crashed to the ground, his white steed dragging him onward with a foot trapped in the saddle. Harry dropped the ruined lance, endeavoring to cast his glance over his shoulder as he rode onward. But he could not see. Tugging the reins, he pulled his mount to a halt. Pages rushed forward to help him dismount and Harry’s gauntletted hands ripped at his helm. Pages tugged at the straps, freeing him from it and, turning, Harry lumbered back the way he had come, to see yet another king brought low.

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FRANÇOIS I, KING OF FRANCE
Chateau d’Amboise, France
*September 1519*

Screaming, screaming and shouting. François’s leg was caught and, desperately, he fumbled towards it. He was being dragged, and from his scanty sight, he could see people rushing. The horse was slowing, and François fumbled for the straps that held on his plumed helm. They had stopped moving. Someone was grappling with his leg, saying things like, “With Your Majesty’s permission,” but not waiting to receive it (not that François entirely faulted him for this, he was more than ready to be freed). “Small miracle you were not trampled by the horse, Your Majesty!”

“Help me up!” shouted François, blackly, but they were still struggling to loose his leg from the
stirrups, and the horse was screaming. François felt his cheeks aflame, thinking of the spectacle he
had made – François I, King of France, dragged through the dirt by an upstart would-be prince from
a nothing, backwater island. “I must stand!”

François struggled to unlace his helm, and then someone was helping. Irritably, François tugged it
off, and tossed it away. He watched it loop through the air, feathers wafting wildly, and cracking as it
hit the ground, rolling…to the feet of Henry Tudor. He loomed, at his height, and shone in his
borrowed armor. The tunic he’d worn was untouched, as François had at the last abstained from
landing a blow in consideration for Arthur.

Furiously, François shoved away the nearest page as the prince continued towards him. “Is it Gog or
Magog who thus approaches me at my end?”

“This is not Your Majesty’s end,” responded Henry, coming to stand over him. His smile was grim,
but his hands were on his hips, legs spread, and François thought he could have been more humble
in triumph. “It is but the beginning of our soldiering together.” Henry offered a hand to help François
to his feet, and the King found himself accepting it. He needed to stand, just now.

“You sound like a king,” pointed out François, narrowing his eyes. He watched as the prince’s own
flashed, and a slow smile stole across François’ features. At last, he thought, he understood. They
were, neither of them, born to rule but only one had achieved that end. “And you look the part,”
resumed the King. “Wearing a king’s armor. Tell me, Henricus Rex, what shall England make of
you when you come in your glory to pound it, too, into the ground?”

Chapter End Notes

The title and Henry’s badge and motto are a reference to a joust in which he participated
in March 1522, where he wore the same motto. Who the lady in question may have
been is often speculated, but most historians believe it would have been either his wife,
Catherine of Aragon, or Mary Boleyn who may or may not have been his mistress
during this period. I lifted the motto, gave it the kind of 1) financing and 2) duration of
time he had available in this fic, and made it a reference to Anne.
In Letters Plain

Chapter Summary

“The court believes that I am the King’s plaything?” demanded Anne. Fury blackened her eyes as she bit out each word. “I think not!”

“I was told of it when first I saw you. Everyone knows that you, Mistress Boleyn, are the King’s own mistress!”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

ANNE BOLEYN, LADY TO QUEEN CLAUDE OF FRANCE
Chateau d’Amboise, France
September 1519

“Why the book?” Anne narrowed black eyes, eyes that sparkled in the glorious sunshine of the gardens.

Testing Mary’s assumptions struck her, now, as significant. The garden was a beatific walled affair sporting formal knots and long peaceful lawns between. Anne loved long walks, and she reminded herself it was the only cause of a smile. Beside her, Henry seemed tense, but she didn’t blame him. Anne didn’t care to dwell on how it felt to know your brother was suffering and, equally, to know you could not prevent it. She tried to take his mind off it, but she knew it would eventually wind back to that.

Henry stopped in his tracks; he was gazing off towards the river, (she wondered if he could see it over the walls, or if he was simply looking that way – Anne, from her height, could not tell). He looked back towards her, resumed walking.

“I suppose everyone knows my history. When my father was an acknowledged King, we had access to many fine books but I, like all children, had a particular favorite. I liked very much as a child to sit and pour over that book: its adventures, its knightly ideals…It seemed the picture of all a kingdom should be.” Henry turned his blue eyes on her, smiled softly. He was melancholy today, and Anne found she missed his smiles more than she wished to admit. “I took that book with me when we went into the Tower for safety, and I took it with me again when we fled into exile. That book has been with me practically all my life. I suppose…I wished to hear a new perspective upon it.” He formed a half-hearted smile. “I’ve grown peevish with my own.” He paused. “I don’t suppose you’ve had the chance to begin?”

Slowly, Anne shook her head. “I’ve not had that chance,” she replied. In fact, that was more polite than it was entirely truthful – she’d not wished to begin just after the argument, so she’d put her reading elsewhere.

“I imagine Queen Claude keeps you quite busy.” Henry smiled softly. “I hope you find the time soon. I remain eager to hear your thoughts.”

Stopping, Anne waited until he had as well. She paused, wetting her lips, and angling her face up
towards her, despite the glaring glance of the sun. “I do not wish – and I imagine you do not wish, either – to resurrect old grievances. Nonetheless, what you said last, implying I had a faithless heart, struck me with the most awful hurt. I must know to what you refer. Please, sir, explain.”

Henry’s eyes were oceanic, she’d often thought before, blue and tumultuous, but there was an awful stillness in them just now. Their glamour was fixed, focused, and Anne steeled herself so as not to flinch from their gaze. At last he shifted. “In truth, Mistress Boleyn, I do not know a polite way to say it.”

Anne’s brow arched and she felt a flash of anger all at once, but she bit it back and formed her features to reflect expectation. “Then, proceed impolitely I implore you. I dislike the charge you have laid against me and wish to dispel the notion. Yet, being ignorant of the source, I cannot proceed.”

“Then, Mistress, I proceed boldly. It is your conduct in regards to the King of France that offends me.”

Anne’s laugh was humorless. “Because I danced the lavolta with him?”

“Yes!” exclaimed Henry, and then, “No! No, madam, it was not the dance…but the implications of its cause.”

“The masque?”

He shook his head, gestured futilely – irritably, Anne thought – and shrugged. “I will out with it, for I cannot find another way to say it. I wish you were not the mistress of the king, because I wish you were mine.”

“What?” demanded Anne, her lips fell open in shock and she took an inadvertent step backwards, away from him, away from his accusations. She thought of Mary, of warning her against her ill-advised affection for a man whose heart could never be hers and, despite everything, Anne laughed. It was not a joyful sound, but an astonished one, a laugh born partially of distress, of anger, of confusion. A laugh born of hurt. “You cannot be serious!” she exclaimed, although she knew he was. “Could you truly have imagined–” she broke off coloring, putting an instinctive hand to her throat as if she had been hurt. Beneath her fingers she felt the smoothness of her pearls she wore and she straightened, raised her chin, arched a brow. “I am not what you say that I am,” said Anne Boleyn. “I am not what you imagine.”

Henry’s face contorted. “Do not imagine I judge you harshly for this. One may be a good woman and–“

“Do not speak it!” bit back Anne. “I am a god fearing woman, Master Tudor, and would never stoop to such a thing, whomsoever might ask me.”

“I saw you!” interjected Henry. “At the masque, the first dance the King danced: I saw you together. Kindness, indeed,” he growled. “It could not have been missed! The whole court is alive with it!”

Anne’s laugh, now, was contemptuous. “The court believes that I am the King’s plaything?” demanded Anne. Fury blackened her eyes as she bit out each word. “I think not!”

“I was told of it when first I saw you. Everyone knows that you, Mistress Boleyn, are the King’s own mistress!”

Anne gasped. Turning half away from him, her hand flew once more to her throat and she stopped suddenly. “Lord in Heaven!” she prayed. “Is my reputation in such tatters?” Quickly, she turned
back to Henry. “Hear me, now, sir. The mistake is the listener’s entirely and I beg you correct anyone you may ever hear spreading this most foul calumny!” she paused. “I will not reveal to you the true identity of the lady in question, as I guard her honor like my own, but I assure you with all the power in me that she is not I. For myself, I am entirely innocent of the charge which you lay against me and, though I do not stoop to answer such a charge, I confess as before God, my soul remains unblemished. I pray and entreat you, sir, in future never to utter such defamatory remarks again without first judging kindly the truth of the matter. In any case, you may inquire of His Majesty, yourself, if it so please you. He will not shy away from the truth of his conquests, if you do not believe me!” Pulling herself to her full height and gathering all earthly dignity about her like a horde of fawning attendants, Anne turned without so much as a curtsy and stalked away. After a few steps, she paused, turned back quickly, and snapped. “As to the masque, sir, I was Perseverance! A truth you would know for yourself, had you not wandered out to meet mine own sister in the dark. Good day!”

Anne rejoiced, listening to the stunned silence, which was at last cut by the shout: “But who was Kindness?” Anne did not answer as she strode away, head held high.

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ARTHUR TUDOR, KING OF ENGLAND
Chateau de Bloise, France
September 1519

There was a scar, now, on Arthur’s face. It stretched from his left temple, arcing upwards, to scrawl across his forehead. Harry had endeavored to tell him that it made him look all the more a gallant knight: war-tested and war-won, but the remark had thrown him into a bitter humor and he had ordered his brother from his sight.

Always, the pang remained, a shriek that shrilled across the back of his head like a burning iron rod, linking his scar to the back of his head. He wanted to scratch it out, blot it from existence, but there was no ignoring it. The pang wailed on and on. So Arthur did what his mother did: he made bold his face. And he did what his father did: he ignored the pain. He walked on.

Today was such a day, and Arthur managed a smile that appeared unpracticed. He could bask in a pantomime of happiness: he chose to view it as a forecast. The day was magnificent, the air brisk and crisp, and the trees wept leaves in every warm color. Crimson and orange, they fluttered towards the ground to hover the breadth of a moment – eternity, for it seemed outside of time altogether – before lolling onto the earth.

Arthur longed for home, the rolling hills, unspoiled green. He did not wish to die in exile, as his father had done, and leave his family to themselves, caught up in the mad fury of desire. The iron rod in his head pounded but Arthur winced and ignored it. He would not die as his father had, no. He would return. He would return to England and reclaim his birthright as King Arthur II of England. Perkin Warbeck had taken their home, but he could not have it. Arthur would see to that.

Leaves crunched underfoot behind him and Arthur turned to see his brother. There was some half-wary thing couched in Harry’s eyes, but he formed a smile notwithstanding. Arthur clapped Harry’s shoulder and watched the wary thing float away. “I was thinking of home,” Arthur told him. “How I’d give anything to return.”

Harry’s blue eyes scanned the horizon and Arthur knew what he pictured: the leaves wafting on the breeze as they fell all over England…and all the changes that had occurred since they’d left. “As would I, brother.” He paused, turning slowly towards him. “You’ve not once chastised me for my conduct towards François at the tourney,” remarked Harry. The wary thing was there again, but
Arthur pretended not to see it, looking back towards the trees.

“Was it lacking?”

“He pulled up his lance at the last moment,” responded Harry. “I did not.”

Arthur’s head hurt. The leaves were falling, gold and red as blood. “I don’t remember the tourney,” said Arthur. He wanted to rip at his scar with his nails and pull the rod from his brain. He smiled, instead.

“What do you remember?” murmured Harry, leaning close. His eyes were intent, searching, and Arthur found he hated that look he’d once so enjoyed. Once, he’d seen it as a promise. When Harry’s interest was earned, it was unending. But now he did not so much enjoy being the focus of it.

Arthur waved his hand. “Enough,” he said and he watched Harry stiffen out of the corner of his eye. “I remember enough.”

A pause, then Harry chuckled and turned towards him, all at once: one of his fresh moods, Arthur concluded. “Then perhaps you can settle a dispute. Who was the lady who played Perseverence in the masque?”

“Mistress Boleyn,” replied Arthur, shrugging.

Harry’s glance was a flash of irritation. He shifted, tried again. “And…who played Kindness?”


“The elder daughter?” whispered Harry and, then, aloud, turning abruptly to stare at Arthur. “Mary Boleyn?”

“Why?” inquired Arthur. “Who did you think she was?”

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RICHARD IV, KING OF ENGLAND
Windsor Castle, England
October 1519

Wolsey’s face said all that his lips did not. Spreading his hands, as though in apology, he opened his mouth to speak, but Richard waved a dismissive hand and turned towards the windows.

“Spain refused us,” the king said to the sky, ruddy with the setting of the sun.

Wolsey’s face was a reflection in the windowpane: a deep frown. His hands gleamed in the candlelight with great rings, and he was dressed in the scarlet robes befitting his priestly station as cardinal. “Not entirely, Your Grace,” responded Wolsey. Richard watched his reflection tilt its head, a reconciling sort of glance. Impatiently, Richard turned back to face his minister. He raised expectant eyebrows and Wolsey continued. “It is only the matter,” he said. “Of Princess Elizabeth’s sons, Your Grace, and their…relationship with France. This proximity, it would seem, is unsettling to the Emperor.”

Richard pinched the bridge of his nose and pictured Catherine of Aragon. He’d seen a portrait of her, some years ago: grey-eyed and pale and soft. It had been a picture that had been sent for Arthur Tudor, her then-suitor, just the year before Richard had assumed the throne. Now, the young girl
whose portrait he’d seen was a woman already widowed.

Every year, it seemed, she was promised to some prince somewhere upon the globe, and every year she was not wed. Of course, she had been married before: to the late King Louis XII of France. By that time, Louis had been close to his death and had not managed to get any heirs on his lovely Spanish bride before death stole into the marriage bed. After the suitable amount of time had passed to ensure that Catherine did not carry an heir of France, she had been shipped back to Spain, like raw goods, and the bidding war for her hand had begun again.

Catherine was some twelve years the senior of her new English suitor – Richard’s heir – but she remained the most eligible lady in all of Christendom, and had only grown more so with the elevation of her uncle to the imperial seat. This was, perhaps, the difficulty in settling upon a suitable husband – but Richard was impatient for a settlement.

“So,” said the King. “France entertains our enemies and deprives us of our friends. These are not the actions of a true ally. Wolsey, I say it is time to act. There were those amongst my predecessors who claimed a right to the throne of France. I remember now that it is a right of an English king to press this claim. Perhaps it is time to make François recollect it, as well.”

Wolsey’s eyes were great saucers, his mouth popping open like a fish. Yet with grace he recovered and with dignity he formed a smile, crossing himself. “To be sure, Your Grace, this is a moment for action, but perhaps to press for war may be a tad premature, particularly given the tenants of the Treaty of Paris, signed by both your royal self and His Majesty of France but one year ago. We have not yet met with France. It is entirely possible their intentions have been ill read by us here and, Your Grace, England is a war-weary nation.”

“All the better, then, to take the fight to France,” growled Richard, dispiritedly, but he turned back to the window and thought of ships, great ships, and a voyage into the Africas, and of the fighting for his throne. Blood and blood and blood running red and sharp: no. He did not want that again. Richard raised a hand to his weary eyes. “Contact Sir Thomas Boleyn. He has had time enough to collect information. I want to know everything he does about François and my Tudor nephews. Now. There will be no delay.”

Wolsey bowed himself out of the chamber.

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MARY BOLEYN, LADY TO QUEEN CLAUDE OF FRANCE
Chateau d’Amboise, France
October 1519

“You haven’t returned the book,” observed Mary, softly. Night had stolen across the valley, and the heavy breathing of Queen Claude’s ladies alerted Mary to the fact that the only other being awake in the dormitory was her sister. Though Mary’s eyes were closed, she knew that Anne lay on her back, staring upwards at the ceiling, towards the stars. Anne was restless.

Mary heard her sister suck in a sharp breath, heard her roll over, presumably to face her sister. “What book?” she asked, but they both knew.

“You’ve hardly spoken to him in weeks,” continued Mary. “But you’ve kept the book.” Opening her eyes, Mary looked towards her sister whose form was dim and still in the darkness. “Why?”

Anne was quiet, but she reached out with long, tapering fingers to touch her sister’s face. “I love you,” she said, rolling once more onto her back. “Go to sleep.”
Mary peered through the gloom at Anne, gazing at the curve of her cheek, the sharp edge of her nose. Objectively, Anne was merely pretty, but even the slightest knowledge of her character rendered her a rare beauty, indeed, and the flash of her eye was enough to dispel any doubts of the sort. She did not require beauty. “I love you,” responded Mary, softly, watching Anne’s lips curve upwards, and she felt a pang deep in her gut for all the things they didn’t say.

“Mary?” Anne turned her head to look at her sister. “What does love feel like? I mean…the other sort of love.”

Propping herself up on her elbow, Mary leaned close to her. “I thought perhaps you knew.”

“It’s too soon for that.” Anne shook her head. “I cannot seem to work out just what I feel.” She looked back to the ceiling. “I never have.”

“I know,” replied Mary, gently, and she thought of home and of the fields and the trees around Hever. She thought of little Anne, practical, passionate Anne, face screwed up in concentration, and the hot blasts of her temper. They were linked, those things, with what Anne said now. Of this Mary had always been certain, but Anne was too understanding to avoid quantification, and too quantified to understand. “I think it different for everyone,” began Mary, gnawing on her lip. She thought of François, of the glow of his smile, of his hands, and of his lips. “For me, it is warmth. I feel warm when I’m in love.”

Anne shifted, narrowing her eyes and chewing her lip just as Mary did. “Warm?” Mary watched Anne working through the notion, processing it, churning it through her capacious mind.

“You’ll not outwit it, Anne. You’ll either feel it or you won’t. If you want to love, Nan, don’t think. Feel.”

Sharply Anne turned away, and sharply she inhaled. Mary wondered what she thought, but she did not press. Anne had kept the book. For now, she supposed, it was enough.

Chapter End Notes

"In Letters Plain" is another line from Whoso List to Hunt by Thomas Wyatt. It refers to how Anne Boleyn is marked as the King’s. It felt appropriate ;D
Le Temps Viendra

Chapter Notes

Le temps viendra is a French phrase meaning, "The time will come." It appears to have been an early motto of Anne Boleyn's, as she wrote it in her Book of Hours at Hever.

Quotes are not mine and belong to whomever owns the rights to the works of Chretien de Troyes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

ANNE BOLEYN, LADY TO QUEEN CLAUDE OF FRANCE
Chateau de Blois, France
October 1519

Thomas Boleyn drummed heavy fingers on the windowsill before him. “I hope you’ve gathered quite a store of information, my girls. The King is in a most black fury, I am sorry to say.”

Anne cast dark eyes towards her sister and Mary reached out to squeeze her hand. It was Mary who spoke. “I suppose he desires an account of the Tudors. His Grace understands, of course, we have not yet met the ladies of the family, I trust?”

Still peering outside, Thomas nodded. “He does. But I imagine his own recollection of his sister should help ease any questions of that kind,” he added, turning around and Anne found herself thinking, If he has ever met her.

Unworthy thought, disloyal thought! Anne turned crossly towards the fire. Disentangling them from Mary’s, she warmed her fingers before it. She was in need of an occupation for them.

“How would you like us to transmit this information to you, Papa? Shall we write it down?” Mary asked.

“Yes,” said Thomas. “But, first, I pray you answer my questions. I wish to have some sort of acquaintance with the knowledge, myself. That is always best.”

“What would you like to know?” inquired Anne, wearily.

“How do the Princes comport themselves?”

“With tasteful manners,” said Mary, and carefully now she avoided Anne’s gaze. “And much feeling.”

“Much feeling?” Thomas shook his head. “Do not tell me you’ve developed undue sympathy for their supposed ‘plight.’ It would be nigh unto treason, Mary. Surely even you-”

“We understand, Papa,” cut in Anne. “King Richard remains King in our hearts. Mary means only that they express themselves in a direct and open manner becoming of the princes they believes themselves to be.” Mary’s eyes were lowered, Anne noted. She did not raise them. Anne felt a tinge of anger towards her father. This was a speech Mary often heard, but this time she’d taken the brunt of it on Anne’s behalf. It was not fair. “You saw the to-do at the tournament, yourself. The actions
on that day were in character of each.”

“Explain,” said Thomas.

“Arthur Tudor lowering his lance to save the pride of the King of France; Henry Tudor driving the defenseless King from his horse to save his own.”

“So you say that one is humble and the other prideful?”

Anne pursed her lips in thought. “One is certainly prideful. The other…I hardly…”

“Anne and I divvied up the brothers,” interjected Mary, quickly. “I became acquainted with the elder while she took the brunt of the younger…A task which, I now believe, was the more difficult of the two.”

“He is certainly the more difficult of the two,” agreed Anne, the corner of her lips quirking upwards.

“As you may imagine,” began Thomas. “It is with Arthur Tudor that the King is most especially concerned.” He glanced between the two of them, an understanding passed amongst them all of his irritation that it should be Mary’s opinion upon which his questions relied. Anne sighed. Thomas continued. “Please, Mary, elaborate.”

“Prudence, perhaps, rather than humility. Sir, the elder of the two seems is a most…meticulous person. He is careful in his addresses: his words, his manner. All that he does, he does with ease as he seems to be the sort of person to whom mastery is of the utmost import. He works most diligently, it would seem, until he has acquired such ease.”

Thomas glanced out the window, drumming his fingers again. “Anne, would you say this of the younger brother?”

“Oh no, I would not. At least, not in that way.”

Thomas turned around to face her, brows contorting. “Explain.”

“I would not say that Henry is diligent. I would say that he is stubborn.”

“Are these not one in the same?”

“The first, sir, implies discipline. The second implies merely the reflex of an iron will.”

Thomas frowned. “Then it is your opinion that one is disciplined, while the other is not?”

“It is,” said the Boleyn girls in unison.

Thomas sighed, nodding and nodding. He fell silent for a moment. “And it is the unruly brother that is the heir, while the ordered one would be King.”

“That is so,” replied Mary.

“What else?”

“They still intend to return to England,” supplied Mary. “The younger brother told me, himself, that he still dreams of home.” There was sadness in her face as she said this. “What a thing it must be, to be so long exiled.”

Thomas rubbed his temples. “What else may I tell the king that may concern their…futures and his?”
Anne looked at her lap. She thought of the way Henry’s eyes could swirl, setting one adrift in a kaleidoscope of stormy blue. There was no way to describe it, to describe him adequately. Instead, she said, “The younger brother is ambitious but he lacks the self-direction to see his desires realized without a pre-existing grip on power. The elder is stayed and steady. He is harder to move, but once accomplished, I believe his aim will be unswerving.”

“And, deep down to his core, does Arthur Tudor wish to return home? Does he wish to be King?”

Mary and Anne looked at each other, long and hard, and then back to their father. “I don’t know,” said Anne.

“I cannot say,” replied her sister.

Thomas Boleyn turned back to the wall. “God help us all.”

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ELIZABETH OF YORK, QUEEN OF ENGLAND

Chateau de Blois, France

October 1519

Elizabeth often thought of home. It whispered at the edges of her mind, prickling the back of her skull. Someday, she had sworn long ago, they would return. Her children would not be forever cut off from their home. The youngest of them, of course, did not even remember England, but Elizabeth remained optimistic. Someday, someday, someday. This invitation to Blois, she felt sure, was another (weary, weary) step.

Elizabeth thought of her Henry, her husband and her King, of his soothing fingers in her hair and his whispered comforts. “We shan’t remain here, always,” he’d tell her. “I’ve made this journey before.” But his old protector was dead before they’d even left England, and the world was cold to dispossessed heirs.

Still, Elizabeth knew Perkin Warbeck’s lack of a son kept the idea of the Tudors alive in the collective imagination of Europe: two Tudor princes, two Tudor princesses, all half Plantagenet to boot – and with all worldly certainty so. And besides that, there was the very uncertainty of Perkin, himself – was this man, once an utter unknown, called pretender, indeed Richard of Shrewsbury? For herself, Elizabeth did not believe it. Could not. No, for many years her brothers had been dead, killed by their traitorous uncle who had plunged all the rest of them into such deep despair.

Only Henry had brought them back hope again and for that, alone, Elizabeth could have loved him her whole life long. But there had been so much more to him than that. Even now, she missed the warmth of his arms around her. He, who had rescued her and set all to rights; he who had known the same triumphs and pits, himself. Oh, yes, he was grasping and suspicious, but Elizabeth knew how to temper these traits, just as he tempered her reticence and her despair. But, even when he’d left her, he left her with children to buoy her spirits. He did not leave her hopeless.

Arthur, her firstborn, was not so very strong of body. Born too early, he had always been of a frail disposition, but his agile mind and good spirits helped to soften that blow. Someday – yes, someday! – he would make a great king, a king in the mold, she imagined of Edward III, whose sagacity would be remembered for generations to come. Margaret was just as able, sharp-witted and strong willed, though given to waves of tempestuous temper like her younger brother. Next came the very same brother, young Harry: bold, active both of mine and body, intelligent but – God help her – spoiled. Mary, also, was quick to please, and loved little more than to be pleased too, but she knew just as well as the others how to achieve her ends and she was inventive to boot.
Elizabeth had spoiled them, herself – in fact she had spoiled all three of the younger ones. Elizabeth knew no love like that she felt for her children, and she felt she never would, not after all that transpired amidst the turmoil of her father’s death. And so it was that Margaret and Henry and Mary were indulged, all, in their fancies, a fact tempered only when the family circumstances were reduced. Only Arthur had his father’s discipline, which he had earned by his harsher early upbringing as Prince of Wales. Having been 11 when they fled, he best remembered England, but it was not he who had the greatest hunger to return.

The journey to the Loire was grueling. Elizabeth did not think she had ever been so weary in all her life. Her bones gave aching complaints, even now that she was finally resting them at the palace. Watching her children, Elizabeth smiled softly. Harry was laughing loudest, as he often did. Those days had comprised a difficult trek and, resting here, they were drinking and making merry.

“I win!” cried Harry, throwing down his cards. Margaret reached out to pick through them and Harry clapped his hands together, laughing merrily at something Mary said. Whenever he was winning, Harry was a most cheerful and generous of men, Elizabeth considered with a small smile. In truth, it was this version of her son that Elizabeth best liked.

“Cheater!” exclaimed Margaret, suddenly, tossing out one of the cards from his deck. “We were meant to discard these!”

Harry’s expression sobered into irritation. “I would never cheat,” he argued. “I did discard, but then I drew another. You can hardly blame me for chance.”

“You’ve won every round we’ve played tonight,” complained Margaret, arching one brow. Her tone was carefully half-playful, but everyone at the table knew her well enough to suspect she also meant it at least by half.

“Now, now,” interjected Elizabeth. “I am quite certain your brother did not cheat, Margaret. You would do well never to make such accusations. Certainly, I pray you, never say such things when we come before the King of France.”

“What is he like?” inquired Mary, eagerly turning towards her brothers. She arched expectant brows and her lips formed into a similar smile. Mary liked best the moment of anticipation, Elizabeth considered, before the reception of a promised pleasure. “I have heard it said he is a most handsome prince.”

“Ha!” exclaimed Harry.

Arthur pursed his lips. “That is hardly a becoming question, Mary,” he reprimanded.

Elizabeth took in her eldest son, her dear Arthur, now sporting a scar across his face where, when last she’d seen him, he’d been quite unblemished. And he was cross, too. The stress of the trip, clearly, was getting to him. Besides, Elizabeth couldn’t help but wonder if it bothered Arthur that Harry had succeeded in unhorsing François where Arthur had failed (even by his own intention) to do so. Yet, it was not a question she had put to either.

“Oh, go on then,” responded Margaret, picking up another hand as Harry dealt it out. “What is this French King’s appearance?”

“He is regal as a king ought to be,” sighed Arthur, fixing Margaret with a look, suppressing a smile as she shone one at him.

“He has no need of a crown,” said Harry. “He’s a nose twice as large as any diadem.”
Clapping a hand to her mouth, Mary snickered and Harry’s grimace became a grin.

“He’s not as bad as all that,” cut in Arthur. “Harry’s simply jealous. François is taller than he is.”

“What!” exclaimed Margaret. “Taller than Harry?”

“Is he human?” queried Mary.

“Stand up, Harry!” demanded Margaret. “How much taller?”

“No!” cried Harry, coloring furiously as he plucked busily at his cards. “I shan’t stand!”

“Stand up!” cried Mary, getting to her feet.

“Stand up!” cried Margaret, getting to her feet also, as the sisters attempted to haul him up.

Laying his cards on the table, Arthur laughed merrily, casting a glance towards his mother. “This is sport, indeed!”

Harry crossed his arms, refusing to be moved, and Elizabeth decided to take charge. “We’ll see His Majesty, soon enough, and will then be able to take a measure for ourselves of just how tall he is. Ladies, sit down. You will not behave in this manner when in public.”

“No, Mama,” sighed Margaret, sinking into her chair.

“Of course not,” supplied Mary, resuming her seat beside Harry. She frowned at him. “I’m sorry, Harry.”

Smiling, he put an arm around her shoulders. “Cards! Mama, won’t you sit with us? Tell us of your journey! I hope it was not too troubling with this lot in tow,” he added, affectionately squeezing his sister closer to him. Mary grinned as she rolled her eyes.

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HENRY TUDOR, PRINCE OF ENGLAND
Chateau de Bloise, France
October 1519

“This book,’” read Anne, head bent. “‘Is mine.’” When she looked up, it was with a smile. Her black eyes sparkled as she closed the volume and arched a brow at him. She was in a good mood, it seemed, smiling, half-teasing. Harry’s heart gave an unexpected squeeze as her smile broadened. “Did you write this?”

“As a lad,” replied Henry. “I confess I did.”

“Very authoritative,” she commented, eyes sparkling.

It was a glorious October day. A chill breeze came off the River, but cloaked in wool, it was a delight rather than a bother. The sun shone merrily up in the autumn-grey sky and colorful leaves made a soft bed upon the ground.

Harry quickened his pace and came to her side. “Did you read it?” he inquired. “The book, that is,” he chuckled. “Not merely the inscription.”

Anne looked at him hard, hugging the book to her breast with both arms. Her smile was thoughtful, a thing he could hardly discern. “I did,” she said, finally. “It has a great many fine words,” she added.
Pausing, she lay the book flat on one hand and opened it with the other. Carefully, she pecked through the beautifully wrought pages till she found what she was looking for. “If I could be a dove,” she read. “Whenever the fancy came to me, I should often rejoin you here. And I pray God that in His pleasure He may not detain me so long away. But sometimes a man intends speedily to return who knows not what the future has in store for him. And I know not what will be my fate.”

Anne bit her lip as she looked back up at him. She paused to close the book. “That must have been difficult to read,” she said slowly. “When you were a child, so far from home.”

Harry paused, glancing away. Off in the trees little birds fluttered and chittered. He narrowed his eyes, watching their many colors swirl amidst the dying leaves of the trees. “Not so very difficult,” he began, slowly. Turning back to her, he smiled. “It’s a promise, don’t you think? Events may detain him, but they will not keep him. He will return to her.”

Anne’s eyes fell back to the page, but she did not seem to see it. Her eyes were deep pools, when they found his once more. Their depths worked with some sweet thing and he longed to stretch forth his hand and touch her pale cheek. “I, too, know what it is to miss home,” she said, at last. “I know what it is to wonder when, if ever, I shall return.”

“Do you remember her reply?” he asked. “In the book, that is. Do you remember what she said to Yvain after he said that?”

“No,” Anne shook her head. “What did she say?”

Harry smiled softly. “My lord, I dare to promise you that, if God deliver you from death, no hindrance will stand in your way so long as you remember me.’ You will go home, madam. I swear it.”

“And you?” inquired Anne, softly.

“I will go home,” he said, beginning to walk. “I was born in England. I will die there, as well. I cannot believe that my bones will molder anywhere else but there.”

Anne shook her head. “You will forgive me, sir, but I do not think it is important where we die. It is important, only, where we live. I pray that we shall, both of us, do that first.”

“And how shall you live, Mistress Boleyn?”

She chuckled, falling into step with him, again. “Wonderfully well, I expect,” she replied. “No fretful, dull existence for me,” she said in English, and in French: “Le temps viendra.”

“The time for what?” inquired Henry.

“To be happy,” replied Anne. She laughed and her entire face lit up with her, brown eyes dancing in the brisk autumn morning. “Do you know, I mean to be the most happy.”

“The most happy…of whom?”

Anne shrugged. “Of everyone.” She laughed again, and Harry laughed too, a great rumble of joy.

In the last month he had apologized and apologized again for his misunderstanding and, he believed, she had enjoyed every groveling moment of it. Yet, he found, now that they laughed together, he did not so much mind at all how slow she had been in her forgiveness.

“And you?” inquired Anne. “What will your life be?”
“I was born a Prince of England,” he replied. “The choice was never mine.”

“Of course it is,” replied Anne, arching brows. “We have, all of us, a choice. Le temps viendra! What will you choose?”


“England,” she replied, tilting her head. It was mischief he saw in her eyes, a groping, testing mischief that never seemed too far from her. “Before all?” Anne’s smile was playful. “I hope, that when the time comes, it will not be a choice of England or all, but a choice of the man you wish to be.”

“As your choice is to be happy?”

“Just so,” she responded. “And when that times comes, I ask you judge the best. There’s nothing more we can ask of anyone than that.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “You think that choosing England is not the best.”

“I think there is a difference between choosing the good of the country, and choosing merely to have it. Which do you choose, sir?”

“They are one in the same. God ordained that my brother should rule. It was for that purpose that he was born.”

Anne nodded slowly. When her eyes met his again, they were dark lenses and unreadable, but there was some wary thing he saw there and in her cheeks, and it gave to his heart a weary jolt. “And for what purpose, then,” she asked. “Were you born?”

Chapter End Notes

As a little boy, Henry was known to write ‘this book is mine’ in his books.

“The Most Happy” was Anne’s motto as Queen of England. The connection between this motto and “Le Temps Viendra” was entirely imagined by me and may or may not have any basis in fact.

The quotes Anne reads and Henry recites are from Chretien de Troyes, a medieval writer who wrote a great deal of Arthuriana. The work cited is Yvain.
Anne shook her head. “I don’t see secrets in that face. She’s laughing at us all. Note her eyes. All she need know is that the world is full of foibles. Isn’t it enough? I see kindness in that face; not secrecy.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

ANNE BOLEYN, LADY TO QUEEN CLAUDE OF FRANCE
Chateau de Cloux, France
October 1519

“This is your idea, I know it,” Henry confided, leaning close to her.

The corner of Anne’s lips turned upwards. “I have no idea what you could possibly mean,” she replied, softly. “This is clearly His Majesty’s idea,” she said, sweeping a hand towards the King of France with an upturned brow.

They both knew that, whatever François might now believe, that was not the case. Anne had, after all, been threatening to bring Henry here, one way or another, for some time now. And François proved predictably eager to impress.

“Did you ever meet Signor da Vinci?” inquired Henry.

It was a brisk October day and – as all the court was in readiness to leave, and all was being torn asunder to pack – Anne had casually suggested to François (via Mary) that it might be just the time for an intimate outing.

It was an obvious choice. Once Anne and Henry had begun talking of art, they’d hardly been able to stop. To see the home of the late Leonardo da Vinci, and the many wonderful works he’d left behind, was the next logical step. The Chateau was a breath away from the Queen’s castle d’Amboise (it was rumored, a labyrinth of tunnels connected the two), and one could plainly view the castle from here. She thought of those left behind.

This was an intimate party, encompassing the Tudor family, the King of France, and the Boleyn girls. Elizabeth of York leaned on the arm of the French King and Anne listened to him laugh with a mixture of anxiety and happiness: happy for the Tudors, anxious for Richard IV and the continued peace of England. Anne knew well that François was in the process of weighing his choices and political sands were shifting. For England’s sake, she prayed François chose against backing the Tudor claim. For Henry’s sake, she…Anne shook her head, as though to dispel these thoughts. Henry Tudor had no need of her prayers.

She returned swiftly to Henry’s question. “I did meet him,” she replied. “Once. It was, sadly, towards the end of his life and he was quite frail, but he remained keen to show me his favorite trees, nevertheless,” she said with a soft reminiscent laugh.
“You must point them out to me,” replied Henry.

“I shall!” Anne laughed. “He was much stuck on the past, as old men often are, and we spoke much of history. He told me that history isn’t made by great men. It is forged by all people who make choices. Great men simply color the landscape.” Anne smiled thoughtfully. She felt Henry’s eyes on her, but she couldn’t quite bring herself to look.

“Le temps viendra,” said Henry at last, in French, and then in English: “The time will come.” Their eyes held, fixed in a gaze and focused entirely on the other. He was huge, Henry, tall and muscular on the outside, but he wished very much, Anne considered, to be moved. And he longed, she thought, to touch her. She thought of kissing him, then, thought of his fingers knocking back her French hood and combing through her long, silken hair. She thought of his mouth on hers, on her neck, of his hands, oh his hands, and she thought of being pulled tight into his embrace. He stepped closer; Anne’s breath hitched. She turned away.

Anne’s throat was tight and she turned on her heel. She walked further into the room, towards where Mary and Arthur were clustered with the other Mary and Margaret and towards where the Princess Elizabeth and François were laughing. She couldn’t breathe. The house was too close, hot even in October. Turning again, she stormed past Henry and back out the door.

The wind was a brisk chill that settled with relief into her bones and Anne, backing up, leaned her head against the cool brick of the building. It reminded her of her early education at the Court of Savoy and long walks with the other girls and Margaret of Austria through its restful inner courtyard. Anne caught her breath, clasping a hand to her chest, to run fingers across her pearls. She straightened, looked out, and found Henry Tudor standing a few yards away, looking at her. Anne stepped away from the wall, as though caught in the middle of something, and glanced quickly away.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“Would you care to see the trees?” Anne asked. “There’s one, there,” she didn’t look at its craggy mass, but pointed, and stared on at Henry. He held her gaze, lips parting in question, then followed the gesture of her arm, stared, and turned back. He wanted to renew his question. Anne watched him asking himself if he dared. Shaking herself, Anne stepped towards him. “I’ll show you the rest later. With the others. Let us return inside. The maestro felt behind the most astonishing paintings and constructions. You will regret it, should we come this far and miss them, now.”

Henry nodded, and offered her his arm. She took it, and the pair returned inside. Elizabeth of York, alone, turned and noted their return, looking first at Henry and then at Anne. Quickly, Anne dropped Henry’s arm and went to stand beside her sister.

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HENRY TUDOR, PRINCE OF ENGLAND
Chateau de Cloux, France
October 1519

“Who is she?” inquired Harry, starry-eyed. “I’ve hardly seen such a face in all my years.”

The lady was not beautiful, but mere beauty might have marred the clarity of her features. It was the look in her eyes, the bold assessing gaze that captured Harry’s attention and held his eye. This was not a woman who would flinch and turn away and Harry found himself smiling towards her. And, besides that, there was a knowing, an intelligence which glinted in her eye. Harry thought she was a woman who well deserved to be admired – and knew it quite well. And Harry had never found
himself able to resist admiration for such creatures.

François shrugged with bejeweled fingers. “You’ve a taste for interesting faces, eh, Rex?” said the King, casting a glance towards Anne, who quickly averted her eyes. Harry rankled at the King’s favorite pet name for himself. Since the tourney, it was all François seemed inclined to call him. He rankled at the insinuation (mostly because it was true). But most of all, he rankled at the obvious glance towards Anne. “It is a very great mystery, I’m afraid,” continued the King of France. “One the maestro took to his grave, sadly, but he always called her the Mona Lisa. A most enigmatic lady, is she not?”

“She seems full of secrets,” said Mary Boleyn, who was standing close to her sister. Absently, Harry wished he were the one at her side, instead.

Anne shook her head. “I don’t see secrets in that face. She’s laughing at us all. Note her eyes. All she need know is that the world is full of foibles. Isn’t it enough? I see kindness in that face; not secrecy.”

“These secretive ladies always understand each other.” The King of France laughed. “It would take one to know one, I should think, Mistress Boleyn.”

Anne looked at him long and hard, before remembering to avert her eyes.

“Aye,” rounded Harry, turning quickly towards the King of France and forming a smile he did not feel. “The kind are very apt indeed to see such goodness in others.”

Anne’s eyes were on him, limpid and searching, heavy in their gravity. Slowly he turned, meeting her orbs with his own. Her face was open, upturned, and she seemed to glow, framed as she was by the glance of the hot sun from the window. She did not smile, but her eyes were enough, speaking eloquently on her behalf. A queer sort of thanks, but one he quickly realized he craved. He wanted to come to her, raise her little hand to his lips. He bowed his head, instead, and Anne seemed to remember herself. She looked away.

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CATALINA TRASTAMARA, PRINCESS OF ARAGON, QUEEN DOWAGER OF FRANCE
Alcázar Castle, Spain
October 1519

A letter. Catalina seized it quickly and dismissed all of her maids, sending them scuttling in a quick array from the room. She went to the window and turned the fine parchment over in her hand. It had been some time since he had written her and Catalina was eager, now, to behold the contents. Running sensitive fingers across the familiar seal, Catalina carefully lifted the wax, rather than breaking it. Unseeingly, she read past the greeting – formal, as always: he was never lacking in politeness or decency – and sought the body of the letter. His Latin, she thought with a smile, was most excellent: better than her own, but his penmanship was lacking. In that area, at least, she prevailed. Catalina had never been one for languages, but in precision she had always excelled.

You will, I pray, excuse the recent absence of letters. It has been difficult, this past month, to commit any sort of word to paper, little less in the secrecy we require to compose such thoughts. I, myself, have been somewhat ill to my head, of late, which has postponed the possibility of composing a suitable letter.

Reading this, Catalina’s brow furrowed. She sank into the generous chair she kept by the window and read with a warm zephyr stirring her the mantle of her fine gable hood.
Do not be ill at ease, dear Cat, the letter continued hastily, predicting her reaction effortlessly. It is owing entirely to a tumble I took and not to any illness or native frailty of body.

Hastily, Catalina clutched the letter to her chest and offered a silent prayer to Heaven to safeguard him in all that he did. Each night she prayed for him, true, but Catalina found it never hurt to add another plea to the load.

I regret to say that this note must be a quick dash of letters, simply to advertise that you are not so absent from my thoughts as are my letters from you, and to pray your forgiveness in being so tardy in writing to you as I ought. I put all my hope in your tireless generosity of spirit and unflagging belief, and content myself in a most fervent prayer that you have not forgotten me. I pray, further, this letter finds you well and happy.

In France, I can scarcely do other than think of you: meeting the people you once described, walking the paths your little feet once trod, and seeing the places so vividly conjured by your letters past. We travel even now to Paris, but to which palace I, as yet, do not know. Whether to Fontainbleau, the fortress of the Louvre, or elsewhere I cannot say, but as soon as I know more, I shall send word that I may hear all the sooner of your hoped-for well-being.

Catalina ran an affectionate finger across the words, and thought of him at the Loire. Her smile was soft, picturing him standing at the parapet, gazing away towards England and perhaps, once – oh, her imagination flew! – towards Spain.

You are much in my thoughts, Cat, and it has been a tear in my heart to hear your name spoken, of late, in a context I confess to find distressing. I hear it said by His Majesty of France that the Usurper means to wed you to his heir. I long to hear this vile rumor contradicted by your most noble self. It was always my fondest wish, my Catalina, to make you a Queen of England. I never imagined that I might not be the King by your side.

Catalina sat up straight, frowning at these words, obviously added later, a scratch-and-dash hasty appeal of disheartened jealousy. Her heart hammered in her ears and she raised the signature impulsively to her lips.

Yours to eternity,

An informal adieu, but eloquent for all that, and then the signature he had used since the death of his father, Henry:

Arthur the King

Catalina stared in desolation at the paper, before turning to gaze outside. Across the mountain landscape was flung a spectacular array of lush trees and beneath, two churning rivers sliced through the vista, sweeping off to the sea. She liked to think that Arthur, too, looked at a river just now, but these were silly and sentimental thoughts.

She had had no desire to wed King Louis XII when she had, but she had done her duty, and Catalina knew she would do her duty as well, should she be shipped off to England to wed the so-called King of England’s heir, even knowing the extreme distress such a matrimony would cause. Whatever the calamity it may cause, Catalina knew she would always do her sacred duty. She must. Still, she could hope and pray that it might be otherwise: that her duty might drive her into the arms of a man she had never met, but knew so well notwithstanding: a man she had grown to adore across a lifetime of constant correspondence. For all that she might be obliged to love or wed others, Catalina of Aragon knew that her truest heart would always belong to Arthur Tudor.
“Shhh,” Mary giggled into his shoulder. François’s arms were warm and tight all about her, surrounding her as he half-lifted her into a passionate kiss.

“Why should I be quiet, when my lady is so bonny as this?” he inquired, squeezing her just a little closer, bending his lips with hers once more. Mary wrapped her arms around his shoulders, ran her fingers through his lustrous dark hair.

“Because,” she giggled, breathlessly, withdrawing from the kiss. “‘Tis a very great secret.”

“Not a secret at all! Your beauty is there for all the world to see,” responded the King, touching her face with eager, sword-calloused fingers.

“Not that! This,” added Mary, pressing herself onto her tiptoes to find his lips once more. Indulgently, he bent down, kissed her cheeks, her hair, her ear, and drew her ever closer to his bedroom door. “If we are found out-“ Mary gave a little exhilarated squeal as he gently nipped her earlobe.

“I tire of secrecy. Let all the world know my mistress is also my mistress!” he replied, whispered against her neck.

“You enjoy it dearly. It is exciting!” she exclaimed. “And the very course of my life depends upon it, Your Majesty. Have you no care for that? If my father should learn-”

François’ hands were exploring, ringed fingers running over satin to find hot skin. “What care I for your father, sweet Mary? England believes it can assail me, ha! Is England so mighty as to think I must quake in fear of its ambassador?” Mary was unable to respond, as he seized her about the waist, pulled her impossibly close, and pressed his mouth once more to hers. “Let all the world know! Let them all see! Let him watch us together, if he so pleases, I give not a whit for the sulky might of Sir Thomas Boleyn!” He threw open the door to his chambers and sealed it tight behind them. Mary’s squealing laughter floated out for all the world to hear.

Anne clapped a hand over her mouth as she giggled and, beside her, Henry laughed as well. His laughter was the exuberant kind, sweeping and booming deep from his chest. He was not one for half-measures: he took his pleasures as his pain: up to the hilt. When he was joyful, thought Anne, it was as though the sun had come out, beaming in its full splendor across a weary world…and his anguish…Anne had not yet seen enough of it to know its full force, she was sure, but she knew the blasts of his temper (though controlled, so far, around her, she guessed) enough to guess at their extremities. Yet, he was smiling now, and she couldn’t do other than smile with him, beaming through the swaths of laughter.

Her hand was tucked in his arm, enjoying the warmth that came off him. October had ushered in its usual seasonal chill and, fond as Anne was of any season’s beauties and delights, it was quite cold.
She was very glad of the voluminous mantle she wore, and of Henry's heat beside her. “Tell me,” she said at last. “What think you of Paris?”

Henry paused, glancing about the gardens in which they wandered. Trees and flowers ringed now-dry fountains and leafless trees exulted the clouded blue sky. “It is not so beautiful as the Loire.”

Anne laughed again and watched his smile broaden in response. “‘Not so beautiful as the Loire,’ he says,” she teased, tilting her head. Her eyes gleamed with amusement.

“Have I made my lady laugh?” inquired Henry, cocking one brow at her.

“‘My lady?’ Have you forgotten who I am?”

“You have forgotten that I am a lord, perhaps, but I see you as a lady, madam.”

Arching eyebrows, Anne shook her head. “You mean to shame me into giving you a title? You have forgotten me, entirely, if you think me the owner of such powers. No one but a king may create a title from nothing.”

“Then perhaps I shall ask my brother to make a lady of you,” declared Henry, enthusiastically.

Shaking her head, Anne looked up to the skies and laughed. “And now you have succeeded, sir. I am laughing, indeed. I believe if you brother gave me a title, my King would be like to want my head for a traitor.”

Stopping abruptly, Henry turned towards her. Impulsively, he touched her chin. “One look upon your face, and no prince in Christendom could do such a thing. You’ve a lovely neck, Anne.” Her eyes flew to his and Henry stopped, suddenly. He drew away his hand, took a step back, releasing her arm. “Madam,” he corrected. “Madam, I meant to say.”

“Is that how you think of me?” inquired she. “Not as Mistress Boleyn, but as Anne?”

He took several steps back, laughing. He glanced away from her, upwards as though the sky suddenly seduced his senses. “Ask not how I think of you,” he replied, arching his brows, half-playful and half-suggestive. “You might blush to hear it said aloud.”

Chapter End Notes

Leonardo da Vinci came to France at the invitation of François I in 1516. He was settled in what is now known as Clos Lucé, but was at the time called Cloux. I kept the historical name here for the purpose of immersion. Leonardo and Anne may or may not ever have met, but for our purposes, I chose to imagine that they did.
Once And Future

Chapter Summary

Kings, her father had said, are always calm.

Chapter Notes

Behold, the first of our flashbacks! Keep an eye out for dates in this one, friends! ;D

Not sure if I should mention, but...violence warning!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

PERKIN WARBECK, RICHARD OF SHREWSBURY
Setúbal, Portugal
August 1487

“Let me through!” hissed Perkin, dodging finely clad bodies and peering over shoulders. He was a gawky lad at fourteen years of age, tall and almost-handsome in a promising sort of way that whispered of fine futures. Like his father before him, he was tall with long limbs, but not yet accustomed to his new stature. All of this, however, did nothing to improve his angle in viewing. Richard of Shrewsbury, Duke of York and rightful King of England, might have been welcome to a prominent seat, but Perkin Warbeck, son of a Tournai comptroller and squire to the knighted fifth son of a prominent adventurer-turned-politician had no such luck. Still, it was a subject of immense importance to Perkin – or, rather, to Richard.

Bemoi, cast off King of Jaloff, came before the court of Portugal to beg assistance in reclaiming his throne.

Bemoi looked the part of a King: crowned in opulence and surrounded by the grand pomp owing to a royal personage. Richard would know. But he was Perkin, now, he reminded himself, and Perkin gaped only in curiosity. Though Richard had seen its like, Perkin never in his life had seen such a display as this. He must remember. He was Richard no longer, but Perkin Warbeck. He must remember. If he did not, he would pay for his blood as his brother, Ned, had paid in the dark of the Tower.

Bemoi tore off his turban, casting it to the ground, as Joao, King of Portugal, descended two steps upon his dais, raising his hat in stilted elegance. At that, Bemoi and all his gloriously-clad attendants prostrated themselves, casting up their arms and flailing them back and forward again in a sign of obeisance. Joao cast a glance aghast towards their interpreter and stilled himself in one look. Kings, Edward IV had once told his children, were always calm.

“Rise,” said Joao. “Good King of Jaloff, rise. Tell us what brings you to us.”

The interpreter spoke quickly and Bemoi rose as Joao returned to his throne, canopied with fine brocade, and sat.
Perkin pushed closer, peering through the translucent orange veil of the lady standing in front of him. Bemoi was clad in elegant silks of rich color (or so he suspected, the bright tangerine of the veil between them made it difficult to determine the exact hue), and he was tall and strong, with a great bushy beard. He stood at the base of the Portuguese King’s dais, arms outstretched as he began to speak. The interpreter was silent at first, watching and listening, as Bemoi spoke in his own language. The cast-off King’s face was a mask of sorrow, crinkled with the great cares of one whose misery is not only on his own behalf, but that of his people. His voice was a powerful, booming instrument that started in grand stretches and paused, punctuated with grief. Grief-stricken and pleading, Bemoi cast his eyes to the great throne of the Portuguese King and clasped his fist to his chest in a moving gesture.

Perkin swallowed and fought back his swelling throat. He, too, would do most anything to return home.

The interpreter spoke, but there was little need of the words. Bemoi had fought for his throne and lost, cast off by those who now controlled his Kingdom. Perkin’s heart gave a clench as he thought of tight-fisted Henry VII, controlling Richard’s own sisters and his mother and all the good people of England. His eyes pricked with tears.

For an hour, the cast-off King spoke of his misfortunes and those of his people, pleading with Joao to send help and free them all. Perkin wished to burst through the crowd and pledge his sword to the service of this great goal, but he dared not. His sword was little enough on its own and it had other battles to fight, anyway. The two kings moved on to the other topics, speaking of the Kingdom of Jaloff and its wonders…and those wonders which bordered it.

“I know where to find the man, the great priest-king, descended from the Magi who attended upon your Christ Jesus at His birth,” Bemoi was saying through his thick-accented interpreter. “The tales are true! In a land walled by inferno lies an earthly Eden, through which the sources of all great rivers flow from Paradise, and whose very streets are pebbled with gems the size of my fist,” he added, raising it above his head and earning a gasp from the crowd.

“Prester John!” exclaimed Perkin. “He must be speaking of Prester John!”

“Shhh!” retorted the woman in the orange veil.

“In the land of Pentexoire, treasure is so plentiful they make of it plates and cups for feasting and the roof of every house is made of gold!” declared the would-be King of Jaloff, eliciting more gasping and whispered excitement. “Treasure such as this has never been seen before! And faith in your Lord Jesus Christ, great faith. He leads a vast horde of a million men clad in crocodile skins to fight the Saracens. His army bear weapons of pure gold and, when he rides out, it is behind three golden crosses, dripping in jewels.”

Joao of Portugal sat forward. His smile was broad, eyes twinkling. “And you believe that, together, we can at last find this great king?”

“I am certain of it,” replied Bemoi, sweeping a grand bow. “Great King.”

Joao laughed and carded his fingers together. “We are, of course, keen to know more of our Great Lord God’s fine earth, but our intent in this is always to serve His Will which is, of course, to bring our Great God to all lands and all people.”

Bemoi paused; formed a broad smile. “And, if Your Royal Self would look upon me so, I would become your own Christian brother and bring our God to all of Jaloff. My time in this wonderful land of yours has, you see, brought me to the True God.”
Joao cast a glance towards his advisors. All nodded to one another. The King of Portugal turned back to Bemoi. “Then, once you have been baptized, it is our most Christian duty to make you undisputed King of Jaloff.”

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RICHARD IV, KING OF ENGLAND
Windsor Castle, England
November 1519

Catherine was washing her hands. Richard watched them sloshing through the water, dipping fingers here, and finally wrapping them in the fine cloth presented, wiping at them. He loved her hands. They were fine things with slender fingers and slender wrist. She complained, at times, that these were not strong hands, but they were fine and he wished to seize them now and pull them to his lips.

“Richard?” she inquired, as the servants bowed themselves away. She walked towards him, touched his elbow.

“I love you,” he said, resting his brow on her hair, closing his eyes.

“What is it?” asked Catherine, folding her hands on his chest. He put his arms around her waist. She pulled back to look at him and Richard formed a smile, touched her cheek with his thumb. There were wrinkles, now, at the edges of her eyes, but her skin was just as soft as ever it had been.

“My father lost his crown, once, but he recovered it,” he told her. “Do you imagine I could do the same, were France to pit me against the Lancastrian menace?”

Catherine’s delicate fingers on his neck, his cheeks. Richard closed his eyes. “Have you forgotten, my love?” He opened his eyes, kissed the sensitive pads of her fingers as she spoke. “You already have.”

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CATHERINE GORDON, QUEEN OF ENGLAND
Windsor Castle, England
November 1519

“These are good terms!” laughed Richard, taking her one hand, thrusting the letter into the other. “They must want this marriage as much as we do. With the might of Spain at our backs, we may easily crush the Lancastrian upstarts!”

“Oh, Richard!” exclaimed Catherine, throwing her arms around his neck. He laughed and pulled her close against him. She felt warm and tight nestled against him and only stepped back reluctantly when he released her.

“I must write. I must agree to this immediately!” he exclaimed, grinning, pulling back to turn towards the table, but Catherine seized hold of his hand.

“Richard,” she said, softly. Catherine glanced about the large apartment unseeingly. Windsor’s stone walls circled, keeping them safe, (and chilly,) within. She pulled her shawl closer. “Wedding Catalina of Aragon to Dickon of Warwick may seem a pleasing strategy at present but,” Catherine lowered her eyes, plucked unseeingly at her sleeves. “I believe there is a better.”

His fingers were warm beneath her chin as he raised her face to meet his eyes. “What would that be?”
Turning away quickly, Catherine paced to the closest window, her back to him. “You must wed the Spanish princess, yourself.” One...two...three...Catherine counts, awaiting his reaction.

“What?”

She turns back around to face him. “If not her, one of the daughters of Henry Tudor.”

His face is the palest she has ever seen it, his brow gone terribly smooth as though all thought has flown from him. Catherine recalled the Richard she had first met: she thought him the most beautiful youth she had ever seen, tall and striking and looking fit to take on half the world. Even with no crown, he’d looked to her every inch a king. Just now, however, he was stricken and, while the threads of grey through his once-chestnut locks usually lent his features distinction, now they looked lank and listless. “No, Cate. After all we have been through, how-”

Catherine took a step to him again, and instantly he caught both her elbows, holding her fast. She touched a finger to his lips. “It is because of all we have been through that I know it must be. You must see that we are poised on the brink of disaster and I am too old now to sit in an empty castle and pray that my husband may return to me,” she said, touching his face, running a hand across his cheek. “It is all very well and good for those of you who may do something in all the fighting, I suppose, but all we ladies can do is remain home and weep and worry. I have acquired, you know, a fondness for England and I would not see her plunged back into the wars from which we first wrested her. France sits across the waters, poised with the Lancastrians in his pocket, and Spain plays idly at his game of chess. If we continue as we are, England will become the battlefield upon which France and Spain fight for control of Europe. If we change, however…” Catherine shrugged; her hand fell away. “Perhaps we can save England from more wars.”

“And you think a different Queen would change that?”

“I don’t know!” she exclaimed, turning away. “But perhaps it would help. And it has been done before. I could enter a monastery and the marriage would be dissolved. You would be free to wed another. We both know that I can have no more children, though we like to pretend otherwise. Catalina is young and, more to the point, she is the aunt of the Emperor. Spain owes to her a debt of loyalty. Under the protection of Spain, with a Spanish Queen and the promise of half-Spanish heirs, well,” Catherine shrugged. “At least then, should France attack, we might rely upon Spain to help us fight back.”

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ELIZABETH OF YORK, QUEEN OF ENGLAND
Chateau de Fontainebleau, France
November 1519

Elizabeth ran a slender finger across Arthur’s scar. It was a brisk day out, but her ladies and most of her children had craved a walk and, seeing an opportunity to have a private moment with her more distant son, Elizabeth had seized at the chance. They sat close together by the window and Arthur’s expression, mostly, was indulgent.

“Mama,” he whispered, shaking his head, pulling her hand away, fixing her with that look, so like his father, that said: don’t make a fuss. That look, so familiar, conveyed many things. It said, too: I’m strong, don’t worry. But, in her heart of hearts, Elizabeth knew what it truly meant and she felt she was cracking: Secretly, I’m scared too. She wanted to pull him into her arms, but she resisted the impulse. Though he would always be her child, he was no longer her baby. She remembered him, her firstborn infant, so well.
Together, she and Henry had planned: their first child was to be born at Winchester, known in England to have once been the fabled Camelot. If it were a boy, he would be called Arthur, the future King Arthur II, and he would be a symbol for all of England of a new Golden Age to come. The once and future King.

Symbolically, it was a good idea, and Elizabeth had factored in that it would be a grueling trip for herself. What she had failed, in all her careful calculations, to consider was the physical toll upon the child. Arthur was born too early and Elizabeth remembered well her initial fears. For hours and hours and hours she lay awake beside him, watching him breathe, hitching in her own breathing to focus, praying God that each of his weak gasps would not be his last. God had heeded those prayers. Though Elizabeth had had other children who did not reach adulthood, Arthur was a fighter and he had grown tall and capable and robust over the years.

Indeed, Elizabeth considered, Arthur fought for everything: breath, from the very first moment; achievement and then ultimately, proficiency; he fought for respect and for stability; he even fought for love. Soon, he would fight for his crown.

“I’d hoped it would have healed by now,” he said of the scar, finally, and she smiled softly towards him, realizing he’d been studying her face, working out her thoughts. He was, she thought, possibly her most perceptive child: he could work in the quiet that so daunted the others, but he had that more from his father, than from her: one of many children in a large cacaphonous household.

“I don’t think it’s going to heal any more than it already has,” replied Elizabeth, gently, and he nodded, a confirmation. He’d already thought about this. Even as a child, he’d possessed that quality: a deep thinker, working through the problem before ever voicing it. Like his father, he was fond of preparation. Elizabeth, who was much more off the cuff herself, had always admired that in both of them, though she’d not quite mastered the whole of it, herself. She could plan, oh yes, and she was tirelessly diligent, but she lacked that keen precision, that efficiency which both Arthur and his father had always craved. She smiled softly. “It makes you look terribly dashing.”

Arthur chuckled. “Harry said more or less the same.” Arthur, she could tell, hadn’t believed it when Harry had said it. He had suspected Harry was placating him. She could see he also didn’t believe her, but the difference was that he knew his mother believed what she was saying: he wasn’t so sure about Harry.

Elizabeth bit her lip. “Your brother adores you, you know.”

Arthur’s jaw tightened, he looked away. She knew he loved Harry, too, but that didn’t always make things simple. With Harry, nothing was ever simple. Somehow, even the straightforward things became so very simple that their own clarity was somehow a convoluted mess of confusion. Harry was a labyrinth, but the problem was that Harry did not realize this about himself.

Arthur, however, did.

“I know,” said Arthur, at last. He smiled towards her, a laconic smile that seemed laidback, and wasn’t truly. Arthur wasn’t one to settle on any count.

“I don’t think you do, not truly,” she replied. “You think I exaggerate and that Harry is forever caught in his own problems – which is true – but Harry loves you, while also admiring you. I don’t think you realize, Arthur, you’re an awful lot to live up to.” But then, Elizabeth’s husband had been even more for little Arthur to live up to. Even today, with Henry VII dead and buried, Arthur was still fighting from under his shadow. Yes, every day of his life, Arthur had been a fighter. “And I do not exaggerate.”
Arthur’s smile was a little broader now and he laughed softly, a chortle really, cocking a cheeky brow at her. “I believe that you believe that,” he said. “And Harry does love me, but…” he glanced off and away, and Elizabeth realized he had bitten something off at the last minute. He wasn’t one for loosing his train of thought. Arthur was nothing if not steady. “Our priorities differ slightly.”

He’d amended, and Elizabeth wondered what he’d meant to say, but she did not press him. His searing headaches had receded in quantity, though they did on occasion still crop up. Elizabeth assumed these pains were to blame, as he’d been in a bit of a mood since leaving the Loire Valley. Even so, he thought out what he meant to say, molding and editing before his words ever tumbled from his lips. Kings, her father had said, are always calm.

Elizabeth wondered at it: even Arthur’s moods were steady. The black veil that seemed to have settled over him did not for a moment flutter away as it might have with his other siblings. It stayed and stayed, always hovering in the background, even when he was distracted momentarily from its presence or trying to make another merry. He had a distracted quality Elizabeth couldn’t make out and she longed to know its source. She could only assume that such a prolonged period with Harry hadn’t done him any favors. Arthur was, for all his steadiness, a worrier, and Harry was decidedly not. But Arthur was not one to be pressed into confessions: he came out with his truths in his own time, and pushing him only served to lodge him more strongly against the object. He was, after all, just as stubborn as the rest of them.

“In what respect?” she inquired. “You both wish to return to England…”

“Oh, not that,” replied Arthur, shaking his head. “It is only that the present has such a firm hold over Harry and I…”

“You live much more in the future, I know,” replied Elizabeth.

Arthur nodded. “I must.” He turned to her with a shrug. “It is my duty to find the route that will benefit the greatest number of people the most…whatever that may mean. But there is always a cost and I have to see it coming, be prepared to pay it. If I don’t…” he shook his head. “Chaos.”

“There are worse things,” soothed Elizabeth.

Arthur was terribly still. He shook his head. “Not for a kingdom, Mama. And I mean to take mine back. Soon.”

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PERKIN WARBECK, RICHARD OF SHERWESBURY

Senegal, Jaloff

December 1489

Perkin leaned forward on the bulwark, gazing across the vivid landscape with wide eyes. The Senegal was even more beautiful than he’d imagined: a landscape of palm trees waving merrily in sea breezes that whipped powdery sand into bright blue waves. The shores of Portugal were unspeakably beautiful, etched from wild rock faces, but still he had never seen a sight like this. Not from the chalky shores of England to the windswept beaches of Calais.

“Look alive, boy!” called out Pero, brusquely. Many called him Bisagudo – “Sharpface” – and with good reason. His visage was like that of a squirrel, sloping out into a pointed nose: but it was not this that had won him the name. Pero Vaz da Cunha was not a man with whom to be trifled. Perkin jumped to comply. “Sickness,” worried Pero to himself with a shudder. “Sickness, everywhere.”
The fort they’d been sent to build remained incomplete. No masterwork, this edifice, and still a shamble of parts that might someday connect. Its construction was, Perkin had heard Pero admit, ill-conceived. Built to take advantage of the confluence of local rivers, it was also therefore vulnerable to both flooding and – until completed – attacks. With a disputed crown in the balance, this was an uneasy combination, made only more poisonous by the still more uneasy combination of Bemoi and Pero. Since the beginning of the voyage, the two had quarreled incessantly and arrival in Africa, rather than improving the situation, had only brought matters to a head.

Perkin teetered this way and that, dodging sick men, his arms full to the brim with material. Again Pero was yelling, yelling, yelling, but thankfully now not at him. There was always the note of affection when Pero was calling to his squires, but there was none of that now. This was a brutal rage that swept over the Senegal like a storm. Standing on the deck, just yards away from Perkin, Pero was slicing the air with his finger, jabbing it viciously into Bemoi’s shoulder.

Swiping his arm away, Bemoi leaned closer to Pero, barring his teeth as he spoke.

“Treason!” The word sliced the air like an arrow, a hush settling across the entire camp as all turned to stare. Pero, however, was not finished doling out accusations. “Treason and betrayal! I see now your falseness. I’ve been warned by my men all this while, but still I chose to believe in you. You, who have led us here on a merry winding path, all the while plotting behind our backs to contaminate us, to sicken and poison and murder every Christian man who sets foot upon these dank shores! To help you! You are no true Christian and no true King! You mean to kill us all!”

Unsheathing the dagger at his side, Pero raised it. Clutched in one hand, he raised it high. He stabbed Bemoi. The King’s scream shrieked out above the trees surrounding them. Again and again, Pero stabbed the would-be King. He plunged his dagger again and again until red rivulets of blood wept all across the deck. Bemoi help up useless hands to ward off his killer. Pero stabbed and stabbed again. Collapsing, sputtering blood, Bemoi sprawled at last on the red-soaked floor. The bloody King of Jaloff stared at Perkin Warbeck with dead eyes.

“There!” announced Pero, holding the bloodied dagger aloft. “Behold the price of a stolen crown!”

Chapter End Notes

Some history things! In 1487, Perkin Warbeck was in fact in the service of Pero Vaz de Cunha, and in 1489, Pero Vaz did in fact stab Bemoi (also spelled Bemoy) of Jaloff (Jolof, Jalof, Jollof, etc...) to death at the Senegal, accusing him of treason and betrayal. However, Perkin had most likely left Pero's service by the time of the assassination. According to his "confession," he left Pero in 1488, hoping to see the world. Now, this confession must always be taken with a hulking grain of salt, as it was acquired under duress, but I don't see any particular reason he'd lie about something like that, or Henry VII would want him to, especially since he'd just seen (and he almost certainly did witness Bemoi's arrival in court, as described here) how to convince a foreign King to give you a country and, whatever his true identity, he did definitely try to take a country ;D However, I wanted to include this sort of ~warning (and Perkin certainly would have heard of the events, regardless) so I extended his service to Pero a mite.

Additionally, Prester John was a real legendary figure of the time and those were, in fact, amongst the stories told of him. Bemoi did dangle Prester John in front of Jaoa and promise to being the Portuguese to him in exchange for the help, in addition to
converting to Christianity...basically, that entire first scene is pretty accurate, right down to the obeisances by both Bemoi and Jaoa, and the brocade canopy over Jaoa's throne. As a squire to Pero Vaz, Perkin would have been there. I based that entire scene on eyewitness accounts. ;D

Unfortunately, the only eyewitness accounts of the murder of Bemoi I could find simply said that Paro "stabbed him to death," and accused him of betrayal and treason, but that Paro had probably been misinformed, and was definitely terrified of the sickness. So...that final scene is primarily just my imagination, but the events and motives are true.

Finally, there was in fact precedent for putting a wife aside by having her enter a convent, so that the King would be free to remarry. As a matter of fact, that is what Henry VIII initially tried to do with Catherine of Aragon, but she refused to go and we all know how it went from there ;D I can't resist a little irony...

Woohoo! Ten chapters in ten weeks! Let me know what you guys thought! Did you like the flashback thing?
FRANÇOIS I, KING OF FRANCE
Chateau de Fontainebleau, France
December 1519

He had borrowed heavily for a crown he did not achieve. Futile bribes came to nothing and his coffers ran sparse. A humiliation, a failure. To think that Europe would collectively vote for the man who threatened them all! François’s fist tightened and he nervously pressed it, up down, up down, against the arm of his chair. His Queen stood by the window, gazing out towards the heart of Paris. She loved Sainte-Chapelle, wished to go there again, but why she was thinking of that…François rolled his eyes to the ceiling and thought, idly, This palace needs improvements. A shame that there was little enough he could currently do about it.

“War is the solution,” he said, aloud, turning – head still rested against the back of his chair – to his wife.

She turned back to him, shrugged, said, “The solution to what, dear?” in a dreary tone and, with a bitter smile, he thought: She does not care for me. He thought this often.

“Our,” he gestured vaguely, disliked this subject, particularly with women. “Troubles.”

“Which troubles are these, husband?” asked Claude, coming to seat herself opposite him. She was a peerless woman, he knew. Everyone said it. To God she prayed much, to the arts she paid much, to learning and the common people, well, François opened his hand, inspected his palm. She was a peerless woman, and François often grew weary of it. Particularly when it became clear she was weary of him, as well.

“I would have made a resplendent Emperor,” whispered François, glancing away, out the window now unobstructed by his wife’s form.

“That is neither here nor there,” replied Claude, prudently, having divined his meaning. “You are not the Emperor. You are, however, the King of France and France has need of you.”

François rolled his shoulders. “Yes,” he replied. “She has.” France was a tireless mistress and François, tragically, was but a mortal man. “But what am I to do about it?” Coming to his feet abruptly, François stalked to the door and away again. He placed his hands on the back of his chair, leaning over it to face his Queen. “A war! What treasure the plunder will bring! More than enough to,” he gestured vaguely and Claude nodded, knowing immediately what he meant: pay off the debts he’d racked up in a useless bid for an imperial title.
“It is a terrible risk,” said the Queen, arching a brow.

“Risk, yes, I’ve a terrible fondness for that word. Such promise! Such…glory,” he turned to her, smiling. She was not smiling. François wound a very grand ring round his finger and turned away again. “A war, yes, but where? Italy is, of course, the obvious answer. A strike to the heart of Christendom, a bid for control of the Mediterranean...But then there is England, tender and ripe for the plucking and so devastatingly close upon our own borders, should Spain move in there. I could place this Tudor on the throne there. He would owe me his very crown! And then, together, we might make a more powerful blow against Carlos—"

“You forget, François, that England has already a King, and that a conquered populace might take some time to muster for foreign war. Stability first.” Claude tilted her head. “Like our marriage.” There was a gleam in her eye. But for Salic law, Claude and not François would now be ruler of their nation.

François sneered out the window, where she could not see. “Speaking of marriages, I hear it is all but settled that your former step-mother, Catalina of Aragon, will wed into the so-called Plantagenet dynasty. You see! Already Carlos moves against us! Even when we hold the trump piece!”

“Clearly,” commented Claude. “He does not fear the Tudors. Nor should you! Their claim is shaky at best. Descended from the bastard line of the second son of a long-dead king! Even our Boleyn girls here at court have nearly so much royal blood through their veins! It is ridiculous. Catalina of Aragon has a better claim to the English throne than ever this ‘Henry VII’ had.”

“Oh, yes,” replied François, nodding. “That is so! The father had hardly a foot to stand on in calling himself King...but that is not true of our King Arthur! Unlike that Perkin Warbeck across the water, Arthur is the undisputed child of the undisputed child! This Richard IV is almost certainly not who he claims, but Elizabeth of York is an absolute certainty, as are her sons. Hers is the only royal claim in England that matters!”

Claude waved her hand. “That is as may be, husband, but ultimately direct bloodlines mean little,” she said, fixing him with a measuring look. “It is might that sways the tide. You would need to invest heavily in this struggle for a throne already secured by another man. Already you have strained yourself fighting for a title you did not achieve. Do not do so on the behalf of another.”

François did not attempt, this time, to hide his sneer. Coming to stand before her, he smiled suddenly, an angry thing that fanned the red of his cheeks into full fury. “I would not expect a woman to understand these things. This is why the crown of France relies upon we males and not you females.”

But what unsettled him most was this: Claude was a peerless individual – and he was not.

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MARY BOLEYN, LADY TO QUEEN CLAUDE OF FRANCE
Chateau de Fontainebleau, France
December 1519

“Majesty!” exclaimed Mary, breathlessly. His hand dropped away from beneath her skirts.

“It is nearly Christmastide! The season of giving, and I wish dearly to give you your gift now,” he said, releasing her waist and taking a step back. “Would you have it of me?”

Mary laughed, putting her hands to his chest, trailing her finger across the elaborate embroidery of
his doublet. She raised large eyes to him. “Oh, Majesty, you are generous, indeed.” Down, down, down her fingers traced. She watched the King’s expression as they found their destination.

Taking her face in his hands, François smiled. “What is that in your eyes, Mary?”

She laughed, surprised. “Mischief, Your Majesty.”

He laughed, as well. “Mischief, Mary, and what else?”

Leaving one hand to do its work, unlacing him, she snaked another up and around his shoulders, to the back of his neck, to his lustrous curls. He was not altogether a handsome man, but he was a confident one, which showed in every glance of his large, heavy eyes. His nose was quite long and large and prominent, and his lips were full and his mouth vigorous. For all that, he was so much more than he appeared, his great stature more carefully conforming to the boundlessly energetic soul within. Not altogether handsome perhaps, but he was something better. He was magnificent.

Mary could see him, just then, big and bold, in the glance of his eyes, the consuming gaze that sought to devour her and she thought, He could hold a thousand nations in his hand, it should never topple. And she thought, This great man sees something in me, too, something no one else has yet seen. But she loved him for all his boldness, his impulsivity, even his fickleness. Always thinking, boundless in his mind; pompous and greedy perhaps, but with good cause and endless mental powers. He was of all things greatness, and she could hardly think of anything else, just then, besides him.

She touched his cheek with her hand, smiling. “Adoration, sire. I adore you.”

“I wish to have you, Mary, not here, but upon my father-in-law’s throne. I wish to have you on my throne.” He bent low, kissed her greedily, powerfully, pulling her up to him as her hand did its work below (Oh why, she asked herself, were there so very many laces?). “Say you will do it, Mary. If you adore me, say you will do it.” His eyes were powerful beams of intensity, goring her with all the force in him. She trembled to feel its heady glance wash over her. She felt alone and naked and suffused in sunlight and seen, oh, gloriously seen as though he could peer into her very soul and saw her for all that she was.

“Do you mean…Do you love me?”

Leaning close, he snaked his hand back beneath her skirt. “You have never known such a love.”

Mary leaned into him, burying her face in the embroidery of his doublet. “Anything,” she moaned, breathless. “I’ll do anything!”

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ANNE BOLEYN, LADY TO QUEEN CLAUDE OF FRANCE
Chateau de Fontainebleau, France
November 1519

Mary’s weeping would not cease. Anne rubbed her back again and again, kissing the nape of her neck with all the comfort she could manage, but Mary’s tears soaked through the rich fabric of Anne’s dress as Mary cried into her lap.

“Oh, Mary,” murmured Anne for the umpteenth time, pitifully, uselessly, and squeeze her shoulder. “Being sent back away…back home, finally home: it is not the end. Only the beginning of something new.”
The time for anger was passed – at least for now, and Anne ached. Her heart was a thundering – useless – a shell that reverberated through her chest. She wished with all her might that she could strike François a blow that would cost him as dearly. Oh, Mary, impulsive Mary, had been foolish, but it was François who had led her to this. Anne knew well and good that this could not possibly have been her sister’s scheme.

“I’m such a fool,” whispered Mary. “That we were seen! I should have known! I should have denied him! Oh, but Anne, for the first time, in that moment when he asked me…I thought perhaps – perhaps at last…at last he loved me, too. Oh, Nan, I am a fool. You warned me time and again but I…am such a fool-“

“Shhh, shhh, no,” whispered Anne, biting back tears of her own. “Don’t say that. You are not a fool-“

“But what I did, Anne!” She sat up finally, her face was red and streaked with tears, eyes puffy and miserable. “It was foolish, so foolish! And you, O sensible Anne, you never would have done that. To…to…on his very throne!…I thought everyone in the castle abed! I did not imagine, even in so public a place…that anyone would see, I…”

Anne felt a tear trickle down her own cheek. Impatiently, she blotted it away with the back of her hand. Taking her sister’s shoulders, she leaned forward. “It was he who misled you, Mary-“

“It was a sin, Anne! A very, very, oh, a very great sin! I shall burn for this, Anne, in hell, I-“ her words were lost in her weeping as she half-bent with them, choked in the torrent of sobs.

“You will not burn!” exclaimed Anne, leaning to look into her eyes once more. She grasped Mary’s arms tight. “By God and all his saints, you will not burn. You have, it is true, made a mistake, but…God is forgiving, Mary. He will forgive you if you ask it. But, for me, I ask this: forgive yourself. You were led astray. By a king! We are all our lives taught to trust in their beneficence as God’s anointed and this is the cruelty it has shown you. He took advantage of your great heart and your courage and your overwhelming desire to give happiness to others. It is he who is married and it is he who is unforgivable, Mary. Not you. Never you.”

“But it is I who is ruined! Who has ruined us all! Papa will never forgive me,” whispered Mary sullenly, refusing to meet Anne’s eye. “And I, oh God, I have marred your chances as well. You will be tainted by association with such a sister, what have I done, Anne, can you ever forgive me?”

“Shh, oh Mary, listen.” Anne, too, cast down her eyes for a moment. “Papa will…have some difficulty to overcome in it, and he will be terribly cross, but he will forgive you with time if you do as he asks. He will think what he is doing is best for you and for all of us.” Fiercely, Anne drew Mary close to her, swaying softly as she held her. “Mary,” she whispered. “Mary, there is nothing to forgive. I love you for all that you are.” Mary’s arms wound round Anne and she wept into her shoulder. “Fret not over me, Mary,” said Anne, fixing her stare on the crucifix across the wall. “I will find my own way.”

“You’ll not find a husband here, now,” murmured Mary, miserably.

“What need have I of a French husband?”

Anne felt Mary nod and for a moment they remained that way. Finally, Mary stirred.

“In my situation, Anne…” Mary pulled away. She wiped tears off her face with sodden fingers until Anne found her a clean handkerchief. “In my situation, would you have done the same?”
Glancing away, Anne laughed. “I hardly know, Mary. Perhaps given—”

Clutching at her hand, Mary kissed it. “Anne, you must never. You must never do as I have done. You are more sensible than I am and more clever. No, don’t deny it. You are. Be so.” Resting her brow against Anne’s, she whispered, “Le temps viendra.”

“Le temps viendra.”

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MARY BOLEYN, LADY TO QUEEN CLAUDE OF FRANCE
Chateau de Fontainebleau, France
December 1519

They all turned away from her, turned away from speaking to her to stare or to whisper amongst themselves. All whom she had once called friend backed away, shunning her. Mary understood that the ladies of Claude’s court must protect their own reputations in this way, but the pang was sharp nonetheless. Though dressed in her usual attire, she felt like a harlot, forced to walk the streets naked for her crimes against the Most High. Her confessor had absolved her of her guilt in the eyes of God, but it was not so easy to obtain the same treatment at the hands of mortals. None spoke of it openly, but all knew her shame.

Snowflakes at which she ordinarily would have marveled littered the sky with white and it seemed a more daunting task than ever to walk out into the cold oblivion, to greet the travel companions her father had provided, to sail across the sea, and wed the stranger her parents had contracted for her immediately for, she had no doubt, some considerable cost.

They had gathered round, the ladies of the court, to witness her inglorious expulsion. She was reduced to a spectacle now, cheapened and tarnished. Still, the absolute silence of their judgment was better, she supposed, than what she had faced earlier. Walking through the corridors, every man who saw her had leered, hooted, hollered. Too many had pinched and forced caresses upon her. At least, now, she was spared that torment.

And for what? For love! Oh, yes, her love of François had been real enough, though she had seen and heard nothing from him since the incident: abandoned to her own broken heart and the heartless jeers of others…Still, her love had been true, though his had flagged at the first test. In that, at least, she had done more, displayed more faith and courage, than even a great king. That, at least, was reason to hold her head high, though she did not feel terribly proud, just now.

No one of her former friends would say farewell as she had wished and Mary did her utmost to square her shoulders. She nodded in acceptance as all her friends shied away and smiled a smile she did not feel. Clutching her belongings, she turned towards the carriage that would convey her away, trudging through the snow alone. Cold leeched into her sodden shoes and she drug her leaden mantles through the unforgiving drifts. No one would so much as lift a finger to help her.

“Mary!” the shout rang through the silent snow drifts as she turned just in time to see the figure bolting towards her. Anne ran towards her, seizing Mary in a warm embrace as their cloaks flapped about them. A stream of whispers rippled through the gathered ladies but Mary ignored them all, pulling Anne tight. “Did you think you could slip away without a goodbye?” whispered Anne.

“I knew it would be unpleasant. I wanted to spare you the association.”

we shall meet again soon. Until then…look forward to seeing our brother again. He will make much of you,” she teased, softly.

Mary laughed. “That is so,” replied Mary, squeezing Anne’s hand. “Me and mine, Nan.”

“Me and mine,” Anne agreed. “Now, let me help you with those bags. You’ve a long journey before you, no use starting off tired.” She smiled. “Write me when you get home. Tell me if it looks the same. I long to see it again…”

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CLAUDE, QUEEN OF FRANCE
Chateau de Fontainebleau, France

December 1519

François rubbed his clenched forefinger endlessly against his thumb, a quick brush indicating nerves. It was a habit with him, going back as long as ever the Queen had known him, and she watched him now, twitching away.

So you fucked her on my father’s throne, Claude wanted to scream. She had suspected (known, really), as she always did, for some time what was going on between her husband and Mary Boleyn, but she had tactfully overlooked it…as she always did. So long as it was kept quiet and private, it was nothing, but now it was an ill kept secret, known by everyone of the court out in the open. Of course, all parties went to great lengths to keep it quiet, now: no one from Thomas Boleyn, to his daughters, to Claude particularly wanted it to spread across all of Europe. Still, Claude did not know where his eye would next wander so, even for this intimate interview with her husband, she was careful to keep the other Boleyn girl close at hand. While Claude and François talked, Anne sat off to the side and embroidered, discreetly pretending not to listen.

Claude did not have any desire to picture the scandalous scenario, but she couldn’t help it. Over and over again she pictured them naked and enthroned, entwined together, and some page walking in at just the wrong moment. Idiots, idiots! Claude squeezed her bottom lip with her thumb absently.

Her relationship with her husband could be difficult, but still Claude felt it: a numb twist deep in her belly that put her off every delicious dish that came her way. François was eager to appease her, his guilt clear for all to see, but she rejected all comfort. She neither wanted it nor could accept it, just now, even if she had wanted it. No, she wanted the sorrow, wanted to feel it as keenly as she might. There was a queer comfort in the pain, as though the pang served as a pleasure. Oh, pleasure, yes. It was all her husband ever seemed to seek and, cross, Claude turned away again. She did not want to look at him, did not want him to touch her – something he kept trying to do – did not ever want to be felt again.

“You great fool,” she hissed, dodging his reach once more. “If only you were stupid I might have an easier time of this, but you are not and I find myself asking how much greater an idiot one must be when they have wits, than those who have not.”

“No, no!” Claude clenched her fist. She’d sent out everyone, save Anne Boleyn, and she watched her husband intently to see if his eyes drifted towards the English girl. So far, he had proven astute enough to avoid that trap, at least. Oh, what a great fool he was. Of all her ladies, for him to select one of the two English girls when even now they stood on such terrible ground with that country! The English ambassador’s own daughter, of all people! For shame! “What were you thinking?” Claude held back her tears, tears of anger, of hurt, of shame for having such a husband – a husband
of whom she could never be rid and whom she must again welcome into her bed. It seemed cruel, just then, when her pride – yes, her pride more than anything: she did not love him always in that way – was so miserably stung. “Did you love her?”

François opened his mouth; closed it. She felt disdain ripple across her shoulders. “I—“ he broke off. There were tears in his eyes and she thought, distantly, that he was humiliated, too.

*Good*, thought Claude. He stretched out his hand towards her sleeve; she pulled away.

“I never meant to—“

“So it was the girl’s idea to mount your throne and…to mount you upon it,” she added, twisting her lips. Her gut gave a great leaping squeeze. She felt suddenly queasy, picturing the scene once more. Perhaps, perhaps it was more than just her foolish pride, she thought, clapping a hand tight across her stomach. Aching, she prayed she was not again pregnant. Now would be a most inconvenient moment. And perhaps, yes, perhaps she did love him somehow, somewhere. Oh, she knew she did, but she also knew it was not in the traditional way.

His mouth hardened into a rigid line. Claude watched him draw himself to his full height, trying to reign down upon her. Claude was unimpressed. “She is a great whore,” he protested. His eyes pricked, his mouth sneered. For all his posturing, he looked as though he would weep or loose his breakfast before her. He was not accustomed to answering for his actions. Claude hoped he did both. His tears, in particular, would prove a very great balm to her wound. “Infamous above all. I’ve said it before, my beloved—”

Claude made a derisive sound, turning away again. Her eyes caught on Anne, in the corner, head still bent over her embroidery, but her needle had stilled. It hovered in the air, held so taut that it trembled. Claude could not see Anne’s face, but she wondered if she was weeping.

“I’ll say it again!” growled François. “She tempted me into much and more! If it is a sin I have committed – it was her wretched doing!”

“I have also heard that you boast to your gentleman of Mistress Boleyn as your ‘English Mare,’ as you ride her so often. Are these, then, the words Mistress Boleyn fed you?”

François colored, looked away. He stammered. “She is a great whore!” he exclaimed. “I am not to be thus questioned!” Turning, he stormed out of the room.

Claude folded her hands before her in a semblance of calm. It was not particularly convincing, she realized, as she was trembling. On top of everything else, she felt the pang of guilt. At first, she’d felt glad when François had said such derisive things about Mary in front of the sister, as it would make her less likely to wish to seduce the King of France…but the victory had quickly given way to the pang of guilt. In truth, she rather liked Anne Boleyn: a quick-witted and sensible girl probably more unlikely to try for the King than many of the others.

Approaching the girl, Claude reached down to touch Anne’s chin, tilting her head upwards. She expected tears and fear and anguish. Yet, when she beheld her face, it was something altogether different scrawled across her visage. Anne’s eyes flashed with raw rage, her mouth a grim line of hatred which she hastily covered with a carefully neutral expression. She could not, however, conceal the expression of her eyes, alive with wildfire.

Seating herself beside her lady, Claude gave a little laugh. “Yes,” she remarked. “I feel quite the same way.” Claude patted Anne’s hand. “A very great whore has in fact just left these chambers, Mistress Boleyn,” said the Queen. “But it was not your sister.”
Anne face betrayed surprise and, at last, she gave way to a startled chuckle. Claude arched a derisive brow as both ladies turned to gaze at the spot where François had so very lately stood.

Chapter End Notes

Ok, so if you didn't want to ready about what happened in this chapter (totally get it!), here's the summary: 1) François, wanting to prove something to himself about his position as king, convinces Mary Boleyn to have sex w him in the throne room. It's at night, so they don't expect to be discovered, but...they are. 2) Since François is a king and also yknow a white male, there's basically no repercussions on him except his wife is peeved, but Mary can't say the same. Her father is furious, all the ladies of the court (hoping to keep safe their own reputations) scorn her except Anne, who reassures her that she's going on to a new chapter back home (where she is to marry a stranger). Mary extracts a promise from Anne that she will never be as careless with her love as Mary has been, not wanting the same fate to befall her sister. 3) Claude feels mostly scorn towards her husband, but can't do much about it except tell him off bc white male king. Nonetheless, she and Anne share a brief moment at the very end, when they silently agree that François is really the the manwhore here and Mary just got caught up in someone taking advantage of her.

Now to history things! ;D There's controversy surrounding whether or not François and Mary Boleyn were ever intimate or, in fact, if Mary was even still in France at this period as details of her life are few and far between. However, many historians believe something did happen, which appears to be part of why Anne Boleyn held out against Henry's advances as long as she did (in addition to being very religious! which I absolutely think was a huge component as well). Additionally François unleashed a torrent of such slurs against her (two of which I quoted here) which also tend to indicate that she was his mistress for a time.

What is certain is that she was shipped off to marry her first husband by February 1520. All that being said, I sincerely doubt they did anything as outrageously public as throne-sex. That element was added entirely to expedite the process of her being sent from court in mingled secrecy and shame.

Again, none of that is absolutely certain (almost nothing about Mary Boleyn is, in truth), but I live for the drama and, more significantly, this does play into character actions and motivations.
Dickon gave a great yell as he swooped forward, swinging his sword. Easily, his sword master stepped aside, missing the blow.

“Patience, Your Grace. Patience wins the day.”

It was Dickon’s least favorite sentiment and he twisted his lips with familiar irritation. “I must be swift,” he insisted, as he always did, and allowed himself an ironic grin. “Patience can wait.”

The grizzled sword master turned with bushy brows raised as he always did. “’Twas impatience, they say, that lost the King Richard that was his life at Bosworth Field. Impatience that lost the King Henry that was his crown as well, they say.”

Dickon scowled at the guard of his sword. Again and again they had this conversation. Again and again it earned them nothing. This itself, he supposed, was a lesson in patience. In truth, Dickon doubted his master of sword had the right of it, in any case. Many things awful could be said about the late Richard III and the late so-called Henry VII, but impatience did not enter into their failings. Turning to his mentor with a forced smile, Dickon shrugged with his sword. “I suppose you’ll be after my footwork, then,” he said.

“It is something terrible, Your Grace. I’ve hardly seen anything like it outside a foal learning to run. You miss only a few weeks to the revels of the season and you’ve regressed some years.”

“I doubt that,” laughed Dickon, arching his brows. “And, in any case, I suspect I’ll have little enough time for swordplay soon enough, when I am confirmed as Prince of Wales and sent off to Ludlow with my new bride.”

It was all set, he’d heard. As of November last, the Spanish had agreed to very fair terms and seemed anxious for the union with Catalina of Aragon to go forward. Their primary stipulations were that Dickon’s ailing father, Edward of Warwick, resign his right to the throne in favor of his son, and Dickon himself be officially elevated to the office of Price of Wales and heir to the throne of England. He’d not heard much since then, but that was not altogether unusual and besides, he was
sure that his uncle, King Richard, was attending to the other necessaries of any union: fixing on the
dowry and all those sorts of essentials. News that the Queen was stepping aside to enter a convent
had reached him, but it was not a notion Dickon had ever connected to his own future.

At seventeen, he was much the junior of his intended wife, Catalina, but Dickon found he didn’t
mind much. After all, she’d been wed before and that meant she’d be an experienced woman: a
notion he found rather pleasant. He’d also seen several portraits of her and, whatever else may be,
she was certainly lovely: a round, full face, large eyes, and lustrous copper waves of hair that marked
her as a descendant of Edward III. Their children would be indisputable as heirs to the throne, given
that the King, his Uncle Richard, had overturned the attainder against the line of George
Plantagenet, Duke of Clarence – Dickon’s grandfather. Dickon’s father was Edward of Warwick
and his mother was Cecily of York. Traitors might continue to whisper about King Richard’s
“dubious” claim, but these doubts could not possibly apply to Dickon or his heirs. No, he was above
dispute. He could not be assailed. And when he was the King of England, he would see that no more
pretenders ever dared raise their misbegotten heads against him.

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ARTHUR TUDOR, KING OF ENGLAND
Chateau de Fontainebleau, France
January 1520

François stormed up one end of the great hall and down the other as Arthur watched with weary
eyes. The King of France had summoned Arthur, his mother, and his brother for an unknown
purpose and, as yet, had failed to tell any of them why. Instead, François paced in distraction,
ocasionally casting his arms out in wide histrionic arcs or alternately decrying the name of the
Emperor.

Casting a glance towards his mother, Arthur stepped forward at long last. He had never been much
good in the particulars of diplomacy: making people like him was an art form belonging to other
members of his family, but lacking in himself. Still, he was tired and the scar upon his brow
throbbed. He was finished waiting upon the pleasure of the King of France. “Might we prove more
useful to Your Majesty,” suggested Arthur, stiffly. “If we knew what it was that so distresses you?”

François stopped, stopped dead in his tracks. Turning, he fixed Arthur with an expression of
frustrated rage. “It is a circumstance I hoped never to endure!”

François’ voice rang to the rafters and Arthur, mindful of his position, summoned his considerable
discipline to keep from rolling his eyes. It was well past midnight when they’d been roused from
their beds and it had been nigh an hour since that time. All Arthur felt, now, was contempt. He
forced a smile he did not feel. Arching his brows, he hinted: “The circumstance being…”

Irritated, François put his tongue in his cheek and scowled, evidently fond of his own hysteria.

Arthur’s lip curled and he opened his mouth to speak when he felt a gentle pressure on his forearm.
Glancing down, he saw his mother’s hand, her patient smile.

Elizabeth of York: daughter of a king, niece of a king, wife of a king, and a queen
herself, stepped forward. With a sympathetic mother’s smile, she walked up to the King of France,
tilting her head. She took the King’s bejeweled hand in her own. “Dear Majesty, you must know
how earnestly it grieves us to see you so distressed. I know I speak for my sons when I say, we wish
to help alleviate your suffering. Tell me, what is it that so weighs upon Your Majesty?”

“It is done,” growled François. “Catalina of Aragon is betrothed to this Richard of Shrewsbury, this
so-called King of England. Already she sails for your isle to wed him. Spain seals its alliance with
the new powers of England—"

On the King’s voice droned, but Arthur hardly heard a word. He felt ill, as though all the blood were
drained from him and he remained an insubstantial husk carven in fleshy bone. His head seemed to
sway upon his shoulders and he reached out, suddenly, to grasp the nearest substantial thing to him
to keep from staggering. It was Harry, and he found himself staring into his brother’s startled eyes.

From very far away, Harry’s voice seemed to call. “Arthur?”

Shaking his head, Arthur released Harry and stalked towards the King of France. “How can this
be?” he demanded, shaking his head as though to clear it. “Perkin Warbeck has already a wife!”

“She has removed herself to a nunnery, it is said,” replied François. “Freeing her former husband to
wed another. And now this enemy of yours means to make heirs of his own body, it would seem:
half Spanish to seal the unity betwixt them. Spain has me all-but surrounded!”

“It is enough,” muttered Arthur. Turning away from François, he stalked away.

“What do you mean?” demanded François of his retreating back.

Arthur did not turn back to face him as he strode towards the double doors that led from the room. It
was stifling hot there and he could not bear the heat. He thought of his Catalina, his sweet Catalina
who had borne all his sufferings from afar, and he thought of his old enemy, who had driven them all
out of their home for the sake of a crown that was not his. He thought of them together, together
barring him ever from returning, together destroying all chance of happiness he’d once prized. He
thought of what he must do. He felt sick, he felt he should scream so loud his very throat bled, but he
did neither. His nails carved crescents into the palms of his hands. “It is war,” he replied and flung
open the doors as he marched out.

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HENRY TUDOR, PRINCE OF ENGLAND
Chateau de Fontainebleau, France
January 1520

“Is he all right?” Anne was asking, brown eyes questioning.

“I thought he would collapse right before me!” exclaimed Harry, shaking his head. “I confess, I’ve
rarely seen him so.” Arthur was a person in complete control of himself, practically since birth.
Always closest with their father, Henry VII had drilled this control into him from, Harry was sure,
their very first meeting. No doubt, even cradling his infant son in his arms, he had spoken of the need
for absolutes in a ruler. Harry, himself, had heard that speech often enough. “I do believe he saw his
entire future shattering before him. But it is not over: far from it. Now Arthur plans a war. Even this
evening, he remains in his room outlining the necessities in what must be done…” Harry stopped,
abruptly, his throat felt dry, and he turned to look at Anne. Her eyes were dark and earnest, glowing
with the need to know what next he would say. She was a woman who greatly loved knowledge,
but these…these were rare facts, indeed. “But then, these are things you shall repeat to your father,
are they not?”

Her eyes dropped, her countenance seemed to blank, and Anne released his arm. It was a dreary day,
the sky painted in pale greys that streaked a once-blue sky. Harry prayed, as he often had, for another
life, a world where all were golden. There, in that world, he should be happy. There would be none
to bar that happiness. Around them, the grey sky seemed to sag towards the pale walls that held up
Fontainebleau, and Anne cast her eyes upwards, threw their gaze towards a sunless sky. This world was bleak.

“He will want to know,” supplied Harry, taking a pace to close the gap she’d created between them. Anne turned away, her back to him, as she gazed up at the swirling gloom. “What will you tell him?”

Her motions were slow, cloaked in the heavy black velvet she wore. She looked, now, towards the ground as though its rough exterior whispered its ancient secrets in her ears. “He will want to know,” acknowledged Anne. She raised dark eyes to meet his bright ones. “What shall I tell him?”

Harry’s brow furrowed as he took her in, her eyes earnest again, they were orbs of fire that seemed intent upon scalding the flesh from his bones. It should be a pleasure, he thought not for the first time, so to burn. Since Mary Boleyn had been turned out of France, Harry had seen only more of the lady before him, as she had no more English friends save the House of Tudor, but however much he treasured their growing friendship, Harry was not foolish enough to think it could outweigh loyalties that had bound her from infancy. He’d said no more, he supposed, than could be reasonably considered. Arthur plans war. It was not yet so very bad. He’d been planning since they had been cast out of England. The only difference was that now he planned with François’ backing. It would take time, yes, but the future lay ahead, painted in the Lancastrian red of blood. “Tell him what you will, Mistress Boleyn,” murmured Harry. “It makes little matter, now.”

But her hands were on his elbow, tightening in a fierce grip, and her eyes were a leaden weight that threatened to drown him in an ocean of breathless desire. He thought of her often, but not always like this. Sometimes with her lips, sometimes with her hands, sometimes the merest touch of skin on skin, but always with eyes bright like lights. He was a ship out to sea and she was the craggy mainland that would either wreck him, should he crash unseeing, or save him should he navigate its shores with dexterity. He did not know which way he must turn. But her little hands were strong and they held him fast as Harry looked down at her. “It does matter,” she said.

“Go riding with me,” blurted Harry and he watched surprise cloud her face. “There is to be a hunt soon, I will see that there is…Ride with me, Mistress Boleyn. Anne. Anne, say that you will.”

Her lips parted, her brow drew into cryptic lines of confusion. Then she was coloring, turning away, and he felt the vague sense of loss, as though she were beyond his touch, as though they were indeed adrift and she floated away, too far for his floundering hands to grasp.

“Anne,” he said, again. “Anne,” he slid his tongue against the name, tasted its touch against his lips. He watched her stop in her tracks. “Say that you will.”

“I cannot make it out,” she began. Her voice had a distant, dreamy quality. She turned to face him and her eyes had turned from fire to ice. Her tone too turned by alchemy to iron with force. It was, he thought, a form of despair in her eyes. “What is it you want of me?”

“I want you.” He shrugged. “Ever since we met… I want all of you.”

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ANNE BOLEYN, LADY TO QUEEN CLAUDE OF FRANCE
Chateau de Fontainebleau, France
January 1520

Her hands were like ice, frigid and stiff. Yet she hardly noticed; a great ball of warmth seemed to spread its fingers from her heart outwards, suffusing her in its heat. The heat of the sun, she thought, a sun that bent its rays towards her in radiance. She felt transported with it, swept away on a current
whose willful tide bore her inexorably to a destination she had once feared. Once. Now, Anne felt she clawed towards that end, wished for it and drifted towards it whenever she could. She was not able, yet, to swim: those currents were too strong and she felt she would drown should she venture from the safety of her little raft. She’d been set adrift in foreign waters with only a rudder she did not yet know how to use to steer. “You do not know all of me,” she found herself saying.

His laughter – yes, she loved the sound, she loved the way his eyes creased and the depth of the laugh, so rich it must come from all of him – was a surprise, but one that guided the veins of warmth from her heart all through her body, directing them downwards to where she tingled. “I told you, I wish to make you out.”

“And will you make me out, should I ride with you?” she countered.

“Certainly, we must agree, it could not hurt.”

“Yet you still see me as my father’s eyes and ears.”

“You,” he replied with a smile. “Are not so foolish as to believe that is what I see. But I am not so foolish as to entirely forget even these sweet ears and tongue have perceived duties.”

Anne rankled, a spike of spite roiled in the pit of her belly. It was cruel of him to say, cruel because it was true. “Do you seek to wound me?” she rounded.

“Never!”

Anne laughed, the sound of disbelief, and she began to turn, but he settled his hand over hers and she was drawn up, up and up and up, to look into his fathomless eyes. Yes, yes, adrift at sea and set on the water without a stable anchor.

He released her hand, reached up, hesitated. His eyes were fixed on hers and she thought suddenly of the great green pastures of home. He put a hand to her chin, her cheek. She gasped. Anne felt strangled, as if she had forgotten how to breathe. “How careless should I be as ever to wound my mistress?” He dipped his head, bent close to her. His eyes were intent, gloriously focused, and she found herself thinking of his lips, full and soft and terribly, terribly near. She thought of putting her hands to his chest to stabilize her rise to her tip toes, raising her mouth towards his. She reached out, felt the solidity of his chest – and pushed away. Turning, she gathered her skirts and darted back to the safety of the indoors.

‘I want all of you.’ Anne rested the back of her head against the stone wall behind her. His voice whispered through her electric brain, a thread of branding unreason: ‘I want all of you…’

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ARTHUR TUDOR, KING OF ENGLAND
Chateau de Fontainebleau, France
January 1520

He clutched a letter in her own hand within his. He wished half to crush it, unread, as though the choice had been hers, but his heart burned like poison and he slapped it down upon his desk, instead. He’d sent the servants skittering away, mid-task, and went to open the shutters himself. Light soaked into the room, glaring in brilliant splendor across the floor, splashing across the desk. Arthur felt numb. If yesterday he had felt all, now he felt only a dull throb, a pulse that reminded him that once he’d known its ebb: an undercurrent that suggested his own pain, but seemed muted and distant, forever removed. All he could see was the next action and the next and the next. François and his
hysterics be damned, it was reason that would bring the situation to heel and Arthur had a mass of it. He knew where to strike and when. He knew how to sweep across the whole of the land, just as his father once had, and as his grandfather had done before that. Arthur had all his father’s logic, and his brother had all their grandfather’s passion. It could be done, Arthur knew it. It could be done.

He cast a glance to the crumpled letter. Unopened, it languished in the scoring heat, a white so brilliant in the afternoon light that Arthur threw up his hand to shield his eyes. It was the heady undercurrent, beckoning him onward. Her words in her own tender hand, some explanation attached, some sorrowful farewell bookended with an appeal for forgiveness and memorials in his own mind and heart to the love he bore her. He was not ready to bury that love, no. It was still alive. Yet, for now, he hated her too. He hated her for what she was forced to do, hated what he knew she would feel, hated her for what he would have done and felt in her place: for Catalina, too, was a creature of duty, and he knew how the letter would end.

This is my last letter, darling Arthur. Today I write as Catalina Trastámara, but soon I shall pen my name as Catherine of Aragon, Queen of England, and no more shall I be at liberty to call myself your own. I shall belong to that nation which once was yours, and my loyalties shall lie with my new husband. Forgive me, Arthur. Forgive me and, I pray, do not forget me.

Arthur closed the shutters and wept in the darkness.

Chapter End Notes

Just a little reminder, since it's been ages since I've mentioned him...Dickon is the nephew and heir (in line after Dickon's father) of Richard IV.

More specifically, he's the (fictional) son of Cecily of York (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cecily_of_York) and Edward of Warwick (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward_Plantagenet,_17th_Earl_of_Warwick), making Dickon a grandson of both Edward IV and his brother George, Duke of Clarence (yikes!), which in turn makes Dickon the obvious choice of heir, since the Tudors have been attainted (and since Richard IV reversed the attainting of George Plantagenet for this purpose), unless Richard IV can come by a child of his own...
“I knew it would rain today,” Anne said, but it was a lie. She didn’t. Couldn’t. It hadn’t seemed a probability to her until the sky had darkened and the earth shook with thunder, but in some faint whisper of her brain she’d known the hunt wouldn’t happen. She had known that the event to which they had both looked forward would be called off, and she had known what it would be, then.

Henry’s face was as stormy as the rain-dark clouds outside as he leaned heavily against the window, gazing into a sky crackling with white fire, rumbling as with the voice of God. She hadn’t known it would rain, but she had anticipated this storm. “The hunt is merely postponed…again,” commented Henry, at last. He waved his hand. He formed a smile, forced a smile, but there lurked a happening behind his eyes, dark as a sky clouded with sheets of rain. “There will be another sunny day. It won’t spoil our happiness.”

“It already has,” replied Anne. She tilted her head as she looked up at him, watched the shadows play across his face. Outside the wind crashed against the rattling pane, but there was a storm in him, too. It was something more than a spoiled hunt, Anne knew well enough. It was something Henry had proven unable to shake through cards, through teasing, through readings, through it all. A bitter undercurrent whispered to them both. Anne had not seen him like this, though the mood did not entirely surprise her: she’d expected to see it, sometime.

Earlier, she had tried to ask. ‘Have you quarreled with the King?’ she’d inquired. His look had been long and black and fierce, a look that made action could flay skin from bone and chew till it found the marrow. He made no further answer and she did not try to ask him again.

Now they stood in silence, listening to the rain and its rumbles, the shriek of a sky cracked open by lightning. The candles guttered and the fireplace roared its distemper. Anne glanced towards the door and thought of walking through it.

“I wonder if it storms now in England,” Henry whispered. It was the breath of a sound: wistful; it seemed far away. Anne gazed at him evenly. “Do you ever think of it?” he asked, continued to gaze outside. “Do you think of England when you close your eyes? Do you think of your family there, and does it give you comfort to think of them?” He paused, looked down, and back to the window again. “I think of it often. I think of it every time I close my eyes. It haunts me, Anne, it…I think sometimes what it might be, how it might be different if we were there still. I think perhaps we’d be happier. Arthur would reign with prudence, mother would guide him gently. Margaret and Mary might have husbands worthy of them. I used to think I should be happy, too, close to my brother, but not too close. I was meant for the church, Anne, and I used to think I could be happy there. Now I
think not.” Henry stepped back from the window, turning to look at her. “Now I fear we shall never see England again, at all, and the dreams we had were just that. Now I wish I could do something, lift this burden from my brother’s shoulders. Now I wonder if any of us were ever built for joy. How is it, Anne, that your sister should fall on hard times and embrace you for it, while at the first touch of disaster my brother should hate the sight of me?”

His face was a tragedy, lines of misery crinkled around his bloodshot eyes, his brows set like stubborn stones over blue eyes that churned like dark seas. They were red-rimmed too, though not a tear had fallen, and his lips were twisted into scorn at a future he might have known – or at himself, for having dared believe in it.

She didn’t know why she did it. Anne stepped forward, listened to the rustle of her gown, and stopped before him, gazing into that miserable face. And then she reached up, hesitant fingers shivering, she reached up and up and she touched his chin, the wiry hair of his beard, there, felt him catch his breath, and her fingers traced upwards, to rest on his cheek. His eyes were a swirl of color, eyes holding hers fast as she drew a breath, sucked air into her burning lungs, and did not exhale. Yes, his eyes were waters she had never sailed, deep seas that held new worlds, and Anne was an explorer who held fast to her sinking ship as it was tossed about upon stormy seas. She had to learn to swim.

He leaned into her touch. Closing his eyes, he cupped her hand in his, turned his burning face to kiss her palm. His lips were warm and soft, tender as the heat of his breath. When he pulled away, his eyes were fixed on hers again, his fingers furled around the back of her hand. He stepped closer, dipped his head and his shoulders as she strained hers upwards. He released her hand and she glanced towards it, and then she felt him looping his arms around her, catching her waist in his arms, flattening his hands against her.

Roughly he pulled her close, pressed tight to him, trailing his right arm upwards over the luxurious folds of her dress, running searching fingers across the front of her bodice and up and up. Her breath came in a gasping loop, his searching fingers were slow as they moved along the outside swell of her breast. Her breath hitched, he leaned forward. His hand swept upwards and over her chest, swept up to catch gently around the back of her neck. He trailed his thumb tenderly across her throat, once twice. He dipped his head again, rested his brow against hers, his nose against hers. She felt his breath on her lips, and then his mouth.

He was hungry, but she was hungrier. Anne leaned upwards against him, her hands pressing against his chest to rise higher, higher to meet him. Busily, his fingers found her cheek, scrawled across the expanse of flesh to sweep upwards under her veil and through her silken hair. The French hood fell away unheeded. And she wasn’t breathing, wasn’t thinking. His mouth was warm and his tongue was wet. He was urgent, lips crushing hers, and she longed to be consumed. With one hand still on the small of her back, he pressed hard, crushing her against him and Anne looped one slender arm around his shoulders, held onto the back of his neck as though it were her only anchor.

His lips were incessant and needy and his hand ran downwards, reaching through the fabric as though he could touch the skin beneath it simply by wanting it enough. His hand cascaded along her rear, finding it and cupping it greedily, and all at once he was smiling, smiling against her lips, smiling and greedily kissing her. She felt the sonorous boom of his laughter, pressed against him, as he laid a train of kisses along her jaw and up her ear.

Anne couldn’t catch her breath as she lolled her head against him. His hand along her neck sank to clasp her waist once again and he was kissing her neck, his hand exploring against up her bodice up and up and up and feeling urgently along the swell of her breasts, running his expert thumb across the nipple to feel it harden. Anne gasped and felt him laugh again as he gently nibbled her earlobe.
His hand found the top of her bodice and he snaked a finger down inside of it, trailing against her hot flesh.

Anne pushed him away.

For a moment, he stood staring dumbly at her and then Anne, red-faced, turned and fled down the corridor. She forgot her hood lying at his feet, did not see him stoop reverently to pick it up.

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HENRY TUDOR, PRINCE OF ENGLAND
Chateau de Fontainebleau, France

February 1520

“You’re certainly in a good mood, Harry,” chirped Harry’s youngest sister, favoring him with a mischievous grin. He knew well enough that she wanted to ask what had made him so merry – had a few suspicions on the subject – but Harry had made up his mind to keep the matter to himself. He could be discreet, and he knew Anne would want that, and there was an end to it.

“I’ve reason to be,” he replied, nonchalant. “It’s a beautiful day!”

With amusement, he watched Margaret cast a dubious glance towards the window. Rain scoured the earth and turned the world to darkness. “You’ve a queer notion of beauty,” she remarked and Harry laughed.

It made him think of what François had said – something he did not particularly like at the time. But now he reveled in it, for it made him think of Anne...Something he was very joyous indeed to consider. Her eyes had been bright and scalding as she gazed up at him and never, never had he seen such longing in anyone. Her entire body had been animated with desire, her arms and lips and tongue, sweet Jesus, her tongue! – had been electric with it. He was as heady with her desire as he found himself to be with his own. Never had he wanted any woman the way he wanted Anne.

Even Arthur, who had been skulking since he heard of the union between the Usurper and Spain, turned and looked at him with narrowed eyes and the hesitant quirk of a smile. “Harry, I hope you’ve done nothing too scandalous.”

“No, brother,” replied he, arching his brows and coming to sit by him. “Nothing too scandalous.”

His grin broadened. “And something I hope to repeat often in the future.”

Rolling his eyes fondly, Arthur turned back to what he was writing and Harry turned back to his sisters and mother with an expression of irony to say: “Back to the war.”

Only Mary laughed.

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CATALINA TRASTAMARA, PRINCESS OF ARAGON, QUEEN DOWAGER OF FRANCE
Dogmersfield, England

February 1520

The trek was slow, but Catalina found she was glad of the extra time. As the procession sloshed onwards, Catalina took in the landscape of her new home. England was as unlike Spain as ever a country was, but its own natural beauties, though foreign, were breathtaking in their own rights. Catalina had felt she should die on the ship crossing the Chanel, but she still remembered the flicker of hope when first she’d clapped eyes on the soaring chalky coast of Dover. And though the cold
rain seemed never to abate, from then she had viewed rolling hills, pretty rivers, scenic wildflowers—all the like of which she had never before known. The people here spoke the barbling English that still for the most part puzzled her, and they gazed with wondering curiosity, but always she was met with kindness—and curiosity. She felt that she could live here, like this, if she tried. There were differences she didn’t like, she found—language and manner were different; many of the native gentlemen were not so refined, particularly towards ladies as they ought to have been, for example—but Catalina chose not to dwell on these points. This was her home now. She must grow to love it.

This place had as curious a name as the others. Dogmersfield, it was called. Up on a hill it sported a pretty little church, and in all the village houses merry smoke rolled from the chimneys. There was something soothing in the prospect, she found, as they neared. Catalina longed to warm herself before a fire, and thus no cheerier spectacle could there be, dotting the landscape. Distracted as she was by the hamlet, Catalina did not at once see the rider bounding towards them, but her servants did.

The messenger was brought before her almost immediately, but the discussion was difficult. Catalina found she was grateful that she had taken some pains to learn a little English, when she had been betrothed to Arthur (and, indeed, she had renewed the effort when she had begun to fall for him). Its study had also been helped along during her time in France, when two of her ladies had been of English extraction. Even so, it remained a tongue cloaked in mystery.

The encounter began in muffled misunderstanding and Catalina felt frustrated. What they called the English language was to her an unsettling quagmire, full to the hilt of pitfalls and unforeseen chasms into which one might at any time fall. Thanks to her years of study, she understood it better than she might have done in other circumstances, but her comprehension seemed to lapse always at the last moment and she was continuously left defeated: feeling as though she’d misunderstood. It was fortunate, she deemed, that there were a few translators about, though Catalina did not enjoy the prospect of owing her comprehension to others. She wished, always, to stand on her own two feet and resolved, as soon as she reached a castle, to renew her study of the language in earnest.

The translator related the messenger’s tale and Catalina felt a twist in her gut when at last she understood. Her betrothed had come to meet her and awaited her, even now, at Dogmersfield. The village she had only moments ago regarded with hope seemed to transmute now into a spectacle of dread. It seemed a cruel fate to be wed to Arthur’s rival, crueler still to pretend this meant nothing to her. She wondered who she betrayed more in this way: Arthur, her new husband, or herself. Yet, there was nothing for it. Her fate was as it was, and Catalina would not shy away from the hardship of it. No, she would endure and do her utmost for Spain and now, too, for England. Catalina braced herself and gave the instruction. They rode onwards to meet King Richard at Dogmersfield.

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ANNE BOLEYN, LADY TO QUEEN CLAUDE OF FRANCE
Chateau de Fontainebleau, France
March 1520

Anne wished, more than anything, that Mary were here. Mary would know what to say, what to do, but Anne did not. She’d done a foolish thing, touching Henry and something still more foolish in allowing him to touch her. For God’s sake, why on earth had she let him kiss her? Why, for all the world, had she kissed him back? Whenever she thought on it, it were as though she had strayed into a dream, as though the moment were a figment of fantasy. Surely, the strangely colorful dreams that followed had been: his hands up her skirt, his body between her legs.

What she had done she knew was wrong, but God! She wanted so much more. I shall burn in hell.
for this, she thought, but her fingers moved of their own accord. Always, always she pictured him, Henry – her Henry – that smile, the smile she’d felt against her own lips, seen a thousand times with her own eyes. Always, she felt the weight of his arms, the bruise of his passionate lips trailing every inch of her body.

Still, for all that he’d remained present in her mind, Anne had avoided him since the kiss. She’d found the hood that had fallen at his feet discreetly tucked away one evening, and knew he must have sent someone to do it, but more than that there had been little. He’d sought her out, too. Followed after her one Sunday after church, slipped to her side one evening while the court listened to Claude’s ladies play their instruments, but always Anne dodged him. She couldn’t breathe when he was near and, more to the point, she couldn’t answer for what she might do. And for all these pains, she had no one to tell, no one in whom to confide. It was not a subject fit for a letter – George and her mother would, seeing a letter from her, demand to read it aloud, after all – and it certainly wasn’t something she could tell the other ladies of court, little less the queen.

Since Mary had left, in fact, Henry had become her primary confidante…but she certainly couldn’t entertain this subject with him. And, cut off from him, she felt more lonely than ever. The month had passed, since, in a dismal fashion, one day bleeding into another, and Anne forever distracted. She told herself it had been good for her, perhaps even freeing.

Freeing…until Anne returned to her chamber, one night, to find something awaiting her. It was a package, wrapped up in brown paper. Seating herself on the bed, Anne put the package into her lap, carefully releasing the cords that bound it with deft fingers. The paper came away…Inside she found a gold and enamel whistle pendant, carefully carved and crafted into the shape of a pistol. Scrolling foliage worked its way in nimble vines and flowers across the piece, and a snake wound round the end of the barrel. Anne laughed, curiously, brows knitting together as she turned the item over in her hands. Her fingers traced along its edge, and three golden hands folded out from beneath, two picks and a spoon, shaped like a spear, a spatula, and a scythe.

Anne stared in confusion at the item for a long moment, before turning to tear back through the paper in which it had been bound. Finally, she uncovered a scrap of paper she had overlooked. In scrawling hand, it read: To the hunt. Anne’s heart pounded in her ears and she swallowed against her suddenly tight throat.

“Henry,” she breathed. She did not need to see the signature.

She waited for him, outside of the chapel after mass, watched him approaching before he spotted her: laughing with an array of other gentlemen. That was a gift of his, she often thought: wherever he went (when he was pleased), the sound of laughter went with him. Yet, soon the other gentlemen dispersed, and Harry walked alone. She knew when he had spotted her, for he stopped dead in his tracks and Anne found herself offering an encouraging smile. Damn it, she thought, blackly. Henry strode towards her.

“I take it you received my gift,” he began.

“I am come to return it,” replied Anne. Her head swam. She thrust her arm out to him. “Thank you, sir, for the gift you so generously offered. It is far too fine a thing for me to receive.”

“And if I will not take it back?”

“Please, sir, I beg it of you.”

“Anne,” Henry shook his head. “I have thought long on why, after…such an encounter you should keep away from me. It occurred to me at last that I gave no indication of my hearty attachment to
yourself. My intentions towards you are pure. I mean to court you. That is what the token signifies, Anne. Nothing more...and nothing less.”

Anne put a hand to her mouth, her fingertips felt somehow raw, and she laughed. It was not a merry sound. “But that is the issue, sir. You must not, cannot court me.”

Henry’s jaw jutted and he shifted. “Why ever not?”

“Because,” replied Anne softly. “I am the daughter of an ambassador who represents the king not your brother. Can you not see that at best such an alliance would create a conflict for us all? And at worst, the both of us should be branded traitors in those causes to which we owe our loyalties? We can, neither of us, countenance such a connection. We must not.” Anne shook her head, swallowed, and pressed the whistle into his hands, alongside her letter. Her smile was sad, her voice a whisper. “We must not.”

Chapter End Notes

Historical notes! Legend has it that the pendant described was the first gift Henry ever gave Anne. While this is merely a legend, I decided to include it here. You can see the pendant here: (https://www.google.com/search?q=anne+boleyn+whistle+pendant&rlz=1C5CHFA_enUS708US708&oq=anne+boleyn+whistle+pendant&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8). The note was my invention.

Catherine of Aragon did, in fact, meet her future husband at Dogmersfield, only it was Arthur and his father instead. The entire encounter was awkward because standards of politeness were different between the two cultures and Henry VII insisted on having his way (CoA reacting with her characteristic good sense and poise), and she didn't speak English. They had thought they could speak Latin, instead, but it turned out they'd been taught different pronunciations so even that proved useless.

The chapter title is, of course, another quote from Thomas Wyatt’s poem, Whoso Lists to Hunt.
Forgotten Futures

Chapter Summary

They came en masse to receive her, these great men and women of England, clad in
gold and jewels and silver and jewels, clad in fine brocades and impeccable velvets, clad
in chains and hoods and so many rings the sun seemed to dazzle from the shore.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

RICHARD IV, KING OF ENGLAND
Windsor Castle, England
March 1520

“The decision has long been made, Dickon,” sighed the King. Wearily he rubbed his brow. The
rubies adorning his fingers glistened in the firelight as his nephew turned furiously away.
“Understand, it is not for myself, but for the good of England that I do this.”

Night had fallen and the winds lashed bitterly against the panes, screaming their fury. England was
buried in mounds of snow which slashed the night with streaks of white as winds tossed them
upwards. Inside, the King, his sister Catherine, and his nephew Dickon were snug by the fire but
Catherine had gone quiet and only the two Richards seemed to speak, now. Round and round and
round went the same argument they had been having for a month. Dickon did not seem to realize the
decision had been already made.

“It is for the kingdom,” cried Dickon. “That you steal my bride and my birthright from under me in
one fell swoop?” He slammed his hand down upon a nearby table. “Now, after so many years your
heir…do you not trust me to rule after you?”

“The twain are unrelated,” muttered Richard. For weeks now this argument had raged on, and never
seemed to go anywhere. It changed nothing. Arrangements for the king’s wedding to the Spanish
princess persisted. “I do this for your good as a part of this country, and certainly as a claimant to the
throne. I do this to shield you from the horrors I, myself, and my brother suffered long before you
ever were born!”

“Strange, Uncle,” hissed Dickon. “That you should choose to shelter me from the throne just as your
own uncle once did to you!” At once, the boy’s face turned ashen, but the words could not be
recalled. He stepped back. Catherine of York gasped and sprang from her chair, beginning to
admonish Dickon, but no one seemed to hear her. The fire crackled fiercely in the hearth beside them
and outside the wild winds screamed like the ghosts of those who died in torment.

Richard felt ill, his head and gut both seemed to go hollow for an instant, as though all he were had
gone to dust, and he thought of his brother, Ned; he thought of his Uncle, Richard. Both now so long
dead. “Forgive me,” his uncle had said and the door had shut between them. Tyrrell’s rough hands
pulled at tender limbs in the pitch of night as they scurried across the bleak terrain. Within two
month’s time, he was Richard of Shrewsbury no more, and Perkin Warbeck he had become.

“I didn’t meant-“ Dickon began, but he was cut off.
“You know nothing of it.” The words hung between them on cords that burned cold like ice in winter. “I will not hear another word of protest. In a fortnight, I shall wed the Princess. That is all. You are dismissed.” Richard turned his back on his nephew, but he listened, listened to the pause, to Dickon turning, pausing again at the door, and finally leaving. 

God grant that Catalina shall give me a living son, prayed Richard, bowing his head.

“Richard,” he heard his sister’s voice, behind him. “Pay him no mind. You will remember, I know, that our Dickon is proud and he is hurt…and he never knew our uncle.”

“I fault him, Catherine,” said Richard. “I fault our Uncle, but I do not hate him. He is a reflection, a horror to think…A reminder of something I might become.”

Richard felt his sister’s hand on his arm and turned slowly to face her. “You are not him, Richard.”

“And he was not what people say he was, either, sister,” replied Richard, softly. “You and I and Elizabeth, across the water in France, know that…but who else now does? And, because of that, he is all the more to be feared. I never wish to be like him.”

“You must remember there is the Kingmaker in that boy, and faithless Uncle George. He does not mean what he says. It is only the name Richard that invites the comparison,” supplied Catherine, softly, but Richard formed an ironic smile.

“No…It is much more than that, Cathy. So much more. Uncle Richard wasn’t like Father, was he?” Richard shook his head. “No, he was only mortal, and so are all the rest of us. We must do the best we can.”

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HENRY COURTENAY, EARL OF DEVON
Windsor Castle, England
March 1520

Hal’s brows knit together. “What’s the face, Dickon?” Sinking onto the step beside his friend, Dickon shook his head. Hal shrugged, commented: “You look miserable.”

Glancing to his friend and cousin with a sour expression, Dickon shook his head, leaned back against the step behind him. His face was drawn, pale as though cold, knotted as though old. “I’ve lost it, Hal. I’ve lost the King’s confidence.”

“No…It is much more than that, Cathy. So much more. Uncle Richard wasn’t like Father, was he?” Richard shook his head. “No, he was only mortal, and so are all the rest of us. We must do the best we can.”

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“Don’t be so dramatic. His Grace loves you like a son.”

Plucking a blade of grass, Dickon folded it over and back once, twice, thrice. “I think not, cuz. I think I’m in real trouble this time.”

Hal returned his gaze to the figurine he was carving. Thin sheets of discarded wood ran across his fingers and fell away to nestle into the brown-green grass by his feet. He’d been sitting on this stoop for nigh on an hour feeling the sun, watching its rays melt the last of the snow away. Soon the winds would return and harry them all within for months, he felt sure. For now, he could enjoy the sun. “Don’t be so dramatic, Dickon. Our own families have seen much worse. My father lived out the end of his life in real trouble. You are not.”

Dickon’s fingers paused, stopped, flung away the stalk of grass. His face went from pale to red. “Your father was a traitor, Hal,” growled he. “Do you mean to compare me to a traitor?” Angrily, he plucked another strand of grass.

Hal’s felt his own cheeks redden and he turned his burning face away. This disgraceful lineage was
something Dickon had harked upon much in their shared childhood, but as age came on, the subject had died away between them. He had thought the matter laid entirely to rest between them. So many years later, Hal found he did not much like its resurrection, though it was only true. His father had sided with the Welsh Pretender: the so-called King Henry VII, rather than King Richard, and had fled with Tudor's retinue to the continent. He had left behind his wife, Catherine of York, and their two surviving children: Hal and Madge Courtenay. “I only meant that the King does not harry you from England or press you and yours.”

“Not yet,” replied Dickon glumly, running his finger along the edge of the grass blade absently. “Do you think it will come to that?”

Hal shook his head. “As I said, cuz: the King loves you dearly. As long as you give him no reason to act against you, he will do nothing of the kind.”

“He’d love me more dearly were I the son of his own body.”

“It would be only natural,” replied Hal with a shrug. “But that is not the case.”

“In any case, he’ll love his natural sons better than he loves me,” stated Dickon. “It may soon be, too, when he weds the Spanish Princess.”

“So that’s happening, after all?”

Dickon flicked at the floppy top of the grass. “It is. The King will brook no more discussion and considers himself quite already bound to her, I suppose. He’s no faith in me, Hal, if he thinks a child would better serve as king…which he must, in order to take so drastic a step now, in the twilight of his life. He is no young man, you know.”

“Hush, cuz. Nephew or no, I need not remind you ‘tis a crime to imagine the death of a king. God be praised, no harm shall come to His Grace.”

Dickon snorted. “Your familial experience with the block resurfaces yet again, Hal. Who else would think of such a thing?”

Hal’s eyes flashed and fiercely he dug his knife into the carving. “I daresay, anyone who valued life and limb.” Hal shrugged. “And, in any case, the King’s actions are no show of discontent in you—“

“What are they, then, Hal? I see nothing other than a lack of trust in these actions. Clearly, the King does not put much faith in me, if he was willing to finally put aside his beloved wife and wed a stranger in order to get another heir!”

“He doesn’t wish to see come again the Cousins’ War. I believe the circumstances remind him too sharply of the end of Richard III who was so easily assailed as he had no sons left living.”

“So instead he seeks to imitate his own circumstances? Cast off upon the cold hospitality of a world that cares little for the forgotten hopes of would-be kings?”

Hal’s lips twisted and he thought of Arthur Tudor: self-proclaimed King of England, though he’d not been there in over two decades. Hal thought of his father, who had so dutifully served alongside Arthur’s father, and had died in exile for them, never again to see home or family. Absently, and not for the first time, Hal wondered if it could all possibly be worth it.

He prayed it was.

“You must credit the King with some good sense, Dickon,” replied Hal, quickly. “An heir of his
own body would strengthen his position.”

Dickon bit the inside of his cheek, nodding. “Perhaps, but until that much is accomplished, the de-emphasis of the assumed heir destabilizes him – and with him, all of England.”

Hal said nothing as he turned back to his carving. A cloud passed over the sun.

“I shall speak to her,” decided Dickon, at last. “I will tell Catherine of Aragon what became of the King’s first wife. Perhaps she will object, perhaps–”


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CATALINA TRASTAMARA, PRINCESS OF ARAGON, QUEEN DOWAGER OF FRANCE

London, England

March 1520

The waters rushed today. She was told that snow melting into the Thames hastened its flow. On the banks of the river, crowds were gathered to watch her pass and Catalina found herself gazing back just as curiously. Today she would be welcomed officially into London, then she would be wed, and after some little time, she would be crowned. Already the events of her life seemed to stack up before her, the course plotted, their outcome sure. She would rule at Richard of Shrewbury’s side, she would bear his children, and she would never be asked if this was what she wanted.

She did not expect to be asked either, but she now had questions. The young Duke of Gloucester, Richard of Warwick, had intimated (clumsily, with the help of translators and, dear Lord, she had tried to remain unmoved but she knew, she knew, she knew he’d seen the realization cross her face) that the King had put aside his previous wife to wed Catalina. She rankled at the notion that, some years from now he might ask her to pack up all that she had and slink meekly away into hiding that he might have a younger bride. No, that would not suit. If she were to give all that she had, all that she had ever wanted, to be his wife, he would – he must, he must – respect that it was she who was his queen and no other. No other.

Catalina glanced upwards at the colors of Trastámara and Plantagenet fluttering merrily above. She told herself that this was a worry she must not have. She was much younger than the king and there was time. They would have many children, she would grow to love England, and he would grow to love her for these things. She would not fail Spain, she would not fail England: she would be the Queen she was meant to be or she would be nothing at all. Duty was all.

The Tower loomed before her, casting its turret-thronged shadow across the great waters of the Thames and, unbidden, she remembered Arthur’s descriptions of it. The center they call the White Tower for the pale stone of it…four peaks…built by the Conqueror…a sanctuary, a palace, and a prison all. Catalina leaned forward as it peeked over the horizon. The White Tower gleamed from within the bulky dark outer walls like the soul within its body.

Her heart pounded against her chest as she realized that, when she entered the royal chambers, she would be walking where he had walked, sleeping where he had slept…But stone had no memory, for all that the Tower was now nearly five hundreds years old, and they now remembered him no more than they would one day remember her brief flicker of passage within them. And no more, she told herself, should she remember Arthur on this day – or any day at all, if she could manage. It was good, she told herself, that they had never in person met. She could less perfectly envision him and soon, yes soon, it would – it must – all fade away to nothing. She must forget him as surely as he must forget her.
They came en masse to receive her, these great men and women of England, clad in gold and jewels and silver and jewels, clad in fine brocades and impeccable velvets, clad in chains and hoods and so many rings the sun seemed to dazzle from the shore. Catalina stretched out her hand and a gentleman caught it, barbled gently to her, and earned a smile for his kindness though she did not know what he said. They parted like the Red Sea before her and Catalina nodded carefully and smiled benevolently towards them all. Familiar scattered phrases caressed her ear and her smile softened still more to realize she understood and could respond in kind.

They told her that the King awaited her. Their previous meeting had been brief and difficult as both strained to understand the other and then, only as he began to speak in Portuguese (its properties being much more similar to her own native Spanish, than English, it proved easier to decipher) – where had he learned it, she wondered? – and she began to better comprehend him, business with a nephew had called him away.

They showed her to the place and the King came forward, a smile on his face, to greet her. Instantly, Catalina sank to her knees. “Greetings, Majesty,” she said in good English, and smiled.

“You learn quickly,” he commented with a smile. He reached out and drew her to her feet. “Well met, Princess Catherine.”

Catalina smiled at the foreign sound of her English name and inclined her head. “Well met, Majesty.”

She shook her head at his comment. “I was three years old when first I was prepared to live and die in England. You see, I speak English but poorly.”

Richard’s brows furrowed for a moment, but then he chuckled. “It is a great pleasure that you are finally here,” he said in Portuguese, earning confused looks from the rest of his nobility who could no longer understand him. “We must allow that there were some years between that did not allow for much study of our language.” He paused. “May I ask…Why were you set to come here when you were three?”

“Oh,” Catalina’s brows contorted. She spoke in Spanish very slowly, that his ear for Portuguese might aid him. “It is because, Your Majesty, I was betrothed…” Carefully, she watched his face, contorted with confusion. “You did not know? I was engaged to marry the king that might have been, Your Majesty. I was engaged to marry Arthur Tudor.”

She studied him carefully, the flick of one eyebrow up a breath and down again, the infinitesimal pressing of two lips close together and back again. Here, she realized, was a man schooled in the control of his features. He formed a smile that did not quite reach his eyes, laughed from his throat and not his chest. “Ah, of course. I…must have known that, I’m sure I did,” he said, shaking his head. “You were…three years old, you said?”

Catalina nodded. “I was, Majesty.”

“Did you…did you ever meet?”

“We did not,” she replied, shaking her head. “But we did correspond…” The words were out, gone, born into the world never to be recalled, and Catalina realized she had broken her rule. She had promised herself that no thought to Arthur would be spared, yet instead she had brought him up almost at the first opportunity.

“Did you?” inquired Richard, softly. “How?”

“In Latin, Majesty. He wrote very well, very gracefully,” As a Prince ought, she thought and glanced away towards her hands.
“I don’t suppose,” began the King, softly. “You’ve any of those letters with you?”

Catalina’s eyes found his again with surprise, her heart seemed to leap into her throat where it might strangle her. Catalina shook her head quickly. “I did not keep them, Your Majesty,” she lied. Her gut twisted. Not yet wed, and already the lies had begun. Catalina felt she could not breathe. She said a silent Pater Noster to calm herself, to pray for forgiveness, and forced a smile. “It was a very long time ago.”

“No, no…Of course not. It was a silly question, really…Perhaps you can tell me of him, however. I am…most anxious to have a better knowledge of my nephew.”

“Of course, Majesty,” she replied. “But I fear I can tell you only a little,” she lied, again. “We were no longer betrothed after 1497, as you may imagine…”

He nodded slowly.

“Your Majesty,” Catalina shifted slightly, colored, looked away. Summoning her courage, she looked back to him resolutely. “I hope…I hope that you are aware that I was married before now. To His Majesty of France, the late King Louis XII-“

“Oh, yes, of course, of course. I did know that, my dear, please do not trouble yourself on that account.”

She laughed a laugh she did not feel, but said genuinely, clapping a hand to her abdomen with a smile: “I am relieved.” She paused. “Your Portuguese…is very good. Where did you learn it?”

He chuckled. “In Portugal.”

“You’ve been to Portugal?”

“I spent some years there in my youth. It was there that I at last decided to come home, to reclaim my birthright, and all that had been stolen from me and mine, though it was indeed an arduous trek in finally arriving here. I hoped to free my mother and my sisters…” he glanced away, shook his head. “It was an idealistic journey. Kingship has been a study in another brand of thought altogether.”

Catalina’s brow contorted. She’d always seen the conflict from Arthur’s side, thought of the struggle in terms of what had been taken from Arthur and his House. “It is strange,” she began, softly. “My mother and your sister, the queen that was for a time…Elizabeth of York,” Catalina formed a soft smile. “They were great friends and wrote one another frequently, did you know? I believe they both felt the burden of being their father’s heir – as your sister believed she was, at the time.” Catalina shook her head. “It has been many years since my mother’s death, Majesty, but I seem to recall that once she read to me a portion of a letter from your sister. It said much the same as you just did. It is, I think, one thing to wish for restitution. It is another entirely to receive it.”

Richard’s eyes betrayed something, then, the evidence of a spark, or some sharp something strike in his mind, real as though she had slapped him. The cheek was bland but the eyes worked with some inner turmoil and he shook his head, whispered in English, “Did not even Lizzie know what happened?”

“What happened, Majesty?” inquired Catalina, softly.

Richard shook his head slowly, ran the pad of his thumb over his lower lip. “Catastrophe.”

Chapter End Notes
The Cousins' War is what contemporaries called the Wars of the Roses.
Queen of Hearts

Chapter Summary

"You see, it is not a game, this life. It is a question. If we are not kind, are we still good?"

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

ELIZABETH OF YORK, QUEEN DOWAGER OF ENGLAND
Chateau de Fontainebleau, France
March 1520

She worried most when he was quiet. Her robust son was a boy made for summer: long days and hot nights, glimmering sunlight and sparkling lakes, the most profound laughter that comes from deep within, bird songs and the thundering hooves of a hunt. This was not Harry: dull unless belligerent, quiet unless snide, retired from life and brooding like a moonless night…No, that was his father. In his lowest moments Harry seemed to retract, to shrivel into a form that Elizabeth had long ago laid to rest, one that once low had been made great and one that once great had been made low again. But this Harry was not his father and her husband’s coldness was unnatural in Harry’s stormy blue eyes, whose native vice was too much laughter. God help her, Harry was her favorite child: golden and great and gleaming, and it diminished her to see him brought so low.

Light filtered through stormy clouds and, though threatened, no rain came. The day, itself, was pent up: determined to strike out but stifled in its intent. Harry’s own atmosphere reflected this as he stood, stony, staring out a window and Elizabeth breathed out a soft sigh. Quietly, she sent her daughters out, squeezed Arthur’s shoulder and he knew to go. Elizabeth dismissed the servants and waited until the door was closed. Harry had not moved. He looked like her father, just then: as Elizabeth remembered him when she was very small, and Edward’s world had turned very bleak, forced into a corner in calling for arms against his own brother. It was a war he had never wanted to fight. Elizabeth remembered him standing by a window, just as Harry did now, seeming to gaze out but seeing nothing beyond the convulsions of his own weary mind.

Tilting her head, Elizabeth smiled softly. “You remind me of my father, sometimes, Harry,” she said gently. He looked up in surprise, but for once it was an inviting look, as she knew there would be. If there were ever a man Harry wished to be, it was his grandfather. Still, he did not ask how. Regarding her with serious eyes, his brows inquired but his mouth did not. Elizabeth drew closer, laid a hand on his shoulder. “He, too, had a capacious mind. What war are you fighting just now, Harry? The one across the sea…or one based in France?”

He shook his head, turned to face her, turned back to the window again. Twice, he opened his mouth to speak; twice, he shut it again.

Elizabeth ran her hand up and down his arm soothingly. “You know, I was very frightened when I heard Henry Tudor was come to England. I thought it was the death of all my hopes, of all my loved ones. I thought to myself that the wars my father had fought in his youth had come again and that we were all doomed without him.” She paused, arched her brows. “And then I heard this Henry had sworn to wed me. I heard this from my mother’s own lips and she said it with all the thrilling
certainty of which only she was capable.” Elizabeth laughed, shrugged. “It should have heartened me, such news: the notion that this Henry Tudor, should he succeed, would propel me and my siblings back to legitimacy and make of me a Queen like my mother before me…It should have heartened me, but it did not. I felt as though I could not breathe.”

Harry frowned deeply, cobalt eyes on hers once again. Harry, this child of summer, was not made for the stormy torrents of winter, but he responded to warm blasts like a ship with loosed sails: ready to soar or to sink with whatever came next. She had his full attention, now, a querying look and a sympathetic one. “But…” he said. “You loved him.”

“I came to,” she nodded. “But I did not know him. Even war I knew better than I knew him, then. He was a stranger to me and, as amusing as a surprise can be in the right circumstances, the unknown can present all imaginable horrors to a mind in suspense.”

Harry’s jaw jutted with displeasure as he cast his glance away, once again.

“You’ve been seeking distractions, Harry. But you cannot run from this.”

Anger crossed his face and, unfolding his crossed arms, he turned to her. “Do you imagine that is what I am doing?”

Elizabeth touched his face, watched surprise cloud his expression and swallow his wrath. “I tried to run, too. Be sure, Harry, that when you go, you are running in the right direction.”

“You’ve never been in a battle,” he whispered.

Elizabeth shook her head. “No, but I’ve borne seven children and that is a battle of sorts, I assure you. And, in any case, I’ve been in wars notwithstanding, if not the battles themselves. It’s not about what we feel, Harry. It’s about what we do. Do not imagine that because you are afraid, that you are weak.”

“I’m not afraid!”

A smile crinkled Elizabeth’s fond features and she brushed Harry’s hair from his face. “No, I suppose not,” she said, half-teasing, and kissed his cheek. “Would you prefer we talk about the distraction?”

Shaking his head, Harry folded his arms over his chest. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Yes you do. She has striking eyes,” supplied Elizabeth.

Harry shrugged.

“And a spirited laugh.”

Harry bit his lip.

“She seems very well educated.”

Harry glanced up and away at nothing.

“Have you kissed her, yet?”

Jolted, Harry turned and stared at her, mouth falling open in shock. “Mama!” he exclaimed.

Elizabeth laughed. “As I said, I’ve borne seven children, Harry. I know something of love.”
Harry arched significant brows and Elizabeth reflected the expression back at him. Exasperated, Harry shook his head, walked away from the window and towards the fireplace, walked back towards her, and stopped.

Elizabeth’s eyes narrowed, watching him. “You wish to know what she’s thinking.”

He shook his head. “I know what she’s thinking.” He colored and then went pale and glanced towards the window. Elizabeth sucked in a breath of surprise, drawing his glance. “Yes, you’ve guessed it. She doesn’t want me.”

“I’m certain she does!” replied Elizabeth. “I’ve seen the way she looks at you.”

“She doesn’t.” He stalked to the mantle again, placed a broad hand upon it, and watched the flames flicker.

“Is that what she told you?”

“She said that it could never be, that I am on one side of a conflict and she is on the other. That we’d both betray ourselves and our families if we pursued this any further.” Glancing up, Harry shrugged helplessly. “Are you going to tell me that she is wrong?”

“She said this…”

“And she wrote it.”

“And she wrote it?”

“She wrote me a letter,” he answered with a shrug.

“What did it say?”

“Mama—”

“Harry. What did the letter say?”

He nodded towards her. “It’s there, on the desk by the window. Read it, if you wish.”

Elizabeth eyed him for a moment, before proceeding to the desk. She found the parchment folded on the table, and gently she opened it, noticing the worn edges of the crease. It was a letter that had been opened and closed many times. The writing within was done with a most practiced hand, its curves and straight lines artful and sketched with a careful hand. Some great effort, Elizabeth saw, had been put into this note. Holding it up to the light, Elizabeth read carefully.

Sir, moved deeply by the most generous gift you have offered me, with my most humble heart I entreat you to think well on the matter that lies between us, beseeching you to judge the best and praying that you will forgive the tremulous heart of a maid flung so far from her home. It belongs only to the mind of a most generous soul to think on me as you have done and it is my great sorrow so to turn from such a bountiful spirit in a manner that may prove hurtful to him. Whatever our own hearts and desires may be, we both must do as wisdom and God’s grace commend, sacrificing our hearts to the good will and hope of better futures for all those whom we hold dear. It is with this thought that I write to you, hoping that you will judge kindly the cause that prevents any further hope of the designs we both might otherwise cherish. Highly as we both may esteem, we must judge the best in this matter, as in all. Perhaps other worlds might be more gracious, but ours is not so. I pray you will still think kindly of me, as in so saying I look only to guard both of us from harm. It is with great regret that I write, knowing this will prove hurtful to you, but it cannot be. I live in hope that
you will think kindly of me, even still, as I remain, ever, your devoted friend. Written by the hand of her that feels most bound ever in kindness to you,

Anne Boleyn

Elizabeth folded the note again. “It is a good letter,” she said. “She is not merely a distraction, is she?”

Still at the mantle, Harry shot a glance towards her. He looked again to the flames, shook his head and Elizabeth let out a breath she did not realize she had been holding. Eventually, he said, “Well?”

“This is not the letter of someone who does not want you, Harry.”

“She means to be kind,” he said, waving his hand. “That is all.”

Elizabeth shrugged, “Perhaps,” she replied, narrowing her eyes. “But I think not. ‘Highly as we both may esteem,’ Harry. She might have said ‘highly as we may esteem,’ but she said ‘both,’ as though to emphasize the point.” Elizabeth shrugged. “She asks you not once but three times to think kindly of her and remain her friend, and repeats twice that she remains yours. Politeness only calls for such a sentiment to be said once if, indeed, it must be said at all.” She paused. “Of course, the tone is formal as she does not wish to seem too inviting, as that would subvert the purpose of the letter, but I think perhaps you have read too much of negativity into it, all the same.”

Harry’s face was blank, as though the ice around him had thawed and left him chilled; chilled and startled, and he gazed at the note clutched in her hand. When Elizabeth held it out to him, he took it directly, opening its folds with a practiced hand. Elizabeth watched him scan the parchment once more, before find her eyes again. “If that is so…Whatever can I do about it?”

“Perhaps what she suggests,” replied Elizabeth. “Perhaps try being her friend.”

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ANNE BOLEYN, LADY TO QUEEN CLAUDE OF FRANCE

Chateau de Fontainebleau, France

March 1520

The book was a marvel, hardly the size of her palm and yet written and illustrated intricately. Anne could feel Queen Claude’s indulgent smile on her, now and again, but she could hardly tear her eyes away as she leafed gently through it. The Queen made it a habit of collecting miniatures, but Anne had hardly ever been allowed to so intimately handle and read them before now. Distantly, she thought of the monk who whiled away his time with delicate pen tracing the shapes of beauteous letters and of the artist who with exhilarating creativity penned creatures and shapes and flora and people across each page in staggering color. Gently, Anne ran curious fingers over the heavy parchment. She did not realize she was holding her breath, until she heard her name.

“Mistress Boleyn,” greeted the voice of Princess Elizabeth, daughter of the late King Edward. “Her Majesty Queen Claude promises she might loan you to me for the afternoon. Might I steal you away for a chance at cards? I understand you are a skilled player and I, myself, am much enamored of the sport.”

Gently, Anne closed the book and passed it to the next of Claude’s ladies to admire. “I am, entirely, at your service.”

Elizabeth led Anne to a table and soon the cards were passed out. Anne picked through her hand with an attentive eye, flicked her glance towards Elizabeth, who was doing the same. Her heart gave
a gentle clench and Anne bit the inside of her lip. She could not account for this encounter, save for Henry, and the thought filled her with disquiet…and with hope.

Elizabeth took her time, minding her cards with great emphasis, ignoring Anne’s questioning gaze and, thoughtfully, Anne lowered her eyes once more. Elizabeth laid a card down. “It is such a relief, you know,” she observed. “After so long abroad, to meet with another Englishwoman. I think my Mary hardly knows what to think of you.” Elizabeth formed a smile, one born of sadness. “I do not think she remembers England at all.”

“That is a very great pity, Your Grace,” replied Anne with a sad smile of her own. “This world has in it many staggering beauties, but there is in all the world only one England.”

Elizabeth chuckled softly. “Woeful as that must prove to all those who would fain rule it.” Anne fought to banish the look of surprise from her face and listened to Elizabeth’s laughter. “You know, I’ve had moments when I’ve wished beyond all hope that this usurper’s claims might be true.”

Anne laid down a card of her own. “But you do not believe it?”

“How could I? You are too young to remember it, but…I know very well that my brothers are both dead. You did not know my Uncle Richard. He was…a careful man. He did not leave stray threads where there need be none. Once he made up his mind to do something, he did it. Wholly.”

Anne tugged at one of her cards thoughtlessly. She left it where it was in her hand, gazing at it. The King of Spades stared dolefully at her, arm raised in a vicious attack, destined never to fall. “And you think he made up his mind to murder his own nephews?”

Elizabeth breathed in deeply, sorted her cards carefully, studying each in turn and Anne found herself realizing, slowly, that Elizabeth was fighting back tears. “My husband used to call me Queen of Hearts,” mused Elizabeth, thoughtfully, after a time. “You know, cards are amongst my favorite pastimes, and he so loved to watch me play. He would play with me, too, of course, but when he was tired, he would sit in a chair by my side, leaning into one arm, an amused smile on his face. He liked to think he was enigmatic, my Henry,” she said. “Just like his sons.”

Anne glanced slowly up, and found the princess was watching her. The candlelight glinted in Elizabeth of York’s eyes, her smile was a sure thing, and Anne thought of how very much she had survived. “Is that how they fancy themselves?” inquired Anne with a casual air.

“Oh, yes, Harry in particular. But he’s always been fond of puzzles. He’s even fond of them in people.” She laid out another card.

“He must be exhausted,” commented Anne. “If all of life is a game, where is one to have any reprieve in pastime? It must feel so hollow.”

Elizabeth laughed. “He is in a state just now, I can tell you.” Anne’s eyes fell away from the princess’s. “I think his traits can appear at times to be a quagmire, from the outside, but it’s really quite simple once one’s got the trick of it.”

Anne pretended to be absorbed in picking out her next card. “And what’s that?”

“He is what you make of him,” replied Elizabeth. “Show him an ounce of loyalty and Harry will repay it a thousand fold, but show him just a drop of hate and his enmity will prove implacable. He requires kindness, after all. You see, it is not a game, this life. It is a question. If we are not kind, are we still good?”

Anne’s mouth felt dry. “Did you learn that from your mother?”
“Oh, no,” replied Elizabeth, very softly. “I learned that from my uncles.”

Anne placed the King of Spades down on the table. “And your uncles…were not kind? Is that why you are so sure your brothers are dead?”

“You misunderstand,” she replied, and her eyes grew distant. “My uncles could be very kind when they had a mind to it. But that was the issue. They were not always of that mind. It was not the core of who they were.”

Anne frowned. “And…you suggest that this is also true of your son?”

Elizabeth’s glance was sudden as it was sharp, and surprised. Anne did not pull away, though she felt the awareness come over her with perfect clarity that this princess, once, had been a queen. Her eyes bore all the weight of that station and her expression seemed strong like carved marble. “I do not take your meaning.”

“You counsel me to be kind to him, as it will nurture kindness towards myself in him, but surely if the impetus for such kindness lies entirely with me, then it does not come from him. It comes from me. And if that is so, then what you are truly saying is that your son has it in him to be kind, but it is not who he is. It is what he can be.” She paused. “Tell me, then, Your Grace, who is he?”

Elizabeth gazed at her, eyes searching, and put her all her cards down on the table before her, facedown. “Who do you say that he is?”

Mimicking her gesture, Anne shook her head softly. “I think we all have it in us to be that of which we are capable. And your son, as he is now…He is life, itself, I think: broad and limitless and exciting and full of promise as of potential. He is a current that sweeps all in its path. And, if I might, I think you may be mistaken, Your Grace. Neither Henry nor life are extant entirely to themselves, as though unattached to this world and all within it. Yes, he is a creature open to influence, but that is because he is alive. He is capable of kindness because that is in him. He requires only mastery of himself to be all that he might and that is something he can achieve with the help, perhaps, of others, but only if it comes from within. The impetus must be his own and no other’s if it is truly to be his. Life is not a question, Your Grace, I believe it is a choice, and if goodness can be equated with kindness, than it is our actions that make us so, and nothing else.”

Slowly, Elizabeth’s lips curved into a smile. She raised her glass. “I think, Mistress Boleyn, that you and I are going to be great friends.”

I lifted some phrases and such from Anne Boleyn's quotes and extant letters in an effort to make the letter as authentic as possible, while also updating the flow of the language since we speak with a slightly different form of English, today ;D so if some of the phrases there are seeming familiar, that's probably why. Also, if you're interested, here's a compilation of some of Anne's letters!

Additionally, both the title and Elizabeth's chat about the Queen of Hearts allude to the legend that, after her death, Henry VII had Elizabeth of York drawn up as the face of the Queen of Hearts bc she so loved playing cards and that, because of this, the face we
traditionally see today on the Queen of Hearts is based on her visage.

Queen Claude did collect tiny illuminated books!!!
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

ANNE BOLEYN, LADY TO QUEEN CLAUDE OF FRANCE
Chateau de Fontainebleau, France
April 1520

He held his hands out before him in surrender as he approached and, despite it all, Anne felt herself smile. He was beautiful, really, in a way she hadn’t noticed at all in the beginning. Always, she’d been distracted by his outward appearance, but now she saw the playfulness in his eyes, felt the electricity of his presence, and knew that even these things were only pretty attendants upon his true self: golden like the sun and brighter still till shadow turned all to dusk. He was beautiful because he was himself. Whatever else happened, whatever he did or said, he was unswerving in the flash of his own person not because of his exterior, but because of his interior and the thought blossomed into another feeling that fanned against her breast and settled into her stomach, fluttering, fluttering.

“What are you doing here?”

Reaching her side, Henry swept a bow while grinning, eyes fixed on hers. “I missed you.”

The butterflies grew taut and stretched out and Anne shook her head, despite herself faintly amused…or flattered. “I do have a winning manner…when I wish,” she laughed.

“You’re manners are always winning to me,” said he. “Even when you’re quite set on proving disagreeable.”

“I’m sure there’s a side of me you’d quickly learn to rue.”

“If there is, I’ve not yet met with it.”

“Oh, I’m certain there is. Such is the trouble with all humanity,” she added, tilting her head.

“Perhaps you’ll grant me leave to search it out, then. It might prove something of a relief to find a flaw. I don’t like thinking that you are too perfect for the rest of us all. It hardly gives the rest of us a chance.”

“Then allow me to assure you most heartily, I am not,” replied Anne.

“Then tell me what you think I should dislike about you.”

“And reveal all my faults at once? I rather prefer the notion of remaining mysterious.” She watched his face with bemusement, watched the softest narrowing of his eyes, the unconscious way he seemed to lean towards her in curiosity, the way his shoulders stilled entirely with focus. Anne turned away, bit her lip. “Did you not receive my letter?”
“I received it.”

“Did you not hear what I said?”

“I heard it.”

“Then you know it cannot be,” whispered Anne.

“Only one portion of our relationship is missing from us, by your request. Does this then too mean that we cannot be friends?”

Anne arched a skeptical brow. “You wish to be my friend?”

“What ever else may or may not happen, I shall consider it a boon to call you my friend.”

She felt warm down to her belly, as though he had said or done something else entirely, a sort of contentment that was aroused by pleasure. “I am happy to hear it.”

“Good,” responded Henry. “I remember, you see, that happiness is your ambition.”

“And what is yours?” she asked as they wordlessly fell into step together. “I’ve yet to make it out.”

“I find that I’ve many. Just now, my ambition lies towards the retrieval of your good graces.”

Anne paused, glanced at her hands, glanced back up to him again. “Then you’ve achieved your goal.” Stretching out her hand to him, Anne smiled. “Friends?”

His hands were warm even through their gloves, but his smiling eyes still warmer. Gently, he closed both his hands around hers; gently, he dropped his left hand away again; gently, he bent to bring hers to his lips: those warm, soft lips she had so craved and, God, did still. Straightening he grinned down at her. “Then you have given me a taste of your own desire and I find I quite relish the feeling.”

“Happiness?”

“Happiness.” He folded his hands behind his back as once again they began to walk together. “I wonder if you might do something for me?”

She glanced towards him in surprise. “And what is that?”

“Tell me about your family.”

Anne laughed. “That is the favor you desire?”

Henry chuckled and arched his brows and Anne felt herself coloring immediately, knowing what lewd image her words had conjured in his mind. She looked quickly away. He said, finally: “At present.”

Anne decided not to challenge this statement and moved forward. “Have you met my father?”

“Never formally, though I’ve seen the back of him passing. I think he’s rather anxious to avoid us.”

Anne nodded. “No doubt. It’s a…complex situation.”

Henry nodded. “You need not tell me.” His eyes were heavy when they found hers, heavy and sad, and Anne held his gaze, finding she could not look away. He cleared his throat; she did look away.
“I hardly know where to begin,” she said, stopping thoughtlessly, caressing a red rosebud whose petals had not yet unfurled. It was tenacious, this rose, budding where its brethren dared not to open, but tightly wound against the cold spate of early spring.

“Are you fond of roses?” asked Henry, coming to stand beside her.

“It is only that I was surprised to see it blossoming so early.”

“I’m partial to the reds and the whites, myself,” mused Henry with a taut grin.

Anne yanked her hand away as if stung. “This rose is a survivor, I think,” she said, at last. “Blooming so nigh upon winter.”

“Yet the season for roses has come again,” he replied, and walked on. Anne watched him, watched his saunter as the sun glanced boldly off him, eyes shaded by his hat. Despite herself, Anne smiled, and despite her wish not to, she hastened to match step with him once again. His smile was bright when she did.

“I’ll not ask further into that,” she said. “I’m not sure it’s best for me to know. I think maybe we should not speak of…plans or futures or any of those things that divide us. I think it would be for the best—”

“Is that why you evade the question about your family?” he asked. Henry shrugged, a vague gesture, but not a dismissive one. “If you’ll not tell me of your father, I’ll tell you of mine. In truth, as a young lad, I think I was a bit afraid of him. At the time, I did not see it that way, did not think it could possibly be that, but my father was a ferocious man, fierce as winter is: cold and hard and implacable, and I suspect I was made for another season.”

“Summer,” replied Anne, abruptly, surprising herself. Quietly, half-sheepish, she added: “You were made for summer.”

Henry chuckled. “Summer, then, which I think we can agree is quite different from winter. Understand, I don’t mean to imply that he was anything less than he ought to have been. My father was unspeakably able when it came to those things that kept us all alive. I don’t think I ever understood him until we were cast off, until we went into exile, which was how he too, grew up. I suppose I had a certain imagination of what such an upbringing might be, but I never understood, not truly.” He laughed. “Now…well…‘I know how men in exile feed on dreams of hope.’”

“Aeschylus,” murmured Anne.

“My father grew up this way, his hopes intertwined with his fears, and he went forth knowing what sort of fate awaited him should he fail: either that of his rival: dead upon the field of battle, or a return to exile. In truth, Anne, I still don’t know which fate he would have preferred.”

“And you?” asked Anne, impulsively. “If you had your choice of it, which fate would you choose?”

He chuckled. “Exile or death in failure?” he shook his head. “I think I choose as you choose: I choose happiness.”

Anne’s eyes narrowed. “But only in defeat?”

“Is it a crime to choose victory above all the others? Does victory not assure happiness, Anne?”

“No,” she replied, shaking her head. “It does not.”
He stopped in his tracks and looked at her. “It does for me.”

“From your own observations, I am convinced that it did not for your father.”

“That was his own curse,” stated Henry, stubbornly. “He was not one born for contentment of any kind.”

“And you?” inquired Anne. “Would mere victory bring you contentment?”

“I think it would. If we won, we might reshape this world as we like it, as it should be.”

Anne laughed. “‘Dreams of hope,’ indeed. Are you sure this is not fantasy? Reality is far more difficult.”

“Do you not think, Anne, that our own situation might be different if I were the uncontested king’s brother?”

“It would be different,” replied Anne. “You would not think of me at all.”

Irritated, Henry shook his head. “That is very hard of you. I assure you in any world, Anne, you should still captivate me.”

“Do I captivate you,” she replied. “As someone you enjoy…or as something you cannot have?”

He stopped dead and she paused as well. “I think perhaps you’ve a cruel heart, after all.”

“There,” laughed Anne. “I think we’ve landed upon it! The first of my traits which you find disagreeable.”

Henry’s laugh was half humorless. “Is this a test, then?”

“No,” replied Anne. “Might I ask…did you send your mother to speak with me, earlier?”

Henry’s brows arched in surprise. “No.” He shrugged. “At least…not intentionally. I did…tell her of you, which may have been enough to ensure that she would arrange an encounter.”

Anne shrugged. “And you still think that, were we in England, you would know me at all? I shall tell you what I think: the only reason you ever noticed me was the revelation that I was English and you were starved for fresh English companionship.”

“No,” he responded, shaking his head. “I still remember the first time I ever saw you. I did not know of your extraction, but your eyes were a fire.” Impulsively, he touched her cheek and urgently he spoke. “You burn me.”

She stepped back and away from his touch, but could not escape the all-consuming power of his gaze. “Sappho,” she whispered and backed away, but she knew very well that the words had been genuine: he had not meant to quote anyone. “‘You burn me.’” She smiled a smile she did not feel, as though she had found him out, as thought it were all a game. She shrugged, she turned, she walked away. He must not touch her again, she knew. He must never touch her.

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HENRY COURTENAY, EARL OF DEVON
Colcombe Castle, England
April 1520
“Treason,” hissed Hal, earning the amazed expressions of his three auditors. “If the King has dismissed this case, the further pursuit of it in strong arming him by uniting a band of nobles to your cause amounts to treason.” His hands were balled into fists as he leaned upon them over the table, towards his cousins.

“Treason,” said Ed, dismissively. “Is an ugly word. All it can be called is a desire to serve justice and the interests of those under the king’s governance? Such a desire is not treason, but patriotism!”

“However pure your motives may be,” interrupted Wilkin, sarcastically. “The word the king would most certainly use is that which Hal applies. An interruption of royal power is always branded as treason.”

Richie rolled his eyes. “You’d have our heads on blocks sooner than stand for anything, Wilkin. Hal, you know we love dearly the King’s Grace, but there are certain…conditions that are intolerable.”

The de la Pole brothers all struck a fine view, arrayed as they were in Hal’s solar. Wilkin sat at the trestle table, fingers laced with his tankard; Ed hovered by the fire beyond, leaning heavily against the mantle to stare into the flames; Richie between them, facing Hal, was all amiable smiles.

As a child, Hal had always greatly admired the older de la Poles. They were elegant and regal figures, their lineage as exulted as anyone’s – and a grand certainty – their courage high and spirited. They remained undaunted, too, despite the bitter end of their eldest brother, John, who had died fighting against the so-called Henry VII – all save Wilkin, whose prudence seemed to overcome his boldness. Still, all of the brothers had learned well the vagaries of betrayal. That military disaster of John’s had been once hailed treason but, now, was heralded as a heroic struggle for the Yorkist cause – if somewhat misled. Lambert Simnel, after all, had not been either Richard of Shrewsbury or Edward of Warwick, and John had died for naught.

“Is the situation not better resolved betwixt you and the King?” inquired Hal, shrugging.

“Already we have brought it before the King,” said Ed, speaking into the flames. “He dismissed us out of hand. Of course, if there were a means of making the King amenable to our very reasonable requests without the force of other powers, that would be preferred.”

Hal shrugged. “And what would you have me do about it, then?”

“Both your sister and your wife serve her Grace the Queen. Might you not bring our petition before her?”

Hal sighed heavily. “You think the Queen will do for you what the King would not?”

“His Grace dotes upon his young Spanish bride,” said Ed, turning. “If she champions our cause, is he not more likely to hear it?”

“And if the Queen is reluctant to hear of it?” inquired Hal. “What then?” Silence fell over the solar, sure as falling snow, and Hal turned away from them all. “I guarantee nothing,” he replied. “But I shall try to help you – for the sake of England.”

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CATHERINE OF ARAGON, QUEEN OF ENGLAND

Palace of Westminster, England

April 1520

Sunlight filtered onto her pillow, gently rousing the Queen. Beside her, her husband still snored.
gently, but Catherine – that was Catalina’s name, now that she was the queen of England and therefore English – watched drowsily as the maids softly pulled back the curtains and stoked the fire. She rose as they approached and allowed them to dress her absently, arms spread. The King, too, was awake, and came to kiss her cheek. “Good morning, Cate,” he greeted with a warm smile.

“Good morning, Your Grace,” she replied.

“Richard, my love,” he corrected for the umpteenth time. “Now that we are wed, when we are in private I pray you call me by my Christian name.”

Catherine nodded slowly. “Very well, Richard. I am sorry I have forgotten.”

He waved a hand. “Think no more of it. I expect this whole thing shall take a little adjustment for us both, my dear. I must away, but I will see you soon.”

Collectively, the entire room curtsied to Richard’s retreating back and Catherine, out of rote, went to sit on a stool so that one of her ladies might brush her copper hair. It was Madge Courtenay, a cousin of the King’s, that she spotted in the mirror. The brush ran dutifully along her head, but Madge’s expression was preoccupied. “Is there something amiss?” asked the Queen.

Forming a smile, Madge shrugged. “I mustn’t bother Your Grace. Please, forget it.”

The brush rushed over the burnished red-gold of Catherine’s hair. The Queen reached up to catch Madge’s hand, turning to face her. “You do not bother me, Lady Margaret. Please, what is amiss?”

Madge lowered her eyes, before glancing back up towards Catherine again. “It is only something my brother, the Earl of Devon, shared with me, Your Grace.”

“What did his Lordship share with you, my lady?” Catherine patted a seat near her own and Madge sank into it.

“Your Grace, it seems that our honorable cousin, Edmund de la Pole, has been demoted from Duke of Suffolk to Earl. This news has been greatly troubling to us all, as it speaks to the mind of the King and it causes us to wonder how well His Grace now loves our cousin. Further, this alteration has been cause of the most acute distress amongst all of our de la Pole kin, who cannot account for the change and fear now that the King loves them not.”

Catherine raised her eyebrows. In her heart, she agreed that this seemed a strange turn of events, but – little as she knew him – Richard did not seem so unreasonable as to act so out of hand. “I pray you forgive my ignorance – what is the history of your cousins, particularly with the King’s Grace?”

“My mother, Your Grace my recall, is the Dowager Countess of Devon, Catherine of York, herself the daughter of the late Edward IV and therefore, second to last living sister to the King. As a result, my mother is also the first cousin of the de la Poles.”

That was a great deal to take in, Catherine thought, but she swallowed it for later digestion. The point, she saw, was simply that everyone involved was of royal lineage, which made dealing with them all far more convoluted, given England’s tumultuous situation. Why on earth, she wondered, would her husband now stir the royal pot, given the precarious situation with the Tudor family in France? “And how have things stood with your esteemed cousins and the King’s Grace, till now?”
“Well enough, I suppose, Your Grace—”

“And during the Cousins’ Wars, Lady Margaret?” inquired Catherine, pointedly. “How did you cousins fare there?”

Madge’s eyes darted away. “They were friends, always, of the Yorkist cause.”

Catherine’s eyes narrowed. “How so?”

“Their eldest brother, the late John, Earl of Lincoln, was at one time considered to be the heir of the late Richard III – when the kingdom was fooled into believing that Edward IV’s children were illegitimate, Your Grace. Later, after the usurping Henry Tudor seized the crown, this same John rose up in rebellion, championing the Yorkist cause, once more. He was cut down in battle, Your Grace, but his younger brothers live on.”

Catherine nodded slowly. “You say that he rose up in rebellion, my lady. Who was to be the recipient of the crown in the event that the late Earl won?”

“A young boy,” replied Madge. “First said to be Richard of Shrewsbury, later to be Edward of Warwick, and last of all, to be the pretender, Lambert Simnel.”

“And your cousins did not realize, I suppose, that the Earl of Warwick was living, still, in the Tower of London? Or recognize that the boy was not his cousin Richard?”

“I cannot account for the mistake,” replied Madge, softly.

Catherine, however, could. Shifting the boy’s identity so – first to someone who had the best claim of all upon the throne – and later to someone who had a lesser claim than his own, in his attainted state, John de la Pole must have known he was neither child. He must have known that this Lambert Simnel was a pretender and, still further, Catherine speculated, the true candidate for the throne was therefore, most likely, none other than himself. Having once been the heir to the throne, it must have been a hard thing, indeed, for John de la Pole to watch a Tudor king rise to the throne. Catherine nodded serenely. “If this late John was Earl of Lincoln, how came his younger brother by a duchy?”

“Earl of Lincoln was John’s title in his own right, taken from Lady Margaret Beaufort and given to him by King Richard III. Duke of Suffolk was the title of John’s father. Because John predeceased his father, the duchy passed to Edmund after both were dead, but never to John.”

“So, since the death of his father, your cousin Edmund has remained a duke?”

“Not always,” confessed Madge. “In 1493, Henry Tudor demoted him to an Earl, but when the King’s Grace, Richard, returned to England, he restored my cousin’s full rights as Duke of Suffolk.”

“And now he removes them again,” mused Catherine. “Why?”

Madge shook her head. “It is a mystery to us, Your Grace.”

“And you wish me to bring this before the King’s Grace, I suppose, Lady Margaret?”

“My cousins love His Grace most dearly, which they have proven by resolutely championing the Yorkist cause, time and again. It is of the utmost distress to them to imagine that His Grace may now no longer love them in return.”

“Very well,” replied Catherine, nodding. “I shall inquire, but it is not for any of us to question His Grace’s decisions or commands. It is likely His Grace has manifold reasons for such an action and
we would all do well, most especially your esteemed cousins, to remember that His Grace has always the tender care and love of all of England, and most certainly that of his family, in mind when he acts.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” replied Madge. “Of course. We are in Your Grace’s debt.”

“Now,” said Catherine. “Finish with my hair. We’ve all of us many matters to attend, and I must speak with the King.”

Chapter End Notes

The reference to the red and the white roses is, of course, a reference to the symbols of the House of Lancaster and the House of York, respectively. These two branches were united in the children of Henry VII (red) and Elizabeth of York (white), forming the red-and-white Tudor rose we know today.

The two quotes belong to Aeschylus and to Sappho, respectively, and I do not claim them as my own.

Lambert Simnel was a pretender to the throne of England who predated Perkin Warbeck. You can find out more about that event here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lambert_Simnel and about John de la Pole here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_de_la_Pole,_1st_Earl_of_Lincoln
Richard’s pen scratched, scratched, scratched. Usually, he was absorbed and the sound of it was no bother to him, but just now it grated on every nerve and, impatiently, he tossed the utensil away. This, he thought, was why he generally employed scribes for this sort of venture, but the fact was that the summit between France and England had now grown pressing…and increasingly delicate. Though plans had been underway for a year, Richard wondered if the engagement would even come off. With a sigh, he buried his head in his hands, rubbing at the top of his head, when he heard a discreet knock. Instantly, Richard dropped his hands and snatched up his pen as though nothing had disrupted him. “Come in.”

The door slid open and, to his surprise, the figure of his wife came into view. Richard jumped to his feet as Catherine swept a curtsey. Richard hastened to raise her up. “There is no one else here. You need make no obeisance.”

She nodded. “As you wish, Your-” she paused, bit her lip. “Richard.” Her voice was still heavily accented, but she had gained more and more English as time passed and now insisted on speaking English and being spoken to in English, as well.

“It is a great pleasure to see you,” he said, leading her over towards the chairs and gesturing for her to sit as he did the same. “What brings you to my door?”

“Business, I am sad to say,” replied Catherine. She glanced about the room and Richard saw it with new eyes: a bank of windows behind him, the roaring fire to his right, wood paneling and rich tapestries all about. In the center of the room, a broad table, surrounded by chairs. It was not terribly grand, save for the luxurious windows and tapestries, but it was immensely practical, and that was what Richard had soon found (after his initial flirtation with gilded ornamentation everywhere within sight) best suited him. “It seems a silly thing to bother you with this,” began the Queen. “But one of my ladies – Lady Margaret Courteney – was most distressed on the point and asked that I speak with you-”

Richard swallowed hard. “What is it?”
“It seems that a mutual cousin of yours who was once a duke has been reduced to an earl, a circumstance that has caused much upheaval, I am to understand, within the household, and engendered a fear of your wrath.”

Richard’s face blackened. He turned, unseeingly, to gaze at his letter. “As well it might,” he responded. “She ought not to have bothered you with the matter.”

“Yet I am glad she did. Is it not my role as queen?”

Richard glanced up in surprise, brows knitting together. “Yes…” he licked his lips. “I suppose it is.” Slowly, he exhaled. “I am very afraid, my dear, that you have married into a strange set of circumstances.”

“No stranger,” assured Catherine, shrugging. “Than the precipice upon which France stood when I was once its queen.”

“Yes!” exclaimed Richard. “I forget sometimes…but you knew this François, did you not?”

Catherine arched her brows. “I did, Your- I did, Richard. Not well, of course, but I did know him.”

“You do not approve of him?”

“It is not my place to approve or disapprove,” said his wife. “But he is not the ruler one might hope. He is given to bouts of temper and thinks first of his own aggrandizement. If he sees the good of France as his own good, he may serve very well in the office, I suppose, but these things can become so very confused.”

Richard tapped the back of his pen against the parchment thoughtfully. “Might I ask… I am writing him, just now… What do you think he will do with… my Tudor nephews whom he currently harbors?”

At once Catherine’s eyes jumped to his face. At once them jumped away. “I cannot say for sure,” she began. Her tone was suddenly soft, almost inaudible, and distant. He guessed she must be speculating. “His Majesty is a slippery person, Richard. He will do whatever his fancy indicates, aided only slightly by whatever might best benefit him. If things go wrong… he will do whatever he can to save his reputation.”

Richard dropped the pen and turned slightly in his seat to cast a glance out the window. He turned back. “How, then, can I convince him that his best interest would be served in aiding the ruler of a stable England, rather than casting her into instability?”

Abruptly, the queen stood. She stood and she stared at him. She stood and she walked to the other side, turned, walked back. “I–” she stopped in her progress. Catherine drew a deep breath, she paused, she turned back to him. “There are two schools of thought in these things,” she said. “There are those who would seek a form of diplomacy similar to flattery, and there are those who take a more direct route.”

“And which are you?”

Catherine’s gaze skirted the edge of the desk, and she clasped her hands together, looking for all the world as though a rosary ought to be clutched between them. “It seems to me that war is inevitable. You can either try to delay it – for there is now, I think, no stopping it – or you can prepare for its necessity. I have always been of the mind that those who are true of heart will fight for their beliefs, whatever grief the struggle may bring. More than that, Richard, I cannot say. I am not the King.”
Richard felt a clench in his gut, and he balled up his fist. “I thought once, Cate, that war was a glorious thing. I may now assure you that it is not. It is blood and sorrow and agony, but if it must come again, I mean to be prepared. Long did I struggle to return to England. I will not so easily relinquish my crown or my country.”

Catherine bowed her head, nodding. “Then,” came her quiet reply. “I think you know the sort of letter you must send.”

Taking the parchment in both hands, Richard tore it in half and cast the remnant into the fire. “I must begin again,” he explained and smiled at her. “Now, then. You came here to ask about, I believe, Edmund de la Pole’s new title.”

Catherine laughed softly. “I forgot,” she confessed, sinking into her seat once again. “What may I tell Lady Margaret?”

Richard shrugged. “You may tell her that I will take the matter up with de la Pole, myself. Because you were brought into the matter, I will explain to you my thinking, but what I am now about to say is not for anyone else’s ears…”

Catherine nodded. “I understand.”

“I have intercepted letters, of late,” he said, sorting through a pile of papers and pulling aside a bundle which he passed to her. He watched her reach for them, her eyes going directly to the seal. Her eyes darted to his. “Yes, those letters are from my Tudor nephew, himself. See the signature? Arthurus Rex. Arthur the King,” he shook his head. “There can be no mistaking his intentions: he means to take the throne for himself.” Richard barked out a laugh. “I must give my sister all credit in the naming of her boy. That is…so very like her; a trick she learned from our father, the ability to turn the public ear. How is anyone supposed to claim they might be better equipped to rule England than King Arthur?”

Catherine glanced up at him. “This one is addressed to Edmund de la Pole.”

“Yes, and the one beneath it, look. Edmund de la Pole made a response.” Richard steepled his fingers. “It is vague, I will grant you, but it makes one thing clear: should Arthur make a good showing when he arrives in England, my cousin Ed will hear him out and, perhaps, even take up his cause. Loyalty, ha! Ed cares much more for opportunity, just like his brother.”

“John de la Pole?”

Richard nodded. “He produced a child that he claimed was myself to turn the ear of the public, and then transmuted it to another person altogether when it suited him. He barely tried to pretend he was fighting for anything other than himself!”

Catherine shook her head. “Why hide his true intent?”

“Why did Henry IV pretend? For that matter, why did my grandfather the Duke of York pretend? A shield to defend his pretty honor. He’d made many oaths to uphold the true king. He could not very well turn and then claim that he’d made these oaths about himself.” Richard stood and turned to the window. “And now his brother plots against me and then complains when I take action against him?”

“Does de la Pole know that you’ve intercepted his letters?”

Richard shook his head. “No, and I do not intend to approach him on that score. I’ve weakened his ability to move against me.”
“But you’ve also handed him a reason to defect,” replied Catherine. “If you do not confront him, it may seem arbitrary.”

“And if I do, I effectively accuse him of treason and shall then be forced to act against him in a much harsher measure.”

“What will you do?”

Richard looked out over the gleaming river, the bustle beneath it, and shook his head. “This is my family, Cate. What would you do?”

“Call them to court,” replied she. “There, you can watch their every move.”

“There, they can circulate Tudor’s call all across my nobility.”

“Perhaps,” said she. “But first they must make very public obeisance to you, which will break their power in the eyes of the people, especially reduced as they now are, and they will know that all their correspondence must move through you. Assure them that it is merely evidence of your continued regard for them, but make them come before you, for all to see, on bended knee. Let them feel your eyes upon them.”

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ARTHUR TUDOR, KING OF ENGLAND
Chateau de Fontainebleau, France
May 1520

“And this! This is the letter of a friend!” growled François. “Your rival does little to endear himself to me. Does he think himself so grand, so mighty now that he fucks Spain every night, that he can assail me?!” The King of France hurled down the document before Arthur and stalked to the other side of the room.

For nearly an hour François had waxed eloquent in this vein and, carefully, Arthur had listened to every word. It seemed Perkin Warbeck had made up his mind to do Arthur a favor, after all, and Arthur had no intention of allowing the opportunity to slip through his fingers. England was all, now. Carefully, Arthur read over the letter. “At least we need no longer wonder what his intent may be,” he said, slowly. The question, now, was what François intended. The French King had played to both sides long enough, and finally Richard had hurled him from his back. “How will you respond?”

François stalked up one side of the room and down the other. “With strength!”

Arthur narrowly resisted the urge to roll his eyes. He knew what was now needed and, sucking in a breath, wondered what Harry would say. Arthur had never pressed François before, but now the words came easily. “Perkin Warbeck has all but declared war on you. Now is your opportunity. Call him out for who he truly is, show all of Europe that he is a vain and vile usurper, a threat to all anointed kings, for as long as a false king rules anywhere, no crown is safe! Show them all the might of France and cast him down! Put a friend on the throne where now an enemy sits, and make Spain say the name of François in hushed reverence!”

François stopped in his tracks, his back to Arthur, as he stared ahead. Arthur’s heart thundered in his chest, rattled his ribcage. He felt suspended in the moment, as though time’s delicate thread had snapped and left him hovering in an eternity colored by uncertainty.

Slowly, François turned. His face was hewn from rock, a ravaged cliff of haughty brows and prominent nose and rigid lips. “Tread lightly, Arthurus Rex. I am not to be commanded by you.”
“No,” replied Arthur, steely. In two quick strides he came to stand alongside François, clasping his shoulder. “We two kings are meant to be brothers. Be my brother, now. Join me on the day of battle and know that the king you help raise up shall always show you gratitude.”

The bolders of his face bore diamonds, sparkling in his eyes. The lips turned to malleable clay as they curved upwards, and the mountain peaks fell away in conquest to a smile. “Brothers,” he mused. “That is very good, yes. Brothers in arms, then, are we.”

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ANNE BOLEYN, LADY TO QUEEN CLAUDE OF FRANCE
Chateau de Fontainebleau, France
May 1520

Beneath her, the horse’s long legs stretched out in full canter and fanned her face with gusts of air. Beyond them the hounds hooted and screamed, rushing heedless ahead after terrified prey. Anne’s breath came in quick gasps as the air rushed past her. Leaning forward across her mount’s broad neck, she kept her eyes on the buck as it scampered ahead of them. Anne flashed a mischievous grin towards Henry, riding alongside her. At last, the hunt he had desired. Anne’s eyes danced.

The creature darted across a stream, up a peak, and out of a sight. Hallooing, the hounds screamed after it, but a rider could not pass beneath the low trees. Anne shot Henry another glance.

“Let the others follow after,” confided Henry. “We’ll go around and take them all unawares!”

Seizing her bridle, the pair peeled off from the rest of the company, bolting across banks and round the ravine. Trees peaked out at them, screening them from view, and Anne found that her laughter was joyous. She felt alive, the newly warm earth showering them in rays of sunshine, the horse bounding with life beneath her, and Henry, golden Henry, gilding the laughter with his own, his smile broad and proud and happy.

Their mounts scrambled up the hillside, and Anne leaned forward into it, as the fields gave way to more trees. “I think we should dismount!” she called out to him and, turning with surprise, Henry nodded.

“I think perhaps you are right.” Vaulting from his horse, Henry bound it up and then walked around to her. “Shall I help you?”

“I can get down myself,” she replied, primly.

Henry’s smile broadened. “Of course you can. That is not what I asked.”

Anne’s heart gave a clench, her stomach fluttered as the idea of his hands on her again rushed over her. But yes, was it not good? It was perfectly acceptable for a gentleman to help a lady down off her horse, perfectly…acceptable. She arched her brows. “I suppose some help would not be entirely unwelcome.”

Sliding her leg around, Anne put her hands on both his shoulders as Henry reached out to grasp her waist. His hands were large and broad and intimate, so familiar as to be comforting, so new as to excite. Slowly he lifted her, slowly he settled her on the ground and, though her feet touched it, neither moved. Anne stood very close to him, her hands resting on his shoulders, his settled around her waist. His eyes were deep and inky like the ocean at sunset, and he was all warmth amidst the cool breeze. He bent his head; she did not shy away. At last, with an affectionate smile, he cupped her chin with one hand, as hers slid off his shoulders. He clasped her gloved first with his other.
“Come,” he said.

They trundled through the trees, walking with purpose, only a little way from their bound horses. Dappled sunlight filtered down to them, and Anne found the shade from the burning sun exquisite.

“‘Highly as we both may esteem,’” said Henry.

“What?”

“In your letter, that is what you said. ‘Highly as we both may esteem.’ Both. Anne, what does it mean?”

“It means that, whatever our own feelings, we must not proceed.”

“‘Our’ feelings, Anne?” He held her hand, still, in his and, when he stopped beneath the glen, so did she.

“What a thing to say!”

“Anne, tell me true,” he said, and turned urgently to her, coming to stand before her, to look down into her dark eyes. “Am I alone in this? Do you not feel something, too? Whatever it is, Anne, I believe with all my heart that this feeling will never die in me. It eats at my very soul, our separation: it lashes with my heart and cloys my arteries. I cannot eat, I cannot sleep, I can do naught but for the thought of you. Tell me, Anne, tell me that you do not feel the same. Tell me that this feeling is not more than what we describe, tell me that it is not born of the communion of two souls, tell me that we are not in our very spirits of one flesh. I do believe that God ordained that we should someday unite and that we two were meant always to be one. Tell me that I am alone, Anne, tell me and I shall never breathe another word of the kind to you.” He cupped her face in his hands, searching her eyes.

He was not warm, no, he was hot: a poker fresh from the fire meant to sear her very heart with the laceration of his words. But, oh, was there any greater bliss, than to burn for joy? Anne’s heard pounded in her head and in her throat. She felt half as though she were nauseous, half as though she should dance or sing. She felt alive and alive and, oh, blessedly alive. She was scared, the rattle of her heart was fear, but it was excitement, too, and Anne felt as though she’d so long held back something that was dear and now the floodgates were open, they were alive, and she was a breathing flame dancing in the wind. “Henry,” she whispered, leaned closer and watched emotions play across his face. “You are not alone, you are not. I have tried to deny it, to run from it, but it is no use. I think of nothing else, I—”

He was moving forward, pressing her back. Anne felt her back against the tree as, roughly, his lips claimed hers. The breath seemed to go from her, chased away as his urgent lips melded with hers. Anne arched her neck into it, felt his tongue like the crush of a wave, and reached with her hands for his face. He was a lion and she longed to be devoured, he was a priest and she longed to be sacrificed. Anne plucked at her gloves, peeled them off. He did the same. She fought with the lacings of his shirt and pulled them away; felt him gasp along her lips as her cold hand touched his naked chest. He wrestled with her bodice, yanking it down to expose her bare breasts, and broke off kissing her mouth. Henry cupped her bosom, winding his fingers across her hard nipple, and ringing his tongue across it. Anne gasped. Her head fell back against the tree as his fingers swept over her sensitive breast.

He wrestled with her skirts. Urgently, he tugged them upwards with his left hand, as his mouth and right hand flirted with her bosom. “Anne,” he whispered, “Anne.”

“Oh, Henry,” she murmured. His hand on her thigh. He ran his fingers up and down, and Anne
found she was trembling. He wound round the breadth of her skin and found the inside of her leg. “Henry, Henry.”

Tenderly he squeezed her breast and Anne bit her lip with a delicious whimper. He released her. He knelt. Anne looked up with surprise. Henry pushed her skirts up and, tenderly grasping her left thigh with both caressing hands, he pressed his lips to the inside of the thigh.

“What are you doing?”

Henry laughed. “I thought it was obvious.”

“We cannot…we must not…I must be a maiden, I-“

“Don’t worry, Anne,” he assured her. “Say the word and I stop. But, I promise you, you will still be a virgin at the end, regardless. Shall I stop?”

Anne squeezed her eyes shut and let her head rest against the tree again. “No.”

Chapter End Notes

Dieu et mon droit is a French phrase meaning 'God and my will.' It is the motto of British monarchs.

The summit to which Richard refers is the intended meeting of France and England (in the real historical timeline, the Field of the Cloth of Gold more info here: http://tudorhistory.org/glossaries/f/field_of_cloth_of_gold.html and here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Field_of_the_Cloth_of_Gold ), discussed in chapter 2 of this fic. It's been a long time since then, so I thought I'd add this little reminder about it here ;D
“Go away,” said Anne, primly, nudging Henry’s shoulder with one hand. “I’m trying to read.” She pretended not to look up from her book.

His smile encouraged her own. “*Make* me.”

Anne narrowed her eyes. “I’m trying to concentrate!”

His chuckle was warm as he leaned close to her ear, hidden beneath her French hood, so very close, his breath tickling her skin. “*Liar.*” Anne turned to gasp and he snatched away her book. “A book of hours…”

“Give that back!”


“At least I didn’t write ‘This book is mine,’” she teased, tilting her head.

“What’s the insignia?”

“My badge…at the time. An astrolabe.”

“An astrolabe?”

“No temps viendra!”

Henry’s lips quirked. “I see. Symbolizing time.”

“I thought it was terribly clever at the time.”

“And what, may I ask, is your current badge?”

Anne’s eyes glistened as she shrugged. “I haven’t decided yet. Something rather grand, I hope. Something…something,” she broke into a smile. “Something warmed by the sun.”

“Icarus?” teased Henry.

“Hush! Give me back my book!”
“Why? So you can smack me with it?”

Despite herself, Anne giggled. “It was one time!”

“Oh, no. I’ve learned my lesson. I’ll be keeping this,” he added, quirking a defiant brow as he hugged the book close to his chest. “It was only one time, because I have been very vigilant ever since.”

Anne laughed. “Keep it, for now. I fancy some time at prayer shall do both our souls good.”

“Is love so wrong?”

Anne glanced away. “Moses would have us so believe.”

“And what does Anna Bolina believe, pray?”

She cracked a smile, absently running her forefinger across his knuckles. “It is reckless and foolish and ill-advised, but the greatest sin of all is the fact that I cannot find it in me to care whether it is or not.”

“Then,” replied Henry, clasping her hand in his. “Let us burn together.”

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RICHARD IV, KING OF ENGLAND
Palace of Westminster, England
June 1520

Edmund de la Pole swept to his knees. He was glorious, robed in the colors of his house, sporting the finest sword and scabbard money could buy, cloak draped over one shoulder, cast over the other. He wore a fine brocade doublet with slashed sleeves through which peaked the finest cotton, and jewels clung to his golden chain of estate. Yet, for all his glory, he looked small so close to the floor, bowed over Richard’s ring, lips hovering in obedience.

Beside Richard sat his magnificent bride on her throne, looking on in her splendor. Wearing rags and plastered in dust, Richard thought, Catherine of Aragon would still look every inch the Queen. Her red-gold hair (a memento from their common royal ancestor, Edward III,) was curly, he had learned, and cascaded about her shoulders as though a golden cloak woven in testament to her family’s imperial glory. Yet, she had pulled it taught beneath her gable hood, so that it merely peaked out at the top of her head. Her eyes were large, the most striking feature of her face, and blazed blue. Her brows were slender and curved delicately over the eyes, testifying where they stood to the regal exposure of her forehead. Her nose was straight and not too narrow, coming into a somewhat round, structured shape at the end. Today she wore costly brocades and a ruby pendant Richard had given her, the royal jewel, in congress with her regal headdress, emphasizing her status as Queen. From her lofty throne beside Richard, she peered down at the de la Poles, and gathered all around the room, the nobility of England watched with her as Edmund bent the knee before his king.

“Rise, good my lord,” Richard instructed his cousin. He watched Edmund straighten his legs and his back, his head instinctively bent, having humbled himself. Richard cast a glance towards his wife who favored him with the ghost of a smile. Behind Edmund, each of his surviving brothers stood in line, ready to kiss the ring as all of England on.

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EDMUND DE LA POLE, EARL OF SUFFOLK
“Do you think he knows?” asked Edmund’s brother, Richie, as soon as they were alone in Edmund’s new chambers. Richie narrowed his eyes, drummed his fingers.

Edmund’s heart leapt into his mouth and, unable to speak he shook his head, cleared his throat. “No. The penalty would be far greater, I imagine. This does, however, reek of suspicion. He means to remind us that he is watching.”

“Then we are reminded,” stated Richie, softly and terribly slow. “The time has come, I think, to give him something worth watching.”

“It is not wise,” replied Edmund. “We’ve just pledged ourselves anew to the king in the sight of all of England. Do not, I pray, be irate because we have been humbled.” But he knew that his brother was so, as he was himself, and however foolish, he could not help but think that their honor needed avenging.

“Then we tell them that we were deceived,” replied Richie. “We all were! For that is not the son of our dread sovereign, Edward IV, but the common whelp of a forgotten man from Tournai. That is not Richard of Shrewsbury, brother: that is Perkin Warbeck, or have you forgotten the name? Surely, he has not, and we, nephews of King Edward’s, must never forget it, either.”

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HENRY TUDOR, PRINCE OF ENGLAND
Chateau de Fontainebleau, France
June 1520

She found him reading her book of hours in the garden and sat down beside him. “Do you like it?”

“Do you remember I gave you a book, once before?”

“You lent it to me,” she replied.

He chuckled. “Hardly. You’ve finished reading it already, and yet you’ve yet to return it.”

Anne huffed, jumping to her feet. “I’ll fetch it now!”

“No, no,” he said, drawing her back down to sit beside him on the garden bench. “I meant it as a gift from the start, you’ll recall. Keep it. I want you to have it. Only promise you’ll think of me when you look at it.”

“Ironic,” she replied, softly. “For was it not, Yvain, the hero of that tale, who forgot his lady? She did not forget him.”

“Do you imagine I shall forget you, Nan? I tell you, I love you most earnestly. I pray we shall never be parted, but know that wheresoever I may be, Anne, I am yours.”

Anne’s eyes were liquid and their deep brown seemed to glow gold with the reflection of the sun, molten as flaming Vesuvius on the day it laid waste to Pompeii, yet still she sat, very still, gaze directed at him, until a winsome smile tugged at her lips and, rolling her neck away from him, she laughed. “I believe you,” she said softly and she continued to look away. “And how I love to hear you say it.”
Those words pleased him, though he made a valiant effort at suppressing his smile, and Anne laughed and looked down at her hands. Harry reached for her, gingerly, as though she might recoil suddenly from his touch, he reached with his right arm, to touch her chin, to turn her back. His heart hammered against his ribs. “Nan, say it…Do you not still love me?”

She softened, visibly, as though she were a mold made of butter beneath the hot sun, and brought her own hand to cup his. She turned her face to kiss his palm. “Must you ask it?” she inquired. “Of course I love you and have loved…but I am only a maid in the service of a foreign queen and you…” she shook her head. “Well, we both know that you were meant for other than the daughter of your brother’s rival’s ambassador.” She laughed pathetically; pressed her free hand to her abdomen. “It is a pitiful thing, is it not?”

“I won’t hear this,” replied Harry. He shook his head and leaned closer to her. His throat was raw as he spoke. “I’ll not hear another such word. Whatever may have been intended by others, it is God who brought us together and I sear now: no other than God shall take you from me.” She tasted of strawberries when he kissed her.

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ARTHUR TUDOR, KING OF ENGLAND
Chateau de Fontainebleau, France
_June 1520_

Elizabeth of York was sewing by the fire. Arthur watched her absently, his mother’s articulate fingers firm and steady as he remembered from childhood. She was now nearly as old as her mother had lived to be, and had suffered the loss of all but a single sibling, yet adversity kept her strong. His mother was nothing, if not a fighter. Arthur prayed that he’d received some portion of that spirit, prayed that he too would prove strong even in the face of tribulation.

“What is it?” asked his mother, the sound of her voice startling him from his reverie. “Your quill has grown still and I can feel your eyes boring into my side.” She smiled, spoke as though she were teasing, but she did not look up from her embroidery and Arthur could see in her stiffness, her worry.

“I have here a letter from Richard de la Pole,” he said, slowly.

“Is that not a good thing?”

“It is, a very good thing. He makes no promises, of course, but eludes to the favorability of our cause…given the right circumstances.”

“Promising circumstances,” interpreted Elizabeth, wryly. “That is to be expected.”

“Just so,” agreed Arthur. “What troubles me is that he further alludes to his brother, Edmund’s, letter to me…which I do not have.”

Elizabeth turned slowly, achingly, to look him in the eye. “It may simply be a matter of late arrival. Letters are scarcely sure things and often come in at strange times.”

Arthur nodded. “That is very true, I agree. But there exists another, more sinister, possibility. Warbeck may have intercepted our correspondence. Already we muster troops from across France and pay those from other lands…Our great advantage being the surprise of it, for so long we have delayed that Warbeck must think we mean never to strike!” Arthur crushed de la Pole’s letter in his hand and tossed it away.

“Or,” ventured Elizabeth. “Perhaps this circumstance could be turned to our own advantage.” Arthur
shrugged with his hands and Elizabeth eased up and out of her chair, gesturing for Arthur to sit again when he jumped to his feet. Slowly, she came to sit by him; slowly she assumed the chair opposite him. “If it is true that Warbeck reads your letters to Edmund de la Pole, then you have only a different audience to whom to cater.”

Arthur felt an emptiness in the pit of his stomach open and growl. “You are far more devious than you look,” he said softly, placing his hand over hers. “Do you suggest I send misinformation through this channel?”

“Tell Warbeck what you want him to know, or what you want him to think. Only wait and see if ever the letter comes in, before you send an incorrect letter. You need not go confusing your own potential allies before ever you meet.”

“You learned this trick from your father?”

Elizabeth laughed, shook her head with dancing eyes. “No, Arthur. I learned it from yours.”

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ANNE BOLEYN, LADY TO QUEEN CLAUDE OF FRANCE
Chateau de Fontainebleau, France
June 1520

The court was gathered all about Queen Claude’s chambers, as she chatted with her husband, leaving the rest of court more or less to their own amusements. Some of her ladies plucked their instruments and sang, while others played at cards or withdrew to quiet corners to talk or read. Anne was of the latter group, settled into a broad window, ensconced next to Henry, with her book of hours.

“Careful!” she exclaimed, laughing. “My father gave me that book, you know.”

“Mmm,” hummed Henry, flipping – somewhat more gingerly – to the next page.

“I didn’t take you to be so interested in books of hours.”

“Perhaps not as a general study,” he replied, glancing to her with a smile. “But I am interested in everything about you, and this is yours, after all, which makes it a most precious volume. How long have you had this book?”

Anne shook her head, ran a finger across the page. “Years,” she said. “I brought it with me to Burgundy from England and, from thence, here.”

“Then this book has my envy, to have traveled so long at the breast of Anne Boleyn.”

Anne blushed, doing her best to look mildly disapproving, but managing to look (as she felt) a touch pleased, instead. Henry’s grin broadened and he returned to the perusal of the holy images.

“Hush!” whispered one of the other ladies to them. “The King is speaking!”

François stalked like a peacock up and down the hall, speaking of lavish galas in future, glorious battles, the rise of France, gesturing grandly with fingers that caught the light with the multitude of jewels he wore. Wickedly, Anne cast a glance to Henry and, wickedly, he caught it. Both bowed their heads, suppressing laughter.

Henry glanced once again at her, before returning once more to the book. Saints and angels danced
across the colorful pages and she watched him, taking them each in, looking as pious at his study as ever she looked at prayer. Impishly, Anne reached for her pen and reached across him to write: *Remember me when you do pray, that hope doth lead from day to day.*

She glanced up at him, squinting around her hand to read as she wrote. When he met her gaze, she broke into a broad smile. Henry cleared his throat and leafed thoughtfully to the next page, shook his head, went to the next. Finally, he took the pen from her. Anne leaned close to him to read as he wrote. *If you remember my love in your prayers as strongly as I adore you, I shall hardly be forgotten, for I am yours. Henry, forever.*

Anne raised her eyes to meet his, stormy blue eyes that, for all the depth of their darkness, looked now to her bright as a horizon on a warm day, but it was the heat he radiated, a heat all unto himself, born of all that boiled within him. Anne wished to kiss him, to press her lips to his, her body, too, but she was frozen with everyone there. Snatching the pen back, she turned with practiced hand to a page she knew well. Beneath the image of the Annunciation, she wrote, *By daily proof you shall me find to be to you both loving and kind.*

Slowly, he moved his hand; slowly, his fingers. He brushed against the edge of her sleeve, fingers sliding across its surface, tilting his face towards hers…

“Rex!” Both Anne and Henry jumped at the sound, and saw François approaching them. The King’s voice was warm as he issued the familiar nickname he had given Henry. “Ah, tucked away with Mistress Boleyn, I see. A cozy match.”

Both Anne and Henry rose. Anne swept a quick curtsy until the king raised her up.

“Tell me, Mistress Boleyn, any news of your esteemed father?” His eyes were narrowed, brows convoluted above them. “He is much missed, here in France. Remind me again why he repaired to England?”

“There is some dispute, Your Majesty, regarding a title. My father has always believed that it would go to him, while apparently someone in Ireland has labored under the same impression. Now both claim right to it.”

“What is to be done?” inquired François.

“That is just what my father’s return to England has been to ascertain. He consults with Cardinal Wolsey on the matter, I expect, even now.”

“What is this disputed title, Mistress Anne?”

“Your Majesty, it is the Earldom of Ormonde.”

“Where are the lands located?”

“They are in Ireland, Your Majesty.”

“Oh,” the King nodded. “I suppose, now, your father may be with your…your sister…How, Mistress Boleyn…how is your sister?”

Anne dropped her eyes from the King’s face, staring at his shoes. “She is well, Your Majesty. She married, this February, to Sir William Carey.”

“Ah, how…charming,” commented François, pursing his lips. His face had turned quite red and he fidgeted with his rings, his fingers, stepped back, stepped forward. “I am glad that she is well.” He
cleared his throat, glanced to Henry, glanced back to Anne. “Uh…Tell me…How will the matter of the title be resolved?” Anne knew, now, that he was merely trying to distract them all, but she acted as though she did not realize it.

“I hardly know, Your Majesty, but two more capable lords than the good Cardinal Wolsey and my father have there never been. I am confidant that an agreeable settlement will be reached.”

“Tell you father,” said François. “That we eagerly await his return. How else to communicate with our fair English friends?” Anne carefully did not look at Henry, but bowed her head in acknowledgement of his words as he continued to speak. “But we are satisfied of his continued friendship, as he leaves in our loving care the wellbeing of his own daughter. Glad we are, Mistress Boleyn, to have you here. Pray, be in no hurry to leave us.”

Anne tried, again, not to glance at Henry, but this time she failed. She bobbed another curtsy to the King. “I assure you, Your Majesty, it is my wish to stay as long as I am welcome.”

Chapter End Notes

The book of hours!! So, first thing's first, the writing done in the book of hours is all accurate: the writing of the real Anne Boleyn and Henry VIII. Henry and Anne did both write inscriptions to one another in her book of hours. However, it is worth noting that Anne had multiples and the 'le temps viendra je, anne boleyn' (translation: 'the time will come I, Anne Boleyn') with her astrolabe drawing, book of hours is different from the one in which she and Henry wrote messages to each other. I simply made them one for our uses here. You can read more about Anne's writing, here: https://www.theanneboleynfiles.com/resources/anne-boleyn-words/writing-of-anne-boleyn/ You can see her motto, badge, and signature inscription in the book of hours here: https://www.pinterest.com/pin/181832903676933947/

The 'this book is mine' reference is, as you may remember, something Henry wrote in some of his books as a child.

Perkin Warbeck was said to be from Tournai by Henry VII. More information on Perkin Warbeck can be found here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Perkin_Warbeck I also highly recommend Ann Wroe's book, The Perfect Prince.

Yvain, the Knight of the Lion by Chrétien de Troyes is the book that Henry lent Anne in Chapter 5 of this fic. You can read more about the work here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yvain,_the_Knight_of_the_Lion

According to Alison Weir's The Six Wives of Henry VIII, Henry is said to have declared of Anne Boleyn: "No other than God shall take her from me," when Wolsey begged him to abandon his nullity suit. In a letter to Anne, while she had the sweating sickness, Henry wrote: "Wheresoever I may be, I am yours."

Elizabeth of York in 1520 would have been 54. If we take Elizabeth Woodville's birthdate to have indeed been (as estimated,) 1437, she would have been 55 at her death.

Cardinal Wolsey’s pen scratched, *itch, itch, itch*, across the parchment before him and, busily, Thomas Boleyn folded his hat in his hands. Sitting opposite the red priest as he wrote, Thomas felt distinctly ill at ease, a fact only enhanced by the knowledge that this was Wolsey’s intent. The Cardinal, a nobody upstart from Ipswich, was now one of the greatest men in England, and made no effort to conceal it. His chain of office wound round his shoulders, his robes were of the finest material, servile officials and nobles hovered everywhere ready to please, work on Hampton was not complete, yet already it was one of the most lavish residences in England. Thomas did his utmost to appear unfazed.

*Blois in the Loire is more impressive than this*, he thought, petulantly, flicking his finger across the smooth velvet of his hat. He knew Wolsey was as tired of these endless meetings as he, himself, was. For five years the dispute had drug on, on and on and on, until finally Thomas had felt compelled to come to Wolsey in person. Even so, progress had been small.

Wolsey’s pen paused, the cardinal flicked intelligent orbs towards the ambassador…and returned to his letter.

“Your Grace, I do not mean to appear impatient—”

“And yet you are,” observed Wolsey, the corner of his lips looping upwards. “Few men are not, my dear lord ambassador.” Setting the pen down, he folded his hands on the table before him and fixed Thomas with a smile that was not a smile. “You are anxious that there should be a final resolution to the question of Ormonde.”

“Surely Your Grace must see—”

“I see a great many things, my lord, as I’m quite certain you must as well. There is much worthy of consideration in this case, as I’m sure you will grant.”

“Granted, Your Grace,” replied Thomas. “Ireland is…difficult.”
“And I need not remind you of the tenuous matters in France which might further influence the Irish to feel…entitled to take what they might like. Surely, my lord would not wish to be the cause of such difficulties for our fair mother England.”

“Never, Your Grace.”

“Then hear my proposal. Yes, your claim to the Earldom of Ormonde is a legitimate one as the son of Lady Margaret Butler. However, Piers Butler has also a legitimate claim through the male line and, more to the point, it is he who is in physical possession of the place, as his branch of the family has been managing the estate for multiple generations, given the continued absences of the previous earls to fight in the so-called Cousins’ Wars. Already Piers Butler styles himself Earl of Ormonde with the support of the Irish lords and people. You will comprehend, my lord ambassador, that we’ve much need of Piers Butler and the other Irish lords in keeping the King’s peace there. To undermine that relationship, at this juncture, could have lethal consequences. I understand, of course, that the estate is entailed to heirs general, not heirs male, making your claim a worthy one, but you will understand, as well, that we must tread lightly in this matter. Ireland is a tinderbox and we’ve no good reason to give it a spark, have we?”

“No, Your Grace, we have not.”

“All of that is as may be,” responded Wolsey with a nod. “I’ve been writing your brother-in-law, Howard, in Ireland who, in friendship with Piers Butler, has set up favorable communication between us all. I believe, at last, I’ve settled upon a solution that, though a compromise, may satisfy all. Piers Butler will send his son, James, to London, and thither you will dispatch your younger daughter, that the two may be joined in holy matrimony. Thus the estate will be settled upon the heirs of both branches of the House of Butler, through that union. With his son in London, Piers will be reluctant to make cause against the crown and you will have the surety that all shall proceed as promised.”

“What guarantee-”

“James Butler will form a part of mine own household and will thus be, also, under my direction. You need have no fear from him. Now,” he said. “Go, send for your daughter from France.”

Thomas did not move, though his velvet hat was now thoroughly crushed in his white-knuckled fist. Still, he knew better than to complain. Wolsey had made up his mind, which meant that the king’s mind, too, had been turned to the solution. He would get no better, now. “Very well, Your Grace,” said Thomas, bowing himself out of the room.

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ANNE BOLEYN, LADY TO QUEEN CLAUDE OF FRANCE
Chateau d’Amboise, France
July 1520

“What is amiss?”

She put the letter into his hand, watched Henry’s face. He went pale then red then pale again, looked up to her, down, and read it again. Again. Read it again and she watched his hope for another outcome fade with the color from his face. “This can’t be, this is a mistake,” he told her, holding the letter out before her, shaking it. The heavy seal drooped, swung wildly, sagged again as it went still. Anne watched it as though it were all happening very far away, or to another person, or as though she’d tripped into some dream representing truths, but far from them still. He took her by the shoulders. “Nan, write him back, tell him you cannot go, will not. Tell him, Nan, tell him!”
Henry’s grip was fierce but gentle, desperate as a frightened child and she remembered that once, indeed, he had been: locked up in the Tower to await his fate, knowing that a single missive was all it would take in changing the course of his entire destiny. She now knew the feeling, though not the awful anticipation: she knew how it felt to hold in her hands a blow to her own hopes, a letter that would send her far from that which she loved. “We knew it couldn’t be,” she said, finally. “We knew from the start that our lives would take us elsewhere, that all it would end in was pain and memories.” Anne shook her head, her eyes ached and she realized she was crying.

His eyes, too, were red-rimmed, but anger was his solace as he stalked away from her and back. “No, I will not accept this,” he declared. “I will not! Is Ambassador Boleyn so fearful a vision as to command-”

She seized his hands, precious hands that she pulled to her. She did not want his royal rage, had no room for it. It was his tenderness she sought, some kind consolation in vulnerability. Leave anger to rulers, let her Henry be hers for this little span longer. “No, no,” she pleaded, lifting one heavy hand to her lips, then the other. “Stay with me. Don’t war and wail, stay with me, Henry, be mine still.”

He was still, terribly still, and she bowed her head, kneaded his hands, till she saw them thread with hers, fingers interlocking as he raised the other to her face. “Nan, will you not fight with me?”

“There is a time and a place for fighting, but it is not here. You say that my father cannot command you and just so, but I am his daughter. He can command me.”

“Let Ireland rebel! All the better for us! It will open the way, it will-”

Anne shook her head, looked down. She did not wish to reason with him, did not wish to help him see, to argue…again and again and again their arguments wound and she knew she’d wanted them, once, longed for them. They postponed the inevitable, but now that she had succumbed, now that the inevitable had arrived, she wanted no more of them. “No, no,” she shook her head, she felt useless like a ghost sustained on time-stained memories, but she was no ghost and this was not her past. “I-”

Anne turned away from his irate visage. This was not how they should part. She’d known, always, that that day would arrive, but she’d imagined a different parting, like Guinevere and Lancelot after all they’d been through, brows rested together, hands clasped, tears still unshed for inevitability as she went to her fate and he, separately, went to his, always bound though never again to meet. But he was no fable and she no Queen. Listlessly, Anne stared at the wooden floor, soaking in every striation in the planks, the whorls and twists from long-lost limbs and rainstorms in centuries past.

His hands on her waist, pulling her backwards against him. Anne fought the tears as she rested her head back against his shoulder, felt him wrap his arms around her from behind. “Shhh,” he whispered into her neck, her hair. “I’m sorry, sweetheart, I’m sorry, I can’t…Anne,” he kissed the top of her head, clasped her tight and Anne wound both her arms around one of his, leaning against it, breathing him in. “This is not the end,” he told her, she thought: It is. He lived in his fantasies and, for a delicious span, she’d lost herself to them. Once, as a girl, she’d been prone to her own romantic illusions, but life had forced her to put them aside. She had forgotten the painful pang of that separation. She’d never known the pain of separation from a person that was home.

Turning in his embrace, she touched his face, traced the line of tears on his cheeks, and rested her head on his chest. She wished to stay there like that forever. “Remember me,” she said, abruptly, disentangling herself and darting for the door, but he caught her again, held her fast against him.

“No,” he groveled into her hair. “Do not leave me, say that you will not.”

She turned again to face him. One hand on his forearm, she tilted her head up to his face and he leaned down close to her. She could hardly find words, for there were none to comfort him that
would not wound. She searched his face, for something, some idea, but she knew there was no stopping this now. “I can abandon my family no more than you can yours,” she said finally. “My exile is done. Find me again in England, Harry.” Raising her hands, she took his face in both of them. “And when you come, Henry, do not play at it. Richard will not. You are capable of great things, if only you see them as they are and not as you wish them to be. This fight, it is for everything. Do not play at this war. Put your all to it and I know you cannot help but succeed.” She ran her fingers through the lustrous red-gold of his hair. “Come, kiss me again, my love.”

His lips were like prayer, and all-consuming, a holy rite that stripped away flesh and revealed only soul and eternity and God tingling through every sense. His hands in her hair, around her waist, and hers wound round his neck, on his chest. Hers was a final farewell, his a promise of things yet to come, and both were lost to it, caught on a golden patch of eternity as their tears ran together and their lips expressed what words could not.

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MARY CAREY, LADY TO QUEEN CATHERINE OF ENGLAND
Hever Castle, England
_July 1520_

Mary touched her father’s arm. “I know this is not what you wanted, but surely it is for the best, to prevent a war, and Anne shall make the most able Countess of Ormonde, I am sure of it.”

Thomas Boleyn sank into his chair. Behind him was the window, which offered views of Kent beyond the red ivy scrambling up the side of the building. “This does not prevent any war, child,” he replied listlessly. “Only, it may serve to more securely ally some segment of the Irish to King Richard’s cause, rather than rallying to the Tudors.”

Mary nodded slowly. “At least it is good that the King is securing his allies,” she paused. “Though the Tudors are not so very bad.”

Thomas laughed. “The mere fact that you knew them, my dear, and liked them as people, does not mean that they are good for our country. England would be a more secure nation had they never been born. As it is…” Thomas threw up his hands. “We stand on the edge of war, my girl. I fear there is nothing to prevent it now. King François tries to conceal it from me, naturally, but it is no very great secret that he mobilizes on behalf of Arthur Tudor. There is nothing, now, to prevent a return of the ghastly wars that characterized my upbringing, I am afraid. I’d hoped, child, that you would not know them, that my children would be spared grief and violence, but it is not to be.”

“Then what will we do?” asked Mary.

“Do?” Thomas shook his head in confusion.

“To do our part, to prevent the wars, or to fight. What shall we do?”

“Nothing,” replied Thomas. “We will do whatever we are told and, as we are at present told nothing, we will do nothing.”

Mary nodded, a small gesture, and got up, went to the window. His words agitated her. He, himself, she could see, did not delight in the situation, but it was a matter for him of prudence. Mary did not live with that luxury: prudence was not her guiding principle in life.

Thomas passed a hand over his eyes. “How fares our new Queen?”

“It is a pleasure to return to her, now that I am wed,” said Mary. Her shameful return to England had
been covered up by all her father’s available political capital and now, sanctioned by a good marriage, she had been once more transformed into a respectable lady. Despite her words, however, Mary was not altogether sure she was happy to be returning to an old mistress. She had once served Catherine of Aragon during Catherine’s tenure as Queen of France, and along with Anne, helped teach her English. Catherine was nothing but good to her, but Mary had wished to start with a clean slate and this did not feel like starting fresh, but Mary was not about to complain. She was conscious that she’d done her family ill by creating scandal and now she had again an opportunity to bring them some good. She would be an ingrate not to take it.

“I only wish I’d secured you the position, earlier,” commented Thomas. “Then you might have helped influence the Queen’s sympathies in terms of the earldom. Everyone says the King dotes upon her.”

“He does seem so to do,” replied Mary. “But in any case, this is still a favorable outcome. Someday, your grandson will be the Earl of Ormonde. Does that not have a merry ring to it?”

“I’d hoped that I might be the Earl and your brother, George, after me. That, my dear, had a far pleasanter ring.”

“George must be pleased that Anne will be coming home,” said Mary.

“He is,” said Thomas. “But she won’t be home long before she’s shipped off to Ireland, and none of us to see her again.”

“That isn’t quite so, Papa,” said Mary. “I heard one of the Cardinal’s grooms saying that, when James Butler was last in London, he looked rather fastidiously to building a career here, until he was called back to Ireland by his father. It’s very possible Anne will live in England for many years, if her husband can be encouraged to pursue that ambition.”

“And I daresay Cardinal Wolsey will be most wont so to do,” said Thomas. “I do believe he intends to delay the marriage, even once they’ve both arrived. He rather looks to James Butler, I think, as a glorified hostage – to keep his father’s behavior in check. It would not do to send this James back too soon, when pretenders lurk on the borders of the imagination.”

“They are more than imaginary, Papa.”

“Are they? No, just now they are whatever the people want them to be. They are symbols of positive change, of opportunity: a veritable King Arthur. Until they are proven, anyone with some complaint might look to a new regime to solve it for them, little realizing that the Tudors are flesh and blood, and just as likely to strike down their hopes as is Richard. Therein lies their true danger: at present, they are imaginary.”

“You underestimate them,” said Mary, very softly. “The danger lies in the fact that they are most stubborn princes and once their minds are set, they are unlikely ever to reverse their course.”

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HENRY TUDOR, PRINCE OF ENGLAND

Chateau d’Amboise, France

July 1520

One final night. Henry watched her face in the firelight, her figure as she slid out of the heavy overdress she wore. He was half-mournful, half-reverent as he approached her, slowly, to drink it all in, slowly, to remember these moments. Tonight, he told her, was not for tears. Too many, already,
had been shed, and that was not how they should pass this night. “I will find you in England,” he’d
told her. “I will find you and we will start again. Only wait, delay as long as you might, wait for me.
Wait for me, and we shall be as one, forever.” And she, tucked into her arms, whispered against his
chest, “Yes, Henry, yes.” He did not know if she truly meant it.

She was golden by the hearth, her olive skin glowed as though lit up from beneath, and her raven
hair turned in its strands to red, like a poker fresh from the flame. “When first I saw you, I thought
you would burn me,” he said, approaching her. He reached out to touch her face, and found with
surprise that she was cool to the touch.

“Is that love?” she asked. “To burn?”

Henry shook his head, resting his brow on hers. “Yes,” he said. “In part, but you have taught me
something, Nan. Love is sacrifice. And that is why I give you up, sweetheart, trusting you will return
to me.”

Her eyes glowed too, in the firelight, but the power was all her own as she cupped his face in her
hands, released him, cupped his neck instead. “You will remember me, Henry?”

“Always.” He carded his fingers through her hair, leaned close, savored the feeling of her breath
against his lips, just before they touched. She was sweet as she was fierce, her arms winding tight
round him as though life itself depended upon the embrace and Henry rose up to meet her, pulling
her close as he could and wishing still to have her closer, to carve out some hollow in his chest where
he might forever house her and they need never part. His fingers found the lacings of her
undergarments and tugged at them with impatience.

The cloth seemed to flutter away like a feather on the wind and he took half a step back to admire her
by the firelight, every curve and motion. He felt the power of her eyes on him and clasped her close
again to kiss her, to run his hands over the luxurious warmth of her bare skin, to press kisses here and
here and here, and listen to her breath catch each time.

“Henry,” she whispered and he opened his eyes. Hers were intent. “Your turn,” she said with a
wicked grin, tugging his shirt over his head. Her eyes drank him in, a devouring flame, and she
approached again, her lips on his throat and his collarbone, a gentle bite, her soft lips, trailing down
his chest. Her hands, nails and fingertips and palms, roved his abdomen, sinking down and down
and down until Henry gasped and her wicked grin returned again. He lifted her up into his arms,
carrying her to his bed where he laid her down, climbed on top of her. She seized the back of his
head, drew him into a kiss as though she could take the air from him, and Henry kissed lower and
lower and lower across every inch of her body, with soft lips and fingers and tongue until she
screamed in delight. Though they were parting, this was not their last night, he told himself: no. It
was the first of many to come.

Chapter End Notes

If you want to read more about Anne's fiancée, James Butler, you can read his wiki
father, Piers you can find out more here:
Chapter Summary

“There is no peace, Mistress Boleyn,” he’d said. “There can be no peace until every Tudor is dead or until England at last is returned to her rightful rulers.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

ANNE BOLEYN, LADY TO QUEEN CATHERINE OF ENGLAND

The English Channel

July 1520

The stack of letters leered at her. Around her, the ship lurched precariously across the waves, but no matter which corner Anne sought in refuge, the letters seemed to whisper sibilant threats and promises in some part of her skull. “You’ve a choice before you, Mistress Boleyn,” Arthur Tudor’s hand catching her wrist, his Woodville-green eyes boring into her black ones. King, she’d thought, or country. She’d bound the many letters in a red ribbon and hidden them amongst her personal possessions. She knew just what their discovery might cost her.

Either she could turn the letters in to the local authorities when she reached England, and betray Arthur, or she could keep them secret and betray Richard. Either way, she knew, she was committing treason. “You’ve a choice before you, Mistress Boleyn.” Anne shook her head as though the motion would banish the intrusive memories, but Arthur’s eyes had been insistent and she felt sick. She blamed the heaving of the ship beneath her, but she knew the cause was something else altogether. I should never have agreed to take Arthur’s letters, she thought, not for the first time. It was too dangerous.

The morning of Anne’s departure had been breezy, gusts whipping in from the river and, she supposed, from the sea. Arthur had caught her unawares, smiled a smile that, Henry had told her, their father once used to wear: a smile fit for a king, a smile that whispered of secrets. “As you are to go now to England, I wonder if you might render me a service,” he’d said. His green eyes glowed, their hazel flecks seeming to glow like amber. Still, his request had rendered her unsure, when at last he’d arrived at his point. “I’ve friends in England, you see, but it seems my correspondence is, as yet, a perplexing scenario. It would be a kindness in you to discreetly pass my letters to my friends.”

“You mean,” Anne had countered. “You wish me to aid the Lancastrian cause against the Yorkist claim when England is at last settled peaceably upon a king.”

A greensick flash of the eye, a stubborn jut of the jaw as he glanced away. “There is no peace, Mistress Boleyn,” he’d said. “There can be no peace until every Tudor is dead or until England at last is returned to her rightful rulers.”

She’d watched him, watched that turn of the face, flicker of the eye. Distantly, she thought of the first time she’d seen the Tudor brothers: the restless one had been Henry, then. Now, there was no stillness in his brother, there were only jittering jumps as though he were a raw wound gnawing away at a desperate animal, and she thought again: I know how men in exile feed on dreams of hope. “Why do you do this?” she asked, softly. “When there is little hope?”
A grim smile, now: resigned, she thought, or resolute. “I have no choice.”

“You’re wrong,” she said, shaking her head, watching as he swiveled abruptly to look at her. “You’re the only one, in all of this, who has a choice. Your actions dictate what everyone else’s will be. If you choose, there will be a war.”

Ice seemed to thaw and grimness washed out of him like melting snow till its only trace was sadness etched into the eyes. “It is not war I want, Mistress Boleyn, it is justice. I did not choose this path, it was chosen for me by God and by all my ancestors. My father died a man without satisfaction, the brave and loyal folk who followed him into exile have, as yet, seen no recompense. I and my brother and my sisters and my mother and my children,” he shook his head. “We will not die as my father did. It is not as you think: that I seek to become King. From the instant of my father’s death I already was that much. It was for that purpose, and for no other, that I was born. If I do not return to England and reclaim my purpose, what am I then? My mother, brother, sisters…what are they? I will not fail them. What else is there for any of us in this world?” Grimness returned to his mouth as a harsh line, but his eyes laughed mirthlessly, a sad echo of the wry young man she’d first met. “You are a dangerous woman, Mistress Boleyn,” he said. “You listen so easily, one might be tempted to confess all. Only consider, madam, if you think not of doing me this good turn, incline your thoughts towards the great good these actions do my brother and find if that will not sway you.”

The ship heaved beneath her and Anne clutched desperately at the wooden frame as though it could stabilize her. The storm had swallowed her whole.

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RICHARD IV, KING OF ENGLAND
Eltham Palace, England
August 1520

“His Majesty, the Most Christian King of France, has written me, Your Grace,” Wolsey was saying. Richard stretched out his hand and was rewarded by Wolsey placing the letter into it. “His Majesty worries that the withdrawal of Mistress Boleyn as well as some students from France ‘seems to indicate an English intention to make war on France.’”

“Mmmm,” hummed Richard, cocking a brow as he swept his gaze over the missive. “Ironic that François should complain of such a thing when, even now, he mobilizes troops against us.” He handed the letter back to Wolsey.

“No doubt he is building a case, Your Grace, to present to His Holiness the Pope in case there should be interference into the matter, that he was merely acting in the defense of his realm.”

“Defense, ha! François has never been in danger a day of his life.” His gut seized as his own boyhood rose, unbidden, before his memory. Richard pushed off from his chair and stood to stroll to the window. A knot garden twisted out beneath his window, and Richard glimpsed his Queen strolling with her ladies. She was a princely vision, just then, her red-gold hair all but hidden beneath a stately hood, her white hands invisible beneath the folds of her elaborate mantle. She might easily have made a great king, he thought, he thought, had circumstances only been different.

“‘It is no matter what his missives to us may claim, Your Grace,’” Wolsey replied smoothly, as though he had not noted Richard’s sudden shift. “‘The truth is indisputable.’

Richard nodded sagely, nodded as though he were truly listening, and twisted the rings on his fingers. He thought of his mother’s eyes, the flash of fear only barely concealed beneath the fearless exterior; he thought of his Uncle Richard’s pensive gaze, focused on Elizabeth Woodville, as he
claimed his royal nephews. His brother, Ned, had seized young Richard’s hand in his own. “It’s alright, Dickon,” he’d whispered. “I’m the King, now. I won’t let anything happen to us.”

Richard’s roving hands went suddenly still.

The King glanced to Wolsey. “What did you tell His Most Christian Majesty?”

“I assured him, Your Grace, that I, myself, was responsible for Mistress Boleyn’s recall, because I intend, by her marriage, to pacify certain,” here he gestured inanely, “Quarrels and litigation between Boleyn and other English nobles.”

Richard nodded slowly. “Very good.”

Absently, the King wondered what his Uncle Richard would have done in these circumstances, or what his father might have done. Certainly, he knew what the Usurper, Henry Tudor, had done firsthand. It had come so very close between them, Richard remembered. One misstep, that fateful October of 1497, and Henry Tudor might have taken the day. He had not, however, and now it was Richard’s turn to face down an invasion. Will these bitter wars between cousins never end? wondered Richard blackly. Must both branches of the family become extinct before there can ever be peace? His fingers twisted his rings again. Damn you, he thought of Richard II and Henry IV who had begun it all. Damn you, he thought of Henry VI and Margaret of Anjou and his own grandfather Richard, Duke of York before him, who had renewed it. Damn you, he thought of Warwick the Kingmaker and his Uncle George who had continued it. Damn you, he thought of them all: all the kings and queens and rulers and nobles who might have been, damnation to them all for what they had made of England and of him. They had, he thought with clenched fist, as good as murdered all his family and stolen peace from them in life, besides.

“You think,” began the King. “That this promised marriage will satisfy Ireland? We cannot afford to discontent any of our peoples, just now…” The thought hovered ominous in his mind. He, himself, had first landed in Ireland. He knew how very accommodating they could be, there, to a new regime.

“The Butler family has some deal of influence with the Irish lords, Your Grace. I believe it is our best chance, but guarantees can be very few and far between, I fear.”

Richard nodded. “I agree. When does the Boleyn girl arrive?”

“Presently, Your Grace. Indeed, any day now, I would venture.”

“Do all that you can to gather information from both of Master Boleyn’s daughters. More than ever, it is pressing to know all that we might of my nephews.”

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MARY CAREY, LADY TO QUEEN CATHERINE OF ENGLAND

Hever Castle, England

August 1520

Her sister was wan beneath wind-streaked cheeks, but the relieved smile that broke out upon her face was the very same Mary remembered. Anne’s wordless exclamation of joy matched Mary’s own as they hurled their arms around each other, rocking with frantic happiness. Anne laughed into Mary’s shoulder as the latter strained to pull her tighter. “Lord knows how I missed you, Nan!”

“And I you! France was a lonely place without you, dearest.”

Slowly they pulled apart to look at each other and Mary clasped Anne’s hands. Conspiratorially, she
lowered her voice, eyes narrowing. “I know there is something you were keeping from me,” she pointed out. “I could tell from the tone of your letters. I always know.”

“You always know,” agreed Anne. “But I was not hiding anything from you,” Anne assured her. “I was hiding it from our parents. I felt sure they’d wish to read any letters I might send you, so I felt I could not be so free with my thoughts as I might otherwise make myself.”

Mary shook her head, narrowed her eyes, somewhat unsatisfied by this explanation. Still, there was no sense in spoiling the moment of their reunion and Mary made up her mind to pursue the subject later. “Come inside! George and our parents are most eager to see you and I should very much like for you to meet my husband when next we see him.”

“Of course,” replied Anne.

“Is Hever as you remember it?” Mary asked. For her, it had not been. Few major changes had been made, it was true, but it was the little shifts that had shocked her: a new – and rather robust – tree where there was never one before, the cushions on an old chair updated with newly embroidered fabric, the orientation of her father’s desk altered slightly to catch the breeze…She hadn’t realized, until she had come back, that some part of her had half-imagined that Hever lay frozen in time – or that time, in fact, had continued to roll by in England while she had been gone.

“Yes,” Anne was saying, frowning at the same tree that had given Mary pause. “No.”

“I agree,” replied Mary, squeezing Anne’s elbow with affection. The pair proceeded onto the drawbridge. “Wait till you see George! He is quite a young man now, and no longer the little boy we remember.”

“What did he say when he first saw you?” asked Anne, quickly.

“‘Why, if it isn’t the Prodigal Daughter, returned from her revels across the water,’” she quoted, mimicking his comical inflections.

Anne laughed. It was her turn to squeeze Mary’s arm. “Our incorrigible little brother, you mustn’t listen to him.”

Mary’s smile was taut. She still remembered the frozen grimace on her father’s face at that word, how he turned away and Mary had turned to George as to see no more. Whatever shame her father had felt, there was none in her younger brother. Rather, in his face there were the dancing eyes of a proud, bemused sibling. It had been refreshing to have it addressed so openly and frankly – and with a note of respect. George had never been one to judge harshly indiscretions. ‘God knows,’ he would say. ‘I’ve had more than my share.’ “I do believe he was jealous.” The sisters laughed.

“Five minutes home and already you’re the both of you laughing at me,” rang out a mock-petulant voice and Mary felt Anne jolt away from her, running to their brother who caught her in his arms and twirled her about. “Look at our sister, Malle,” he called out to Mary, using his old pet name for her. “Has England ever known such an elegant woman? The very dirt on her hem is, I daresay, at least partially of regal French extraction!”

Anne’s eyes twinkling merrily and she reached out to Mary for her to come join them. “George, I see you are quite as ridiculous as I remember you.”

“I’d hate to disappoint, Nan.”

“He means to say you look lovely,” pointed out Mary.
Anne caught both her siblings in her arms, laughing merrily. “He’s right,” joshed Anne. “I do.”

“You’re holding out on us, Nan, I think. I can tell from the tone of your letters,” George was saying, narrowing his eyes into quite the same expression Mary herself had used not ten minutes before. “Whatever was it that was so very shocking as to be unfit to write to your own siblings? Malle had her way with the King of France…I don’t suppose you seduced his steward?” George gasped. “His Queen?”

“George!” exclaimed Mary, smacking his hand. “Nan’s only just arrived! Be nice or you’ll have her longing for France and not even properly home, yet.”

“My darling sister,” complained George. “I am a vision of fraternal hospitality.”

“No prophet is ever appreciated in his own house, George,” teased Anne, wryly.

They reached the doors that led from the courtyard back into the house and stopped dead.

“Gather your courage all ye who enter here,” said George with a twinge of irony. “Through these doors stalks the dread lord of our stately manor: Thomas Boleyn.”

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ANNE BOLEYN, LADY TO QUEEN CATHERINE OF ENGLAND
Hever Castle, England
August 1520

Alone at last. Anne lay on her bed, staring at her canopy. It felt strange, now, to have her own room rather than being squeezed into a dormitory with a dozen other young ladies, yet this was the chamber in which she had passed her childhood years. She recalled, too, her astonishment at being cramped into sleeping quarters with foreign strangers, upon her arrival at Margaret of Austrias court in the Low Countries. Closing her eyes, Anne thought, unbidden, I wonder if Henry has ever been there. Her eyes snapped open again. Throwing back her sheets, Anne slipped from her bed and padded to her trunk on the floor.

Opening the lid, she rummaged through her possessions until she found the bundle of letters smuggled across the waters. On top sat perhaps the most dangerous note of all.

“Write me,” Henry had urged. “As soon as you make shore, write to me.” He put a letter into her hand. “Read this when you are home, if I should slip across you mind unbidden and you should think you miss me…read this.” His hand closed over hers. “Read it and write to me.”

Anne’s lips curved upwards. She’d persuaded him, that if he were going to write to her, it must be under an assumed name.

“A lady’s name! Nan, I swear,” he’d blustered. “Of all the indignities!”

Something in his eyes changed, some – she considered – recollection of his own time there and, at once stiff and softened, he glanced away. Grudgingly, he bit out, “No.”

“Then we must raise no suspicion whatsoever. If some female friend should write me from France there is far less reason to whisper than if a male one were to do so…little less a Tudor.”

Gingerly, Anne loosed the ribbon holding the letters together and lifted the top one gently before
tying the others up again and putting them back into their place of concealment. Others were written in Arthur Tudor’s own hand, addressed to great lords of England, but for all that their words were more treasonous, Anne knew that the letter she had selected was, to herself, more dangerous than any of the others. Impulsively, she touched it to her lips before she pulled it open to find Henry’s scrawling handwriting across the parchment.

*MINE own SWEETHEART, this shall be to advertise you of the great elengeness that I find here since your departing. I think your kindness and my fervency of love causes it, otherwise I would not have thought it possible that for so little a while as it has been that it should have grieved me so. The cause of my writing at this time, good sweetheart, is only to hear of your good health and prosperity, of which I would be as glad as of mine own, praying God (if it be His pleasure) to send us shortly together, for I promise you I long for it, wishing myself (especially an evening) in my sweetheart’s arms, whose pretty dukkys I trust shortly to kiss.

*I hope soon to see you again, which will be to me a greater comfort than all the precious jewels in the world. No more to you at this present, mine own darling, for lack of time, but that I would you were in mine arms, or I in yours, for I think it long since I kissed you.*

*Written by the hand of him that was, is, and shall be yours by his own will,*

*Henry, Duke of York*

Swiftly, Anne closed the letter and darted towards her fireplace. She held the parchment over the open flame, knowing she must burn it, but found herself staring at the writing, instead, the clean – though unclear – hand, written with haste and she smiled, too, thinking how deeply he detested writing and yet had undertaken it for her. She should burn the letter, she knew, but instead she traipsed back to her bed, with the letter in hand, and crawled back under the sheets. “*You’ve a choice before you, Mistress Boleyn.*” Arthur Tudor’s voice whispered in the recesses of her mind. Anne slipped the letter beneath her pillows, and left her hand over it as though she were touching, instead, the warm flesh over Henry’s heart.

Chapter End Notes

When Anne Boleyn returned to England in late 1521 (which happened to coincide with some English students in France doing the same), Francois I feared that Anne’s recall from his court “seemed to indicate an English intention to make war on France,” though Wolsey assured him that “he himself was responsible for her recall, because he intended, by her marriage, to pacify certain quarrels and litigation between Boleyn and other English nobles.” Since it was so appropriate to this fic, I decided to include the reference.

In terms of the ages of the Boleyn siblings, no one knows for sure as they were not recorded, though most scholars agree that Mary was born between 1499/1500 and that George Boleyn was born around 1504. Anne, however, is the subject (as per usual) of much more controversy, her birth dates ranging from 1501-1507. Here, I make her her the middle sibling, purely for my own uses, as I wanted her to be older in age, given the subject matter.

The letter Henry writes Anne is, in fact, real...more or less. As there are 17 extant letters from him to her, I squashed a few of them together and also modernized some of the
language a bit to make it flow better to our modern eyes, just as I do with the dialogue. You can read all 17 of Henry's love letters here: https://www.theanneboleynfiles.com/resources/anne-boleyn-words/henry-viis-love-letters-to-anne-boleyn/ I plan to include more of them, too :D “dukkys” was a sixteenth century slang term essentially meaning “boobies”
Chapter Summary

“It is not about what we want, Nan.” She looked down at her sister’s hands, their long fingers, and massaged them gently in her own. “We do not have the privilege of a choice.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

ARTHUR TUDOR, KING OF ENGLAND
Chateau d’Amboise, France
September 1520

“What is it?”

Harry’s expression was black as he waved a letter in one hand, accusatory or stricken: Arthur could not determine which.

“What’s this?” inquired Arthur again, shaking his head. His head was pounding – always pounding – behind the scar, and bent over a dozen or more maps of England, the British Isles, and Western Europe, he had little patience for one of his siblings’ self-indulgent tantrums. Still, the missive – flapping absurdly in Harry’s clutches – concerned him. There were too many variables, still, to take any news lightly.

“It is a letter,” Harry replied, waving the document still closer to Arthur’s face. “From England.”

Arthur’s stomach lurched; his eyes widened. “Yes? And what does it say?”

“Is it true, say that it is not, brother mine…Is it true that you have willfully put Mistress Boleyn in danger?”

Arthur’s brow furrowed. “What?”

“You have endangered her life. Is that true?”

Accusatory or stricken? thought Arthur, again, inanely: Both. “What on earth—” he’d been about to deny it out of hand – had he ever harmed the lady? Certainly not! – but he realized, then, that this was not what Harry meant. Arthur had endangered her in other ways. Though not by his own hand, he had placed her in jeopardy by asking her to pass letters from under his enemy’s very nose. “I did not command her, Harry,” he replied softly. “I gave Mistress Boleyn a choice and I pray God she will find favor with our cause for we’ve much need of her assistance.”

“If our return to England should jeopardize her life, Arthur, what business have we in going?”

“Are you so selfish? There are many that will fall to this cause, but you care only when one of them might be your own plaything?”

“She’s not—”
“Harry, I understand the prospect is upsetting. Believe me, I was quite loathe to ask it of her, myself, but our options are few and we do this not only for ourselves but for each other and, ultimately, for all of England. Our fair nation festers under its current leadership. Warbeck’s own heir is no more fit to rule than a particularly obstinate oxen and as for the so-called King, himself, he plunges England still further into debt with his pointless exploratory ventures, made fruitless by the fact that soon he will have no coffers fit to pursue the claiming of such a venture, therefore rendering moot its purpose. He rules by impulse and will rather than order and focus, rattling first here and next there, patching up the holes his blindness have ruptured only when he at last sees them! Seeing them, only, once the damage is so supreme as to make his blunders all the more glaring—”

“You’ve a bad accounting of it, I think, dear brother. It is not so bad as all of that.”

“Not now that he’s a true Queen at his side,” muttered Arthur. Behind his scar, his head was shrieking. He passed a cool hand along his brow. “Before his new Queen arrived, our Aunt Cecily helped him along, but the span between our Aunt’s passing and Her Highness, Infanta Catalina of Aragon’s, arrival showed Warbeck’s true colors, Harry, and they are not pretty. England suffers. It is time we returned home to aid her.”

“And Anne?”

Arthur sighed. “Pray God she sees fit to help us, rather than hinder us.”

“That is not at all what I meant!” Harry hurled the missive down upon a nearby table and stabbed the air between them with an angry finger. “Brother, do you not see that, whatever the wars might be between those of us who might hope to rule England, Anne is innocent of them. She has, till now, been treated merely a pawn under her father’s charge and for him to barter, and therefore can have no stake in this battle—”

“I asked you, brother – do you not recall? – if she could be trusted. You told me, then, that you would trust her with your life, your very soul. Do you think now those words were unfit?”

“Is this the cause for which you asked?” asked Harry, breathless. “Had I known, I should never have told you of my trust in her. You ask her to doom herself for us! She’s no experience of—”

“Discretion is all that is asked of her. Who has more experience, my brother, in discretion than the lady to a Queen?”

Harry’s laugh was humorless. “You miscalculate the risk, Arthur. It is not merely discretion you ask of her, it is the sort of work once done by father’s spies, slipping in and out of webs and spinning her own when necessary.”

“Is that not what any courtier does?”

“No. What you ask of her, Arthur, can be by Warbeck considered only to be treason. Should she be discovered, and well she might be, there is nothing to stop her from paying the full price of such an action. Arthur, you did not ask her to help you: you asked her to die for you.”

The words struck like a blow, but Arthur leveled beneath their weight. He felt as though a powerful wave had just passed over his head, but like a wave after pressing him down, it propelled him back towards the surface again. “Warbeck would not execute a lady.”

Harry’s lip curled with disgust. “You truly believe that, don’t you? I assure you, there is no king under the sun who would not, if pressed, execute anyone, even a lady.”

Arthur shook his head. “If you were king, Henry, you would not kill a woman on so slight a
charge.”

“Of course not!” Harry exclaimed. “But the charge is not slight: it would be treason, and Warbeck is the son of a merchant. I truly believe that he would behead Anne Boleyn and there is no one, no one there who could protect her. You ought never to have asked it of her. I will write her and ask her to stop immediately.”

Arthur’s throat was tight. “How did you know I asked?”

Harry picked up the letter, waved it at his brother. “She wrote to me.”

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ANNE BOLEYN, LADY TO QUEEN CATHERINE OF ENGLAND
Palace of Placentia, England
September 1520

This, she realized in sudden epiphany, was the place where he was born. Anne felt an odd sort of thrumming in her chest, a queer desire to see the chamber, to visit the rooms that had once housed Henry as a child, to walk through the corridors he had once frequented, to see the spot where he had been instructed. She had in her possession, she knew, a book from this very library. This book his mine, he’d scrawled across it in childish hand, and the last evening, she had – herself almost childishly – pulled it out and compared it to his letter to see child and adult side by side.

Beside her, Queen Catherine was reading a book, but abruptly put it down. As though reading Anne’s mind, she said: “Tell me, Mistress Boleyn, how found you my husband’s nephews in France?”

Caught off guard, Anne started, smiled to herself at her silliness, and turned towards the Queen. “I found them very well, Your Grace,” she replied. “They are both robust young men, tall and princely, given to bouts of high temper and rather fond of philosophizing.” Anne stabbed her needle through her embroidery purposefully. It felt rewarding, just then, to pierce something, though she felt more like screaming than entertaining such a topic with their sworn enemy.

Catherine studied her book, intently, as though only half-listening. “Tall and princely, you say,” she observed, nonchalantly. “How do they look?”

Anne felt a blush blossom across her cheeks, heat that suffused her face and her breast. She smiled. “Your Grace,” she replied. “They are most…handsome. The younger brother is very tall, nearly as tall as His Majesty King François of France – Your Grace will recall his relative height, I trust? – and, if I might say so in all delicacy, well proportioned, he,” she shook her head, pictured Henry, her golden Henry, the red-gold of his hair bright in the sunshine, his fists on his hips, cutting an imperious vision across the horizon, softened by the broad smile, the boisterous laughter-

“And the elder brother, Mistress Boleyn?”

“Oh,” Anne cleared her throat. She saw Arthur on that last day, deep circles under restless eyes, pensive mouth a firm line of tension, and for all of that, she felt a pang for him. It was not the same, certainly, but she knew what it was to feel such pressure to excel, to wonder if you might ever live up to the expectations of others…She wondered, indeed, if that pressure did not grow worse, rather than better, once those people had died. “He is also quite tall, Your Grace, though not quite so tall as his younger brother. He is slighter than his brother, as well, but very well formed and handsome, in his own right-”
The Queen smiled softly, arching her brows in a form of humor. “You compare him to a brother, Mistress Boleyn, that I have never seen. Tell me of this…would-be king in his own right.”

Anne felt her sister’s eyes boring into her and, stubbornly, refused to look at Mary. “Yes, Your Grace,” she replied, evenly. “The elder brother has green eyes which can glow amber-hazel in candlelight, as some green eyes do, and high prominent cheekbones. His hair is a bronze-copper – a hue native to each of the children of Henry Tudor, though his is perhaps a touch darker than his other siblings, being nearly a chestnut in color,” she licked her lips, continued. “His eyes are large and prominent in his face, his nose is rather like those of the Romans. His lips are full in his oval face. He is clean shaven and keeps his hair long as was the fashion, though I heard him speaking of trimming it as the French do before I left. In movement, he is controlled but graceful, in his eyes there is that characteristic of one who is always thinking: a mind that does not still. He is lithe and gives the impression of one who is, with ease, at mastery of all he does.”

The Queen was quiet for a time, her eyes distant from the tome cradled in her hands. At last, a humor-tinged smile touched her lips. “He is, then, all that a king must seem to be.”

Anne bent her head, once more, over her embroidery. Acorns and strawberry flowers bloomed and she did her utmost not to think of Henry. "You've a choice before you, Mistress Boleyn, Arthur’s voice reminded. Anne swept her eyes back towards Catherine and found the Queen’s own orbs settled, still, upon herself. “Was there more Your Grace wished to know?”

Catherine glanced back to her book and turned the page.

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MARY CAREY, LADY TO QUEEN CATHERINE OF ENGLAND
Palace of Placentia, England
September 1520

“God’s Grace, Anne!” hissed Mary. “What was that?”

Her sister shook her head. “Would you have counseled me ignore the Queen’s Grace?”

“Of course not,” replied Mary. “But I would counsel caution. You need not have waxed so eloquent of their graces! You might have given them a few…” she shrugged. “Warts. I don’t know, perhaps an extra finger.”

“They have none! They are both, as you know, most handsome princes.”

“They are not princes, Anne. Not here. You must remember that! Such a mistake might well cost you, and all of us, very dear.” Impulsively, she took Anne’s hands in her own. “You will remember that, Nan, won’t you?”

Anne’s eyes were black and searching, frantic in their motion as they read in the expression of Mary’s own. They were captivating, those eyes, even for her sister who was accustomed to their expressions, their movement was gripping, unsettling now in their consternation. “Mary, whose side are we on?”

Mary’s heart heaved and she squeezed her sister’s hands. “We are too lowly for such an option. We are on the side of whomsoever should command us, my dear, whatever else our hearts may say.”

“I do not wish to sit idly by and allow fate to choose our futures for us, Mary. Is that what you want?”
She turned her face away, unable to bear the fierce gaze of her sister. She thought of William and of
François and of the ruin any whisper of scandal might so easily have brought upon them all. “It is not
about what we want, Nan.” She looked down at her sister’s hands, their long fingers, and massaged
them gently in her own. “We do not have the privilege of a choice.”

Her sister’s fingers broke away and touched her chin, raising her eyes to Anne’s furious black gaze.
“Perhaps, Mary, it is time we had.”

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ANNE BOLEYN, LADY TO QUEEN CATHERINE OF ENGLAND
Palace of Placentia, England
September 1520

Arthur’s letters were specific. Picked out in his precise script, they rattled off the names of great lords
of whom she had heard much but never met: Edmund, Duke of Suffolk, read one; Henry, Earl of
Devon, another. (Was not, she thought, inanely, Edmund de la Pole reduced in rank? She supposed
Arthur had promised him the return of his dukedom.) There were also letters to each of the de la Pole
brothers, and to others besides, but the de la Poles weighed most heavily on her mind. Anne had
heard the whispers that King Richard had commanded the de la Pole brothers here after demoting the
eldest brother in rank, which gave rise to the popular theory of the king’s disapproval in them. If true,
Anne conjectured, this meant that she must be particularly careful in approaching them.

She tried to think what she knew of each of them: the favor Richard III had shown them, their older
brother’s rebellion against Henry VII in support of the mouthpiece pretender Lambert Simnel, John’s
subsequent death in battle leading to Edmund’s subsequent rise as heir, the demotion to earl under
Henry VII, their return to Duke under Richard III and subsequent return to earl under the same
monarch. The two eldest brothers were both wed, one to Margaret Scrope with whom he had but
one living child, a nun, (and given Margaret Scrope’s age, was unlikely to get another); the other to
Katherine Stourton (who was already 42 years of age at the time of their marriage and therefore
unlikely ever to bear him children); which settled the future of the de la Pole name, lands, and titles
indirectly upon the descendants of the as-yet unmarried youngest brother, Richard. It seemed odd,
she thought, to risk so much for such uncertainty but that, she supposed, was the hope upon which
the Plantagenet dynasty, from which the de la Poles were descended, had been founded. For reasons
unknown (though there was much speculation to be found), the King had called the brothers to court
and kept them now within his sight, a move that both allowed Anne access to them in theory…and
hindered her ability to connect with them significantly.

She tucked the letters away in her pouch, moving swiftly down the corridors. Anne wished she was
better acquainted with them, wished she knew how the labyrinth interconnected, but she’d never
been here before, and she did not even know where to begin looking for their chambers or else she
might have tried simply to slip the notes in there (an option which was, itself, fraught with difficulty).
Instead, she realized with a tremor, she would have to approach them and that, she knew, was far
more dangerous, particularly as she did not know their feelings towards Arthur. Anne swallowed
hard as she drifted towards the sounds of music and chatting and laughter. There, she knew, she
would find King Richard’s court clustered. There, she might find the de la Poles; there, she would
almost certainly find the man she dreaded most to meet: her fiancé, James Butler.

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JAMES BUTLER, CLARK TO CARDINAL WOLSEY
Palace of Placentia, England
September 1520
England, he had decided, was colder than Ireland. He did not know this for sure, in a scientific sort of way, but he felt confident of its truth in his bones, knew that the lapping shores of his greener-than-green home could not possibly be so frigid as this place nestled along the slate-grey of the Thames. He’d heard at least one maid commenting to her friend that the river was known to freeze over in the harshest of winters and, though he did not know for sure whether this was hyperbole, he could believe it.

He had been to England, before, working studiously under the tutelage of the very same Cardinal whom he now served, but wars and politics had merged to ensure that the promising political career he’d wanted in royal service had evaporated. He had not expected to get another run at the chance until now. The Cardinal was sure, so far, to take James with him wherever he went and, as he was now in attendance upon the King’s Grace, so too was James. He knew well that his father was a tad disgruntled to have James removed, but James did not feel the same. He was eager to learn from Wolsey and to acquaint himself with the pleasures of the King. How else, he wondered, to rise?

Still, it was cold here and the question of his marriage hovered in the air about him, since the lady had been recalled to England. He’d seen her sister, the beautiful Mary Carey, but it was said much to his discouragement, that her sister was middling and swarthy and striking, but not beautiful; handsome but not pretty. What was more important to James, however, was that she would be a partner in his rise and, while her fostering abroad might have seemed promising in other circumstances, the association France now had with the Tudors was...troubling. James prayed the King would not judge him harshly on that score. His father’s wishes aside, James wanted only to rise, to prove himself, to prove the House of Butler and restore it to greatness. However this was achieved, it must be done with determination and precision, and the distraction of a rival royal house was, he feared, disastrous to his hopes. Still, he was determined to make the best of the match.

She was wearing all black when first he saw her. Dark she was, with jet hair beneath a becoming French hood, her eyes were deep embers that sparked and snapped seeming to move within the iris of their own power, her nose was a sharp point which, beneath her thick dark brows, was somehow oddly becoming as though the strength of the characteristics lent their own alien beauty. Her skin was olive, and her cheeks high and elegant, lips pink and in appealing proportion to the nose. Her neck was long and swanlike, her figure slight and lacking in much bosom, though appealing for the manner in which she moved. She carried herself with grace, as though born to the crown herself, and clad in garments of the finest fashion. Her eyes roamed the court, glossing over him as though he were no more than an ornament, and James’ lips twitched into the ghost of a smile.

Chapter End Notes

Mary's line: "'You might have given them a few…' she shrugged. 'Warts. I don’t know, perhaps an extra finger,'" is in reference to the historical fact that some descriptions of Anne Boleyn, designed to further discredit her, described her as having warts and an extra finger. Obv Henry exclaiming that he would never kill a woman is inaccurate...but I do think it's what he, in these circumstances, firmly believes...he just happens to be, as we know, very wrong.
Anne Boleyn strode into the hall, surveying the figures ringing about it. Chatter soared above string and wind music and Anne took her time in walking, strolling as though time were not of the essence to her. She felt curious eyes, whispers of “late from France,” and “raised abroad,” swirled around her in a chorus of harsh English. Its sound, she acknowledged, might almost be foreign to her, now, were it not for the Tudor princes at court, but however long abroad, Anne was English, through-and-through. It was for this reason that what she did, now, was so very difficult.

Picking her way through the throng, Anne sought out the faces of men she had never met. Arthur had described them to her, as they had looked twenty-three years ago, but a verbal description that was over two decades old was not, she knew, to be of much use, and Anne feared to ask about them, feared to be publically in any way linked with them. If pass these letters she must, better for her that not even the de la Poles should suspect who had brought the correspondence thither. After all, having come so fresh from France, she would be an immediate suspect, anyway. Better not to heap further evidence upon the tinder of her own destruction.

She paused before the fire to warm her hands and, discreetly, to observe the fine gentlemen standing nearby, hoping that she might catch a snippet of gossip.

The fire licked upwards on the cool September evening and Anne felt grateful to feel it soaking through her skin, through the fabric she wore, towards her chilled bones.

“I hear,” one of the gentlemen was remarking. “That His Majesty is most wroth with the brothers.”

“He must be!” exclaimed another. “Why else would he strip Edmund de la Pole of his duchy?”

Anne’s ears pricked and the breath caught in her throat. Busily, she rubbed at her hands as though this were still her chief objective.

“Is that true, then?” asked the first.
“But the King has summoned them to court,” said another gentleman. “Surely that is a sign of favor!”

“But the King has summoned them to court,” said another gentleman. “Surely that is a sign of favor!”

“Or perhaps of distrust?”

Arthur, it seemed, had chosen his allies well, if perhaps not so discreetly as would best suit either them or Anne. She glanced up, hoping to get a glimpse of who the gentlemen might be looking at for, perhaps, this topic had been inspired by spotting the brothers…She found that another person entirely was staring at her. Anne regarded him, guardedly, and he came forward, swept a bow; Anne dipped a curtsy.

“Forgive me, madam. You have caught me staring. I feel bound to introduce myself, seeing as we have met here.”

Anne formed a smile that, though guarded, she knew would appear inviting enough. It was a talent in which Queen Claude had coached all her ladies. “Are you acquainted with my father, perhaps?”

“I confess, I am not, though I’ve heard much of him. Madam, I am James Butler…and we are betrothed.”

The breath went out of Anne and she gazed in astonishment, lips parting. “This is momentous, indeed,” she replied. “I had heard you were here but did not think to meet with you.”

“I realize that introducing myself like this may appear a bit untoward, given our relation, as we are alone but, you see,” he said gesturing to the crowd around them. “We are not alone, either, for all that.”

Anne chuckled softly. “So I see,” she acknowledged. “In any case, I am glad to meet with you…however unexpected. It does not seem altogether agreeable to first meet with my groom at the altar.”

“No more so to me, Mistress Boleyn.” He cleared his throat. “It seems to me that, though from Ireland myself, I may be a bit more familiar with our present circumstances than you are, madam. Have you met anyone here?”

“I have, by circumstance, become acquainted with some of the Queen’s ladies and, of course, I am quite familiar with my own family members, naturally, but beyond that, I’ve little scope of acquaintance. And you, Master Butler?” she paused. “That is…the correct mode of address? I confess, details were somewhat scarce on the circumstances and I remain a bit confused.”

“It is, for now, in any case, Mistress Boleyn.” James offered a smile. “With what may I acquaint you, madam?”

Anne smiled, tilted her head. “Whatever you like, Master Butler. Perhaps there is local news,” she added, demurely casting down her eyes and hoping, fervently hoping, that he should alight upon the topic of conversation that now seemed to arrest everyone…and was of utmost import to herself: the de la Poles. “That has not yet reached us across the water. How go things in England?”

“Amiably enough, as far as I can tell. It can be speculated the King is…less than pleased regarding his nephews in France, but there has been no particular sign of it in public.”

Anne’s brows furrowed with surprise. In truth, she would have expected that King Richard would be doing something to galvanize an effort against them. “What can account for it?”

“I believe, Mistress Boleyn, that the King’s Grace intends to make no display of disquiet outwardly: does not wish to allow anyone to think they could possibly be a threat to His Grace.”
“I wonder that that can be a wise strategy, if indeed his nephews should choose to press their claim?”

“And yet, His Grace has already won England by just the sort of enterprise upon which they would be embarking. I wonder, Mistress Boleyn…as you were so lately in France, did you meet with the King’s nephews? Do you imagine they mean to make war against England?”

“I did meet them, yes,” Anne replied, glancing busily towards her hands as she rubbed at them over the fire, as though to chase the cold away. “As to that, their fortunes rest highly upon the will of His Most Christian Majesty, King François, but I imagine, should they prove able to embark upon such a quest, they would say that they make war for England and not against her.”

James nodded. “An important distinction, I suppose, given their positions. It would do well to win the hearts and minds of the people. Do you think they can have much chance of success at it?”

“That I do not pretend to know, Master Butler. We can only pray that God will save the King.”

Which king she meant, Anne did not rightly know.

“That I do not pretend to know, Master Butler. We can only pray that God will save the King.”

Which king she meant, Anne did not rightly know.

“Just so,” James said with equanimity. “But which King?”

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CATHERINE OF ARAGON, QUEEN OF ENGLAND

Palace of Placentia, England

September 1520

Catherine drifted towards the windows. Their panes were ironwrought and diamond patterned, the view wiggling with the imperfections of the glass. Outside the green trees were shifting in hue, leaves softly tumbling towards the ground. Catherine had often found autumn a sad affair: a farewell to the heat of summer, a welcome to bitter cold that nipped cruelly. However, today she took a moment to scan the horizon, to take pleasure in the beauties of the season. It was tolerably warm, still, and the lilting of the plants suited her somber mood.

Catherine was familiar with homesickness. She had suffered from its effects most acutely in France, and so the edge of its return was blunted, but still it remained sharp enough to cut when caught unawares. England was much more different from Spain than ever France had been, and it was colder, too, she thought, gingerly touching the glass with her forefinger, breaking away. Catherine suppressed a sigh. Her husband sat not two feet away and would, most certainly, be discontented by any such signs of anything but perfect happiness. How easy for him, Catherine thought, after his travels abroad, he had come home.

“Did you ever journey to Spain?” asked Catherine suddenly, coming to take a seat by him.

Richard’s face was softened by a smile. “Do you miss it?”

Catherine shrugged. “It is only natural, I suppose.”

“It is,” agreed Richard. “I remember the feeling well. There was a time when I thought I would never see England, again.”

Catherine’s smile was sad. As I shall never again see Spain, she thought. “What did you do to ease the heartache?”

Richard arched his brows, laughed. “Well, I was a young man, then…old enough to think I was a man but young enough to be, still, a boy at heart in many ways and…” he glanced away. “I indulged of the pleasures that most often occur to youths,” he replied, discreetly. “It was distracting, but the
only thing that really worked, I suppose, was carving out a place of my own in my life. All the pleasured distractions came to nothing: it was hard work that carried me through.”

Catherine smiled softly. “And what hard work was this?”

“Mmmm, well there was a great deal of traveling around, you see, but eventually I found myself in Portugal where I was put to work as a squire to a very…energetic knight. Severe, yes, but always, always going somewhere or doing something. He did not allow me to run quite so wild…and, I think, for the best.”

Catherine paused. “Is this the same knight who, I heard, murdered an upstart African king…he was sent to help?”

Richard grew still, finally started tapping his index finger against the table in front of him. “Yes,” he said softly, gravely. “He did.” He laughed humorously. “I confess, I had identified with that king. He had such charisma and, I thought: if any cast-off king can reclaim his birthright, it must be this man!” Richard shook his head, glanced towards her again. “I was wrong.”

Catherine nodded. “Did that frighten you?”

Richard shifted. “It did,” he admitted. “But the death of my brother, earlier, frightened me far more.”

Catherine glanced at her hands. “If his charisma got him nothing,” she began slowly. “What was it that turned the tide, ultimately? How is it that he lost his kingdom and his life and you gained both?”

Richard drummed his fingers, barked out another humorless laugh. “I would like to tell you, my dear, that it was my own brilliance, but…” he shook his head. “I will tell you what it was: pure, simple, and unadulterated luck. I came very, very close to loosing that battle to Henry Tudor in October and, if I had, history would probably look very different. But we can only guess what September 1520 would have looked like under the Tudor regime, I suppose. What matters is that I did win and, my dear, if ever I am tested, I will win again.”

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ANNE BOLEYN, LADY TO QUEEN CATHERINE OF ENGLAND
Palace of Placentia, England
September 1520

Anne’s heart rattled in her ribcage, rattled and seized at queer moments. She was not sure whether James had been simply pointing out the simple fact of a coming civil war – a land with two kings – or if he had firstly, accusing her of Lancastrian sympathies or, secondly, if instead he was softly implying such loyalties, himself. Either way, she had been sure to excuse herself at the earliest possible moment and retired to lie down in the cool dark of the shared chamber belonging to the Queen’s ladies for a few moments, asked a maid who entered about the palace and how it connected, as if from idle curiosity. When she got up, she squared her shoulders, smoothed her fine gown, took off her B pendant, and walked with purpose.

She had the letters tucked away on her person and moved slowly through the darkened corridors. She shielded her candle with one hand. Beneath her, the wood floors creaked. Anne caught her breath. Held it. Her hand trailed along the stone walkway. From behind closed doors came laughter, chatting, moaning. Anne walked on. According to the maid, this was the room…Anne’s breath caught. Beneath the door she saw a pale sliver of candlelight. Anne licked her lips and drew her courage about her like a heavy cloak. She withdrew the letter Edmund, Duke of Suffolk the name on the letter read. Anne crouched before the door, and slid the letter under it. Turning, she hastened
down the corridor the same way she had come. She went quickly, but did not run, and prayed that she would not be seen or heard.

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RICHARD IV, KING OF ENGLAND  
Palace of Placentia, England  
September 1520

“Enter,” the King’s voice rang out. He quirked a brow towards the person entering, to see Wolsey sweeping a low obeisance, both towards Richard and Catherine.

“Forgive the intrusion, Your Graces, I would not disturb you if it were not a matter of the utmost urgency.”

“And what matter is this?” Catherine’s softly Spanish tones inquired.

Wolsey cast a glance from her, to the King – who nodded – and back again. “Your Grace,” he wound his ecclesiastical ring round his finger once, twice, glanced back to the King. “I regret to inform you that the King of France is assembling many ships, enough to transport an army. These ships, it is suggested, are to come to England, and are to be used by the express wish of your nephew. Arthur Tudor is coming to England, Your Grace, to take back his father’s usurping crown.”

Beside him, Catherine’s knuckles turned white as she clenched the arms of her chair.

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ANNE BOLEYN, LADY TO QUEEN CATHERINE OF ENGLAND  
Palace of Placentia, England  
September 1520

Henry’s two letters arrived at once, the next morning, though the briefer missive had been sent, she saw, over a week before the other. The elder of the two was simple as it was direct.

_Leave off with and do not attend to the office with which my brother has charged you. It is for him to find another courier. For lacking of time, darling, I make an end of my letter, but pray God keep you well till I may be with you again._

Anne clasped her hand over her mouth and laughed. Had the note arrived but one day earlier, it might have spared her much grief and distress and, furthermore, might not have exposed her to the possibility that she would be discovered. Anne cast the note into the fire and watched as the flames consumed it, praying against all hope that that was the last she would ever again hear of the matter.

When the note had been consumed, she turned her attentions to Henry’s other letter which had arrived with it.

_MY MISTRESS & FRIEND, my heart and I surrender ourselves into your hands, beseeching you to hold us in favor, and that by absence your affection to us may not be lessened: for it would be a great pity to increase our pain, of which absence produces enough and more than I could ever have thought could be felt, reminding us of a point in astronomy which is this: the longer the days are, the more distant is the sun, and nevertheless the hotter; so is it with our love, for by absence we are kept a distance from one another, and yet it retains its fervor, at least on my side; I hope it is so with you, assuring you that on my part the pain of absence is already too great for me; and when I think of the increase of that which I am forced to suffer, it would be almost intolerable, but for the firm hope I have of your unchangeable affection for me._
Now I write to say that I am coming towards you, and the pain of absence seems half removed, and approach of the time for which I have so long waited rejoices me so much, that it seems almost to have come already. However, the pain of absence must continue till the two persons meet, a meeting which is more desired by me than anything in this world; for what joy can be greater upon earth than to have the company of her who is dearest to me, knowing likewise that she feels the same on her part, the thought of which gives me the greatest pleasure.

Judge what an effect the presence of that person must have on me, whose absence has grieved my heart more than either words or writing can express, and which nothing can cure but to hold my mistress once more.

Written by the hand of the secretary, who wishes himself at this moment privately with you, and who is, and always will be de votre seul,

Henry, Duke of York

Anne gasped, and drew the letter close, crushing it against her chest. She could hardly breathe for hope. He’s coming, she thought. He’s coming back to me.

Chapter End Notes

James approaching Anne alone and wo a proper introduction by a third party is a breech of etiquette but I didn’t want to include other ppl so...I didn't.

The chapter title means, essentially "only yours," or "yours alone," and comes from one of Henry's love letters to Anne. Speaking of which, the "second" letter is in Henry's own words (though, again, I modernized some of his verbiage slightly), but they come from a few different letters which I, again, sort of smashed together.
Chapter Summary

"What we do in these days will be remembered as a blow struck for the good of England."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Catherine of Aragon, Queen of England

Sheen Palace, England

October 1520

Where is he now? Catherine’s ladies chattered around her amiably but Catherine could hardly think of them, now, or anything else. Since the report that François had acquired ships for the Tudors, Catherine had been distracted by the notion, picturing Arthur aboard some ship crossing the stormy channel as she had done, herself, so very recently, or else boarding a ship. Where was he, what was he doing? Was François giving him the ships, after all, or was it all some ploy by the French King to put both Arthur and Richard off kilter? Her needle nibbled against the cloth in her hand and Catherine stabbed at the white rose she was creating. Arthur, Arthur, Arthur, sang her heart like some sickening refrain, and Catherine wondered if soon she would see him for the first time in their lives, now wed to his rival.

Catherine knew very well that they came to Sheen because of its proximity to the Thames, to London, and to the Tower. Long ago, one of Arthur and Richard’s common ancestors had built the White Tower to secure London. Before him, Danes and Saxons and even the Romans had battered each other over the possession of the area of what had, once, been little more than a fishing village.

Catherine bit back a chuckle. It was ironic, she thought, that her husband – one of the Princes in the Tower – should think to barricade her safe in that self-same Tower and from there, perhaps, into exile like Elizabeth of York. At least, she felt confident, should that be their fate, they could find asylum in Spain. Will Arthur win, she wondered. Or will I? Never, never had she wanted it to be one or the other.

But there was nothing she could presently do and so Catherine looked around her for something else to take her mind off things. Spotting the Boleyn sisters sitting close together, smiling and laughing, she felt a wash of relief. After all, they were her ladies in France and they helped her learn English there. She told them, at the time, that it was merely a diversion (English, since they happened to be English) but the truth was it was just another way to come closer to Arthur, even married to another and from such a distance. Now that that distance was shrinking, Catherine did no know how to feel.

“Come here,” she instructed with a smile. Dutifully, the ladies approached. “Mistress Anne, I can’t help but notice that you can’t seem to stop smiling, today. Will you confide the object of your joy?” Anne’s smile faltered, resumed, but for the breadth of a moment something unsettled stirred in the black eye. “I’ll not judge you,” she confided when Anne was settled quite close to her. “Rumor spreads that you have met your fiancé. Can that be the cause?”

Something in Anne’s eyes sparkled like amusement and she dipped her head, returned to Catherine’s
gaze. “And here you said you would not judge me,” she replied finally, teasingly. “Are you acquainted with him?”

“I confess I am not,” replied the Queen. “But he must be a most charming creature to have so quickly ensnared you, Mistress Boleyn. You must like him a great deal.”

Anne’s eyes were distant, dreamy. “I’ve never met anyone like him, Your Grace. I don’t believe there is another soul in this world quite like him.”

“I am certain he would be glad to hear you think so. What else?”

Anne smiled. “Do you know, when first we met, I did not like him, but later I realized it was simply that he was so free and open in all his opinions and feelings. I found it off-putting at first, but…then I realized that I prized that earnestness above much else in this world. He is often foolish but it is only because he is idealistic. He is perhaps the most authentic person I have ever encountered.”

Catherine tilts her head with amusement. “That is quite the comprehensive summation after so slight an acquaintance, Mistress Boleyn, but I am pleased. It is a happy circumstance that you should so admire the man to whom you were promised from afar.” Catherine bit her tongue, realized that this was also her own situation. Yet, in her circumstances, it had not proved a happy fate after all to love Arthur Tudor. She hoped that Anne Boleyn would have better luck in her affections.

Mary Carey cleared her throat, rubbed her sister’s arm, and changed the subject, but Catherine hardly noticed because she was thinking of Arthur again. Lord in Heaven, she prayed. Keep him safe.

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RICHARD IV, KING OF ENGLAND
Sheen Palace, England
October 1520

“What?!” the king’s exclamation seemed to reverberate about the room as he came to his feet, but he paid it no heed. “Is this true?”

Wolsey bowed. “Your Grace, I’m afraid it is.”

At the king’s side, Catherine gently put a hand on his forearm. “Richard, what is it?”

Lowering the pamphlet, the king turned to his queen. “Open rebellion, my love,” he replied, handing her the letter. “In Lincoln.”

He watched her face, brows seizing, lips parting. She was composed, but Richard could practically feel her heart beating in his chest, feel it clench, pounding against her ribcage. “What will you do?”

Richard rose from his seat. “I will do as my father would have done. I will raise my army and I will ride with it for Lincoln. If it is indeed the case that my nephews are on their way, we can’t have a bastion of open rebellion anywhere in England to greet them when they arrive. Better to stomp out their allies before their coming.”

Catherine nodded. “Would you like me to accompany you?”

“Darling,” whispered the King, kissed her cheek tenderly. “War is no place for a woman. I need you to stay here in London, where it is quite safe. Will you do that for me?”

She nodded. “I am yours to command, Richard.”
“Wolsey, call my council together. It is time to raise my banners. I will see you again, my dear Catherine, before I go,” he assured her, kissing her cheek once again, before leaving the room alongside the Cardinal.

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ANNE BOLEYN, LADY TO QUEEN CATHERINE OF ENGLAND
Sheen Palace, England
October 1520

Pennants snapped smartly in the breeze: the white rose and the sun in splendor rising cheerfully above the heads of Richard’s men. From the courtyard, they watched the horses and men accumulate. Armor glowed, shouting and the jangling of metal mingled with the music of King Richard’s trumpeters. The King was still inside, saying farewell to his Queen, but everyone else was gathered. Anne felt sick, watching them all swarm like angry hornets around their nest. They bristled with weapons and even the air seemed sharp in her nostrils with spite.

She felt Mary looping her arm with Anne’s own and Anne clung to it fiercely. Soon, Henry would be here, and these white knights of York would rise against him, too. They would rise against him and the purchased French army – would it stay by his side or abandon Henry to his fate when these bold knights came screaming out of their fortress with the intent to kill?

“THE KING! THE KING! THE KING!” a page ran out ahead of him and, like the Red Sea, the crowd parted to make way.

Richard was clad in white traveling clothes and he raised one fist in the air and dropped it again as he began to speak. “We ride now to ensure the safety of this, our realm. It is for those of us who love our good mother earth to do our all in the defense of our fair country. What we do in these days will be remembered as a blow struck for the good of England,” Richard paused, looking at the men gathered around him and raised his fist once more. “FOR ENGLAND!”

“FOR ENGLAND!” came the resounding shout from the throng.

Richard mounted his horse and rode to the front. He cast a single glance over his shoulder towards Catherine as he rode out of the gates.

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RICHARD DE LA POLE
Sheen Palace, England
October 1520

“Mistress Boleyn, a word?”

She spun around, clearly in surprise. “Sir? Do I know you?”

“I do not have that pleasure,” he replied. “But my brother has ridden out with the king this day, leaving my other brother and myself here. It seemed a fine time for a meeting betwixt us.”

“Oh,” Anne shook her head. “I’m sorry, sir, I do not understand.”

Richie casts a glance around, ensures there are no ears around them. “Mistress Boleyn, I am Richard de la Pole and I know that it was you who brought those letters.”

Her expression immediately seemed strained and her eyes seemed to flare like sparks. “I don’t know
what you’re talking about, I—"

“He told us in the letters who had delivered them.”

Anne pressed her eyes shut, took a step back. At first she did not look at him, seemed to draw her strength and, when at last she fixed him with a look, its power caused him to take an unconscious step back. The black eyes blazed with fury and Richie felt as though she had stabbed him. He swallowed hard. “I see you've the courage of a lion,” he said. “But I mean you no harm. I, rather, hoped to deliver a message.”

“I’m sorry,” replied Anne, softly. “He ought not to have named me. I no longer have the power to write to him. Pray forgive me, sir.” She paused. “I hope you burned the letters?”

Richie nodded. “You need have no fear on that account, madam. They are now but ash.”

“Good,” replied Anne. “Then it is in God’s hands,” she said, starting to walk away.

Richie caught her arm. “God’s,” he said. “And our own. It is not a message I wished you to bear to the king, Mistress Boleyn. It is a message from him. We says, madam, that he will not forget the service you rendered him and that there is, now, much and more that you may ask of him which he shall not fail to answer. Without you, what is even now coming to pass may not have been possible.”

Anne’s brows furrowed. “And what, sir, is now coming to pass?”

Richie’s smile was broad and pleasant and he raised his hands. “Wonders, Mistress Boleyn. Wonders.”

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ARTHUR TUDOR, KING OF ENGLAND
Mill Bay, Wales
October 1520

Arthur fell to his knees, clasping his hands and prayer. He turned his eyes skyward. Above him, the clouds gathered like a veil over the blue sky, swathing the sun’s glory in thrills of pink and gold and palest cerulean. The sun peaked down from this bower, blazing upon him like a torch and Arthur closed his eyes to pray. “Judica me Deus,” he said, as his father had said before him, making the sign of the cross. “Et discerne causam.” Reverently, Arthur bent and kissed the ground beneath him.

Rising, Arthur turned to the troops gathered by him on the beach. “In the name of God and St. George,” his voice rang out. “Forward!”

Chapter End Notes

Arthur arrives in the same place that Henry VII did for his invasion of England and repeats his words, from a Psalm, in Latin. "Judica me Deus et discerne causam," which essentially means, "Judge me, O God, and favor my cause." You can learn more about Henry VII's arrival in the British Isles here: https://www.tudorsociety.com/7-august-1485-henry-tudor-came-unto-wales/

St. George is the patron saint of England, who (notably) is said to have fought and slain a dragon who represented sin/death/the devil and thus helped to convert St. Alexandra.
You can read more about St. George here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_George
here: http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php? saint_id=280 and here:
http://www.britannia.com/history/stgeorge.html
Chapter Summary

“What did you just say?” demanded the Queen. She rose straight like an arrow from her throne, bejeweled hand trembling as though it longed to turn to a fist but some strength of will kept the impulse at bay. “Say it again.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

HENRY TUDOR, PRINCE OF ENGLAND
Thames, England
December 1520

The water sparkled like a river of sapphires, crashing around them in bursts of foam. The Thames had rushed up to meet them where the sea ended and now Harry leaned against the bulwark, gazed into its depths wishing that he could reach out his hand and touch the glittering surface beneath him. Home, home, home! rejoiced his heart in a chorus, half-unbelieving. So long he had imagined this, so long its possibility had whispered through the swirl of his thoughts, like a promise half-dead for being so often repeated, yet here it was before him. The air was English, the clouds were English, the land to either side of them was English: the land was, itself, England. Harry closed his eyes and raised his face to the English sun, a great grin suffusing his features. His heart leapt and crashed in excitement, yet still it seemed surreal, like a dream from which he would surely – though unwillingly – soon awaken.

Arthur's plan was simple enough, in theory, but exquisitely difficult for all that to actually achieve. No conquest had ever been easy. Its reality would, Harry was certain, soon break his trance, but for now he was glad of the heat of the sun, even amidst December’s chill. He clasped the rails of the ship and tried very hard not to think of the last time he had traveled this same path. This time, after all, he was not leaving London: he was approaching it and, when he did, he would rush up to meet an unsuspecting and unprotected prospect. Soon, soon.

Harry opened his eyes, strolled towards the prow of the ship, watched the steady stream of water roll onward and onward and onward. His father’s men and François’ mercenaries looked to him, alike, and Harry clasped the nearest by the shoulder. “Soon,” he promised. “Soon.”

Soon, and he would see Anne, soon he would reclaim what had once been stolen from them.

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RICHARD IV, KING OF ENGLAND
Lincoln, England
December 1520

Beneath the solar disc, Richard unfurled the sun in its splendor upon his white banners. Smartly they snapped in the wind and the splendid chargers of his knights halted as they bore down upon the spot. Behind castle walls, the helms of defenders gleamed at them. Richard dispatched a page with a message and Richard glanced to Edmund de la Pole – who returned the gaze, nodded – and his
nephew and heir, Dickon, who stared dead ahead at the castle.

Already on their way here Richard and his army had mown through small, guerrilla resistance, which had harried Richard’s men only to fade away as quickly as it cropped up, its aim forgotten almost as soon as it appeared. The resistance would bleed Richard of a few knights and seep back into the landscape as if they had never existed at all and Richard wondered, in a distant kind of way, if this queer revolution represented the kind of rebellions with which his father, his uncle, and the Tudor usurper had dealt before he, himself, had landed in England.

It was far easier than a real battle, this guerrilla fight, but for all of that, far more frustrating. It also seemed to have a way of preying upon the minds and hearts of Richard’s valiant knights: always cringing before any unexpected sound, forever casting their glances over their shoulders.

At last, now, Richard would put an end to all of that. At last, they had come to the Lincolnshire fortress of their enemy and would finally put down this noxious revolt once and for all.

Richard watched as his page spoke in harried communion with the person who hustled out of the castle to address him. Heads bent together, one nodded then the other. The page began his dash back to Richard.

“Steady!” Richard called to his men. “Steady!”

The page rushed up to the king and his chief lords, swept an obeisance. “Your Grace, their leader wishes to speak with Your Grace.”

“What is the fellow’s name?”

“Calls himself Roy, Your Grace.”

Richard hated that, hated the simple fact that the traitor’s name meant king, even in another language, but brushed it aside. For all that he might rise up, for all that his parents had given him such a name, there was only one king here. “Did they convey nothing else?”

“Nothing, Your Grace.”

Richard shrugged. “Very well. Invite him to my tent. He will be delivered here under my protection. No harm will come to him.”

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ANNE BOLEYN, LADY TO QUEEN CATHERINE OF ENGLAND
Sheen Palace, England

December 1520

“What did you just say?” demanded the Queen. She rose straight like an arrow from her throne, bejeweled hand trembling as though it longed to turn to a fist but some strength of will kept the impulse at bay. “Say it again.”

The envoy staggered back from her stormy visage, stumbling as though struck. This did not surprise Anne. The Queen was thunderous. “Y-Your Grace,” stumbled the messenger, darting fretful eyes towards the Queen’s ladies. “An armed force has been spotted approaching by the river. They fly the colors of Lancaster. It is a ship, Your Grace, of war.”

Anne heard the drum of her heart in her ears, rushing like oars in a choked river. Her hands shook as she grasped her sewing. Dear God, watch over him, she prayed, clasping the cloth to her chest.
Watch over him and over us all.

The Queen was still, still, terribly still. Though her eyes were fixed on the messenger, she seemed to look through him as though he were a mirage rather than a person and, at last, she turned, as though she walked in a dream and all around her was comprised entirely of the contents of her own mind. Her face was pale, pale as milk, and Anne stood, quickly.

“Thank you, master, for this warning,” said Anne and, grateful, the page nodded, stepped backwards. “Your Grace, is there anything else you wish to ask before this young gentleman makes his rounds to alert others?”

Catherine’s eyes flickered back to life and she turned back to the envoy, stretched out a regal hand, pointing towards the door. “Go, now. Tell them, tell them all, and dispatch a messenger to the King in Lincoln. Rouse the city and the countryside, besides. We must, each of us, do our duty before man and God. Let not any man say that London sat idle when danger beset her. We will test the mettle of these invaders and, by that same merit, we will earn our own reputation for courage. Go, now!”

***

RICHARD IV, KING OF ENGLAND
Lincoln, England
December 1520

Roy looked less like a king than a beggar. He wore a torn tunic, hadn’t washed or shaved in weeks, his hair stood at strange angles, but for all that, there was a gleam to his eyes like steel and Richard recognized it as the mark of one who leads, however unimpressive his outward appearance.

“What are your demands?” Richard, for his part, was magnificent. Nature had made him so from the start: red-gold hair had turned to chestnut and was, now, peppered with grey, but still it gleamed in the daylight. His height forced most men to tilt their heads upward to gaze upon him and his eyes, the green of his mother’s, were set like great emeralds in his face. Clad in the gorgeous robes of his office, he looked more like the church paintings of great saints than like any earthly man of rural Lincolnshire.

Though the ministers Roy had brought with him were clearly intimidated by Richard’s regal appearance (as he had intended them to be), their leader did not seem to share this feeling. He did, however, bow his head respectfully. “We haven’t got any demands, Majesty,” said Roy.

Richard was caught off-guard. Words stuck like a stone in his shoe and he stopped, frowned deeply, started again. “Explain.”

“You see, we don’t want nothin’, sire.”

“Then why do you raise rebellion upon our land?”

“Rebellion?” Roy glanced at his men, back towards the king. “No, sire, there’s no rebellion here, Majesty. We are your loyal servants, as we was born, sire.” Roy knelt, his lieutenants knelt with him.

“Why did you take up arms? Why did your men attack us on the road?”

Roy prostrates himself. “’Twasn’t us, Majesty. We surrender ourselves to Your Majesty’s mercy.”

Richard points to his men. “Search the castle. Now. Bring back every armed man you find. Go, now.”
When they return, it is with the report that the castle is entirely empty, save for empty helms set along the walls.

“What,” demanded Richard, shaking his head as he looked around in wonderment at his generals. “The fuck?”

***

ARTHUR TUDOR, KING OF ENGLAND
Monmouthshire, Wales
December 1520

Arthur nodded, drawing his finger along the map of Britain. His new captains and devotees from Wales gathered around, curiously, to learn what Arthur’s plan had been.

“We see, now, how well the Usurper knows his history,” he said. “Warbeck claims to be the son of Edward IV, yet falls for the same prelude to invasion that once the so-called Kingmaker used against that very Edward. You see? A false rebellion to draw him away, while our true forces make their landing to the south.”

Arthur tapped Lincoln on the map. “Our ghost army is here doing its work – a few servants loyal to our ally, His Grace of Suffolk, along with a few false but well-placed messages form the ruse, even now in drawing the Usurper away from the real battlefield,” he explained.

“His Grace, the Duke of York falls on London from one side while we gather our forces here and move to meet him there. Once we’ve done that, we will have cut the Usurper off from the lower portion of the country, and therefore from all of Europe and any Spanish help, while we also strengthen our position here, in our base of Wales.” Arthur pointed towards the red dragon banner that marked him a relative and heir of Owain Glyndwr.

“We also thus press Warbeck towards Scotland, which is not like to be particularly fond of him, just now, seeing as he has recently set aside a Scottish queen in favor of a Spanish one, and as the Scots are always reliable when it comes to remembering the Auld Alliance with France. We are in this, you see, allied with France.” Arthur glanced around at his listeners to be sure they were following his line of thought. All of them were nodding sagely. Arthur continued.

“As it now stands, Warbeck and his fighting force are somewhere over a hundred days away from my brother’s location, which means that he cannot possibly reach London in time. We are a little over a fortnight away. My brother, His Grace of York, however,” Arthur felt a smile tugging at the corner of his lips. “He must be there almost this minute.”

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HENRY TUDOR, PRINCE OF ENGLAND
Thames, England
December 1520

Harry put a hand on his envoy’s shoulder. “Send word to Catalina of Aragon that, if she surrenders now, there will be no violence done upon London or any of its citizens. If she lays down all arms, we will treat her, as a Spanish Infanta, with all royal courtesy as our esteemed guest and all of London we will, in the name of Arthur the King, consider to be under our protection.”

The envoy nodded, rushed down the netting into a smaller boat, bound for Sheen. Harry remembered the palace the way any six year old might recall their home: huge and sprawling and
wonderful. Distantly, he wondered if the actuality would disappoint the boy’s travel-induced imaginings, or if now a man, he would find it unchanged from memory. Harry placed his fists on his hips and shut his eyes.

Nerves wraithed him, hollowing out his notions like a fire, but he did as he mother would have done: he made bold his face and walked on with confidence. Harry was no stranger to fear.

An hour later, the envoy returned, kneeling before Harry. “Your Grace…it seems the lady was not surprised by our coming.”

Harry frowned: unlike Catherine, he was surprised. “Well, what was her answer?”

The envoy bit his lip, glanced towards the gathered officers, and back towards Harry. Reaching into his pouch, he drew out a small lady’s glove. “Her response, Your Grace. She said, Your Grace, that even a woman must do her duty. Her glove sent, she bid me say, in place of a gauntlet.”

Chapter End Notes

You can read more about the rebellion the Kingmaker orchestrated against Edward IV in 1469 here: http://www.luminarium.org/encyclopedia/edgecote.htm

Catherine of Aragon did, in fact, defend England in her husband, the King's absence. You can read more about that here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Flodden and here: https://www.theanneboleynfiles.com/9-september-1513-victory-regent-catherine-aragon/

If you have any questions about the plan, please let me know! I'm not sure how clear it was hahaha I know I often get confused when I read about stratagems so please feel free to hit me up! ;D

Throwing down a gauntlet, or in fact even handing one to someone was, of course, a signal of one's intention to fight that person, so by sending Henry her glove, Catherine is announcing her intention of fighting him rather than surrendering.
Never Surrender

Chapter Summary

They pounded their staves and spears against the ground till all of London seemed to thunder with the sound.

Chapter Notes

tw: violence
if you don’t want to read depictions of battle, skip the second part of Henry's pov, that is: the part after the three asterisks and skip directly down to Richard's pov.

ANNE BOLEYN, LADY TO QUEEN CATHERINE OF ENGLAND
Tower of London, England

December 1520

The Queen was quiet that morning as Anne brushed her red-gold curls, staring on and on at her own reflection in the burnished mirror. She did not speak to any of them, that morning, and they did not say to her more than what was strictly necessary. Only the rustle of their skirts seemed to disturb the air as they made ready. Catherine dressed in white and gold, wore a tiered gable hood over her luxurious locks. Always, the Queen had been short in stature but she seemed to stand above all those around her, now, apart from the world they inhabited.

Her ladies attended her when she went to meet with Richard de la Pole and the few other remaining lords who would be overseeing Catherine’s army in battle, saying what must be said to them. They started well, kneeling, kissing her hand, and Catherine raised them each up in turn. Then she went out with them, and with her ladies, to speak to the rabble of an army gathered in her name: gold men and lame ones, young boys with tools for weapons, and all the remaining knights and lords that Richard had left in his wake when he set out for Lincoln with his army. All looked to the Queen in hope, in fear.

“Masters,” began the Queen at last. When she spoke, her voice was sweet and strong and filled with all the world’s zeal. “We have come at last to a place we hoped, none of us, ever to be. A powerful enemy stands at our door, breathing in the hopes that our breath and life and hope will cease. Yet, this enemy has grown abroad and knows not the strength and vigor and endurance of England. They have come to take from us all that we hold dear, to strip us of our pride and our freedom and our honor but they do not know us. They do not know that we, children of God, will never surrender.

“We will meet them in the field and we will show them that no man attacks England with impunity. For England is not theirs to take. It belongs to us. This city they mean to sack is yours. It is your homes that they will burn and your children that they will put to ruin. It is your wives they will ravage and your gold they will steal to fill their own coffers. It is us and it is ours that they shall kill, and once they have finished their gory work here, it is our land of England that they will take to pulverize and to subjugate. We are all that stands between them and this world of brutality.
“We stand now on the brink of horror, but we stand here firm and we shall never surrender. In future days, let them say that on this day it was we few who stood against a mighty foe and conquered them all, that it was we who tore these invaders from their high seats of empty ambition, and that it was we who saved London and with her, all of England, from rack and ruin. When they speak of this good earth of ours, they all shall know that it is to us that they owe all, for we shall go on fighting and we shall never surrender. Let them remember that on this day, we won.” Catherine smiled, raised her arm. “Let them come,” she cried. “We are waiting for them!”

As one, they raised their shields and their swords, as one they raised their voices and shouted “FOR ENGLAND!” They pounded their staves and spears against the ground till all of London seemed to thunder with the sound.

Anne cast a glance to Richard de la Pole. His eyes were dewy, but he held her gaze and Anne clasped her hands. Henry, Henry, for once in your life, prayed Anne. Do not play at this.

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HENRY TUDOR, PRINCE OF ENGLAND
London, England
December 1520

“A quarter century ago, our home, our names, our very lives were stolen from us. All that we held dear, our enemy took,” Harry was mounted up on a high charger, riding his horse back and forth before the formation of his armed line. The men who had remained loyal to his father, and then to his brother, had donned their old armor and looked to him with misty eyes. Harry lifted his voice to carry over the throng of his troops. “Our loved ones died as we looked on, our identities and our longings washed away. For more than twenty years we have been cast about, forced to seek our lives and fortunes abroad, hunted and oppressed. For over two decades we have been cast hapless upon the tides of fortune and we have learned the hard way that she is a cruel mistress. No more! Today, today, we return. Today, we come home. Today, we reclaim what was taken from us and bring back to England what once was great and good and beautiful about her. Today, at last, we seek justice for all that was done for us, and today we take back our realm! ENGLAND!”

With him, a thousand voices took up the call. “ENGLAND! ENGLAND! ENGLAND!”

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Harry’s sword was heavy. Rain splattered all around him. He hardly felt a thing. His enemy was before him, sword bared. The foe swung. Harry’s teeth jarred together as the blades met, their scream split the air. He pressed the enemy blade down, lashed out with his shield. The enemy recoiled, caught the shield with his sword and Harry took the opening. He stabbed with his blade. The knight sloped backwards across his horse. His lips gurgled red.

Rain hung over the countryside like a grey curtain. With it had come a deep fog and Harry could see hardly a thing. All around him, the smell of blood mingled with the scent of death and Harry laid savagely about him with his sword. He peered out of the slit of his visor, but everything around him was nestled within a film of haze. He could not see. His standard bearer was near him, still, and Harry raised his sword above his head. “To me!” he shouted. “To me!” His stallion reared up, massive hooves pounding the damp earth as they leveled again. “To me!” screamed Harry. “To me!”

Harry’s men, clad in Lancastrian red, hurtled towards him and Harry lashed out at all others with his blade. The battle lines had long since been lost to the confusion of the fog and Harry felt the grip of panic heaving in his chest, battled it away.
Swords clanged. Harry struck a savage blow, landed it in an enemy shoulder. The sharp, acrid sting of blood in the air. Struck again. The enemy lashed back, barred his teeth. Harry’s sword was heavy in his hand, but he hardly noticed now. His limbs were tired, he felt sluggish, but the weight seemed as nothing. “To me, to me!” He had to find them all, had to regroup, had to start fresh.

Three enemy fighters charged him on foot. They slashed at his armored horse and Harry’s legs. Harry screamed, tasted blood in his mouth – whose, he did not know – slashed downward with his blade. One combatant shrieked as he took the blow in his chest, the others converged. Arrows. Harry instinctively flinched as a range of them crashed around him. One of the enemies screamed as well. The last one stabbed at Harry’s mount with a dagger. Harry’s horse reared up and struck him in the face with iron-shod hooves. Harry urged his horse forward: more fighters rose up. Again and again and again Harry swung his sword. Again and again and again men fell before him, screaming, bleeding.

Harry raised his sword as his own men gathered around him, pointed towards another group of knights. “CHARGE!”

Wet wind whistled through his helmet and the chinks in his armor. He felt each surge of his horse’s legs as they soared down the hill, crashed into the ranks of the enemy who pointed spears their way. Harry slammed his shield into the face of his nearest opponent, knocking the spear out of the way. He stabbed with his sword, swung the edge of his shield again, felt a crunch against steel. He snarled, cried out as he felt something strike his armor, buckle it. Turned, hacking with his sword in that direction. Swarming everywhere around him: enemies. His standard rose up, a red dragon, a red rose.

“Arrows!” screamed someone, but there was a loud pound and Harry flinched. A gun, he thought. There were arrows, too, darkening the sky, thudding all around them. Harry raised his shield, felt the flood, Bang! Bang! Bang! against his upraised arm as they crashed into it. And then he was falling, his horse heaving to the side.

Harry tried to move, to hurl himself forward, away from his falling mount, but his armor limited him and his foot was caught in the stirrup. He screamed as the horse collapsed on his leg. Harry struggled, pushing at the dead horse, trying to wriggle out from under it. Pain shrieked through his limbs and, as Harry fell back against the wet earth, he thought, half-bemused, Perhaps I shall drown. The world sparkled in diamonds of color before turning all to darkness. “Retreat!” Someone, very far away it seemed, was screaming, “Retreat!” but Harry crumpled amidst the pool of darkness...

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RICHARD IV, KING OF ENGLAND
Lincoln, England
December 1520

“The messenger says he has ridden a series of horses to death to bring this news to you, Your Grace. He said he brings a most urgent message...from the Queen.”

“Bring him to me, at once.”

The messenger panted, and when he dropped to his knees, Richard did not know whether to think it was out of respect or from sheer exhaustion. “Speak,” urged Richard.

“Her Grace the Queen bid me say unto you, Your Grace, that...that London lies in peril. Even this moment, the battle has most like already been waged, but what the outcome may be,” he shook his head. “I cannot say. Her Grace begs Your Grace come at once in full haste with your might to save
London from the Lancastrian onslaught. She is sore pressed and swears that she shall bring them battle, but she finds herself in sore need of the men that are presently here.”

Richard felt sick, felt he would scream. His heart leapt as his stomach clenched. “What battle?” he gasped, desperately, but he feared he already knew.

“Your Grace, the Tudors besiege London this instant.”

Richard felt a surge of horror, horror and disbelief, but he stabbed a finger in the air towards his nearest generals. “Carry the word!” he commanded. “Turn about! We ride for London, at once! Make haste! Make haste!”

The men tore from the tent, shouting orders and Richard clasped a hand to his pounding heart. “Catherine, forgive me. How did I not see? This is Warwick’s old design,” he whispered. “The Kingmaker!”

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CATHERINE OF ARAGON, QUEEN OF ENGLAND
Tower of London, England
December 1520

She touched them each on the shoulder. Muddy and slick with blood or grime, she touched each of her generals, fresh from battle, looked them in the eye and said: “We thank you for your most courageous service to this, our good realm of England.” They turned blood-and-dirt spattered faces up towards her as they knelt. Their eyes, round and white, seemed to glow in the midst of all the grime.

“But where is the Earl of Suffolk’s youngest brother?” inquired Catherine, as she came to the last man. “Where is Richard de la Pole?”

“Your Grace, it seems he has gone missing amidst the action with much of his detachment of men. They were nowhere to be found.”

Catherine bowed her head. “God rest their souls,” she murmured, turned to the remainder. “We bid you stand, our most honored generals,” said Catherine and each man climbed to his feet. “We are informed that you bring us a most valuable prize.”

The same man spoke. “Your Grace, you will not be disappointed. We have captured Henry Tudor, the brother of our would-be king, Arthur.”

“How?”

“We found him trapped beneath his horse in the mud, and unconscious. Seems the animal fell prey to a volley of arrows and his rider beneath him. Tudor’s left leg is badly broken from the fall. He must have passed out because of it.”

Catherine nodded. “Thank you for this. We shall not forget this act of service. I hope that you have already seen that he is attended by physicians?”

“We have, Your Grace.”

“Thank you. Though also an enemy combatant, Henry Tudor is a valuable hostage to us and is thus to be accorded every respect we can well afford to give.” The respect they could well afford, Catherine knew, was little and less, but it was enough. Though they had succeeded in fending off the
capture of London, the battle itself – far from being a victory – had proven both Pyrrhic and more or less futile. They had held them off one day, and bought precious time to close the gates to the invaders and, Catherine supposed, that was a small victory in itself, but it was not enough. The enemy stood, now, outside the ancient gates first built around London by the Romans, which were now the second last defense the city. Its final hope was the fortress whose shadow the loomed over all of England: the Tower of London.

The Lancastrian forces surrounded them, although their efforts had momentarily subsided. Still, Catherine held the Tower and the Bars and, from there, she held still London. William the Conqueror and Emperor Hadrian had given her that much, at least.

Catherine wondered what Arthur’s game was, as she peered out towards the Lancastrian camps. Why had he not yet struck another blow? Why did he do nothing, send no missive, not even a charge? Fear pricked her heart that he, too, had fallen in the battle (for surely he had fought there – where else could he be?) and that, now, without Henry, the army out there – though still intact – was without a clear leader. It would make sense, after all. Following Henry’s fall, his men had panicked and retreated, rather than flocking to Arthur, himself. Yes, perhaps Arthur was dead, after all.

Catherine’s heart ached, she wished to weep, to wail like a tiny child, to cast herself down from her throne and sob till her heart finally burst, if it must, but she did not. She stood before her men, spoke to them calmly, and tried to behave as her mother would have done in the same situation.

*Action*, she thought. *My mother was a woman of action.* Catherine would do no less. She would not be idle.

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**ARTHUR TUDOR, KING OF ENGLAND**  
Monmouthshire, England  
*December 1520*

Rain split the heavens, driving in sheets and slowing Arthur’s progress to a strenuous crawl. He clenched his teeth together in frustration. He wished to scream, but he reigned in the impulse. The last missive he had received from Harry had informed him that he was about to engage the enemy at London, but still Arthur had heard no news as to how it had gone. News took a great deal of time at such distances, he knew, but he could not help but worry greatly over the matter. The lack of news sought to strangle him, slowly.

In truth, he felt like a failure. For all his plotting and planning, Arthur had not thought of the weather, fool that he was, or at least had not considered it, enough. His mother had mentioned the *mud*; Harry had talked of Henry V’s horrid end due to unhealthful battle conditions; François had – rather unhelpfully – spoken at great length about how accustomed his French troops were to the sun. All of this together, and he ought to have thought of the weather as an active element, yet each tidbit had been said months apart and Arthur had been much too caught up in the histories, in the possibilities. He had thought of it as a scholar did: considered the pitfalls of strategies as well as their positives, thought of the weight of the armor and armaments; thought of the terrain; thought of the persuasions and loyalties and hopes of the people; he had even thoroughly studied Richard’s own battles in the days when he had been Perkin Warbeck and come – he hoped – to understand him thoroughly as a general...but he had not thought of the very real possibility of a torrential downpour in the midst of a march across the width of England. And he had certainly not thought of it happening at a time when his little brother needed him most: engaged in his first real battle, thousands of miles away and under, himself, only God knew what conditions. Particularly when time was of the essence.

At least, Arthur could hope, Richard was enduring the same weather and was, currently, trapped
somewhere in the neck of England with all of his men. Now, Arthur thought as his gut clenched horribly, it was a race. It was a race Arthur could not afford to lose.

Seeing a cart stuck in the mud, Arthur swung down off his white charger and leaned into the wheel with the common foot soldiers. His knights swung down to join him, pushing and heaving till the cart rolled free.

Arthur slapped the man next to him on the shoulder. Their shoulders sagged with exhaustion, but hope had shone again as soon as the king had jumped into the mud beside them to help loose their burden. To them all, he said: “England has need of us. We must do all that we can to aid each other, and so we shall help her, and we shall never give up.” Stalking to his charger, he vaulted onto the horse’s back and the company proceeded forward again. Arthur reached into his pouch and found the rosary his mother had given him, there. Caressing the beads, he squeezed the cross in his hand. “We shall never give up.”
“Mama,” he’d whispered, tugging on her mantle, terrified to the point of tears. “You can’t bring me in here. You know what they do to princes here!”

Henry Tudor, Prince of England
Tower of London, England
December 1520

He’d been here before. As a lad, it had been the sanctuary he’d shared with his mother and sisters – but he’d preferred the term prison. Harry had been raised on the stories of his mother’s brothers – the so-called Princes in the Tower – and he had known well what it was that had become of them. Murdered, everyone agreed, by evil King Richard. Their fate had been so unambiguous to Harry that he’d been gripped with fear when his mother had bundled him in and commanded the gates sealed behind them.

“Mama,” he’d whispered, tugging on her mantle, terrified to the point of tears. “You can’t bring me in here. You know what they do to princes here!”

Harry closed his eyes, rested his head against the wall behind him. It had been twenty-three years and some months since that day, now, but when he’d left, he’d prayed he would never return to the Tower’s sinister clutches. Instead, he was now lodged there a prisoner in deed as well as word. Restlessly, he cast his glance out the slitted window which was his lonely source of daylight, and ran his fingertips idly across the pale stone that surrounded him. Once, these very walls had served him and his, promised protection and potency...Now he wondered if soon they would soak in his blood.

His leg was a source of awful, constant pain, though it dulled when he was still. The physicians, such as they were, had done in their words ‘all that can be done by mortal man,’ and taken their leave. Henry now sat in the window, where his shallow cot was located, with his leg out before him, praying it would heal...and be quick about it. He had little inclination towards the sedentary, particularly when his thoughts plagued him.

Nightmares, he remembered. As a boy, here, he’d been haunted by a host of horrible dreams: awful King Richard, hunched and scrabbling, lurking near his bed, clutching a dagger wet with the blood of Harry’s uncles...He’d awaken screaming more like than not, those nights. That much was still true, he found. There was something toxic and polluting about the air here, he decided, some disease that hovered on the ether ready to deprive a man of his senses.

Henry shifted, but couldn’t get comfortable. Seizing the pillow that propped him up, he held it down and punched it, punched it, and punched it, before replacing it behind him. He felt considerably better, he found...although the pillow remained lumpy.

“Wretched, confounded prison,” muttered Harry. He ran his hand absently over the cleft cover of her Book of Hours, which she had left with him in France when she had gone. Before the battle, he had
put it in his tunic over his heart, that she might be there with him. One of the doctors told him, when he’d awakened, that the book had saved his life by taking an arrow that had slipped between the chinks in his armor. He poked his finger through the hole in the cover, laughed. “Stricken,” he whispered. “With the dart of love.”

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ANNE BOLEYN, LADY TO QUEEN CATHERINE OF ENGLAND
Tower of London, England
December 1520

Anne raised the hood over her head a touch tighter, loping towards the apartments where, she had learned, he was said to be held even now. It had taken her time, far more time than she might have liked, to find a moment in which she could slip away without suspicion. Head held high, she walked with confidence and poise, as though there were nothing amiss in her actions. Anne spotted the guards, felt her heart clench, and walked directly up to the them.

“Her Grace the Queen bids me see to the prisoner,” she lied, arching her brows with regal authority.

The guards looked at each other dumbly, nodded. “As you say, mistress.”

“Please, be at your ease. I shall call for you, should I have any need of you.”

She passed beyond them with a jolt of joy and she forced herself not to run to him. She felt as though she should fly, soar towards his side now, but she made her legs carry a more sedate pace. Still, it did not take her long to find him. The door was shut and barred, but there was a slit to peer through and, standing on her tip-toes, Anne did so. Henry was inside, nestled by the window, she saw, asleep. Dozens of scratches and bruises marred his pale skin, but he seemed otherwise unhurt, sitting up with his legs out in front of him. His head was lolled to one side, eyes shut. He looked peaceful in sleep, almost like a little child…a great, muscular child with long limbs and a beard, she thought in bemusement, but still it was innocence in his face and Anne caught herself holding her breath.

She glanced down the corridor, towards the guards she had left behind, and slid back the latch. Henry jolted awake at the sound. Anne slid into the cell, all-but closing the door behind her. His eyes were on her, bleary with sleep and still too lost in his haze even to register surprise. Yet it was adoration scrawled across his face as he drank her in: lips parted with all the world’s tenderness and eyes soft as though she were the loveliest sight he had ever seen.

“Nan,” he whispered and the word seemed to rouse action. He started to move towards her, as though to swing off the bed, and then his face crumpled, seized up in pain as he made a harsh sound in his throat and grabbed for his leg.

“Henry!” Appearances forgotten, Anne dropped her things and ran to him. Kneeling on the cold stone floor before him, she took his face in her hands. “Oh, Henry,” she whispered.

Amazement peered back at her as slowly he turned to look at her, angling his face away from the light that splashed, now, onto her own visage, to gaze at her. “Are you real, then, Nan?”

“I’m real,” she assured him and Anne leaned close, covering his face with kisses. “I’m real, I’m real.”

“Nan, Nan,” he put his arms around her, lifting her as though she were nothing onto the cot to sit beside him and held her close. Anne kissed his eyes, his brow, his cheek, his jaw, his ear. She kissed his nose and his hands as they touched her, kissed his neck and his hair. He nuzzled close, resting his
head on her shoulder as she nestled hers against him. “Don’t weep for me, Nan,” he whispered. “No tears.” And it was then that she realized she was crying. Anne wiped at her face as he snaked his arms around her. “No sorrow when my mistress is so close to me.” Anne closed her eyes and lost herself to the moment.

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RICHARD DE LA POLE
London, England
December 1520

The Tudor army was in a hopeless state. The capture of its obvious leader had left in its wake confusion and disorder. Richie was a stranger here, that much was unsurprising, as he had defected during the battle (something long organized with the Tudors), but without either of them present to receive him, that was another point of confusion. The English lords who had remained loyal to Henry VII and then to his son in succession, did not trust him, and the French ones did not seem to know what was going on. Every lord argued that their point was best, that their command must be taken. Richie, for his part, did the same.

It helped that he had thought to keep, rather than burn, and to bring into battle, documents granting trust from King Arthur, which had at least prevented him from being seized as a prisoner. What everyone desperately needed, Richie could see, was order. The conditions of the battle and the capture of Henry Tudor had stolen those things from them, but Richie was determined they should have it all back. An army was little use without it.

The debate wound on endlessly, and the longer the generals debated, the more restless grew the army. Storming out of the little house that the generals had taken up as their center, Richie went to walk amongst the tents that comprised the army, itself, stopping to talk to the men – the English in good English, and the French in the smattering of that language he’d picked up at court. He stopped at the house which had been set up as a hospital and spoke with the patients, there. He went to the edges of the fortification they’d set up to speak with the men stationed there and bring them something warm to eat. As the other lords prattled on and on, he did this, till the soldiers would stop in their tracks when they saw him coming and respond to him as their lord. He did this till they listened when he gave advice or instruction. He did this, till even the generals inside their little shelter looked out and saw that the army had found its leader and came to him to say so. Then he wrote a letter to King Arthur.

Richie knew that action must be taken, and quickly, or whatever discipline remained here would soon be broken down and he would lose the standing he had won. All around them, the fortifications of the city of London bore down and Richie made the Tudor army battle ready, once more.

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ANNE BOLEYN, LADY TO QUEEN CATHERINE OF ENGLAND
Tower of London, England
December 1520

“How went the battle?” asked Henry, at last. He intertwined his fingers with Anne’s, looking pointedly at them, she noticed, and not at her face. “I-I wasn’t conscious for the end of it which, arguably,” he chortled. “Is the most important part of any battle…”

They’d ben dancing around the subject: Henry afraid to ask, Anne afraid to tell. She ran her thumb softly across his fingers. “I can’t be sure,” she admitted, finally, and Henry looked up at her face again. “No one is eager to share details with one of the Queen’s ladies, particularly,” she confessed.
“One known to have spent so much time in France. However, I gather that…there is a great deal of uncertainty to the thing and I wonder if anyone really knows. Certainly, we are holed up within the walls of the city and the Queen has moved her headquarters here, to the Tower, and there is still an army waiting for us out there. More than that,” she shook her head. “I cannot say.”

Henry nodded slowly, rubbing his brow with his free hand.

Anne paused. “But…who now has control of that army, with you in here?”

Henry’s hand dropped away and his eyes found hers once again. “In truth, Nan…I do not know. It would depend very much on who survived the battle and that, alas, I cannot say.”

“Then,” she said softly. “Let us pray, whoever he is, he proves a very able captain, indeed.”

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HENRY TUDOR, PRINCE OF ENGLAND
Tower of London, England
December 1520

Anne’s head was cradled on his shoulder once more, his arms locked around her. For all the sorrow and pain and tension, Harry had not felt so content in a very long time as he now felt holding Anne Boleyn close.

“What was it like?” she asked, nestled against him. “When you were a boy, locked up in this awful place?”

“It’s not so awful,” he said, thoughtfully. “When you are free to leave it. It is when the great gates close that it begins to feel like a prison.”

“I shall have to believe you,” she replied. “This is my first experience of it.”

Harry drew his hand up and down her arm. “I confess, as a child…I was terrified. I could only think of my uncles and the terrible deaths that awaited them here. I was, then, younger than they ever grew to be, but…I feared that I, too, might meet such a grisly end. I feared for my father and for my brother, as well, outside the gates, and I feared for my mother and sisters within them. Every shadow seemed to be the hiding place of some deathly creature and every unexplored nook of the fortress the same. Every unexpected sound earned a flinch and every breathy silence seemed the prelude to doom. And I knew that the adults were afraid, too, try as they might to hide it. I knew that they were afraid and felt that, thus, my cause for fear was just. But Nan, Nan,” he turned, she raised her head to look at him and he held her face in both his hands. “You’ve no cause for fear. There is none in my army as shall think to harm a woman and none here who would do harm one of their Queen’s own ladies.”

Anne grasped his left hand, kissed the palm. “Henry…It is not for myself that I am afraid.”

Harry closed his eyes, resting his brow against hers. “I believe that I am safer as a prisoner, here, than ever I was in that battle out there and, see? I survived.” Her smile did not reach her eyes and Henry knew that she was thinking of all those sorry kings and princes who died prisoners. He thought much of them, too. He wished he had some way to refute those fears for both of them.

They remained still like that, finding comfort in the moment, until Anne pulled away to turn her black eyes on him. “What happened to your leg?”

He winced at the memory. “My horse took an arrow, it seems…Poor fellow collapsed on my leg,
Anne nodded, sadly and, he could tell, she was trying very hard to look practical. Harry found himself smirking, despite himself. “Will it heal?” she inquired.

Harry sighed. “Yes,” he replied. “But will it heal properly? I do not know. The doctors did what they could and seemed optimistic but from here it is only to pray for the best.”

“Then I shall unite my prayers with yours.”

Harry chuckled, tapped the tip of her nose affectionately. “Then I am confident they shall be heard.”

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ARTHUR TUDOR, KING OF ENGLAND
Monmouthshire, England
December 1520

“Your Grace, a letter.”

Arthur accepted it with a nod of thanks and went with it into his tent. He broke the seal with a practiced hand (noted it came from Richard de la Pole with a jolt of surprise), and marked it was a short note. Good, he thought. To the point, then. Arthur read past the salutation.

It comes now to my attention that Your Grace has not been made aware of the events which have overtaken your host. London lies now within your grasp if only Your Grace may come speedily to the aid of your most loyal servants, here. There has been already an altercation with the enemy, the result of which has been the capture of His Grace the Duke of York, and has thus left Your Grace’s army in my hands. If I might make so bold as to crave Your Grace’s instructions, I should be most grateful of them, but if this note does not reach Your Grace in time, I shall organize another attack. Your Grace, the knowledge that the Usurper shall soon return and take us from behind troubles us most potently and I see little wisdom in a delay for that cause. The enemy, Your Grace, led by the Usurper’s queen, cowers behind London’s walls and it will most like be a siege that awaits us all

Arthur cast the note down, pressed the ball of his right hand to his brow. Catalina, he thought. Cat, what have I done? He felt the gentle bump of the scar there, left by François’ lance, and rubbed at it before dropping his hands away. Rising, he went to the map of England.

Henry was captured and the unknown, untried Richard de la Pole now commanded Arthur’s army. He made mention of wanting instruction but almost within the same breath informed of his own intention not to long await them and to act on his own. The rain had all-but trapped Arthur in Monmouthshire and heaven alone knew where Warbeck might be. Richard de la Pole was now in command of his army – Richard, brother of the same John de la Pole who had once made war on Arthur’s own father under the pretense of helping another – only to turn, at the last, and use the army he’d garnered to prop up his own bid to rule. And it was that man who stood, now, ready to besiege both Catalina Trastámara and Henry, who waited behind the walled city of London.

“Fuck!” Arthur flung the map away from him, ran his hand through his auburn hair, and took a deep breath, another. He nodded to himself. It was calm he most needed now: calm for thought. Bending, Arthur scooped the map back up and carried it back to his campaign table where he spread it out. He tapped on the spot that marked London, ran his finger across to his own location in Monmouthshire and rubbed at his chin.

It was time he drew Perkin Warbeck’s eye, himself, rather than hiding behind ghost armies. Perhaps
it was not too late to draw him away from London. Would he sacrifice the safety of his sacred borders for one city? Arthur did not think that could possibly be a wise trade.

“Chepstow,” whispered Arthur, tapping the castle’s location on the map twice.

It was time to act.

Chapter End Notes

"Stricken by the dart of love," is a reference to one of the Henry VIII's letters to Anne Boleyn. You can read the letter here: https://www.theanneboleynfiles.com/resources/anne-boleyn-words/henry-viiis-love-letters-to-anne-boleyn/love-letter-1/

Royal Progress

Chapter Summary

They stank, these walls, riddled with centuries of muck and grime and crime and death.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

ANNE BOLEYN, LADY TO QUEEN CATHERINE OF ENGLAND
Tower of London, England
December 1520

Round and round the stairwell wound, steps convex at the center from centuries of passengers wearing them away. Anne’s footfalls were quick and careful, darting across the unbalanced stone purposefully. When she emerged into the sunlight of the Tower’s courtyard, she felt a jolt of pride wash over her at her escape from detection – but too soon.

“Mistress Boleyn!” a familiar voice hailed her.

Anne turned quickly to see James Butler approaching from another direction. The breath stuck in her throat, threatening to choke her. Anne swallowed hard and dipped a curtsy. “Master Butler,” she greeted in as friendly a tone as she could muster.

James swept a bow of his own, waiting until he had come up to her before speaking further. “Have I just seen you emerge from there?” He pointed towards the portal she had just, indeed, exited. “Is that not the entrance to the place where the… hostages are currently being lodged?”

Anne smiled thinly, decided to own it. “Indeed,” she responded. “Her Grace the Queen thought it prudent to see to them and ensure their wellbeing, particularly given Master Tudor’s injury.”

“Ah,” replied James. “And how did you find them?”

“Well enough, Master Butler. Well enough. And now I must leave you to return to Her Grace.” Anne dipped another curtsy. “Good day, sir.” She quickened her pace to escape his notice as swiftly as she could. She prayed no further questions would be asked.

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EDMUND DE LA POLE, DUKE EARL OF SUFFOLK
Northamptonshire, England
January 1521

Progress had slowed to a crawl given the rains early in the trek, but now, though snow speckled the ground, their march was steady. The army had made up much of the time. Still, they remained far from London when the dispatch found Richard. He took it alone, shooing away peers and servants alike. When he had read it, he summoned Edmund de la Pole into his tent.

“What do you make of this, Ed?”
The Earl held out his hand to receive the letter, curled his fingers around it. “These are black tidings, indeed,” he remarked, at last, when he had read it. The hand that had written the letter was scratchy and harried, the letters mussed and hasty, and Ed felt an odd clench in his gut. He winced and placed the missive on the table between himself and Richard, who was sitting before him.

“How can this be?”

“Your Grace?”

“Last we heard, perhaps you will recall, Arthur Tudor’s force was besieging London. Now, we hear that, indeed, he is also in Wales, and took by storm Chepstow Castle on Christmas day…All the while the siege of London continues to progress. How, then, can he to be in two places?”

“He cannot,” replied Ed. The gig was up: any secrecy Arthur might have hoped for gone up in smoke. Better, he decided, to proceed directly. Ed continued cautiously. “But that means little enough when it regards his forces. The Tudors have the support of François of France. It is just possible he furnished them with men enough that they arrived with two armies: one to the east and one to the west…one to besiege London and one to massage the old Tudor holdings in Wales.”

Richard drummed his fingers against the campaign table. “Then which force does Arthur, himself, command? And who commands the other army?”

Dangerous questions. Edmund glanced back down at the letter in his hand, indicating a certain passage. “It seems, here, that Arthur has been seen, in his own person, to be at Chepstow.” Why would Arthur openly show himself, Ed wondered, if he did not wish to be seen? Ed narrowed his eyes. “Forgive me, Your Grace, for intruding with my own opinion,” he added, leaning across the table. “But I believe this is an opportunity. If we can strike a blow at Chepstow, capture this would-be king, then their war will be over before it has begun.”


“The brother, I should imagine, Your Grace.”

“No,” said Richard, shaking his head. “Not him. Not now.”

Ed’s brows knotted together and he felt a dull hollow in his stomach. He swallowed, shifted. “Then, Your Grace, I do not know.” He paused. “Why do you dismiss the other brother so readily?”

“You see, I’ve a theory,” began the king, digging through his belongings to produce another dispatch, which he put into Edmund’s hand. “The Queen’s Grace, you see, took Henry Tudor prisoner after the first attack against London, so it is not he who now commands the army, though I’ve a notion you’re right that he did, before.”

Ed scanned the document, written – it seemed – in the Queen’s own hand, celebrating her triumphant capture of the would-be Prince. “This is fortuitous news, indeed-“

“So who now controls the second army? The Tudors have no other male relatives on their father’s side that followed them into exile. Ergo, Ed, there is no clear demarcation for this event. So who do we battle?”

“Your Grace?”

“When we go to London, who will we fight?”
“You do not, then, mean to make for Chepstow, Your Grace?”

Richard’s eyes were cold, dull and flinty like obsidian, and he regarded Ed gravely, as though the words said to him had been akin to insult, hurled at him from spite. Richard turned away. “I do not wish to hear that you think it a mistake. The Tudor war might be won, but it is no longer the Tudors we fight on two fronts, is it? With Henry captured, an unknown commands that army and London—"

“London is the capitol, and strategic to boot, but if Arthur gains and maintains a foothold in Wales – a country notorious for its intangible armies – how will we ever root him back out again?”

“If I give London to an unknown, he will sail along the Thames with nothing to stem his access to the rest of the country, free to meet up with Arthur in Wales. Or to take almost any river almost anywhere in the nation.”

“If you suspect the army no longer serves the Tudors, why would it wish to meet up with Arthur?” inquired Ed. “Though Your Grace, of course, is right. Ceding control of the Thames would cut us off entirely from the lower portion of the country. Allowing the siege of London to continue, however, will not do that. There is much between London and Wales along the Thames to hold back such a progress, or at least delay it.” Edmund paused. “Clearly, allowing anyone to claim London is…far from ideal, but securing our borders may prove even more valuable, still, Your Grace. Once they are secured, we may turn and fight whomsoever it is that now lays siege to London. It may even be that London’s walls will keep safe the city while we fight the Welsh. What is sure, Your Grace, is that if we do nothing to stop them at Chepstow, the Tudor army will progress towards us, taking castles all along the way to guard their back and, holding already one, they may safely claim that area conquered until such time as we take it back.”

Doggedly, the King looked away. He seemed to chew at the inside of his cheek, smoothed his hand over his beard again, again, again. “You may be right,” he allowed finally. His voice was soft and reedy, and Ed almost did not hear him at first. Richard gripped the edge of the table and Ed watched in strange fascination as the king’s knuckles went white. When he spoke again, his voice was fierce with rage. “But it is my queen, my queen they besiege and I cannot allow anything to befall Catherine, Ed. Anything. I love her and I swore a sacred oath to protect her, did I not? If I do nothing more with my life, at least I will not have failed her as I failed my last wife. Perhaps I jeopardize the war, Ed, but this is not a battle from which I can turn away.”

Ed nodded, narrowed his eyes towards the king. “With respect, Your Grace, it seems you already knew all of this,” he began. “Already had your mind made up. Why did you summon me here?”

Richard laughed, humorlessly. “Truth be told, Ed, I had hoped you might agree with me. I had hoped…that my desire to move on London was not simply my personal inclinations but, rather, a potent instinct for war.” He shook his head. “Now that I know it is not, however, I remain undeterred. We ride for London. London,” he said and softer still: “And the Tower.”

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CATHERINE OF ARAGON, QUEEN OF ENGLAND
Tower of London, England
January 1521

They stank, these walls, riddled with centuries of muck and grime and crime and death. Catherine would be glad of it when the time came to leave this fortress – she only hoped that that occasion would come under the right circumstances. Dingy as it was, the darkness made it more difficult to move with confidence, yet Catherine made as good a showing of it as she could. She was not one to advertise hardship. When, at last, she and her escort of guards reached the grim chamber, Catherine
stepped inside.

She had never seen any of the Tudors in person, before, but she found the revelation of Henry’s appearance to be quite agreeable. He was certainly a handsome fellow, well-formed and (she imagined from the length of limb) tall, though he was at present seated on a cot with his legs out before him. His hair and beard (both of which were longer than described, but then he’d been some weeks here without the use of a razor) were the famed red-gold of his mother and her father before him, and his before him, stretching back and back and back for, it seemed, five centuries. It was, after all, their common ancestor that had imbued Catherine with curls of the same copper tone.

“I would rise,” said Henry, drinking her in. “But I fear that capacity is beyond me, just now,” he added, gesturing to his leg.

“I hear it mends,” observed the queen.

“It does.”

He said no more and Catherine found herself wondering why she had truly come here, but she banished the thought and returned to the reason she had stated to her allies here in this dread Tower, a reason that was, indeed, compelling. “Outside these walls, who now has charge over that army?” Catherine was not tall, but she drew herself up to her full height, doing her utmost to stare regally down at him. No, not tall, but she had perfected the withering gaze.

Henry grew red-faced, but, she saw, it was anger in his eyes rather than intimidation, and she felt her lips twitch with a kind of bemusement that startled her. He looked at his hands, flipped his them to inspect his nails.

“How would I know?” demanded Henry, finally. “I’ve no notion of who survived.”

Catherine turned to nod to the guards, who fetched a chair. She seated herself opposite the prisoner. “You may leave us,” she told the guards without turning to look at them. They filed out of the door, shutting it behind them. “Is it your brother?”

Henry turned sharply towards her, hand falling away from his determined gaze. His eyes, she noticed, were a deep and dark blue. Green, she recalled: that was how Arthur’s eyes had been described. She tried to place them in this face: broad and golden and brooding. They would look, she thought, very fine with their flecks of amber, but it was difficult to imagine in so stormy a countenance. Suddenly, Henry looked away again and the vision she had so carefully constructed vanished before her. “You were betrothed to him once, weren’t you? How does it feel now to make war against the man who once you, yourself, acknowledged as rightful king? How do you so easily disregard your own beliefs?”

Catherine cleared her throat, dislodging the lump caught there, and glanced towards the pale stones that made up the floor. “It was not I who changed,” replied Catherine, tilting her head, slightly. “It was the situation, and with it, the facts. Once your father was king. Later, he was not. So, too, did your brother’s fortunes shift but, I imagine, I need not school you in these things. Doubtless, experience served better in educating you on these matters.”

Catherine tried to think how he must feel, tried to imagine that somehow her parents’ forces had been overcome; she had been exiled in shame from Spain; had after nearly a quarter century of exile
returned triumphant to reclaim her homeland…only to be imprisoned in what had once been her own palace. She felt hollow at the thought, as cold as the unfeeling stones around them. Fear cringed along her spine.

“I did not come to quarrel,” said Catherine, at last. “But, rather, in friendship.”

Henry’s laugh held not humor and he turned sharply to face her again. “You came to work out how best to defeat us. Let us have no confusion on that point. But I neither wish to nor find myself able to assist you in this matter. You will have to depend upon the strength of these walls, as my parents once did. If I may offer some advice: pray, Catalina Trastámara, that they serve you better than they did us, or else soon enough you will discover to your sorrow just who leads that army when he bursts through these stones to tear you from that stolen throne.”

Catherine slammed the door behind her as she left, and left him with the long shrill of the bolt being drawn.

Chapter End Notes

Let me know if you have any questions, esp about Richard and Ed's conversation! I'm not sure if I was clear enough...

This chapter is a wee bit short, but it sets things in motion...
A Contract

Chapter Summary

Mary brought candles, candles and candles and candles, littering the quiet cell with the merry twinkle of light.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

ANNE BOLEYN, LADY TO QUEEN CATHERINE OF ENGLAND
Tower of London, England
January 1521

“Marry me.” He hadn’t meant to say it like that, she knew: hasty, spewed out like a fountain. His eyes betrayed it, turning round and wide as his lips parted and she wondered if he wished to recall the words, or if he had simply wished to say them more eloquently.

Anne’s own surprise was a marked thing, and she felt herself lean away from him. “What?” Her voice surprised her, reedy: thin and hollow as though her throat had closed, and her chest with it, and left her swaying in the wind.

She watched as the round orbs softened, his open expression strengthening. Sunlight from the narrow slit in his cell splashed silver moonlight across his features and the single candle suffused him in rosy light. “Marry me,” he said, breathless but sure: earnest as ever he was. “I’ve little to offer you now, I know, but my enduring love.” He stretched out his arm slowly, as though she were a woodland creature he feared he should startle with sudden movement. “Little as only love may be, it is a strong love which, I think, finds its match in your heart, beating in time with mine: two hearts as one. I am minded, now, of the ancient Greeks, my love, and their firm belief that true lovers were once but one flesh, split in twain by the gods themselves, that these fierce doubled beings should not, together, overpower the Olympian race and, indeed, Anne, my Anne, does not your heart find its mate in my breast? I feel the quickening of it as though you and I are one flesh, my love, and must unite. Say it, Nan, say you will marry me. Say it now, and quickly! End my suffering and be mine.”

She did not realize she was trembling until she spotted her hand. It gripped hard the edge of his cot, so hard her knuckles stood out stark and white against the pale expanse of her hand, and it shook, that hand, quivering in a cadence all its own.

What he asked did not surprise her. Anne had known long and well that he desired this outcome for nearly so long as he had known her – a span over a year and a half in length – but she had not imagined he would actually ask her such a question until everything was well and truly settled with him, one way or another. She had certainly not imagined he would dare to ask, either, while she was promised to another.

Anne yanked her hand away from his cot as though burned. James Butler, she thought, reminiscently. It was the name which belonged to her intended husband. “I am already elsewhere betrothed, you know.”

He scowled, frowned, shook it off in so quick a succession Anne scarcely registered each emotion.
“You do not love him.”

Anne stood abruptly, walked across the room, came back. She threw her arms wide. “I do not know him!”

“You know me. Marry me, Nan. Leave Butler to himself and find your own happiness. He does not deserve you.”

She folded her arms over her chest. “And you do?” She watched surprise register in his handsome face, then a bald look of questioning. She knew what he was thinking: of the golden crown that once had ringed his father’s head; of the matching circlet that once might have gilded his own temples. Anne shook her head.

“I love you,” he said, at last. “Does he?”

“I’ve not given him the opportunity.”

“Why then,” demanded Henry, his lips curling into a petulant pout. “Do you visit me if not for love? When first we saw each other again, I-”

“There are other considerations, Henry-”

“Pray tell, Nan, by what accounting do I not deserve you? Are we not the same?”

Anne laughed, pressing a hand to her abdomen. “We most certainly are not, Henry. We never have been. I do not mean to imply that you do not deserve me, only that I am already claimed by another and it would be dishonest in us both to imagine otherwise.”

Henry shrugged, shook his head. “Has there, then, been a pre-contract?” he inquired, softly. “Has it been…consummated?” At this, he turned quite red, then white, but it was not shame in his eyes, rather anger, and Anne thought, fleetingly, that she rather liked the look of jealousy on him. He wore it well and, more so, she found to her own surprise, that she rather liked that jealousy was something she could make him feel. She delayed responding, watched his hot, furious cheeks and fury-bright eyes. “Has it, Nan?”

“No,” she admitted, softly. “But the future of the marriage has already been stipulated. I’ve told you before, Henry. I’ve not only my own wishes to consider, but the wellbeing of my family.”

Henry waved a dismissive hand. “So your father might have, through you, a half-Boleyn Earl of Ormonde. That is not, in any case, his true desire and, I’ll tell you this as well, if you wed me, instead, he might have a half-Boleyn Duke of York. Would that not better suit him, hm? And, further, I’d champion his Ormonde suit to my brother the king.”

“It is not a stream of titles that hold my particular loyalties, Henry,” replied Anne, shaking her head. She put her hand to her throat. “It is my head. I rather like it where it is, firmly affixed. I have a little neck,” said Anne. “Would you risk it and those of all my family? My brother is but sixteen years. I would not see him harmed for all the world.”

“And why would they harm my wife or my sixteen year old brother-in-law?” asked Henry, shaking his head. “These are not barbarians.”

She heaved a sigh. “My father, then. Do you think they would believe that he truly knew nothing, particularly when he stands so much to gain and he was the ambassador who presided over the breech between England and France? Would it not seem rather as if he interfered for his own benefit?”
“But he did not!”

“You know that and I know that,” said Anne softly. “But I doubt as anyone should believe us when they are searching for heads to sever in order to put everyone off the idea of seizing the throne. This has always stood between us, Henry, and until all is resolved, it always shall. I would not risk my family for all the world.”

“Then,” began Henry, softly, reaching for Anne’s fingers, kneading them softly. “We shall not. I’ve rather a notion to set before you. Did you know, Nan, that my father and yours quarreled bitterly…and rather publicly? My father, as he was wont to do – God rest his soul – fined yours rather awfully for it. We could play up the dispute between your house and mine, and the everlasting enmity between our fathers, if ever it came to that, and quite alleviate him of suspicion. Why would he champion the son of his foe, when he’s only gained by service to Warbeck’s regime?”

Anne felt she could hardly hear anything over the pounding of her own heart in her chest. “You think that would work?”

She watched Henry’s certain eyes flicker as he drank in the hopeful expression of her own eyes. Leaning forward, he pressed his brow to hers. “I do.”

Anne felt as though she were floating, her chest was full, full of giddy, giddy air that seemed to sparkle, yes, sparkle! in the light. She felt a laugh burst from her as she moved to kiss him.

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MARY CAREY, LADY TO QUEEN CATHERINE OF ENGLAND
Tower of London, England
January 1521

“I know that look.” Mary narrowed her eyes. “What favor would you have of me?” Anne folded her hands before her, running fingers over fingers and Mary bit her lip as she realized her sister was nervous. Taking one of her hands, Mary drew her to a bench in private, and drew Anne to sit down beside her. “Anne? What is it?”

“It’s true,” she began, looking away. “I have something, indeed, to ask of you. Something…momentous. Perhaps to us all.”

Mary wetted her lips. “It’s something dangerous, isn’t it? Just what have those Tudors drawn you into now, Nan, I-”

“I wish to marry him,” blurted Anne.

Mary felt the air die in her throat. It seemed to waft away and Mary felt as though she’d not breathe again. Unconsciously, she clasped the pearls winding round her neck. “Henry?”

Anne nodded, laughed and shook her head. She dipped her head and said in her most sarcastic tones, “No, Arthur. Of course Henry!” Clapping her hands to her mouth, Anne laughed, her eyes dancing with joy. “Mary! He asked me, he asked me to be his, today. Oh, please, say nothing against it. I know there’s little wisdom in it, but my heart is full to bursting and he and I talked it over and there’s no risk to anyone else in it. The risk is all mine and, God in heaven,” Anne laughed. “I’ve such a desire for that risk!”

Mary held up her hands. “Anne, I’ve no wish to disrupt your happiness…but you are already promised to James Butler.”
Anne ducked her head, shrugged. “Then I am very sorry to disappoint him and the others, but I’ll not have him, Mary. I’m going to marry Henry,” she said, reaching out and taking Mary’s hands in her own. “Which is where the favor comes in, I must tell you.”

“I’m not going to like this, am I?”

“We mean to be wed tonight,” said Anne. “And, as you know, all that is needed for a binding pre-contract is…a witness.”

Mary stood, walked across the room. “Anne, this is a dangerous game, indeed.”

“I love him.”

“Full of pitfalls and bungles just waiting to snatch at you!”

“It won’t be easy.”

“I love him.”

Mary sighed, sinking back into the seat she’d abandoned beside Anne. “You’re quite determined, aren’t you?”

Anne beamed. “Oh, Mary, I’ve never wanted anything so much.”

Exhaling slowly, Mary placed her hand over sister’s. “Then,” she said softly. “It will be my delight to witness your vows.”

Anne threw her arms around Mary, kissing her cheek happily. “Thank you, Mary. Thank you!”

Mary brought candles, candles and candles and candles, littering the quiet cell with the merry twinkle of light. The two sisters had slipped into the best dresses they had with them, Anne had donned a veil, and then they had whisked across the Tower courtyard in the cover of darkness. Henry, insisting that he could not possibly sit for his wedding, made it to his feet with some effort.

“Lean on me,” whispered Anne, gripping his hand as all took their places.

Mary watched through misty eyes as they put their hands together, watched their eyes light up as they met. Mary knew how it felt to look at someone with such longing. She knew how it felt to be looked at with such adoration. She did not know how to felt to love and to have that love returned equally by the same person, but the tears that clouded her eyes are not born of that inequality. Mary had never seen her sister so radiantly happy in all her days, and watching them together – despite all the danger – she couldn’t help but feel a sliver of gratitude that she had agreed to help them. If there were anything worth such a risk, Mary considered, was it not love?

Their hands were joined, tucked into one another, and the couple could not seem to draw their eyes off one another. As it should be, Mary thought. She linked her own fingers together before her, smiling through her tears as first Henry made his vow and then Anne made hers. Lovers, Mary thought. The word had never sounded to appropriate to her, and she was glad that it was her own sister who had the good fortune to prove the truth of the word.

Henry’s voice was warmth, itself, his own eyes rimmed with red, his lips rounded with a ceaseless
smile that seemed to beam from each pore of his skin, washing over all the room in golden light. When Anne spoke, her voice was clear and bold. She was straight with certainty, black eyes a blade of earnest light that seemed to drink in Henry’s warmth. As she spoke, Henry massaged her dear fingers, but he did not for a moment shy from her gaze. That was a power, Mary considered, to hold so fierce a look, and meet it with adoration. Doom hung over their union like a cloud, Mary thought, but they had seized love and happiness from its very teeth, and there was no more potent cause in all of history for joy than that.

“Don’t cry, Mary,” Anne sister told her after the ceremony was finished, taking her hands and pulling her close. “We are happy, so happy, Mary, so happy.”

Despite herself, Mary laughed. “Don’t you see, Nan? That’s why I weep.”

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RICHARD IV, KING OF ENGLAND
Northamptonshire, England
January 1521

The Tower loomed, a hulking shadow across his consciousness. It had been too many years, he tried to tell himself, since the end of his beginning to let it eat away at him, now. Yet, as they traversed the sweeping expanse of his kingdom, eat it did. Richard pictured her there, his queen, trapped as once he had been, frightened as once he had been, with not even the illusion of some formidable uncle to shield her. Illusion, yes, that was the word. Richard remembered too well the end of his predecessor to call it anything else. And now Richard’s queen stood besieged behind those hulking walls – meant to subdue those without but used, now, to shelter those within.

In his travel bed, Richard rolled onto his back, sighing upward at the canvas above him. The tent billowed in the blustering wind, but Richard watched with heedless eyes as it whipped. Across these endless streams and fields and woods she waited, his wife. Richard wondered if aid would come for her soon enough, or if – like his brother – it would arrive too late.

Restless, Richard peeled the sheets away from himself, stalking out of his tent and into the night. The wind lapped at him, tugging at his nightshirt and the boots he’d hastily stepped into, and his hair, once a fine auburn, now streaked with silver. Closing his eyes, he felt the cold snap of winter entwining him, zinging about him like the caress of a capricious lover. All he could think of was the whimper of frightened women and the screams of dying men.

“Lizzie,” he whispered, hands fisting at his sides. “Have you forgotten me?”

But his sister was faraway and her sons beset him now, on all sides. How could he think anyone remembered what had been? So much had passed since he had been a prince locked in the Tower at the pleasure of an uncle whose mind remained to him a dark enigma. How could anyone remember?

Chapter End Notes

Anne’s quip about her little neck is an actual quote: something she said at the Tower while awaiting her execution. You can read more about it here: https://www.theanneboleynfiles.com/18-may-1536-postponement-preparation-prayer/

Thomas Boleyn did, indeed, seem to have in some way quarreled with Henry VII,
though it was likely in the latter portion of his realm. We, however, don't have many
details about it save that he was on the petition roll for Henry VIII's coronation. You can
read a little about it here: https://www.theanneboleynfiles.com/sir-thomas-boleyn-father-
of-anne-boleyn/ Big shout out to Haley @boleynqueens for turning me onto this
fact!!!!!!!! THANKS, BABE!!!!!!!!!!

Anne and Henry do appear to have been married privately in January (of 1533). Anne
was probably already about a month pregnant at the time. That being said, they are also
said to have been married or perhaps bindingly pre-contracted in November 1532. You
can read more about it here: https://www.theanneboleynfiles.com/a-secret-marriage/

Finally, pre-contracts could be consummated and were then considered a legally binding
marriage. Here's a blurb about that: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Precontract
Red Drifting Snow

Chapter Summary

“Stop!” shrieked the king, swinging his broadsword. His foes fell before him. The shadows remained.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

ARTHUR TUDOR, KING OF ENGLAND
Gloucestershire, England
February 1521

The past months’ campaign had proven fortuitous for Arthur Tudor. Castle after castle had fallen to him, till now he was master of the border between England and Wales, fortifying each edifice with men loyal to him. Standing on the parapets of his latest conquest, he watched the red dragon pennant flapping boldly. In one hand he held the frayed emblem of Perkin Warbeck, stolen from Arthur’s own grandfather, Edward IV – the sun in splendor. Ironic, now, to rush up against it, wearing Edward’s own crowned helm.

Arthur held the helmet in his free hand: Arthur’s father had claimed it at Bosworth and Arthur’s mother had brought it with her into exile. It had been her last gift to Arthur before he had set out to reclaim the throne. “Your grandfather,” she’d said very softly. “Would be proud.”

But now Perkin Warbeck claimed Edward’s banner and his heritage, using what was rightfully Arthur’s against him.

Imposter, thought Arthur, blackly, and crushed the sunny pennant in his hand. He passed his helm to a page and strode forward towards the chambers that were now reserved for him. The pennant fluttered to the ground. A thousand muddy boots tramped over it.

An army of pages and squires skittered through the halls – pausing to bow obeisance to their king as he passed – dragging Arthur’s personal effects and maps and maps and maps, charts and papers, books and quills and precious ink…All that was needed to run a war from a single room and all that was needed to run Arthur from the same. He watched the frenetic motion of them languidly, reading it. There was the jolt of victory to their steps, as well as groomed military order, and Arthur felt a stab of regal pride. Hard he had worked for all of this; hard he had fought.

“The table here,” Arthur instructed, coming to stand near the spot as the young men came in with it. He gripped one side along with them as it came close, helped settle it, and thanked them each before beginning to organize the countless scrolls and tomes upon it. “Bring a seat next,” he told them, as they left. He had many letters to write and missives to sign. They stood but a breath away from Oxford and the Thames.

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CATHERINE OF ARAGON, QUEEN OF ENGLAND
Tower of London, England
She could see the Tudor ships from her window. Catherine peered carefully out at them, red flags waving like blood in the air. Tower Bridge was fortified, as were the banks of the river and, for some time, there had been a silent standoff as the Tudor army stood to their back, beyond the walls, and the Tudor navy to their front, along the water. The Tudor forces allowed news of a string of Tudor victories to reach the Queen, but she suspected that any news from her husband was held up.

There had been no word from him, but there had also been no word of him, which informed Catherine’s view: surely, if he were dead, the Tudor forces would be certain to flaunt the news. As **Catherine had no children by him**, the Tudor forces must reason: **What, then, would she be defending?** The answer was obvious to Catherine: his nephew, Dickon’s, rights, of course. That nephew was at present with the King. As with Richard, Catherine had no reasons to fear for Dickon’s safety: surely the demise of the king’s heir would be something equally demoralizing to the Yorkist cause and, therefore, something the Tudor forces would also pass along.

No, Catherine had no cause to doubt that Richard was on his way, but she almost wished he were not. She did not wish him ill; did not wish him dead: but she did wish for an honorable surrender. Catherine did not wish to fight. Her duty told her that she must, so she did, but she wished it could be some other way.

Catherine marked her map red as each new missive brought news of another fallen Yorkist stronghold. Tudor victories ran from all across the Welsh border and plunged deep into the west of England, itself. As she marked her map she thought, **Here is Arthur now, and, Now is he here.** The line of Tudor red edged nearer and nearer to her, but she wished it nearer still. She preferred to think it was led by Arthur, rather than the alternative that he had died when his brother was captured and the army along Wales fought now in Henry’s name. These were, she felt sure, the two alternatives. After all, Arthur was not here. If he sat outside her walls, Catherine knew, he would have sent her word. **Surely**, she thought. **He would.** She wondered what she would do, if such a letter arrived. She could form no sure answer.

Catherine’s head pounded from the noise of constant construction outside the walls. Tudor hammers banged and banged and banged, and the mighty trebuchet they built went up and up and up. Soon, she estimated, it would be ready. Already, her archers had managed to burn down two others, but they’d started again and well out of her range. Inside the walls, they were helpless to do aught but watch as their doom rose.

Catherine was hungry, too, but she said nothing. The rations were cruel to them all, but their necessity was lethal. Surrounded as it was, London was in full siege without any source of supplies beyond what was already within the city’s walls. They must wait, Catherine knew, and conserve food – or starve. Catherine knew the others felt it, as well. Glancing around at her ladies, she saw their pale visages with an aching soul. **How cruel this world is**, Catherine thought with a heavy heart.

Yet, there was a face missing. The Queen leaned towards Mary Carey. “Where is Mistress Anne?”

“Ill again this morning, Your Grace,” replied Mary soberly. She forced a smile and stabbed her embroidery with her needle.

“Perhaps I should send my physician to her.”

Mary shook her head. “There is no need, Your Grace. She is already attended.”

“I fear for her,” confided Catherine, softly. “Her illness has been quite prolonged.”
Mary opened her mouth, thought better and glanced away. She did not respond.

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ANNE BOLEYN, LADY TO QUEEN CATHERINE OF ENGLAND
Tower of London, England
February 1521

“Anne, the Queen frets,” said Mary, running a soothing hand down her sister’s back. “This cannot last.”

“Believe me, I would it had not begun,” Anne replied, sullenly. “The Queen has noticed my absence?”

“How could she not!” exclaimed Mary. “It is continuous.”

“She would notice far more if I were to be sick in her presence,” remarked Anne, irritably.

“It is time to discuss the possibility that you are with child, Anne.”

Anne shook her head, miserably, but she could find no words, no words to put off her sister. No words to put off the inevitable.

“There is a great deal of evidence that you may well be.”

“I don’t understand! We were so careful!”

“These things happen, Nan,” replied Mary softly. “And, if it has happened, we must deal with it.”

Anne shrugged. “If I am with child, I am ruined, Mary. Ruined.”

“There are two options, as I see it. We can claim that the child was conceived out of wedlock. You will be shamed, but you will be safe.”

“No!”

“Or,” added Mary, ruefully. “If you prefer your pride to your safety, then we can tell the truth.”

Anne stared blankly at her sister, drank in the stern look in her eyes and glanced away again. “What if it’s a boy?” she whispered, but she knew already the answer. Such a child would be in danger, here, from the instant anyone knew of its heritage, particularly its legitimacy. “Even if we lie, someday the truth will out. If Arthur does not win this war, my child will never be safe, Mary. Never!”

Mary pulled her sister close. “Shhhh, shhh,” she whispered, rocking her. “We will protect it, Nan. We Boleyns, if no one else shall: we will keep your baby safe. Together.”

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RICHARD IV, KING OF ENGLAND
London, England
February 1521

He called for a halt upon the hill. Dawn’s first spark glistened on the horizon off their left shoulder, but Richard focused his gaze upon the walled city beyond them and the bristling camp of warriors surrounding her. All the world was carpeted in white and snow swirled from the pale skies in pale
droplets. From the height of his horse, Richard gazed upon the people, all specks below. Even from here, he could almost hear the occasional shout, the work of their tools. A mighty trebuchet rose from the ground, almost complete, and Richard felt anger broiling deep in his stomach. He raised his sword to the army behind him, felt every muscle tense. “For England,” he breathed and swung the sword down.

The charge began.

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Slam. They hit the scrambled Lancastrians like a rock. Richard felt the impact against shields and bodies in his gut as his horse trampled through them all. Screams, black dirt raining in clumps, white snow turned red. Richard stabbed with his sword; swung with his shield. Sling! His sword sliced. It seemed to glow Tudor red. Skee! It rang out: a song of death. The snow drifted in Plantagenet white. A knight approached, swinging a mace. Richard held up his shield, felt the blow ring through his bones. He stabbed outward, crunched against armor and chainmail, stabbed again, ducked away from another vicious blow. Thought unbidden of Catherine and of Catherine – Gordon and Trastámara – and swung his blade.

London, London swam up to meet him, it’s walls shadowing them. From here, he could spot the gleaming White Tower and his father’s fluttering banner: the sun in splendor. The hulking Tower whispered in the back of his head, slithering like a glittering serpent through the slick shadows of his consciousness. Brother Ned flung out a childish hand and screamed, “DICKON!” through strangled throat.

Richard screamed, too. Stabbing, stabbing furiously. The knight opposing him clutched at his throat and fell back, streaming blood. Richard slashed out; raged against another knight nearby.

Uncle Richard’s voice again, and again, and again: “Forgive me.”

“Stop!” shrieked the king, swinging his broadsword. His foes fell before him. The shadows remained.

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CATHERINE OF ARAGON, QUEEN OF ENGLAND
Tower of London, England
February 1521

They rushed to the window as one. Yet, the crowd by it parted before her like the Red Sea. Catherine leaned forward, her hand resting against the chilly stone told her the scene was real. “The King!” she exclaimed. “Go! Send forth our knights. To the king! To the king!”

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RICHARD DE LA POLE
London, England
February 1521

“Fuck, fuck!” Richie fumbled with his helmet, pointing a half-gauntleted hand as his squire struggled with the straps. There Warbeck’s army raged, and here Catherine’s poured from the open city gates, slamming into his men from both sides. “If ever you were to change the tide, Ed, do it now,” muttered Richie, swinging up onto his horse. Turning the head, he rode against Richard, pointing to one of his cadets, shouting directions, then another.
Richie slammed his heels into his mount, galloping towards the front. Confusion screamed in his ears. “To me!” he shouted. “To me!” A volley of arrows rained from the city walls. “To me! To me!” The army gathered and Richie pointed them against Richard, pointed another fork towards Catherine. He remembered his history: he must prevent double envelopment. Catherine’s men were starved; Warbeck’s men were exhausted. Richie knew he could do this, he could do this, he could do this. His sword flashed, screaming across the brightening sky as the sun rose to the right of him.

*Turn them*, he thought, suddenly. *To face the rising sun. Blind them.*

“Keep formation! Press them boldly here! Do not falter!” he shouted to his generals. And elsewhere: “Let them have this spot, let them drive you here!” *Let them think they have the advantage.*

The battle was begun.

Chapter End Notes

to be continued! Sorry about the cliffhanger!! I promise, all will be resolved!
The Sun in Splendor

Chapter Summary

The Thames itself seemed to glow with fire as Richie raised his sword in savagery.

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning for gore! If you don't want to read this chapter, you can locate a brief summary at the end of the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

RICHARD DE LA POLE
London, England

February 1521

Snow swirled about them in droves of white, like clouds descended from the heavens. All around, shrieks shriilled across the field. The sun cast its golden hue across the weary sky, streaking it with tendrils of brilliant color. Richie spurred his horse, thundering across the plains. “Drive them!” he shouted. “Drive them!”

Weary soldiers clashed. Swords and spears slashed outwards, the air choaked with the screams of dying men. Swearing, swinging his sword, Richie rode amongst them. “Drive them! Drive them!”

Richie did not know how long it had been, hardly thought of it at all, but exhaustion wreathed his bones and cramped his muscles as he rode left and right, forward and back. On and on and on, his men clashed. On and on and on the day drew. A hand flung before his eyes, Richie squinted into the growing daylight. Blind them, he thought. It was their best chance, beyond his brother. Defect, thought Richie. Do it, now, Ed! Do it now!

Richie’s forced pressed Warbeck’s army, shifting them so that they faced into the rising sun. Blinding the enemy would give a solid advantage, but Richie knew they needed so much more than that. “Now is the time, Ed,” muttered Richie. “Now is the time.”

Taken unawares, the Lancastrians ran amuck in confusion across the white-painted field of death. Snow fell and so, too, did Richie’s army. It was bad enough to be taken by surprise from the rear, Richie considered: worse, still, by the man they’d once called King. For all that Richie’s forces had defected, they had been raised from infancy to bow before the unfurled banner of the sun-in-splendor, spread in its glory across the host that now assaulted them. They had turned, yes, but their upbringing could not be. Some part of them – indeed, some part of even himself – quailed before the Plantagenet Kings they had always known. Resolve weakened and so, too, did limbs as the battle drew on.

Still, Richie also knew that maneuvering the sun-in-splendor banners to face down the real sun in all its true splendor would help, and that was something in itself. It was, perhaps, all they had. The Thames itself seemed to glow with fire as Richie raised his sword in savagery.
HENRY COURTIENAY, EARL OF DEVON  
London, England  
February 1521

Shrieks. Hal had never been in a battle before. His squire stumbled, red blood flowing freely from a fresh wound. An awful gurgling sound and blood, more blood. Hal was numb with horror. Squire’s red hand shot out as he stumbled forward. Hal reached for him, watched the squire ring bloody hands around him as he fell, felt the shock of the impact as he plummeted, glanced down to see that he wore, now, a long stripe of red blood down his length. Hal felt sick, rattled. He watched as the snow bled red.

His charger screamed a warning. Reared up to batter enemies. Hal swallowed his breath and gripped his sword hard.

“FOR ENGLAND!” someone bellowed.

Hal gasped, breathed in and breathed out his own call, “FOR ENGLAND!”

Lashing out with his sword, he hacked at the enemy. His sword was red, the snow was white. Hal plunged it through his enemy to the hilt. For England, he thought, desperately. For England. His eyes clouded and he realized he was weeping. “FOR ENGLAND!” he screamed aloud.

He spotted the King. Richard IV lay waste to all who came near, lashing and slashing, screaming aloud. His regal limbs were possessed as though by the Demon, himself, and Hal felt an awful prickle sizzle along his spine. There was no order. The men were afraid. His heart rattled against his ribcage, his lungs screamed for air. Someone do something! he thought, petrified, and his chest constricted with a sudden thought.

Hal raised his sword. “To me!” he shouted. “To me!” Confusion howled in his ears. “To me! To me!”

The colors of Gloucester flashed before Hal’s eyes, and Dickon of Warwick road up alongside him. “How now, cuz?” called Dickon, raising his spear above him.

A thrill through Hal’s chest, confidence spurring back to life. I am not alone. “Never happier to see you!”

The men flocked to the united banners of Gloucester and Devon. “Fight!” shouted Hal. “For God and for England! Fight!”

Knights struggled against them in confusion, falling here, stalling there: one side of their line seemed to fold entirely under Yorkist pressure. Hal could see no plan behind any of it. Yes, they had taken the Lancastrians unawares! “Press the advantage,” commanded Hal. “Harry them sharply!”

EDMUND DE LA POLE, DUKE EARL OF SUFFOLK  
London, England  
February 1521

He heard the distant shouts: ‘To me, to me!’ Ed peered through the slit of his visor. The colors of Devon and Gloucester fluttered together at the crest of a hill: Yorkists hastened to the call. Ed swore sharply, softly. Lancastrians fell in droves before the onslaught, red collapsing beneath white. This
was not how it was supposed to go. None of this was according to plan. Yanking at his sword, Ed slashed outwards. His mind was not in it, his heart fluttered fast away. His mind settled deep within, pouring over old thoughts and conversations, letters scribbled and sent beneath the cover of darkness – and the seal of Arthur Tudor, would-be King of England.

No, Ed decided. No, this called for a shift, a change in plans. Ed could do far more good just where he was. This was not the ultimate battle, it was only a beginning, and that meant it was time to adapt. Richie would have to do likewise.

Cursing, Ed turned his horse to face Gloucester and Devon. “Onward!” he called to the men around him. “Onward and to the King!”

Now to focus on tearing a rent through the Lancastrian line. Riding to his young cousins, Dickon and Hal, Ed saluted. “Break through the line!” he shouted over the relentless racket, fighting his way through the throng to them. “Halve them and claim victory!” Ed threw his hand up to shield his eyes as blinding light glared through his helm. They were facing directly into the glory of the rising sun. “We must halve them! Now!”

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RICHARD DE LA POLE
London, England
February 1521

The fresh-falling snow splattered red with Lancastrian blood. It soaked through the white blanket, splashed with queasy color from the rising sun: that ferocious glare which gave the Tudor cause its last chance in London. Ed did not turn. And at this point, Richie realized with a sickening tumble of his stomach, he was not likely to. Now it was the sun that offered their last best chance. Now it was simply to get the bulk of the army to safety and save the cause with them. The sun would provide cover as they retreated to the ships. Arthur was on his way, stood on the brink of the Thames. Best, Richie considered, to meet him there. Best to salvage his army.

This withdrawal would require an organized approach. Riding to his captains each in turn, Richie gave direction. He detested the word retreat, feared its implications and refused to use it, but it was not lost on him that that was just what this was. Richie pressed the front lines steadily against the Yorkists, ordered group after group after group head to the ships.

“Hold them!” he commanded the frontline. “We must hold them here!”

Richie rode up and down the line, fighting and fighting and fighting. The rising sun was blinding, shrouding the retreating army in brilliant light, shrouding them from the notice of the enemy as they slipped away, away, away.

*Live, thought Richie. Live to fight another day.*

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RICHARD IV, KING OF ENGLAND
London, England
February 1521

“Your Grace, Your Grace!”

It was far away, that voice, far away but present in a way the other voices were not. ‘Forgive me,’ whispered Uncle Richard ever and anon; ‘Dickon!’ screamed brother Ned. The sword slid from the
King’s hand. He seized a fistful of his horse’s mane; realized he was shivering.

“The battle is won, Your Grace,” said the faraway voice.

Richard leaned forward, outstretched hand flat against the stallion’s neck, supporting him.

“The fighting is over,” the voice told him.

“Forgive me,” said Uncle Richard. “Forgive me.”

“Forgive me,” said Uncle Richard. “Forgive me.”

“Your Grace, the city is ours.”

Ned flung out a childish arm towards him, “Dickon!”

“Mother,” whimpered Richard. “Father.”

He felt it, suddenly. A hand on his shoulder. Richard bolted, reeling towards the intruder, pulling away. The intruder jumped back. “Your Grace?”

“Ed,” whispered Richard, gained his voice again as he recognized his cousin. “M-my Lord Suffolk.”

“The battle is won, Your Grace,” said Ed, bowing. His eyes were wild, but his face was staunch and stoic as though there were nothing amiss. Richard clutched his fist over his heart and swallowed past his heartache. He knew that, for whatever victory had been won here, he had lost his own personal battle. Ed stretched out his hand and Richard followed it, eyes trailing the line he seemed to draw in the air towards the city.

Trembling, the king looked away.

“Forgive me,” said Uncle Richard. “Forgive me.”

“Your Grace, is it not time to ride into the city, victorious? The enemy is fled.”

Richard did not answer. He could not tear his eyes away from the vision that swam before his eyes.

The hulking silhouette of the Tower stood between Richard and the splendor of the rising sun.

Chapter End Notes

The sun-in-splendor is the emblem of Edward IV, which was adopted by Richard IV.

If you’re looking for a brief summary, here it is: The Lancastrians, taken unawares and outnumbered by the combined forces of Richard IV and Catherine of Aragon, retreat to their ships on the Thames, hoping to meet Arthur. Edmund de la Pole had intended to defect and join his brother, but thinks better of it, which also helps turn the tide in Yorkist favor, and thus making the retreat a necessity. Richard IV successfully seizes London, but faces down the looming threat of losing the rest of the country, in the process. Throughout the battle, he is haunted by harrowing flashbacks to his childhood as a captive in the Tower...
Shadow of the Tower

Chapter Summary

Each stone seemed to close in, staring in accusation at him: *Survivor,* they growled. *Escapee. Coward.*

RICHARD IV, KING OF ENGLAND
Palace of Westminster, England
February 1521

“You’ve met him?” Richard’s voice was raw, still: raw from screams, from gasps, raw from the terror that came with battles, and battles remembered. He raised a hand to his chest, ran his fingers along the gilded chain of office resting there. “You’ve met my nephew, Henry?”

He noted how Catherine’s eyes darted away, before returning to settle stubbornly on his chin. “I did, yes.”

“I shall assume it was not a friendly encounter.”

Catherine’s eyes flashed up to meet his own, held there, and she inclined her head. “His feelings at the time were rather too turbulent, it seems, for even the appearance of charitable discourse.”

Richard bowed his head. “Understandable,” he murmured and flicked his orbs towards the window. “Doubtless, he doesn’t know if his own brother lives or has died.”

His queen was silent for a moment, pondering the flames in the mantel sullenly. She did not look at him. “No word reached any of us, here, either. Does he? Does he…live?”

Richard nodded, coming to assume a seat beside her. “It seems so. A large army flying his colors emerged from Wales at much the same time his brother arrived here and, since, has marched across England, and now nearly reached Oxford.” Catherine turned to him so abruptly Richard heard her jewels chime as they clanked together. Her eyes were misty and Richard stretched out a hand to touch her chin. “Do not be afraid, my love. We will survive every hurdle God sends to us.”

Catherine looked away just as suddenly. Richard’s hand fell away from her face, but she seemed not to notice. She looked unseeingly towards her lap. “Of course,” she murmured, distractedly. “Of course.”

Richard swallowed hard. “Will you tell me of him?”

He watched her blue eyes cloud with confusion, and she turned searchingly. “Arthur?”


“Oh,” she said. “Henry.” Catherine arched a brow, her mouth opened as though to speak, closed again. She stood abruptly, went to the mantel. “Henry…” she mumbled again, staring into the flames as though the word were meaningless to her. She shook her head. “Yes, yes, I…did. I met him. He was not terribly civil.” Catherine ran the two first fingers of her right hand over those of the left,
clutched with them, looked into the fire, again.

“Did he insult you?”

Catherine looked to her husband as though startled. Then she blinked, shook her head. “No, he…He was truthful, but I did not much want to hear the truth.”

Richard felt a pang of guilt. He had been told of all Catherine had done in his absence and, as beautifully as she had it all, he knew she should never have had to. Her nephew had given her in marriage with the understanding that these wars were finished and, besides, Richard should have been there, should have been at her side, should have been the king she deserved. He patted the seat by him once again and she looked blankly at it, before coming to sit down again. When she did, Richard clasped her hands in his own. “My dear,” he began in his softest tones. “Were you afraid?”

Her eyes were limpid blue, a cerulean that put him in mind of the sky in spring: clear, bright, open, and she gazed at him. He took her hand in his own and watched as, slowly, unwillingly, she nodded. Covering her other hand with his, he nodded. “So was I,” he admitted. “But there is nothing now to fear. Believe me when I tell you this, Catherine: I will never allow anything to happen to you. You are safe.”

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RICHARD IV, KING OF ENGLAND

Palace of Westminster, England

February 1521

The Tower loomed, a hulking mass of stone and horror. Richard gazed up at the wretched place as it cast its long shadow over him. He had lost his battle out on the battlefield, and Richard steeled himself. He would not lose this one. Squaring his shoulders, he rode across the bridge, entering the Tower of London. He had not been inside since he had been a child. He had hoped never to return. His heart skittered inside him, his breath came in clumps and patches, but he rode into the courtyard, notwithstanding.

“Take me to Henry Tudor,” he ordered.

He placed a gloved hand on the outside stones of the portal before he crossed inside the keep.

“Forgive me,” pleaded Uncle Richard’s voice.

He went in.

It did not truly take so very long to come to the chamber, but it seemed a dire eternity. The dank darkness was the same, the awful scent and the filtered shafts of dingy light just as he had remembered them. Each stone seemed to close in, staring in accusation at him: Survivor, they growled. Escapee. Coward. Richard bowed his head, subduing his ragged breath, and walked on. Round and round and round the steps wound, hearty divots dug into each step from centuries of passage, his own included.

He remembered well traipsing these same footfalls on tiny, eager feet. “Ned, Ned!” his childish voice sang out. “Come out and play! Come outside, Ned!”

Richard stumbled on the next step.

“Your Grace!” exclaimed one of the guards, throwing out a hand as though to catch him, save him

Bowing his head, Richard made a fist and struck at the wall with the side of it, twice. The reality of the wall was solid and cold. You’ve returned, it said. But the walls were smaller now, more closed in, and they were distant as though he’d walked them only in a dream. They were real, but they felt foreign. This was no longer a home to him. It was no longer a prison. Richard exhaled a hollow breath and took the next step.

“I’m fine,” he growled. They walked on.

At last they came to the cell. Richard waved his guards away as he approached. “I wish to be left alone with my nephew,” he instructed, and he reached for the latch that held the door closed. His hand closed around it, feeling the cold metal even through his gloved hand. He pulled the bar back. The door screeched protest as it opened. He stepped inside.

Henry Tudor was seated on a small cot by the window and turned with curious eyes to take him in. “I know who you are,” he said. His eyes were the darkest tone of blue, and turbulent, accusing.

Ned threw out his hand and Richard looked quickly away, willing the vision away. Richard swallowed, looked back to Henry, found the young man’s brow contorted with confusion. Richard drew a chair to the spot beside the cot. “You remind me of my brother,” Richard said, as though it were enough to explain.

Henry stared, did not speak, said at last: “You do not make me think of mine.”

“You look a little like him,” continued Richard, narrowing his eyes as he took in the boy. “Much like our father.”

“A comptroller of Tournai.”


“Your father was John Osbeck. Your mother was Katherine de Faro. I know who you are.”

Richard studied Henry: a broad face, fierce eyes, thin brows, copper hair. Yes, this boy was Plantagenet, there could be no denying it. He wondered, then, that Henry could deny Richard’s own ancestry. “You truly believe that, don’t you?”

“I do.”

“And your mother? Does she believe it, as well?”

“She does.”

Richard bowed his head, ran his knuckles across his lips absently. He thought of Lizzie, gentle Lizzie, winding her arms around him. “Dickon, all will be well, soon. All will be well.” Richard cleared his throat. “You know, it is one of my great regrets that I never met your father.”

Henry’s brow pulled downward, dark eyes studying Richard.

“It is. For all that we each harried each other, he was an impressive man. I feel that we each might have learned much from the other. I wish that we had been brothers, as we ought to have been, rather than foes. I wish that we had never had cause to war against one another.”

Henry laughed a humorless laugh. “Then perhaps you ought never to brought war to our doorstep.
Perhaps you ought have let us all live in peace.”

Shaking his head, slowly, Richard barked out a humorless laugh of his own. “Perhaps. But then, you are hardly one to lecture me for bringing an army to England to reclaim a lost throne.”

“We have the right of it,” growled Henry. “You do not.”

“I want to tell you something, Henry. I want to tell you something I wished could have been said to me, here, once: You need not fear, Henry. Your brother is still alive.”

Henry looked frozen, as though a snap of ice had turned him to stone on the spot: frozen in the quagmire of emotion. Red rimmed his eyes as unshed tears infected them. He said nothing.

“He is alive and he is marching this way. Your cause still has much reason to hope.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because,” he began, kneading his left hand with his right. “I know that you, too, were once a little boy trapped here for your own safety only to loose everything, and now you are trapped here once again. I know what it is to be afraid.”

Henry’s face crumbled, then turned to anger, he looked quickly away, determinedly out his slit of a window, and Richard rested in the silence.

“I still hear my brother’s voice, you know,” said Richard. “And my uncle’s. He was not the monster your lot made him out to be, but he was not perfect, either. I learned to fear him. I learned to fear your father, as well. I pray you have not learned to fear me.”

Henry still did not look at him, but he chuckled, a sound that was half a sob. “My father would be glad to hear it.”

Richard bowed his head. “It is not lost on me, Henry, that you, too, are a second son of a man once the king, locked up in here by your Uncle Richard. It is not lost on me.”

Slowly, Henry turned to face him. Tear lines marked his face, but he was not crying now. He stared baldly at Richard, stared at him as though his words were alien and meaningless. When he spoke, his lips became a sneer. “You are not my uncle.”

“Does this place haunt you, Henry, like it haunts me?” Richard rose, slowly, from his seat, gazing beseechingly at the younger man. Henry’s eyes were flint as he gazed up, but he did not respond. Richard nodded. “I can see that it does. For that, my boy, I am sorry.” He reached out as though to touch Henry’s face, paused in the air between them when he saw his hand was shaking. Tears of his own hovered on the brink of falling and his voice quavered. “Forgive me.”
Chapter Summary

“By order of King Edward V and Parliament, you will hand over the Duke of York to be lodged with his brother the King in the Tower of London. You will do so immediately.”

Chapter Notes

tw: death

This is a flashback chapter. Since there are so many Elizabethts and Richards, I use the same names to refer to each.

Dickon = Richard of Shrewsbury, Duke of York, the future Perkin Warbeck/Richard IV
Richard = Richard Plantagenet, Duke of Gloucester, the future Richard III
Elizabeth = Elizabeth Woodville, Queen of England
Lizzie = Elizabeth of York, Princess of England, future Queen of England
Edward = Edward IV, King of England
Ned = Edward V, King of England

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

ELIZABETH WOODVILLE, QUEEN MOTHER OF ENGLAND
Sanctuary of Westminster, London
May 1483

Cleopatrat had tested poisons on others, it was said, before she turned the asp upon herself.

Elizabeth Woodville watched her candle dwindling, guttering bleakly, unseeingly. Seven of her children remained to her, the rest of her family cast off to God knew what fate.

Tears, salty tears. Elizabeth Woodville wept in silence, suppressing the blubbering sobs that threatened, even as she shook with them. Her husband, Edward the King, was dead of a sudden; her brother, Anthony, was arrested; her son, Ned the new King, held by the man who had shackled her brother. These were desperate times, indeed. Elizabeth was no stranger to trouble, but always before there had been Edward, and always before the two of them – yes, and Richard of Gloucester had played his part, as well, loathe as she was to admit it – had formed an unbeatable union. Now the man who had held them together was dead and what remained of the union splintered. Elizabeth, for the first time in her life, was utterly alone.

When last Elizabeth had heard from Gloucester, he had promised to “come and offer submission, fealty, and all that is due” from him to his lord and King: her baby, Ned – now Edward V. Yet, Richard’s actions had proven him a liar, something which puzzled Elizabeth exceedingly. Always, before, he had been a man of his word. Yet, upon meeting up with Ned and Elizabeth’s brother, Anthony, (who had had charge of Ned,) Richard had arrested her brother and seized her son. As
soon as Elizabeth had heard the news, she’d fled with her remaining children here, to sanctuary, where she now waited and schemed while, outside, Richard took all that was not his. If there could be further proof that she were in the right, Elizabeth did not know what it might be.

Elizabeth rocked, hand clasped to her heart. They must not hear her cry. Her children must rest in peace tonight: they deserved that. She bowed her head, resting her chin against her breast. The thought plagued her that there was something, anything, she should have done – or not done – something that might have changed the course of events – something that might have saved her husband, son, brother.

“God,” she choked out. Her voice was a croak, ancient and decrepit in her own ears, and she soothed herself with the thought: Cleopatra and her asp. The ancient queen had given up and given in, but Elizabeth Woodville never would. There was recourse, still: recourse for her sons, recourse for her daughters. It was for them that she toiled, now. She would not do as desperate, beaten Cleopatra had done and slink off to her death, no. She would live and she would fight. She had failed to save her husband already. She would not fail her children. They would rule England, as their father had done, and they would survive as she, herself, had done. They would make bold their faces, and they would live and live and live. It was what her Edward would have wanted.

With one of her remaining brothers, she had taken her eldest son, Tom Grey, and her youngest son, Dickon Plantagenet, and the girls with her into sanctuary and now Richard of Gloucester dared not touch her or risk the wrath of God. Now, she decided, to regroup and think. She knew Richard. Though they had never cared one for the other, she understood him. He was a man of determination, hard numbers, yes, but he was a man of principles, as well. He would not harm her son: his own nephew. If there were but one person in all this earth that ever Richard of Gloucester had loved, it had been his brother, Edward, and Elizabeth felt sure that, even in death, that bond would not shatter. What would become of Elizabeth’s arrested brother, Anthony, was uncertainty itself, but Ned at least was safe. And Anthony, no doubt, was little more than a hostage. Richard had always been of the opinion that the Woodville clan was wild and war-mongering. Where Edward had loved Elizabeth’s passionate nature, stayed Richard feared it – and rightly so, she supposed.

Elizabeth was not yet undone.

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RICHARD OF SHREWSBURY, DUKE OF YORK
Sanctuary of Westminster, London
June 1483

“What do you think Ned is doing, now?” whispered Dickon, sitting in his sister, Lizzie’s, lap as she rocked him softly. Lizzie ran gentle fingers through his curls, arms locked around him. He felt her rest her head against his.

“I don’t know,” she replied, at last. “Probably reading or perhaps playing out in the sunshine. What do you think he’s doing?”

“Playing,” decided Dickon, nodding. “Playing swords! I wish I could play with him.”

Lizzie’s warm arms wound around him and pulled him close into a hug. “I know, Dickon, I know,” she replied. “So do I.”

Wriggling in her embrace, Dickon turned to face her, found his sister’s face wet with tears. Thoughtlessly he reached up to touch them, watched a salty bead run down his finger. “Don’t cry, Lizzie. All will be well.”
She smiled, sadly, and nodded, resting her brow against his own. “My brave boy,” he whispered. “My own sweet one. You know, Papa would be proud of you, so proud.”

Dickon felt a wave of seriousness wash over him, his heart felt larger and warmer. “You think so?”

Lizzie nodded solemnly. “I know so. He would be very proud, indeed.”

“Do you think he looks down on us from heaven, Lizzie? Do you think he wishes he were with us, now? He’d know what to do, wouldn’t he? He’d know.”

Lizzie tilted her head, brushed affectionate fingers through her little brother’s hair. “I do,” she responded, nodding. Her blue eyes were sure, despite the tears that she had so recently shed. “I think he’s waiting for us, even now. And when we die, if we’re very good, we’ll see him again in heaven.”

Dickon leaned against her, resting his head on her shoulder. “I miss him.”

Lizzie was crying, again, and so was he. She hugged him tight to her. “So do I, Dickon. So do I.”

“I’m scared, Lizzie.”

“Shhh,” his sister held him fast, rocking him soothingly. “Dickon, all will be well, soon. All will be well.”

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RICHARD PLANTAGENET, DUKE OF GLOUCESTER, LORD PROTECTOR OF ENGLAND
Sanctuary of Westminster, London
June 1483

“You dare,” sneered Elizabeth Woodville, coming forward. Her eyes were green and blazing, hellish as Greek Fire, and just as catching. “Come into a house of God and drag an innocent child from sanctuary. You coward, you spineless heathen, you-”

“Mama!” exclaimed Lizzie, catching her arm.

Elizabeth Woodville ceased speaking, but still she leaned close to Richard, chin thrust out in anger, eyes shrieking her rage. He watched her struggle, watched her efforts to reign herself in at her daughter’s touch. Always, she had been one to fly into a passion, always she had been one to leave sense and certainty behind her, one to leap to conclusions and fly into fury. Edward had loved that about her, but Richard had never understood what enticements such an illogical humor could hold. When first they’d met – his brother already married to her – Richard had assumed that her attractions had been entirely in her beauty and, indeed, she had been a marvel to behold: called the most beautiful woman in the land and rightly so. However, Edward’s feelings for her had never abated, even when her beauty had. Richard had wished to cherish Elizabeth as a sister, for Edward’s sake, yet he had never found his way to it. Always, his coolness and her heat repelled each other. Now, their enmity shook a nation.

Richard sighed softly, ordered his thoughts. “It is for the good of England.”

“The good of England,” spat Elizabeth. “How is it good for England to tear a boy away from his mother? He is but nine years old! Have you no pity? Always I have asked myself, and never have I understood it – how can you be so cold?”
“This isn’t coldness, it is reason. It is sensible for Dickon to lodge with Ned. The country is ill at ease and there is no safer spot in all of England than the Tower. They will be safe there. Don’t you see? Ned is now the heir to the throne.”

“And what is that to you?” demanded Elizabeth. “I see you, Richard Plantagenet, all you want is to control my sons, my darling boys, so you may control this nation. I won’t let you. I won’t!”

“Mama!” cried Lizzie, again, squeezing her arm. “Peace! For pity’s sake. This is not what Papa would want.” Lizzie reached in front of where Elizabeth stood and swept up Dickon her arms. The boy was crying silently.

“Then he should have lived,” Elizabeth choked out. Tears stood out in her eyes, but she refused to shed them. “He should have lived! He should have lived and he should not have abandoned us all to this awful fate.”

Lizzie turned beseeching eyes to Richard. “Please, Uncle Richard, surely you must see Mama’s distress. Surely, for Papa’s sake, there must be some-”

Richard glanced away. Tears pricked his own eyes, his throat felt close and constricted. “Lizzie,” he choked out, slowly turning back to her. “You know there is nothing I would not do for you or for your dear Papa, but I can see no other way. Dickon, don’t you wish to see Ned again?”

Dickon nodded eagerly. “Yes!” he cried, adding mournfully. “It’s sad to think of him alone with no one to play with him.”

“Particularly with the upcoming coronation, it is necessary to have Dickon on hand.” He turned back to Elizabeth Woodville. “You must see that, surely?”

“I see that you have surrounded Westminster with troops, O Lord Protector,” replied Elizabeth, scornfully. “How very safe we all do now feel.” Elizabeth took Dickon from Lizzie, cradling him in her own arms, close to her heart.

Richard stretched out of his hand. “Enough, madam. By order of King Edward V and Parliament, you will hand over the Duke of York to be lodged with his brother the King in the Tower of London. You will do so immediately.”

He watched Elizabeth Woodville’s face intently. She who had once been Queen of England, she who had once issued commands and seen them carried out. Her face quivered, her eyes seemed to dull for a moment, as though looking within, only to harden as she found his face again. Her shell had turned from stalwart steel to a brittle shell and Richard felt, for the first time in his life, a pang of pity for the woman his brother had loved.

“I swear on my honor,” added Richard, a touch softer. “I will keep them safe.”

Kneeling, Elizabeth placed her son on his own two feet again, reaching up to touch his face. “Be brave, my son. My darling, darling boy. Your Mama loves you so,” she added, wrapping him in her arms. Her eyes from over Dickon’s shoulder were flinty with malice as she stared at Richard. “Never forget,” she said to them both. “Never forget.” Pulling back, she touched Dickon’s face gently. “My darling boy. I will see you again, soon. Be brave. Be brave.”

Standing, she put a hand to Dickon’s back, pressing his towards Richard. “Now go with your Uncle Richard.” Arching a brow, she stared at the Protector. “You will be good to them both. Whatever happens, I too will never forget.”

Richard took the boy in hand and led him away.
A frightful thud. Ned felt it in the tenseness of his shoulders, felt it as it thrummed down his spine. Swallowing hard, he stared with furrowed brow at the great gates of the Tower as they swung shut once again. Riders approaching – Ned narrowed his eyes, trying to make out the figures as they came closer. Was that Uncle Richard? Yes! And a little boy…

“Dickon!” exclaimed Ned, dropping his bow and arrow and darting towards the escort bringing the Dukes of Gloucester and York to him. As soon as Dickon dropped down off the horse, Ned enveloped him in a warm hug. Over his brother’s shoulder, he spotted Uncle Richard smiling down at them. Something was sad in his look, a weariness that hovered behind his eyes.

Quickly, Uncle Richard dismounted. “At last,” he said. “All is well.”

“Dickon, how long are you visiting me?” inquired Ned.

“Dickon is not merely visiting you, Ned,” Uncle Richard informed. “He is to stay with you, at least until your coronation.”

“When will that be?” asked Ned. “Last I heard it was to be the 22 of this month, is that so?”

Richard reached up to his hat, adjusting how it sat. “I do not recall, just now. There is much to be done toward that end, Ned. I must away.”

“When will we see you again? It’s been so long since I’ve seen anyone…”

Richard mounted his horse swiftly. “Soon,” he said. “Soon.” He turned his mount’s head and rode away.

“Ned?” Ned’s eyes were shut, but Dickon could see his eyes moving beneath the lids. “Ned, won’t you come out and play?”

The lids fluttered open, green eyes, struggling to focus, eventually found Dickon’s face. “Of course, little brother,” he mumbled. His voice was quiet, so quiet. Dickon strained to hear. “Just a moment more and I shall attend you.”

Dickon worried at his bottom lip with his teeth. He did not like the slow, half-slurred way in which Ned was speaking. “Come on,” he said, coming over to tug at his brother’s hand. “Let’s not do this anymore. Let’s go out into the sunshine. Doesn’t that sound nice?”

He watched Ned’s brow knit, his eyes – green as their mother’s – sluggishly settled on his face. “Why don’t you go out and play? I’ll come and meet you.”

Dickon rubbed his arm. “All right,” he mumbled, unconvinced. “But you’ll come out soon, won’t you?”
Ned nodded, shutting his eyes, again. He coughed, breathing laboredly for a moment, his head lolling back against the wall behind him.

Tears pricked Dickon’s eyes. He did not like this at all. It had to stop, had to stop. If he just came out, things would be different…Dickon bit his lip. “Promise?”

The eyes fluttered open again, settling directly on Dickon. He gazed at him for a long moment, almost sharply, and then he nodded very gravely. “I’ll come out and play with you soon,” said Ned. “I promise.”

He did not keep his promise.

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Dickon stretched his hand as far through the window slit as it would go, feeling, feeling, feeling. Though meant to keep arrows out, the window was just wide enough for the boy to reach out. Falling rain tickled his fingertips in wet, cold drips. For days, now, it had rained, providing an excuse to keep him bottled up inside, but Dickon knew better. He was no more to go out than he was to leave this cursed Tower. He had thought, when he left Sanctuary, that it was to be free at last. Too late he realized his miserable mistake. Both he and his brother were prisoners here and everyone was afraid.

Summer was an assault to the senses – dismal and hot and dismally hot. The Tower reeked and so did everyone in it. And Ned, Ned was ill. Everyday Dickon went and sat with him, everyday extracted the promise – “We’ll go outside again, we’ll go outside and play again.”

Everyday, Ned promised that he would.

Everyday, he did not.

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JOHN ARGENTINE, PHYSICIAN
Tower of London, England
July 1483

The boys’ breathing was dreadful to hear, rasping, gasping, and wretched. Twelve and nine, the sons of the late King Edward IV. Dr. Argentine had a whole medical team at his disposal, set to save the one-time Princes in the Tower, but no matter how many attendants, their condition did not seem much to improve. The doctor had bled them, just as Aristotle and all medical knowledge commanded for the balancing of their humors, but both boys seemed to grow only worse despite their treatments. He’d shut out all the windows, kept the harmful breath of the outdoors away from them, yet the pestilence increased. He heated the room, yet their fevers gave no sign of breaking.

He was loosing them, these precious children, and he did not know how to stop it. At first, he’d separated the brothers, but then thought better of it and brought them together in the inner apartments of the Tower. He did not know which had been better – or if it mattered at all.

The elder of the boys certainly believed himself near death, calling often for his confessor and asking frequently about the fate of the deceased after death. He said daily confession; he performed daily penance. God save him, prayed the doctor. For I fear I cannot.

“Doctor?” one of his attendant physicians asked him.

Dr. Argentine bowed his head. “I fear we have come, now, to an end of our methods. It is in God’s
hands now.” He cleared his throat. “Still, we shall remain here until it is all over and there is – for one reason or another – no more that we can do.”

He prayed that they recovered. He feared they would not.

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RICHARD OF SHREWSBURY, PRINCE OF ENGLAND
Tower of London, England
July 1483

Click, click, click. Dickon’s eyes were blank and blurry, gazing in sluggish confusion towards the constant sound, a drip of water sloping from the rain somewhere outside. Beside him, he heard forced, ragged breathing: a wretched sound, guttural like gasps, wet and bubbling like foam. It was a sickness caught in his throat, his ears, his gut…Dickon burned, his fingers felt blistered, heat engorged his senses, but beside him, his brother was shivering.

A different voice prattled nearby, urgent and frightening, but it seemed somehow removed to Dickon: only the thick, slushy sound of his brother’s rasping breath was real, something seeping and sticky. The voice droned on, on, on, but it was an urgent sound, now not so frightening as frightened. Dr. Argentine, he realized, dully. The adults are scared. He turned to look at his brother, in the bed beside him. This isn’t real, he thought, but it surrounded him, It can’t be happening, he reasoned. But it was.

Dickon’s head pounded, protested as though a fiery iron rod inside his skull connected temple to temple. Take it out, take it out, take it out! The boy moaned, rolled. He felt something like flesh, but cold. His brother’s hand. Dickon choked on his own breath, pushed dazedly against the sheets to raise his chest.

“Mama,” shrilled an almost-unfamiliar voice beside him: his brother’s voice gurgled around the desperate sound and Dickon turned blearily towards him. Ned was crying. “Mama, Mama!” Ned threw out his hand towards him. “Dickon!” Drool ran down Ned’s cheeks, foaming and plastering his clothes and sheets in its drying crust. His face was white as undyed wool. Blood from cuts administered by the doctors sank into the linen around them and turned dark like mud. Dickon closed his hand around his brother’s. Ned’s choking breath cloyed, his eyes bulged, staring sightlessly. Suddenly, Ned seized stiff and still, jaw clamped shut as he seemed to go rigid, then down again. His breath was less labored, then a shrill shriek, then nothing. The doctors were screaming, rushing, pulling at his brother, yanking him half from the bed, trying to pry open his mouth, beating at his body.


Ned didn’t move again.

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RICHARD III, KING OF ENGLAND
Placentia Palace, England
July 1483

The day was desolate – clouds gray and bleak. Richard balled his fists, resting them against the tabletop. Of all the outcomes he’d once so carefully calculated, he’d not foreseen this one. Bowing his head, Richard turned away, watching, watching as sheets of rain assaulted London – and beyond,
the Tower. *Forgive me, Edward,* thought Richard fervently. *Forgive me, forgive me, forgive me.* The king shook himself, cast a glance over his shoulder.

Dropping Dr. Argentine’s letter on the table, Richard sank into his chair, burying his face in his hands. At just twelve years old, little Ned was dead and Richard felt horror bubbling up, drowning at the crest of his throat. He could hardly catch his breath.

Edward had entrusted Richard with his family and with all of England – and this is what Richard had done with it. Stolen a throne, stolen a life. Edward was dead not three months, having entrusted his young son to Richard’s care for that time, and in that time already Ned was gone and dead. Richard’s throat was dry, suddenly, his voice cracked. He’d sent them to the Tower – there was no safer place in all of England. They were supposed to be safe. He’d sent them to the Tower!

*Little Dickon,* Richard remembered, getting to his feet again so abruptly, he nearly overturned the chair behind him. Impatiently, Richard danced around it, heedless of whether it fell, and hastened to the door.

“Your Grace,” greeted the servants, bowing, who stood at the ready.

“Make ready. I go this evening to the Tower.”

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He took the steps two at a time as they wound round and round and round, hurdling upwards. The steps had divots from years of this, but he ignored the dangers. One boy survived: one chance.

He found his namesake huddled by a window. Dickon was listless, wrapped in a cloak. His eyes were bloated and red, matching Richard’s own, and he hardly looked at his Uncle. He was alone, that little boy: terribly alone and trembling.

“You said we would be safe,” whispered Dickon. His voice was strained and fresh tears flowed down his face. “You promised.” He got to his feet, shoved Richard with all his strength. “You promised, you promised, you promised! Liar! You promised!”

But Ned was already dead and gone and there were no words on earth that could ever recall him. Only Dickon remained.

Chapter End Notes

I just want to take the time here to thank all of you for your patience during this time and for returning with me to this fic! This has been a very difficult time and your understanding has been simply wonderful. A special thank you, as well, to those of you who were kind enough to express your condolences. Your support is a beautiful thing and I am so touched by it. Thank you so much!!
He knew that his cousin wondered why he smiled, but he had no answer for him. There was none he could afford to give.

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes.

ARTHUR TUDOR, KING OF ENGLAND
Sudeley Castle, England
February 1521

Physicians scurried around him like field mice harried by a hawk. Closing his eyes, Arthur breathed out slowly. The battle had cost him little more than flesh wounds – bleeding and fierce to look upon, to be sure – but of no real consequence and he found the doctors wearisome. Still, he submitted to their scruples. It would not do to fall ill. Spotting pages leading in a lord wearing the colors of Suffolk, however, he found he was relieved to wave his nurses away.

Arthur stood to greet the man. “And you,” began Arthur. “I must assume are none other than His Grace of Suffolk’s youngest brother, Richard. Well met, cousin.” It was not their meeting, of course: Arthur remembered the de la Pole brothers well from childhood, but that had been decades ago and it was a first meeting as men, as soldiers, as lord and as liege.

The older of the two chuckled as he swept a bow. “I have that honor, Your Grace.” Richard de la Pole was six years Arthur’s senior and had always seemed to him as a boy wise and sophisticated. Now, drenched in sweat and dirt and blood, Arthur felt only gratitude to see him.

“We, as king, must congratulate and thank you both for your tireless service in the defense of our realms. Your service will not be forgotten.”

“I am honored, Your Grace,” said Richie. “By your remembrance of me and mine.”

“My lord,” said Arthur, sweeping an arm. “Please, be seated. I find myself indebted. If you had not swept into Oxford when you had, the tide of battle might have gone quite differently. You not only saved and bravely commanded the Duke of York’s army, you saved our ships as well and came to our aid when we were in most dire need.” He cleared his throat. “In terms of my brother, the Duke of York, I did also hope you might be able to make a report?”

Richie nodded eagerly. “Your Grace, that I can. Unfortunately, I was deprived of the opportunity to meet with him in person by the Queen-“

Arthur’s heart leapt. “The Queen?” he asked, a bit more passionately than he intended.

“Forgive me, Your Grace,” said Richie hastily, misinterpreting Arthur’s reaction. “I meant…the Usurper’s wife.”

Arthur cleared his throat, managing dispassion as he said: “Catalina of Aragon, though no true Queen of England, is still an Infanta of Spain and Dowager Queen of France. She deserves our
respect as such.” His throat felt constricted. The Usurper’s wife, he thought. When in another life, she might have been mine.

“Forgive me,” replied Richie again, nodding, but Arthur waved a hand in dismissal.

“It is nothing. Please continue and pardon my interruptions. Her Majesty the Princess harried you, you say?” The words caught in Arthur’s throat and his mouth formed a hard line. Cat, how has it come to this?

“She did, Your Grace, and she took your brother hostage before ever I had the chance to meet him.”

“Indeed,” responded Arthur, slowly. “And he is held in London still, I gather?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” responded Richard.

“And Mistress Anne Boleyn is still there, as well?”

“Do you wish to write to her?” inquired Richie, some concern in his tone.

“No,” replied Arthur, shaking his head. “That would put her in much jeopardy for little cause. I wanted, only, to know that my brother is not entirely without friends even in his present predicament.” He forced a smile. “He’s never been one much for dealing with loneliness. There is nothing he detests or fears so much as the notion of being alone and friendless.”

“My brother is also there, still,” pointed out Richie.

“It was my understanding that he was to help you turn the tide when Perkin Warbeck returned to London. He did not follow through.” Arthur allowed the statement to hang in the air between them.

“Is he truly a friend of ours?”

Richie swallowed hard. “I am confident he simply felt the cause would be better benefited were he to remain with the Usurper…I am certain he has not switched his allegiances, Your Grace. Certain.”

Silence hung between them and, idly, Arthur wondered if Richie truly believed a word.

Arthur shifted where he sat. “I wonder, my lord, if you might not better acquaint me with the actions of the Infanta,” he added. Arthur averted his gaze towards one of the large gashes slashed across his forearm and thought grimly: This hurts less. He formed a hard line across his mouth that might almost have been a smile, had he felt any joy.

It was Richard’s turn to shift where he sat, to glance away (towards his brother), and back again. “I doubt as we shall again have cause to face her across the field, Your Grace…”

“Nevertheless, I wish to hear it.” He glared pointedly at his arm before looking back to Richard de la Pole. “One never knows.”

The expression on Richard’s face was slightly embarrassed and he bowed his head. “Yes, of course. Forgive me, Your Grace.” He cleared his throat and began. “She is a most dogged person, fierce in the protection of her rights. Why, before the battle where I rode out to join His Grace the Duke of York’s ranks, she gave a most stirring speech that, I confess, nearly cost me my resolve to abandon her. There is no one more courageous, Your Grace, and to find such high bravery in a woman, well…Your Grace, were it not for her sex, she could have defied all the heroes of history.”

Clasping a hand over the cut on his arm, Arthur stood. He felt warm and full, pride washing over him like the rising tide of a great ocean. He knew that his cousin wondered why he smiled, but he
had no answer for him. There was none he could afford to give.

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CATHERINE OF ARAGON, QUEEN OF ENGLAND  
Palace of Westminster, England  
February 1521

“So Arthur Tudor has seized Oxford,” King Richard said. “And with it, control of the lower Thames and access to the greater waterways of England…Have I forgotten anything?” Outside, the rain was ceaseless, thundering in a grey curtain across the whole of London.

Wolsey bit his lip. “Your Grace, his warships and the supplement of men who retreated from London have met him there.”

“So, my enemy has now the means to take his troops anywhere in my realm with all possible haste.”

Beads of water ran down the windowpanes outside, coursing together like wide tributaries. Pensively, Catherine ran her finger along the flow of them, tracing the weeping path they picked. Arthur, she thought. Arthur, take care. It was an illicit prayer and she dropped her hand away from the pane as though burned. Outside, it was cold. Inside, she felt colder. Catherine stood abruptly, approaching her husband and Wolsey. “Ireland,” she said. “Tell us of Ireland. We must secure the place rather than allow the Tudors to accumulate allies there as well. Your Grace,” she said to Wolsey. “I understand you have a political hostage from that place here in your very household.”

Wolsey swept a bow. “Your Grace, I have. His name is James Butler and he is, in fact, betrothed to one of your ladies: Mistress Anne Boleyn.”

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ANNE BOLEYN, LADY TO QUEEN CATHERINE OF ENGLAND  
Tower of London, England  
February 1521

“There is something I must tell you.” Anne picked her way towards her husband. It had been increasingly difficult, between the Queen’s household’s removal to Westminster Palace, and Anne’s own ongoing illness, to visit him, but she had managed today. Taking up her habitual chair at Henry’s side, she smiled uncertainly. Her belly lurched with nerves and, impulsively, she reached for his hand.

Henry’s brow furrowed and he ran his fingers comfortingly over hers. “What is it?”

She knew her face betrayed her, nerves heckling her as she bit her lip. Anne focused on his hands, his sweet hands, large and broad and capable hands, trained and used in battle – yet so warm and calm with her. She looked up to his eyes again and swallowed past the hard spot in the back of her throat. “Henry…I’ve much cause to believe…”

“What?” his voice was gentle but she could hear the sharpness of worry lying beneath its tones. Anne glanced down.

“I’m with child.” Anne looked again to his hands. They had gone suddenly still and, impulsively, she raised one to her lips, kissed it, held it to her cheek. Slowly, she raised her eyes to find his. Her heart pounded against her ribcage.

His eyes were fixed on hers, urgent and questioning, but there was shock there, too, mingled with the
other feelings yet separate, like ink in a glass of water. “What?” he whispered. His voice sounded dry, cracked, hardly a voice at all. He, too, was speaking around a hardness in his throat now, she knew. “But…but…” he shook his head. “Oh, Nan,” he murmured leaning forward, touching her face. Closing her eyes, she leaned into his touch. “Forgive me.”

Opening her eyes again, Anne stared at him hard. “Forgive you? Henry,” she sat up straight, again. “There is nothing to forgive! It is not as if this were a possibility we could not have foreseen.”

He nodded, slowly, carding his fingers with hers, staring at them in silence. Slowly, Anne stood from where she sat and shifted onto his cot so that she could lean against him, lay her head on his shoulder. Henry wrapped an arm around her, resting his head against hers. Anne closed her eyes, enjoying the comfort of the moment. Stolen as it was, it was only the more precious to her.

“You mustn’t risk coming here anymore.” She heard his voice and felt it, too, close to him as she was. It was the sound of the blood draining from her.

Anne bolted up sharply, pulling away to look at him. “What?”

“If it is even suspected that the child is mine, or certainly that is legitimate, both you and the child are in peril, Nan. There can be no further risks. In fact, you should retire from court before anyone finds out about…your condition. If you can, you should go back to France and seek shelter with my mother and sisters.”

Anne shook her head fiercely. “No,” she growled. “I will not give you up!”

Henry leaned forward, touching her brow with his own. “How it warms my heart to hear you say, sweetheart.” Pulling away, he kissed her forehead. “But it cannot be. I will not put you in such danger and, besides,” he added, smiling. “If you do, indeed, carry my child, are you not taking a piece of me with you?”

Anne shook her head, fiercely. She blinked back tears that rose to her eyes. Henry extended one hand, laid it against her abdomen. “See now, Nan,” he began, his voice husky and she realized he was suppressing tears of his own. “So long as we have a child together, in its form, are we not always together?”

“How does it serve you to be left here…alone?”

Henry shook his head. “Knowing you are safe will be my comfort, Nan. I can ask for none better.”

“No,” she replied. “I will be your comfort. Now put this notion out of your head. I will not leave.”

“Then you must not come here to me, again, Nan, you must promise. And when, inevitably, your condition is discovered, you must claim that the child is a bastard.”

“And declare myself a fallen woman?” demanded Anne, aghast.

“Yes! Or else you must wed another and invent the deceit that the child is his. The child cannot be mine.”
Anne gasped. “You would make of me a bigamist!”

“No, sweetheart,” he replied, tersely. “I would have you away to France but that seems to discontent you. These are your only options. You must acknowledge to none that the child is mine, Nan! That we wed under their very noses in this very cell! Don’t you see?”

“I’m staying,” stated Anne, arching a brow. “I’m not leaving. The rest…” she shook her head. “We’ll figure it out. I won’t leave you, Henry, I won’t!”

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CATHARINE OF ARAGON, QUEEN OF ENGLAND
Palace of Westminster, England
February 1521

James Butler had a rounded face and a ruddy beard beneath the darker head of his hair. His nose was prominent and ennobled by his high brows and cheekbones. He was broad and sturdy looking, though perhaps not traditionally handsome. But then, Catherine supposed, neither was Anne Boleyn: his intended bride.

Catherine’s husband was laughing with the man, who struck Catherine so far as sharp and practical and able – something else he shared with his future wife. The King clapped James’ shoulder. “You know, His Grace the Cardinal,” Richard said, pointing a ringed finger towards Wolsey. “Tells me that you’re betrothed to one of Her Grace the Queen’s own ladies.”

“Yes, Your Grace. Mistress Boleyn.”

“And when is that happy union set to occur, Master Butler?”

“A date has not yet been set, Your Grace. There are ongoing arrangements, as I understand it, between the lady’s father and my own.”

“Ahh,” responded Richard, thoughtfully. “Well, as it happens, Her Grace the Queen is wonderfully fond of weddings. Perhaps,” he added, glancing towards the Cardinal. “Something might be done to speed the process? I can think of no better occasion for a happy event than in the wake of such an English triumph as the salvation of London, eh?”

Catherine glanced back towards the window. The sound of the rain was harsh against the high roof.

Chapter End Notes

"Were it not for her sex, she could have defied all the heroes of history," is an actual quote about Catherine of Aragon. It was actually said, however, by her enemy, Thomas Cromwell in 1533.

Sorry this chapter is on the shorter side. I’ve been very sick all this week and it made this chapter particularly difficult to write. Hopefully, although short, it's still an interesting read!!
Whatever Must

Chapter Summary

"May I inquire, Your Grace, if I might assist you? I see you are awake and there is no one here to wait upon you."

Chapter Notes

A little Valentine's present for you all <3 (though sadly no directly romantic scenes :/)
Anyway, this chapter's brief but I hope you enjoy it anyway <3333

Note: I haven't had a chance to edit it, so I apologize in advance!

RICHARD IV, KING OF ENGLAND
Palace of Westminster, England
February 1521

He thought often of his nephew, shut up in a dark little cell in the Tower. He woke at nights, thinking of his own incarceration. He woke in the twilight of gloomy thought. Tonight was much the same. He did not know the hour, as he jolted awake, only that he could see hardly anything at all. All around him he heard the gentle breathing of his sleeping attendants and – quietly, quietly – crept out of bed, hoping not to disturb a one.

He pulled on a robe over to shut out the chill – gently, gently – so as not to disturb the others. Richard padded against the rushes strewn across the floor, creeping for the door, wincing as it groaned open, and slipped out of his chamber. The space was dark, terribly dark, and lonesome of a single soul. Richard closed his eyes, enjoying the quiet. When he was quite a little lad Richard had feared the idea of being alone, but now he welcomed it. A life abroad as the squire of no one in particular had given it a greater sense of normalcy and kingship had made it desirable. He did not long to hear others prattling in his ear, asking their endless requests.

Closing his eyes, Richard stood where he was, enjoying the stillness of the evening. He did not know how long he stood there.

A sound. Richard’s eyes fluttered open. Footsteps, then the light of a single candle, shining like a beacon. A woman draped in a cloak walked swiftly by him. One of his queen’s ladies, he realized. Richard closed his eyes, enjoying the quiet. When he was quite a little lad Richard had feared the idea of being alone, but now he welcomed it. A life abroad as the squire of no one in particular had given it a greater sense of normalcy and kingship had made it desirable. He did not long to hear others prattling in his ear, asking their endless requests.

She jumped, backing away, her eyes growing great and wide. Suddenly she laughed, clasping one hand to her chest as she swept a low curtsey. “Forgive me, Your Grace!” she exclaimed. “You gave me quite a fright! I did not see you there.”

“Then it is I who must crave your forgiveness, Mistress Boleyn,” responded Richard, chuckling. “What has you awake at this hour?”
Anne opened her mouth, closed it again, laughed. “Your Grace, I will blush to tell you, but…I have some of nature’s business to which I must attend.”

“Oh,” replied Richard, bashfully. “Then I must crave your forgiveness once again,” he replied, clearing his throat. “I had no intention of interrupting your…routine.”

“It is no urgent matter, Your Grace. Pray think nothing of it. May I inquire, Your Grace, if I might assist you? I see you are awake and there is no one here to wait upon you.”

Richard shook his head. “No, I was just…thinking of my poor nephew, you know.”

“Your nephew, Your Grace?”

“Oh, yes,” he added, barked a laugh. “Her Grace the Princess Elizabeth’s lad…Henry Tudor.” Anne fell silent for a moment, her eyes registering something Richard could not read. “Ah,” he murmured. “But I forgot! You know him, do you not? In France…”

Anne looked very pale in the moonlight and the King came forward slowly, offered his arm and guided her to a bench. Once she was seated, he took a spot beside her.

“How do you think he fares,” began Richard. “Imprisoned as he is?”

Anne glanced towards the floors, then back towards him again. “I-I couldn’t say-“

Richard chuckled. “Of course not,” he responded, lightly. “I only meant…what would your best guess be, given your acquaintance with him?”

Anne folded her hands in her lap. When she spoke her voice was little more than a whisper. She continued to stare at the rushes on the floor. “I-I imagine he does poorly, Your Grace.”

“What makes you say so, Mistress Boleyn?”

Anne’s eyes found his, suddenly, and they were black and singing in the darkness. He suppressed a gasp, as though she had cut him – and all at once she looked away again. “Your Grace, if you will pardon my bluntness…in France he could hardly speak of his time as a lad in the Tower while…while you reclaimed your throne. It was, to him, the greatest horror I think of his entire life and…”

she swallowed hard enough he could hear the sound, watched as she glanced away and back again. “I need not tell Your Grace that life is hard on those who once have worn a crown and lost it.”

“No,” agreed Richard. “You need not tell me.” Portugal flashed before his eyes, Portugal and the Netherlands, Portugal and the Netherlands and Africa, yes, and Burgundy and Scotland, too. He remembered them each all too well. Sometimes he wished to forget. “Mistress Boleyn, is it your opinion that…if I were to…allow young Henry some freedom of movement, that it might…that he would make no effort to…leave us here?”

Her eyes seemed to bore into him, searching his face frantically as she turned to face him. Something quavered in her gaze, something he could not read, and he wondered if she were afraid.

“Be not ill at ease, Mistress Boleyn, I would not do it if you think it untenable.”

Anne turned to stare into the candle she held and Richard noticed it trembled in her hand. “It-it is not that, Your Grace. It is…Your Grace’s generosity that astonishes me, given…given all that has passed between Your Grace and the Tudors.”

Richard laughed. “Then you do not find the prospect an unforgiveable lapse of judgment?”
“Your Grace, I think it a splendid gesture of goodwill,” she responded. “And one for which I think your nephew would dearly thank you. I also doubt as he should make any attempt at escape, just now,” she added, thoughtfully.

“Just now?”

Anne’s mouth opened, shut again. “Oh,” she said softly, laughed, rearranged the candlestick in her hands. “That is…Your Grace…because of his leg,” she added all at once. “It being broken…”

Richard regarded her closely for a moment and suddenly burst into laughter. “Oh, how stupid of me!” he laughed. “I’d quite forgotten that. You mustn’t be afraid to point out obvious things I’ve overlooked to me, Mistress Boleyn. I assure you, however, your delicacy does you credit.”

“Thank you, Your Grace.”

“Mistress Boleyn, I’m glad I caught you.” Richard smiled softly at her and, tilting her head, Anne returned the expression. “Not only because of this, mind. There’s another matter involving yourself, madam, that I’ve had some wish to mention to you.”

“Your Grace?”

“I believe you are betrothed to Master James Butler – the son of your father’s rival claimant for the Ormonde title.”

Anne sucked in a breath, smiled, nodded. “I am, Your Grace.”

“It is my hope that the marriage may soon be settled. I’ve a desire to speak to your father about it, as well.”

Anne’s mouth fell open; she shut it again. “Y-Yes,” she mumbled. “Yes, Your Grace. Of course.”

She nodded, said almost as though to herself. “Of course.”

“Good,” he replied. “I…sense there’s something of an issue?” he inquired softly.

Anne’s gaze leveled with his own and, abruptly, she smiled, laughed, waved a hand. “It is…It is only my father, Your Grace. But I’m sure he will be brought round.”

“Yes,” agreed the King. “He will be.”

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MARY CAREY, LADY TO QUEEN CATHERINE OF ENGLAND
Palace of Westminster, England
February 1521

“Heavens,” whispered Mary, sinking into a seat beside her sister. “And to think he caught you on your way to meet Henry!” she exclaimed. “What excuse did you make?”

Anne clapped a hand to her mouth, laughing. “I…told him I was on my way to the privy.”

Despite herself, Mary giggled. “Lord above, Anne!” Clasping her sister’s hand, Mary squeezed it. “Did you still meet Henry?”

“No, I confess I thought it ill advised at that point.”

Mary nodded. “Henry’s right, you know. You mustn’t go to him again.”
“If the King does as he says, I shall soon be deprived of the need, as Henry will mingle freely amongst us.”


“You are not happy for me?”

Mary sighed, turned to look Anne directly in the eye. “I fear for you. Greatly. Of course I am happy that you shall be able to see your husband, but…it also raises a greater likelihood that your…connection may be guessed out when people see you together.”

“We will be discreet,” promised Anne.

“You must. Your safety, his, and that of your child depend upon it.”

Anne looked at her hands.

“And all of that is to say nothing of the Butler marriage! Nan, what on earth will you do?”

Anne fell quiet, rubbing at her hands. When she glanced at her sister, it was with a determined smile. “Why,” she replied. “Whatever I must.”
"How will you behave as though you mean little and less to one another?"

HENRY TUDOR, PRINCE OF ENGLAND
Palace of Westminster, England
March 1521

It was surreal, this feeling. He felt like a ghost, drifting through a half-imagined corridor. It was not the things that he recognized, had obsessed over during his long absence, which attracted Harry’s attention now but, rather, the things that had changed. No rose banners anywhere to be seen: all the sun-in-splendor. These drapes were different and those tapestries moved. Out this window, the tree that once had been small now had grown large. Everywhere he looked there was some shift, most likely imperceptible to everyone else, but searing themselves into his mind with sickening ferocity. He felt strange, as though he himself were not so very real, as though the changes had come from within rather than bombarding his senses. And he felt dull and listless, as though the changes were seeping the fight from his limbs.

Harry remembered very well Westminster in his father’s day: red-and-white rose pennants snapped smartly in the breeze from every available spire and hung behind the throne in his father’s chamber. The door there was always open to his mother’s chambers so that she was always advised of what was going on. Harry couldn’t think how many hours he’d spent playing on the floor with his sisters as a little child, the faint drone of royal business humming from the next room, his mother’s sharp eyes focused now on her needlework, now on her husband, now on her children. But today that secret door was shut and Harry very much doubted it openly frequently. It was not the usual way of things.

Harry’s gait was agonizingly slow. His broken leg had healed, physicians agreed, but not having walked on it in so long was proving its own difficulty. One hand on the wall, he hobbled along, determined to go wherever he wished under his own power. He refused to accept aid from his enemies in his brother’s own palace. The notion of such humiliation was too much to stomach. Gritting his teeth, he limped along, leaning on the wall. In all this change, besides, there was something comforting in the firmness of the structure beneath his fingers. These walls, at least, had not changed. He wondered what they had witnessed during his long absence or if, in their own way, they knew that he was home.

Yet, chilling words from long ago swirled through his brain, blotting thoughts of comfort from his mind: “Tell me, Henricus Rex,” François had asked: “What shall England make of you when you come in your glory to pound it, too, into the ground?”

He did not know.

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ANNE BOLEYN, LADY TO QUEEN CATHERINE OF ENGLAND
Palace of Westminster, England
March 1521
“Henry’s up and walking around the palace,” Mary chirped as soon as they were alone. “What will you do?”

“What will I do?” asked Anne, frowning. “Nothing. I’m glad he’s finally free and healing.”

“No,” replied Mary, sounding exasperated. “I mean…when people see you together.”

Anne glanced towards her sister and away again. “I’ll behave naturally,” she said. “It won’t be so very different from the way it was in France.”

“It is very different, Anne! Perhaps you don’t see it yet, but you will. Now he is your husband! You carry his child! How will you behave as though you mean little and less to one another? Here he is not a respected guest, he is an enemy prisoner!”

Anne stiffened. A prisoner of war, no less, she considered. It wasn’t as though any of this were surprising, or as though she’d not thought of any of this before – it was simply that she’d avoided it. Her mind was not settled, fluttering away from things it could not so easily resolve, and she found she had no actual answer for her sister. Bowing her head, she studied her hands, before turning back to Mary. But she did know some things. “I did speak to Henry about it, before his release. We agreed that our meeting must be entirely by chance so as not to seem suspicious.”

“Well,” murmured Mary. “That’s part of a plan, at least. But won’t the surprise nature of such a meeting necessarily be…emotional?”

“It’s not actually a surprise. Certainly, we don’t know when or how it will happen, but…we know that it will.”

“And James Butler?”

Anne made a gruff sound of irritation deep in her throat. “What about James Butler?”

“He expects to marry you, you know.”

“Well, he’s rather late for that, isn’t he?”

Mary nodded slowly. “Yes…but he doesn’t know that.”

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CATHARINE OF ARAGON, QUEEN OF ENGLAND
Palace of Westminster, England
March 1521

Her ladies trailed behind her as she walked, like ducklings after their mother. She thought little of it until she spotted a tall figure leaning against the wall. Glancing towards her ladies to see that they were all accounted for, she glanced towards the figure.

“Master, is all well?”

The figure turned to face her and Catherine took an unconscious step back. Henry Tudor stood before her, tall and broad, and quirked the hint of an irritated smirk. “‘Master,’ is it?”

Catherine stood her ground, waiting for an obeisance that did not arrive. Grimacing, she arched a brow. “Do you require assistance?”

“No,” he responded brusquely, edging away from the wall as though to prove he did not need it. He
paused, glanced towards her gaggle of ladies, looked somewhat chastened suddenly, and turned back to her. “But I thank you, Infanta,” he added, placing a hand back on the wall to sweep a bow.

“Here,” responded Catherine, staunchly. “I am Queen.”

He glanced away and back again. “I will own that I believe you believe that to be true.”

Catherine rankled, but pushed the feeling back, searched for something else to say. “I believe you know Mistress Carey and Mistress Boleyn?” she inquired, indicating each lady in turn, as each in turn bobbed a curtsy.

“I do,” he responded, bowing in return. “Well met, Mistress Carey; well met, Mistress Boleyn. I see the journey has not treated you ill.”

“It seems,” said Anne, eyeing his leg. “The same cannot be said of you.”

“This is nothing, madam,” he replied. “And owing not at all to the journey across the Channel, I assure you. London was not so hospitable in its greeting, however, as it might have been.”

“I trust you find your apartments to your liking?” inquired Mary.

“Thank you, madam, they are a vast improvement upon the ones which lately I occupied in the Tower, I assure you.”

Catherine cleared her throat. “I believe,” she began. “That His Grace the King will be eager to meet with you in the near future.”

Harry’s lips curved upwards. “I also look forward to meeting with my brother again.”

Catherine’s heart clenched. Arthur, she thought.

“You might do well, sir,” said Anne Boleyn, sharply. “To remember whose guest you are here.”

“And you, madam,” responded Henry. “Should recall that, as the son of the late King Henry, I grew up in these halls. I know well to whom they truly belong.” The look between them was prickling, like a child caught in a brier of wild roses.

Catherine cleared her throat and the spell was broken. Anne’s gaze returned at once to the floor, but Henry’s lingered before slowly, painfully, dragging to meet Catherine’s own. “I shall give you a piece of advise, Henry Tudor. This is not a game.” Nodding to her ladies, the Queen swept out of the room.

She did not see Anne turn to look at Henry; she did not see the gaze returned.
Anne eyed him carefully, noted the new creases between his brows, and wondered if he believed those words.

**ANNE BOLEYN, LADY TO QUEEN CATHERINE OF ENGLAND**

*Palace of Westminster, England*

*March 1521*

“The King’s Grace is most insistent.” Thomas Boleyn did not look at his daughter. Instead, he stood by the window, peering wistfully towards Hever – towards home. “He feels it would help bind the Irish to our cause and, more importantly, prevent them from straying to the other side of things. A display of favor, giving to them what was disputed by the English…and as to me…a chance to prove my loyalty after the disaster that was our French foreign policy.”

Anne peered at her father’s back, watching as he tried not to move. “It was the King’s own choice to wed a Spanish princess that decided François against him,” replied Anne. “Not a failure of your policy.”

“Perhaps,” muttered Thomas, turning to face her. “But the fact remains that I was the ambassador to France when relations with that nation came to ruin. Whether or not I am to blame has less to do with anything than the mere fact that I was there. I am sorry, my girl, that it is you who are made to pay the price. Believe me, in other circumstances…I would have fought for you.”

Anne eyed him carefully, noted the new creases between his brows, and wondered if he believed those words. She wondered if she believed them, as well. “Papa, you must understand,” she began again, softly. “It is not that I fail to comprehend the difficult situation in which you find yourself…but I will not, cannot marry James Butler. Please, Papa! Please believe that I must not. Not even by His Grace the King’s command.”

Thomas was silent, still. She had his full attention, she knew it from the stiffness of his back, the pressure in his arms, but he was quiet, awfully quiet, and Anne found herself holding her breath. Finally, a single word and Anne felt the held breath go out of her: “Why?”

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**THOMAS BOLEYN, ENGLISH AMBASSADOR TO FRANCE**

*Palace of Westminster, England*

*March 1521*

There was nothing for it but to sit and wait. Thomas hated risks, detested them, loathed the leap, the fear, that sick feeling of plummeting without a net. It was a feeling that rushed up to meet him now, swirling in his gut, stiff but malleable like hot glue. Anne’s lack of an answer spoke volumes and fear hovered at his shoulder. “Nan,” he whispered towards the window. “What have you done?”

He heard movement, the rustle of silk, behind him but he did not turn to look at her. He could not move.
“Papa,” began Anne. “Papa, please try to understand-”

“No,” whispered Thomas. No, that wasn’t what he’d wanted to hear her say. He turned to look at her, felt distant as though his mind whirred in absent confusion. “No, my girl. Do not say it.” He waved a hand of sadness, dismissal. “I expected this of your sister,” he said. “But never of you.”

Her look was long, black eyes that seared from her gaze, then suddenly diverted. “What would you have me do?”

“Marry him,” said Thomas, breathlessly, then suddenly fiercely, coming forward to grasp her shoulders: “Marry him!”

“Papa…” and she cut off, looked away. “But,” she whispered, then something kindled in her expression and there was laughter, sardonic laughter in her glowing dark eyes. “Oh, my darling father,” she said and she raised a hand to touch his face. Her eyes were sad, yet they danced with laughter and he knew, that once again, for all her sorrow and all her anger, she was laughing at him. “You don’t know what chance you give up.”

Anne pushed away, turned to leave, footsteps padding across the ground. Her father watched her retreating form, watched her disappearing from view. Something rattled in his head, her words ringing in his ears. Give up, give up, give up. Thomas’ fists clenched at his sides.

“Nan!” he called at last. “What do I give up?”

She did not turn back.

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RICHARD IV, KING OF ENGLAND
Palace of Westminster, England
March 1521

“It must be got on with,” said the King. “Why does this tedious delay persist?”

Thomas Boleyn was not a broad man, not a tall one. There was nothing at all striking in his appearance, save for his eyes which were pale. Yet, for all that there was nothing physically extraordinary in him, there was something more that struck one. When he wished to exert his presence, one felt it. One felt it. It was a trait, it seemed, that he had passed on. Richard glanced over his shoulder towards the man. He had once hoped the feeling of that presence might bend the ear of the French king, yet it had come to nothing. At least Boleyn’s daughter, now, would lend some aid to his cause abroad, if only in Ireland.

Ireland, yes, thought Richard. Land of ire. Once that Irish spite had swayed in his own favor, now it settled in to grumble, grumble against him. Another failure. Another betrayal.

‘Forgive me,’ whispered the shadow of the Tower.

Richard turned Woodville-green eyes on Thomas Boleyn. “Explain this delay.”

Thomas lowered his pale eyes and Richard watched them seem to scan the rushes on the floor, eyes moving as though reading. “Your Grace,” he said. “It is my daughter. I am very much afraid she refuses to marry Master Butler.”

“Refuses? She struck me as a dutiful one. What can account for it? Have you put it to her in all gravity, sir?”
“Your Grace, I have. My daughter has never before refused me any command. I cannot account for it.”

“Then,” said Richard. “Shall I put it to her.”

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CATHERINE OF ARAGON, QUEEN OF ENGLAND
Palace of Westminster, England
March 1521

Daylight filtered into the Queen’s rooms from the windows. Catherine thought of it sparkling over the Thames, over the Tower. A fortress, a palace, a prison. She curled her fingers around the arm of her chair. Was not all of England now that to her? Fortress and palace and prison, all. Catherine gazed dully at her hand, saw without seeing how the ruby on her finger glemmed in the light, saw how the gold setting seemed to burn with fire of its own. Fortress and palace and prison. She had not thought of it so, until now: until after all the fighting here was said and done, but the realization rose like a pearl: pressed and pressed and pressed until something of exquisite value emerged: a fortress and a palace and a prison, just as France had been; a fortress and a palace and a prison just as Spain had been. A fortress, yes; a palace, yes; a prison, yes: was that not what the round ring of the crown upon her head was? The circlet that was her ring? Even in the Alcatraz, had she ever known anything different? The ruby sparkled cruelly in the light: red like Lancaster; red like blood.

The creak of the door alerted her. Catherine cast her blue eyes towards it, towards a page scurrying inside, sweeping a bow. “His Grace the King!”

Around the room all activity ceased, all rose, all bowed.

Richard came to her, raised her from her own obeisance, kissed her. “My dear,” he said softly. “I wondered if I might not speak with you and with one of your ladies.”

“Of course,” she replied.

“Mistress Boleyn!” called the King. “Attend upon us.”

He led them into the Queen’s private chambers and sent everyone else out.

Anne swept a low bow, but the King raised her up.

“I have summoned you, Mistress Boleyn, as a subject. To that end, I wish to be brief, that I may be clearly understood.”

Anne flicked a questioning gaze towards Catherine, then back towards the King again. “Your Grace, I am listening.”

“It comes to my attention that you will not heed your father’s command that you should wed James Butler.”

Anne’s eyes fell with her countenance. She looked suddenly pale. “Your Grace, it is so. I cannot wed Master Butler.”

“Then,” said Richard. “Understand, Mistress Boleyn. We, your King, do command and instruct that you shall be wed to Master Butler.”

Anne hurled herself upon her knees, folding her hands in supplication, which she raised towards
him. “Your Grace, I beg you in all Christian mercy, pray make of me no such command. I would, if only it were my own choice, do nothing to displease Your Grace. Please understand, Your Grace, it my own soul which I would forfeit were I ever to do as you command. Your Grace, I beg you, have mercy.”

Richard’s eyes gleamed. His face was hard, then soft, and hard again, going by turns one way and another.

“Your Grace,” said Catherine softly, softly, touching his elbow. “Mistress Boleyn, I pray you rise. Do you mean to tell us, then, of an impediment?”

Anne rose slowly, eyes fixed on the floor, watching the bed of rushes as though she feared the floor might collapse beneath her. “There is, Your Grace.”

“What is the nature of this impediment?” demanded Richard.

“Your Grace,” whispered Anne Boleyn. “I am already wed.”

Catherine heard herself gasp. Her gaze caught with Richard’s before returning to Anne’s.

“When?” demanded Richard. “To whom? Do you say then that you have deceived us?”

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ANNE BOLEYN, LADY TO QUEEN CATHERINE OF ENGLAND
Palace of Westminster, England
March 1521

Anne’s head was bent; she closed her eyes. Her stomach was turbulence; her head cacophony. *I should have seen this coming*, she thought, desperately. *I should have foreseen it.* “Your Grace, I have kept this secret since France. As to his identity, Your Grace, I have sworn to an authority even greater than your most august self that I shall never reveal it,” she began slowly, raising her eyes. “I imperil my soul to ever speak a word of that. I throw myself, unworthy creature that I am, entirely upon Your Graces’ mercy,” she added, kneeling again. The Queen did not raise her up, this time.

“Tell us of the man,” said the Queen.

Anne nodded. “I met him in France, Your Grace. He is a gentleman, but has not a penny to his name. Knowing that my family would never approve of such a match, we were wed in secrecy. As to my deception, Your Graces, it was never so meant. When I was recalled to England, I had no excuse or choice but to go, the matter being one of absolute secrecy. I never meant to cause any harm, Your Graces.” She bowed her head, thought of Hever, and said fervently. “Never.”

*It is not a lie*, she told herself. *It is all the truth, if ordered incorrectly and presented oddly. It is all true, all true.*

Richard turned his back on her and Anne pulled her hands towards her chest. *Henry, Henry,* she thought. *What have we done?*

The silence rattled on.

“Mistress Boleyn,” said the King, at last. “I hereby banish you from court. Pack your things and go at once. I will not see your face again.”
“You met him in France, Mistress Boleyn, but is he French?”

“Mistress Boleyn!”

Anne halted in her swift pace at the sound of Catherine’s voice. Pausing, she turned; pausing, she dipped a low obeisance. “Your Grace.”

“There is something I wish I ask you before you go…” she glanced around them. “But it is something I would prefer to ask privily.”

Sweeping her gaze through the corridor, Anne spotted several persons. She nodded slowly. “As you wish, Your Grace.”

“Attend me in my chambers, Mistress Boleyn.”

When they arrived, Catherine sent everyone out and closed the door firmly behind. She turned back to Anne. “Your husband,” began Catherine. Anne opened her mouth to protest, but the Queen held up her hand. “Your husband,” she continued. “I know you have sworn upon the most Holy Sacrament that you shall not speak his name, but that oath in no way binds me and I must ask you, Mistress Boleyn…” Catherine paused. Her eyes were pale, a bright blue, a sharp blue, clear and direct like a bright Spanish day – not the dark, stormy turbulence of Henry’s. “You met this man in France, you say.”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“You met him in France, Mistress Boleyn, but is he French?”

“You Grace-”

“You and I also met in France, madam, but neither of us is of French extraction. Therefore, I ask you, if he is not French, Mistress Boleyn, is he English?” Bright as a Spanish day were Catherine’s eyes; clear and sharp. Anne thought of falcons, flying high and fierce and joyful above these worldly cares. A falcon owned the skies but Anne, a woman, was caught beneath them.

“Your Grace, I cann-”

Catherine nodded, slowly. “You must know, Mistress Boleyn, that I, too, am but a woman and I, too, know what it is to have conflicting duties and conflicting loves. Tell me, Mistress Boleyn,” she began again. “Is he English? To say one way or another is not to reveal his identity, is it?”
Is it? wondered Anne, fixing her gaze on the hem of Catherine’s skirts. Is it? She looked back up, again. “May I ask, Your Grace, what excites this line of inquiry? Why would you imagine-”

Catherine shook her head, glanced reflectively towards her mirror, then back to Anne. “Did I not tell you, Mistress Boleyn? I know how it is.” She paused. “Have you married him? My husband’s enemy, this country’s enemy, your enemy…Mistress Boleyn, have you married him?”

Anne swallowed hard, staring at the Queen. Her mouth was dry, dry and raw. She wished that she could turn and run or else that the stones beneath her would suddenly crumble, releasing her from this interview, but she could not escape. She could not even find words.

“You forget, Mistress Boleyn, I was once engaged to him, myself. I know well his charms.”

Anne stopped, her mouth fell open, then shut again. Falling to her knees, Anne clasped her hands together. “Your Grace, I beg you to hear me in good faith. Allow me to but see a priest and I will swear to you, upon the Most Holy Eucharist, that I am no wife of Arthur Tudor, would-be King of England. Most humbly I implore Your Grace: send for Henry Tudor and he will confirm that I am not his brother’s wife.”

Catherine shook her head, slowly. “That will not be necessary,” she replied, softly. “Please, Mistress Boleyn, rise, and forget we ever had this conversation. I pray you forgive my suspicions. It is very hard, in these times, to rest easy.”

Getting to her feet once again, Anne nodded. “It is already done, Your Grace.”

“No just yet,” replied Catherine. “Only, you looked very pale and made no answer until late. Why?”

“It was owing entirely to my shock and horror, Your Grace, at such a traitorous act. Please forgive me that I was not more resilient and answered sooner.”

Catherine’s limpid gaze did not stray and silence rattled between them before, at last, the Queen nodded and put her hand into Anne’s. “You have always served me well, Mistress Boleyn, particularly when we at our most dire straights in the Tower. I will not forget it.” With that, she dismissed Anne. Scrambling away from the Queen’s chambers, Anne sought some quiet place and, grasping at the pearl B necklace around her neck, she suppressed a host of tears.

No tears, thought Anne. No tears. She pressed the back of her head against the stone wall behind her.

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MARY CAREY, LADY TO QUEEN CATHERINE OF ENGLAND
Palace of Westminster, England
March 1521

Anne busied herself, scuttling this way and that, extracting gowns from this space to fill that trunk, dusting at this mote of dirt, folding and re-folding her garments…Mary knew well the signs of her sister’s distress, but few were more potent than the frenzied need to clean, to organize, when upset. Usually, Mary would try to talk her down, to help her, to chat sweetly with her and distract her, but today she did not. There was no healing this, not as she used to. No, Anne was banished from court; at least as of earlier that day suspected of treason; secretly pregnant with the child of a man labeled traitor who was himself currently a prisoner – and therefore someone she would not see so long as she was banished from court…And these were but her most recent complaints. Instead of trying to talk her off this distress, Mary stayed close in silent solidarity, helping her where her frantic
ministrations required it and standing back when Anne needed more room.

“There we are,” said Mary, at last. “I believe you’re quite well and truly packed, now.”

Anne stood with her back to her sister, head bowed. She said nothing. Her arms were pulled forward and Mary fancied she must be looking down at something clasped in them.

“Nan?”

Mary watched as her sister shook her head, jerked her head towards and away from Mary, and went still again. “This is his,” said Anne. All at once, she strode purposefully towards a desk. “Mary, fetch me pen and ink, if you will.”

Quickly, Mary complied. As she approached Anne’s side, she saw tears running down her cheeks, but this did not stop Anne. Quickly, she scratched out her illustrious handwriting in the book, flipping this way and that. She wiped impatiently at her eyes and resumed writing. Finally, she turned back to Mary, putting the book into her hands.

“This is the book Henry lent you in France!” exclaimed Mary. “Troyes’ Arthurian romance. You still have it?”

“I doubt as I shall be able to see him again before I am sent away, given the manner of my parting,” said Anne, hastily. “When I am gone, put this book into his hands and tell him that, if ever he wishes to think of me, he need only consult the pages about which we first spoke in France. Will you do that for me, Mary?”

“Nan, of course I will!”

“Then,” began Anne, reaching out to clasp Mary’s hands in her own. “There is nothing left but to say goodbye.”

Mary shook her head. “This is not goodbye, Anne. I will see you soon. Mind you give my love to George and our parents.”

Nodding hastily, Anne threw her arms around Mary. “I will miss you so dearly, so dearly, Mary. Will you come see me sometime soon?”

“As soon as I am able,” promised Mary. “But we will not say our farewells in this dismal dark chamber. I will see you to the horses, at least.”

“Mary,” said Anne, suddenly. “I love you.”

“As I love you, Anne.”

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HENRY TUDOR, PRINCE OF ENGLAND
Palace of Westminster, England
March 1521

“What’s this?” inquired Henry. Astonishment stole over him like a veil, clouding his perceptions and leaving him hazy. “Mistress Carey, why do you give me this?”

“My sister, Anne, has been banished from court.”

Blankly, he stared at her. Blankly, he stared at the book Mary had put into his hands. “What?”
“It seems,” said Mary, glancing towards the various others that always seemed to lurk discreetly nearby wherever Henry went. “That while abroad in France, Anne met and ultimately married a man she refused to name. Because of this, her proposed wedding to James Butler could not go forward, causing much distress to His Grace the King who hoped to use the marriage to help bolster relations with the Irish and prevent them from declaring for your brother. For all of this, my sister was banished.”

Henry shook his head, dumbly. The information did not seem to make any sense to him. The idea that he would not now see her felt unreal as a dream. “Where-Where is she now?”

“She heads to Hever Castle, our family home. She asked that I put that book, which you so kindly lent to her, directly into your hands with a message.”

“A message?”

“Anne instructed that if ever you wished to remember her, you need only consult the pages that first you discussed.”

The book was small in his hands, small and rectangular: gold and red, a jewel of Lancastrian workmanship. He’d seen it in her hands: tapering fingers clutching its smooth edges, sweet palms cradling its spine. It seemed so much smaller in his grasp as he tried to put his hands just where hers so recently had been, as though through it he could reach across all that space and touch her. He did not know when he would see her again; he did not know where. It was unthinkable even to imagine that they should be so cruelly separated of a sudden, unable even to exchange words of parting. But he could show no measure of the shock, no measure of the hurt. To others, she must always appear to be a mere acquaintance. To others, she must be forever removed from him – a good, faithful Englishwoman and he the barbaric son of a usurper.

“Thank you, Mistress Carey,” he said softly, dully. He was glad, of a sudden, that it was a dreary day outside. The rain splattering across the windowpane was his, the dark clouds hovering overhead belonged to him as well. He longed for a storm that would rattle the heavens, but spitting rain would have to be solace enough. It was the only solace he was likely to receive.

Mary swept a curtsy. “I remain here,” she said softly, very softly. “If you ever grow lonesome for a friendly face.”

Henry blinked back the tears that pricked, sweeping low to kiss her hand. “I thank you, madam. It is a comfort to know that even here I am not entirely friendless. I thank you for the courteous return of my book.”

“I must away to Her Grace the Queen. God bless you, Henry Tudor.”

He watched her retreating back, this sister of his who was not his, and turned his gaze to the book he now clasped in both his hands, head bent to study it. Tenderly, he opened it. There, in his own hand he saw words he’d scrawled when not more than six: This book is mine. His lips curled upwards as his heart tugged. She teased me about that, he remembered. She’d been so cross before then, but it had been one of the first sweet things she’d uttered to him again and how it’d made his heart glow. He ran his fingers across the page – only to note faint writing hidden amidst his own. Her writing, but strange: a series of letters and numbers in jumbled confusion, interspersed with punctuation.

“What the devil?” muttered Henry. Recalling the message Mary had delivered, he quickly flipped to the next pages of which they’d spoken. “If I could be a dove,” he muttered under his breath, recalling the first words of the passage, and stopping when he came upon them. There, just as faint, he found her writing in the margins: a key to the cipher.
‘If I could be a dove,’ Troyes’ passage read. ‘Whenever the fancy came to me, I should often rejoin you here. And I pray God that in His pleasure He may not detain me so long away. But sometimes a man intends speedily to return who knows not what the future has in store for him. And I know not what will be my fate.’ And the response: ‘My lord, I dare to promise you that, if God deliver you from death, no hindrance will stand in your way so long as you remember me.’

Flipping back to the first page and forth, he deciphered her note. *I love you, I love you, I love you. I count the days till I may be with you again. Wait for me, and come to me if you can. Remember that I love you now and always.*

Tenderly, Henry raised the book to his lips.

Chapter End Notes

Anne and Henry did, indeed, share some sort of secret code for communication. We do not know what it meant, but we know that it existed. We find it in Henry VIII's second love letter to Anne Boleyn. You can read it, here: https://www.theanneboleynfiles.com/resources/anne-boleyn-words/henry-viiis-love-letters-to-anne-boleyn/love-letter-2/
“Whatever has changed between us, you will always be to me that golden lass who first smiled at me when others gawked.”

Chapter Notes

Note: this chapter has not yet been edited. I apologize in advance!

SISTER PAULINE, QUEEN OF ENGLAND
Holystone, England
May 1521

“You should not have come so far.” The Benedictine sister’s words seemed tinged by the fire that burned in the hearth nearby, singed by its heat, but it was worry that gave them rise.

“What else am I to do?” asked King Richard. He did not look at her, the woman who had once been his wife, but rather stared into the flames. “Ireland has fallen to the Tudor cause. I must ensure that Scotland does not take after its Celtic cousin in this.”

“Are we so very hemmed in?”

“Yes, Cathy,” he breathed, put his head into his hands. “Yes.”

Pauline watched him gravely, watched the fire from the hearth cast its silhouettes here and there across him like groveling hands. The room is empty, save for the two of them, and wearily she shifts into a seat opposite him at the table. “It’s been some time since anyone has called me that.”

Richard raised his head slowly, his eyes finding hers. Pauline stared hard at him, at the scar beneath the one eye that narrowed it, at the still-clear hues, at the forehead now even more lined than it was when last she saw him. The years have not been generous, but his is still the face she loves. He reached out, hands grazing the top of the table as he stretched them sluggishly towards her. Her hands in his and he raised them to his lips, kissed one than the other. “My dear,” he began. “Whatever has changed between us, you will always be to me that golden lass who first smiled at me when others gawked.”

“Cathy, then,” replied she who had once been Catherine Gordon, and laughed. But his eyes were sad and her mouth turned downward. “You believe Scotland means even now to abandon you.”

“Why should they not? Certainly, King James raised me to my throne, but now that I have cast you off and another contender rises, backed by France, why should he not think to cast me down again?”

“The Auld Alliance,” murmured Pauline, looking down at where their hands were still entwined. “How might I help you?”
“Perhaps you could write your cousin?” suggested Richard. “You always had such sway over him…”

Pauline laughed, shook her head. “The Queen had some sway, yes,” she agreed. “He rather fancied a Scottish Queen of England, but his little cousin has never had much hold on King James, I am afraid, my love. It is for this reason that he gave me to you when things were still uncertain. I was, and remain, disposable, my dear Dickon. You, however, are not.”

“Cathy, you mustn’t say so!”

She shook her head. “Make no mistake, Richard, I am quite content. I prefer it this way, in fact. Nevertheless, I shall write a fine letter and send it with you when you go. You’ve made it most of the way, now. There’s not much farther to go.” Holystone lay placidly sprawled across Northumberland, a far cry from London, now. “How fares your young wife?” inquired Pauline, glancing away to the fire, again. “The Spanish princess?”

“She is well, I thank you,” Richard bit his lip and Pauline watched a scarlet flush rush over him.

“It’s all right, you know,” she said. “I’m the one who pushed you into the marriage. It’s all right.”

Feebly, the King lifted his gaze to her. “She is a good woman, Cathy. Strong and hearty. I believe she could quite rule England without me, if it came to that. She might be stronger than I am, Cathy.”

A pause. “I think she is.”

“She sounds like a worthy partner in all this. I am glad you have her.”

Richard’s expression turned wry, one of her favorite moods in him: when his eyes would twinkle and she could catch a glimpse within the King of the adventurer she had known as a girl. “Even if King James is not.”

“In another circumstance,” she replied. “That would gladden me all the more, for you would at last be free of the noose he has round you.” She paused. “As it is…As it is, should my cousin turn his back on our old understanding, well, I am glad you’ve such a woman at your side to help you weather the storm.”

“I suppose, even should he side with my enemies, at least I shall be free of that noose.” He smiled, squeezed her hands before releasing them again. “Though it was never so burdensome a rope as I think you may have believed.”

“As a king, to be forever beholden to a man for helping you to your rightful throne! It was a burden you ought not to have had to bear.”

“Then, should I fail, my Cathy, pity Arthur all the more for it. He shall owe his crown to a far fiercer king in François than had I in James.”

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ANNE BOLEYN, DUCHESS OF YORK
Hever Castle, England
May 1521

She would begin to show, soon. Her pregnancy would soon be obvious and then everyone would know that the timetable she had originally provided was a lie. Anne walked listlessly along the grounds. Fawning trees shaded her, and she ran her fingertips across their tender foliage without seeing them at all.
George’s shout roused her from her weary thoughts. Stopping short, she raised her hand to shade her eyes and glanced around her for the source of the voice.

He came loping along from behind her, stopping short of her. “Did you not hear me calling?” he asked, breathless.

“I confess, I did not,” she replied, reaching out to dust his shoulder of debris, dutifully. “Have you been struggling through the underbrush.”

George laughed. “I took a shortcut,” he replied, ruefully.

Anne smirked. “And did it turn out any shorter a path, in the long run.”

“Much lengthier, I suspect.” He grinned, paused, glanced upwards towards the leaves that danced upon the trees, casting speckled shadows upon those below, before turning his eyes back to his sister. “Now, Anne, there’s something I wish to ask you. I’ve forborn these past months, hoping that you might choose to confide in me, unpressed, seeing as I am your favorite living brother.”

Anne quirked a brow. “You are my only living brother, George.”

“Quite right and therefore, one should hope, entitled to keeping all your secrets.”

“You wish to know who my husband is.”

“Is it so much to ask?”

Anne sighed. “I fear there’s a danger in it, George,” she said, very softly.

He fell quiet. “Then,” he said, very softly, indeed. “I believe I comprehend, already, who he may be.”

Anne shook her head. “Not that one, George. The other one.”

“The other one?” demanded George. “Well, why him, Nan, when you might have had the other?”

Anne paused, she laced her fingers along the nearest leaf, again, peering up and up and up towards the sky through the dancing green above her head. “It was never like that, George,” she said, at last, turning towards him again. “I never set out to catch him. This is not my ambition, my dear brother; I fear it is my folly. I married him because I love him. That is all.”

Taking her hand, George led her to a bench nearby. The warm sun drenched them in light and Anne closed her eyes, soaking it in. She felt George clasp her hands and opened her eyes to look at him, evenly. “I’ve some fortuitous news for you, Nan, if that is the way your heart lies, though it may prove troublesome for our country, as it inclines towards the growing ferocity of this war and, some may say, is linked inextricably now with the Boleyn fortunes.”

Anne swallowed hard, glanced away. “Ireland has turned Lancastrian?”

George squeezed her hands. “Do not be afraid, Anne. It happened some time hence, only father was too wroth to tell you. However, even if the King does blame you – though I do not think he possibly can, not entirely – he has already ventured to the North of England. He plans to meet with King James. He is not here to make any trouble for us, just now.”

“George, there’s something else,” broke out Anne. “I was afraid to tell you before, but now that you
know the truth…I carry his child.”

“Henry’s?”

Anne gasped and smacked his arm. “Whose else?!”

Cracking a grin, George chuckled. “Forgive me, sister, it is only that you were so serious I thought you inclined to cry. I suppose I prefer you on the verge of violence than tears,” he added with a wan grin. He shifted. “There’s something else, isn’t there?”

“The child…was not conceived in France.”

“I see. So you fear your secret will come out sooner than later.”

“And then where will we be?”

Leaning forward, George took her hands in his. “Lancastrian, my dear sister. We will be Lancastrian.”

“But father—“

“If I am not mistaken, you carry even now a child that may be the future Duke of York, should Arthur prevail, is that not so? Well, then, isn’t that worth a shot at something, a risk, even to father?”

“He detests risks!”

“He is doubly disgraced and quite sent out of court, now. His way of perseverance will bring him back into favor, someday, but it shall never raise him as high as King Arthur might raise his own brother’s father-in-law. If we both work on him, we can bring father around I am sure.”

“And if we cannot?”

“Then we do as we will.”

“What if Papa should think, George, to surrender us to the King for treason?”

George swallowed hard. “That, dear sister, is why we must be careful. But you, Anne, by this marriage are already Lancastrian, whatever happens, and as you go, so go I: to whatever fate. I promise you.”
"Once, I was as outspoken as are you. Someday, you will learn to hold your tongue. I pray it shall not be to your sorrow as it was to mine."

GEORGE BOLEYN
Hever Castle, England
May 1521

Raising his fist, he knocked softly on his father’s door: once, twice, with a practiced hand. It was something he did often, standing there knocking, waiting to be allowed to enter. The fine striations of the wood on his father’s study door were well known to him, thin veins running parallel to the doorframe, only to loop into a wide knot three quarters of the way down. Yes, he did this often.

“Enter,” came his father’s voice three, four seconds after the fact, as though the response was gleaned only by some concentration of the will accumulated over time.

George’s lips quirked upwards. He cracked the door open, slid in, closed it behind him. “Well, now, Papa,” he began, eyes glittering with mischief. “You sound terribly sonorous, after all that time. Were you expecting someone very dreadful?” He liked to tease him about the delay, liked to tease him because he knows that it was more game in Thomas than carelessness. Of all the things Thomas Boleyn had ever been, careless was not one.

Thomas flashed troubled eyes towards his son and away again. "I was absorbed in my reading, George.” He was reading this correspondence carefully, running his index finger along each line. Yes, his father was a careful man, and George knew in some preternatural way that comes only from living in close quarters with a person for many years, that this was not the first time he had read that letter. No, he was scavenging for hidden details that one cursory glance could not have provided. Careful, yes, his father was a careful man.

George, however, was not. Slinging one leg over the other, he smiled at him. “Well, I can assure you that I am far more entertaining than the seventh read-through of any letter, no matter how scintillating.”

Putting the letter down, Thomas peered irritably at his son, but George was given the distinct impression, as he always was, that his father was equal parts annoyed and amused. “What is it you’ve come here to say?”

“What do you think?”

Thomas’ sigh was laborious and he looked quickly away, shunting his gaze towards the window where red vines curled around the castle walls. “Did Anne send you?”

“No,” responded the son. “I sent myself, but I will confess that it was on her behalf.”

“You wish me to forgive her. How can I? She was-” Thomas cut off, jolted out of his seat, went to the window.
“I know,” murmured George. “She was the prized jewel of the Boleyn family, and you were proud of her. You hate to be embarrassed in your triumphs.” Thomas Boleyn had been embarrassed enough in his younger days, by Henry Tudor, to ever wish to re-visit it. ‘Once,’ Thomas had been fond of telling George in his childhood. ‘I was as outspoken as are you. Someday, you will learn to hold your tongue. I pray it shall not be to your sorrow as it was to mine.’ This was the foundation of the problem, and it would be a great deal to surmount, but George had never backed down from a challenge.

Many years ago, Thomas had quarreled publicly with the so-called King Henry – but no, no, George needed to re-order his thinking, now: the rightful King Henry VII. Despite the fact that Thomas had been a favored friend before that time, Henry, as he was wont to do, had fined Thomas and Thomas had been shunned and humiliated until the Usurper, the so-called King Richard IV, had assumed the throne and pardoned Thomas of his debts. In his service, Thomas had risen high, but now he stood at the edge of being disgraced once more. Perhaps he would not be eager to return to the son of a man who once had humiliated him, but he would have much work ahead, here, if ever he were to reclaim the Usurper’s favor once more.

“What doesn’t?” bit back Thomas, turning to glance at his son. “And she has gone and bestowed herself in a useless match to a penniless Frenchman. I know I was not well disposed to the thought of giving her to the Butlers, but it was because she was worth so much more. How could she throw herself away on someone worth so much less than even that fool, James?”

George paused, ran his fingers across the arm of his chair, and stood. “It’s hardly Anne’s fault that Ireland has aligned with the Tudors. Indeed, Anne might even now be a Tudor hostage, had we married her off and shipped her back with James Butler to Ireland. They’d be hard-pressed to break through the wall of steel Arthur Tudor has carefully crafted between London and the west these many months and would most likely be living, now, only by his charity as hostages.”

Thomas relented somewhat: George saw the slouch in his shoulders. “I know that,” he said and he sounded weary, weary and old. “I know that and you know that, George, but the King? The King does not now regard us with much favor.”

Looking at his father’s back, George’s lips quirked somewhat. “No, I suppose you are right. He does not forget slights, does he? Even perceived ones. And that is not to speak of how he blames you, yourself, for France…How long do you imagine till he shall be able to look past it?”

Thomas leaned against the windowsill. “Long,” he said. “Years. Years, George, years.”

Slowly, George crossed behind his father’s desk, approaching his father. “My dear Papa,” he said softly, laying a hand on his father’s shoulder. “What if there were another way?”

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RICHARD IV, KING OF ENGLAND
Holystone, England
May 1521

“What is that to-do out there?” asked Richard. Whispers and chatter from the next room filtered in to where the King supped with the Mother Superior and Sister Pauline: his own Cathy.

Mother Superior nodded to one of the young novices who was serving them. Quickly, the girl scuttled out into the next room to see what the other sisters were about. “I must apologize, Your Grace,” said Mother Superior, a mite indignant. “I have never heard such a fuss in all my days.”
“Peace, Mother Superior,” replied Richard. “It harms no one. It is only my idle curiosity which is excited.”

When the novice returned, however, her face was ashen. She slunk in the door, staring at the floor with wide eyes, as though hoping she would go unnoticed.

“What is it, girl?” asked Richard, careful to keep his voice gentle.

The girl gasped at the sound, stole a glance at him and looked away towards Cathy as though for aid, before glancing down again.

“What is it?” asked Cathy.

“Speak,” commanded Mother.

“For-forgive me, Your Grace, it is only…I am afraid.”

Richard exchanged a concerned glance with Cathy. “What is a-miss?”

“If you please, Your Grace, you know I’ve no love for, for him. It is to Your Grace that I am loyal, most loyal, Your Grace, most loyal. Pray pardon me for bearing the news.”

“For whom? Child, for whom have you no love?”

“Must you torment us with this suspense?” demanded Mother. “Tell us what it is you mean to say!”

Dropping to her knees before the King, the little nun began. “The talk out there is of news, Your Grace. News from Winchester.”

“Winchester?” mused he, surprised.

“Your rival, Your Grace, Tudor, has there been crowned King Arthur II.”

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ANNE BOLEYN, DUCHESS OF YORK
Hever Castle, England
May 1521

“Arthur II?” asked Anne.

“Arthur I being the King Arthur of legend, I suppose,” clarified George with a shrug. “And Winchester, naturally, being Camelot of old and Winchester Cathedral the ancient site of coronations, as well as our new Arthur’s birthplace, thus cementing his position as King-Arthur-to-come. It is even said that he was crowned with the diadem that once adorned the head of that very legend which, conveniently, turned up no sooner than our Arthur arrived. I suppose it must have been a sign,” he drawled.

“Neatly done,” commented Anne. “Do you suppose Henry knows?”

George shrugged. “Who can say? I suppose they might try to hide it in London for a time but… Arthur’s hardly trying to conceal it. No, it’s bound to come out, sooner or later. If he doesn’t know now, he will soon.”

Anne nodded. “I should write to him, nevertheless.”
“You’ve been writing to him this whole time?”

“He is my husband.”

“And how, exactly, do these letters come and go?”

“I send them to Mary and she sends his to me.”

George chuckled. “‘Neatly done,’” he teased, mimicking her earlier tone. “You don’t suppose Mary will get into some trouble with it?”

“Arthur had me do something even more dangerous and I was not caught. I do not anticipate any trouble for Mary.”

George laughed. “Well, then, I suppose you must write him. There’s other news you may wish to convey.”

Anne frowned. “Being?”

Her brother’s expression grew sly, suffusing his face with mirth. “I’ve spoken with our illustrious father. I wheedled him down a little bit at a time over the course of a few days before suggesting treason,” he said in a laughing tone. “But treason I did, ultimately, suggest.”

Anne felt breathless, as from fear. It was a black thing that weighed in her chest, tightening against it. “What did he say?”

George flicked his glance towards her, quirking his brows and his lips as one. “You know our father, Anne,” he said, reaching out to place a hand over her belly. “Not even he could resist a Boleyn Duke of York.”
Family Feud

Chapter Summary

When will this all be over? wondered Richard. When will we all be free?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

THOMAS BOLEYN, ENGLISH AMBASSADOR TO FRANCE
Hever Castle, England
May 1521

The gallery was long and narrow. Thomas stopped dead when he saw his younger daughter at the end of it. She wore black, as she almost did, and she looked almost a strange hallucination by comparison to the rich wood that constructed the house or the pale plaster that held it all together. Yet, for all that, her striking features were warm and rosy. Anne had never had the classic beauty of her sister, but she had, he supposed, an allure of her own – one that had apparently proved much more attractive to a would-be Prince of England than her sister’s more ordinary attractions. Thomas’ jaw set as he studied her. Her pregnancy remained invisible – for now – but it would soon be known. And when it was…

“You’ve made a right mess of things, Anne,” said Thomas, sternly.

She stopped as well, studied him as she folded her hands before her. It was never easy to know what she was thinking, almost impossible to read her inscrutable features unless her expressive eyes betrayed her. Just now, the black orbs were hooded and withdrawn. She was still, still, as though she were, indeed, some strange spectre of the night – clad all in black as she was, she must belong to the midnight hours though morning’s rays peaked through the windows.

“How could you do it, my girl?” he demanded, his lips drew back to reveal his clenched teeth. “How could you do it?” Of them all, it was Anne he least expected to behave so rashly, so without any thought to the Boleyn fortunes. “You’ve betrayed us all!”

Anne stared at him, her black eyes were like coal: kindling with a spark and she drew herself to her full height. “I’ve raised us, Papa,” she said slowly, her tone controlled. “When we had nowhere to go, I raised us up.”

Black fury bit at his gut. Thomas was the head of this family, surely such duties fell to him. It was no place for a daughter – and a second daughter, at that! – to meddle. “I always thought you were most like me,” he gestured, vaguely. “Of the children. I thought you were most like me.”

Anne paused, bowed her head. She took several strides to approach him. “Am I, dear Papa?” Gingerly, as though he might snap at her, Anne reached for his hand, took it in her own. She kneaded it gently with her thumbs as she lifted her eyes to his own. “Who is most like you, Papa?”

Thomas glanced away. “Henry Tudor had no love of me.”

“He is dead, Papa. There is now a new king and a new Henry and they will love you dearly for my
sake. My brother-in-law, the King, owes me much and Henry…” she smiled and he saw the warmth blossom in her cheeks and in her eyes. “Henry adores me, Papa…and I him.”

Thomas glanced away fiercely, casting his gaze towards the windows. Light slanted through the diamond-shaped panes and Thomas blinked, willed away the tears that bit the corners of his eyes. “You didn’t even contact me,” he mumbled past his tightened throat. “You didn’t…George told me, Anne. George. Not you. Why did you not-“ Thomas shook his head, cleared his throat, and continued to gaze unseeingly away. “Nan, do you not trust me?”

Anne paused, looked – he saw from the corner of his eyes – to the floor beneath them or her shoes or the rushes. “No more, my dear Papa,” she began, turning to look at him once again. “Than you have trusted me.” Thomas swiveled to look at her. She did not flinch. “If I had told you at the start, Papa, you would have separated us. You would have put a stop to it.”

“Yes,” said Thomas. “Yes. It was my right! I would have protected you, Nan…I should have protected you…”

Anne shook her head slowly, slowly. “No, Papa. The choice was mine; mine and his, Papa, and we would have found another way back to one another had anyone meddled with us,” she paused. “I tried, at first, to elude him, tried to elude myself, but to no avail. I love him, Papa, and no other than God may part us now.”

Thomas pulled away. “Foolish girl,” he rasped, but it was tears and not anger that clogged his throat. “Have I failed you so thoroughly?”

Anne held out her hand, again. “I married him, Papa, as Mama married you: for love. It was love that brought me into this world and love that shall bring my child into it. My child, Papa: your own grandchild, who shall one day be the Duke of York like his father before him. You might have had from me an Earl for a grandson. Do you not now see, Papa, I have given you something far greater? A royal Duke with the whole of England in the palm of his hand. Take mine, now. Help us. Let not this world ever forget the name of Boleyn.”

Thomas put his hand in hers.

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RICHARD IV, KING OF ENGLAND
York, England
May 1521

Behind the ancient walls he waited.

‘Do not go to him,’ Sister Pauline, his Cathy, had warned. ‘Do not meet him. Go on to my cousin, the King of Scotland! Do not hesitate in your aim; do not be distracted.’

Instead of marching north to Scotland, however, he’d turned. He couldn’t let Arthur cut him off in a foreign country. Too often, already, Richard had been pinned down in Scotland by a Tudor king. He was not willing to do so again. Too well he remembered the snapping red banners of his old enemy, the knowledge that somewhere across that hill stood Henry the King: a fastidious foe, a careful foe, a clever foe. A foe who had come so very close to destroying Richard. Richard would not let his son overtake him the same way.

When will this all be over? wondered Richard. When will we all be free? He narrowed his eyes, scanned the horizon. The River Ouse wound its way along the world like a silk silver ribbon, its
seemingly still surface reflecting gold where the sun’s rays caressed it.

Not so careful, perhaps as the father, but the son of Richard’s old foe was proving clever enough. He’d industriously spread the rumor that he’d been crowned in Winchester in May, when in fact the event had taken place in February – giving him time to move, to arrive, long before he was expected. If scouts had not spotted his ships, Richard would have been caught entirely unawares. Not now, thought Richard. Not this time! The first Henry Tudor was dead; the second was Richard’s own prisoner. This Arthur would not defeat him where the others could not, no.

“Forgive me, Lizzie,” whispered Richard. He’d ridden into battle and faced her husband before. Never Lizzie’s sons. When they had fought, other generals had met them in battle. He had hoped never to confront either of his nephews in person. God had ignored his prayers. “We will be ready.”

Chapter End Notes

Forty chapters and 113,344 words!! Yay!!! Thank you so, so much, my friends, for sticking with this story so long and for all your continuing love and support <333333
Eve of Battle

Chapter Summary

Raising his arms, Arthur put on his grandfather’s crowned helm and mounted his horse.

Chapter Notes

This is very short (and unedited bc I ran out of time!) but it sets things in motion...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

ARTHUR TUDOR, KING OF ENGLAND
Paris, France
September 1520

Elizabeth of York touched his face; her eyes glistened with tears. “For so long I have prayed for this day...yet now that it is here, I can hardly believe it. That I should live to see you sail back home...Will I recognize you when I see you, again, my darling son?”

Arthur laughed, “When next you see me, Mama, it shall be in England: as a king crowned.”

Her eyes searched his and she pulled her son close. “My boy, my darling, darling boy. Oh, Arthur,” she pulled back to look his in the eye again. “Your father would be so proud, so very, very proud.”

He felt choked, compressed, his eyes grew misty. “We will bring him home, again, Mama,” he assured her. “We will give him the funeral in Westminster he deserves: the funeral of a King of England.”

The last three words seemed to remind her of something. Elizabeth reached over her shoulder to gesture to an attendant. “I have something for you, Arthur.” She takes the bundle, wrapped in velvet, and hands it to him. “For all that we sold to make it so far as we have, I could never bear to part with it. Before you go to England, you must take this with you.”

Arthur clasped the item, pulled free the velvet. “Grandfather’s helmet – the same that Father claimed from your uncle at Bosworth. Found it in a puddle, didn’t he?”

Elizabeth smiled, a knowing half-grimace. “I believe it was a bush. A rose bush, blushing red blooms.”

Arthur scoffed.

“Remember, my boy, once we are gone, the past serves only the living. Let the dead rest in peace. The living must survive.”

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ARTHUR II, KING OF ENGLAND
York, England  
*May 1521*

Two years ago, two years ago almost to the day, Arthur and Henry were invited to France to beg their fortunes of King François. Today, Arthur stood surrounded by his armies, ready to come at last face-to-face with the Usurper, Perkin Warbeck.

Arthur remembered well the stormy voyage of 1497: tossed and slapped across the seas like driftwood, his father’s steadying hand on his shoulder. He remembered, too, his own harrowing escape from the castle where he lived, crossing the country in secrecy – for fear to capture – to join his father for the crossing to the continent. King Henry’s visage was as stormy as the seas around him, but stony too, stony and determined.

“We will return,” said the King. “And you will rule after me.”

“I shall, Father,” Arthur had promised, then. Bowing his head, he murmured the words again. York lay before them: York and the Usurper. Raising his arms, Arthur put on his grandfather's crowned helm and mounted his horse.

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**RICHARD IV, KING OF ENGLAND**  
York, England  
*May 1521*

They’d spotted them miles off, his captains had immediately shown a disinclination to meet him outside the walls of the city. The king felt differently.

“You cannot be serious, Your Grace,” one of his lieutenants was saying. A tremor ran through that voice, the softest of hums and Richard turns to look at him, to look at him hard.

“Do you question me so, sir?”

The lieutenant paled.

“We will meet them on the open field. Do you think I shall hide behind castle walls while the child of my enemy assails us? No! I shall meet him in the field of battle.

Wind swept across them, rising from the river, and Arthur’s armies waited near their ships. It had not taken long for Richard to rue his own courage. The warriors loomed like a storm cloud, grey fields of armor gleaming in the sunlight. Above them the red dragon pennants snapped smartly in the brisk wind. Richard unfurled his own banners, watching the sun – its true form even then receding behind the clouds – burst into view upon his banners. *The sun in its splendor*, thought Richard, glancing around him at his own forces.

All around him they gathered, showing their colors boldly, bowing before Richard’s own. Across the field waited Arthur Tudor and his volley of French, English, Welsh, and Irish. *A ragtag gathering*, Richard told himself. *What harm could such a conglomeration do me?*

Richard nodded to his line to hold fast, heard the shouts from across the field. “The King! The King! The King!” His great enemy rode into view. Richard staggered backwards as though a bolt had struck his heart. Tall and proud of limb, crowned with the helm he so often wore into battle, Edward IV rode into view beneath the banner of Tudor.

Richard felt the life drain from his face, the luster from his limbs. It was not his father, he knew this:
it was his nephew wearing the helmet Lizzie had taken with her into exile, but there was a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach to see him notwithstanding: strong and proud as ever he had been, sheathed in armor and tall at the head of his army. Yes, yes, this, *this* was how Richard remembered his father almost more so than the quick-witted man from feasts or the affectionate one in private: across the field from Richard, Edward IV’s legacy unsheathed his sword.

Chapter End Notes

Hello, my darlings! So, first of all, thank you so, so much to those of you who have done so for commenting!! I love them and I’m so grateful and overwhelmed at the outpouring of kindness! Secondly, I'm sorry I haven't responded (and therefore) posted them yet!! Since you've been so generous as to take the time to comment here, I want to take the time to properly respond. Because of this, I haven't posted any of the comments yet, since (knowing me) as soon as I post them, I won't be able to find them again and I want v much to respond to all of you. I love receiving them and I save them up for bad days to read and read again so thank you so, so much I love each and every one of you for taking the time and making the effort to comment <333333333
“Men of England, men of Wales, of Ireland, of France! Today we settle an ancient score.”

The world narrowed to single moment, suspended like dew on a cobweb. Arthur drew a deep breath, heard it rattle through his helm, and raised his sword. “Men of England,” he cried, riding before their line: back, forth, eyes locking on each passing face. He spoke in English, in Welsh, in French, and vowed to learn Irish so that one day he could speak to them, too. “Men of Wales, of Ireland, of France! Today we settle an ancient score.” Extending his sword, he pointed towards the great city of York, its Roman-built walls hovering at the crest of a hill like the white hart, ready for pursuit. “The dread Usurper who stands now across that field claims that he is a Duke of York and King of us all, but that title is not his. Let us prove his lie and take from him this proud city he would seize as he has seized all of England: with falsehood and force. England lies now in shackles but we, together, may set her free. Today we fight for what is ours: we fight for home, for God, for our sacred honor. Today, we fight for England and we fight for liberty from tyranny! For freedom!”

“FREEDOM!” thundered back his army. Men raised their swords and spears in the air, crying at this word. They banged their javelins against the earth and Arthur seemed to feel his teeth clank with the shudder of the ground beneath them.

“I don’t like this,” murmured Richard de la Pole, reining up alongside him. “Why have the Usurper’s forces not awaited our coming from behind those stout walls? Why do they come afield to greet us, leaving behind their great advantage?”

Arthur shrugged. “Perhaps they plan already to make a retreat?”

“Your Grace, what if it is a trap?”

“Then,” said Arthur, gathering his reins in as his stallion tossed his head. “We spring the trap.”

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“Then,” said Arthur, gathering his reins in as his stallion tossed his head. “We spring the trap.”
Richard stared towards the horizon. Across it he heard the shouted challenge of the Lancastrians. His father – no, the vision of his father: Arthur, whose brow was wreathed with the crowned helm of Edward IV – rode before his army, speaking to them, encouraging them. Richard had heard much of Arthur, heard that he read and studied and read and studied. Richard swallowed hard, narrowed his eyes. Was that where he had learned to speak to men, Richard wondered?

All that Richard knew came from experience – handed down from his father or won by his own valor. He swallowed, but his mouth was dry. I, too, know how to address an army, he thought, but words escaped him now. Forgive me, Lizzie, his one refrain. All he heard was the thud of his own heart; all he saw was his father’s figure riding before an army once more. Though his banners were the red of Lancaster, behind him Edward IV’s banner still gleamed as the sun in its splendor shone its glory upon the world: dawn breaking over the next hill. Echoes of lost histories rolled on and on and on again. Shall I never escape it? wondered Richard. Shall I never be free of what has gone before?

Hal Courtenay, Earl of Devon, touched his elbow and Richard turned to look at him, at him and at his heir, Dickon, Duke of Gloucester, and at Edmund de la Pole, Earl of Suffolk, and at all the others assembled behind him.

He swallowed again and rode out in front of his army. “You see them there,” he shouted, pointed. “There, before the walls of York, stand invaders. They wish to take all from you: lands, wives, riches, all. They are not, however, the first invaders to attack England. Like those who have come before them, they shall break their might upon the impregnable walls of York and they shall wash away! Their spirits and their power shall crack. We fight now, in the knowledge that we shall win: to defend all that is ours and all that we hold dear. Fight, men of England, fight! FOR ENGLAND!”

“FOR ENGLAND!”

“Let us end this, once and for all,” growled Richard to himself. From across the field, horns sounded the charge.

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ARTHUR II, KING OF ENGLAND
York, England
May 1521

He slashed with his sword: again, again, again. Arthur’s arm was stiff and sore but he hardly felt it. Beyond him lay the city of York, wreathed in mist as dawn unfurled its colors in red and gold behind them, bathing the city in a rosy hue. A little farther, thought Arthur. A little farther, still. He knew the banners each by heart: Devon, Gloucester, Suffolk…and the sun in splendor.

Digging his heels into his stallion, Arthur pressed further and further, riding into the breast of the crippled enemy line. Both lines had broken over each other as they charged: crashing like waves, striking only to be repelled, only to gather strength and begin again. The smell of blood permeated every breeze but Arthur hardly smelt it. He saw only the banner of the Usurper fluttering nearby. Arthur lay about him with his sword, striking down all those who stood in his way and spearheading the breach of his own warriors who followed after him.

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RICHARD IV, KING OF ENGLAND
York, England
May 1521

Horns, screams, wails. Richard leaned forward across the broad neck of his steed. The horse tossed his head. The king raised his sword again, again, again. The shadow of his father rode ever closer.

“To me!” shouted Richard. His men gathered near. “To me!” The enemy drew close as well.

I was saving them, Richard thought. I imagined that I could save them. He wondered if Arthur came with the same goal. Richard had imagined his sister: sold into bondage to the cruel and unfeeling Henry Tudor; his other sisters held in close captivity: his own mother shut up in a monastery to die. I was the only one who could save them…He’d failed. How little he’d known! His sisters hadn’t believed him; hadn’t wanted him to return and his mother had died, anyway. He never saw her again after she gave him to his Uncle Richard. And Lizzie: she hated him so deeply she had raised up her children to fight him when their father died. He hadn’t saved her; he’d flung her into exile…and he’d never seen her again, either. Richard remembered the sound of his sister, Cecily’s, laughter. “What did you expect, Dickon?” she’d demanded, many years ago. “You took up arms against the only man our Lizzie ever truly loved.”

Yes the Plantagenets had fought, they’d died, and Edward IV’s shadow drew ever nearer. Richard watched; lashed out with his blade; watched more.

I was walking in your shoes, thought Richard, looking at his father’s helm. I was taking back England, just as you had done! But it had gone so differently for Richard, and his father’s ghost did not relent; only drew nearer and nearer. His blade shone red with blood. I did my best! I gave my all! I fought and I fought and I fought! I gave up the woman I loved for an alliance; abandoned the travels I’d so adored in my youth; returned though I’d seen kings die in the pursuit of their thrones! I came back, though I was not wanted; to put all to rights, and even when I knew I was not wanted I stayed to do my duty! What more do you want of me? What more do you want?

Richard raised his sword far above his head; ripped a savage cry from his throat. “God and my will!” he screamed, viciously spurring his mount. The soldiers gathered round him turned as one. The kings clashed.

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ARTHUR II, KING OF ENGLAND
York, England
May 1521

A furious counterattack. Arthur raised his shield as arrows and javelins whistled past. “CHARGE!” Hooves pounding – Arthur thought suddenly of the joust in France – jolted through his bones. He leaned forward, heard the wind whistling through his grandfather’s helm; felt it sting his eyes.

The enemy surged forward as they raced together. Arthur raised his sword. The breath went out of him as his stallion leapt and the two counter-charged crashed. A full-body slap clattered through Arthur as horse and rider landed as one; collided with a foot soldier. Arthur felt a crack! and the soldier went under the warhorse’s hooves. The sun in splendor banner wafted nearby, its standard bearer fought courageously nearby a knight in gorgeous armor – armor fit for a king.

The Usurper! Arthur’s heart seized his throat; his fingers tightened around his sword hilt. “You took everything from us,” muttered Arthur through blood-stained lips. “You sent my father into exile and to his death!” He cried out wordlessly, heedlessly hurtling through the throng towards the would-be King of England.
“The King!” screamed Hal; spurred his horse. Arthur Tudor bore down upon King Richard and Hal felt helpless, as though he were gazing through some portal or distant, as though in a dream. His horse seemed to still; the world around him glinted in the searing sunlight for a moment, caught between Hal’s ragged breaths. Arthur Tudor was bearing down; Arthur Tudor’s men were bearing down; and a volley of arrows screamed through the air, for half a moment darkening the sky, before raining before Arthur upon King Richard’s head.

Hal gasped, felt sick to his stomach, and then the world was moving again. Arrows pierced the sky, whizzing to lodge deep in the earth or striking true as they tore through Yorkist soldiers. For a moment, Hal saw nothing, peering forward his gaze was screened by the bristling arrows that landed between himself and his uncle. Then the volley was ended. Hal spurred his horse onward – and spotted the King’s warhorse – but Richard was not mounted upon it.

“The King!” he shrieked. “The King! Where is the King?”

The colors of Gloucester intercepted, reaching Arthur Tudor and the spot where Richard had just been before Hal. He staggered drunkenly into the back of the group, found that as men fought around him, cousin Dickon was hastily dismounting and crouching around a prone figure. “No,” whispered Hal. “No, no, no.”

Dickon gently lifted the helmet off the figure. Richard’s head fell forward in Dickon’s arms. Flinging himself from his horse, Hal landed beside his cousin, kneeling in the mud with the king. “The King! Uncle Richard! Is he dead?” demanded Hal.

Dickon’s face was tear-and-dirt streaked as he raised his face to Hal’s. Slowly, he shook his head. “I do not know.”

Chapter End Notes

So this is a little choppy which is...intentional but if it's too confusing let me know!! I'd be happy to clarify as long as it isn't spoilerish ofc ;D
Cousins' Wars

Chapter Summary

“You misunderstand our motives in coming here. I mean only to say to you that I am now the King and you shall bow before me!”

Chapter Notes

cw: language

short and...not so sweet ;D I hope you enjoy! <3

ARThUR ii, KING OF ENGLAND
York, England
May 1521

The portcullis creaked as it drew upwards and several riders emerged, their fine ornaments gleaming in the noonday sun. Arthur, astride his own horse and also dressed, namely, to impress, awaited them in a storm of impatience. The Usurper had fallen, he’d seen that; but whether he now lived…Ior died…Arthur could not begin to say. The white pennant of peace streamed above the riders’ heads. Arthur sighed, felt his mount shift beneath him.

“Hush, friend,” said Arthur in his most soothing tones, patting the creature’s mane.

The Usurper was not amongst the riders coming from inside York, he noted, but that meant nothing. He may now live; he may have already died.

After their so-called King Richard had fallen, his host had panicked and retreated back behind the sturdy walls of York. Accordingly, Arthur’s troops had taken up siege position…and now the Yorkists requested a parlay. Arthur had granted it. He had questions of his own, after all.


“I am not your cousin,” growled the response.

Gloucester rode a bay horse, and, Arthur noted coolly, wore a doublet richly embroidered with the sun in splendor, surmounted by a golden crown.

“Our relation cannot be disputed, whatever the Usurper’s lies about my rights. Our mothers were sisters; therefore we are cousins.” Arthur paused, glancing dispassionately at Gloucester’s assembled nobility. The Usurper, he confirmed, was not amongst them, but Exeter was. Arthur inclined his head towards him. “Cousin,” he greeted.

Exeter returned the gesture evenly. “Well met,” he responded.
“Hardly!” scoffed Gloucester.

Arthur felt sour at this, but pressed down on it, flicked an imperious gaze over the assemblage. “Well?” asked Arthur. “The Usurper – is he dead?” The question hung heavy in the air, dread and deep. He knew well enough this was a callous question addressed to people that most likely cared about him, but he also knew well what it was to receive such questions. He had often been the recipient of such inquiries about his own father. The Usurper deserved no better than King Henry VII had gotten.

“Yes,” bit out Gloucester, looking away. From the corner of his eye, Arthur saw Exeter hang his head.

Dead! His old enemy dead and gone at long last! Arthur did not know whether to weep or pray, he could scarcely believe it after all that had been, but his throat was choked and he tightened his hands on his reins for want of something to hold onto. “Well, then,” he said, at last. “We come now to the matter at hand. Cousins, I will maintain your exulted places of honor as well as those of your men, and I will spare this, your city, and the people therein if you bend the knee to me now. Your army may disperse unmolested and you may return with me to London to be confirmed as my lords and captains and friends.”

“No!” barked Gloucester. He shook his head vehemently. “You misunderstand our motives in coming here. I mean only to say to you that I am now the King and you shall bow before me!” He leaned forward in his saddle, his voice harsh against the hot summer air and Arthur laughed.

“You sound more a petulant child than a King.” Looking past him, Arthur addressed his men. “Are there any amongst you who would care to take up my offer? Though this boy has rejected it, it still stands towards the rest of you.”

Gloucester’s eyes widened and he glanced behind him towards his attendants. “You would not dare! I am the King!”

Some mutterings stirred his people and Arthur smiled softly. “There is much to decide. Fear not, I will extend my offer until the sun sets. If any of you should wish to come to me before then, I will honor these terms.”

“This is ludicrous! None of my men will accept such terms, as it would mean turning their back on their king! None, cousin,” he added, pointedly. “You will dismount that horse, give it to me as a gift, return my grandfather’s helm which your father stole like a common thief, and kneel before me or you will have no thought of mercy from me.”

Arthur’s heart gave a clench at the mention of his father and, when he spoke, his voice was cool and grave and biting. “I’ve no need of mercy from a child. This discourse is at an end.” Turning his horse, Arthur and his men rode back towards camp.

“I have not dismissed you!” cried Gloucester at Arthur’s back. “You cannot leave! You cannot leave! I have not done with my piece! Come back! I have not dismissed you!”

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RICHARD, DUKE OF GLOUCESTER
York, England
May 1521

“How dare he!” shouted Dickon. “How dare he!”
Hal shrugged. “He does truly believe that he is a king, Dickon. And you were hardly civil.”

“Neither was he! You heard what he said! He called me a child!” He turned towards his cousin, watched him bite his lip. “What? Out with it!”

“Perhaps…” Hal cleared his throat. “It could be said…”

“Fuck you, Hal,” growled Dickon, pacing away. “You only say so because of how you felt about the plan.”

“Dickon, it’s not right! Our Uncle, King Richard, is not conscious to be sure, but still he lives! He lives and fights on! Ought we not to be truthful about his condition?”

“Surely not! After all, was it not you who said that the Lancastrians might make some effort to seize and hold him, should they perceive a medical caravan betaking him towards Scotland and aid?”

Hal sighed. “I did, but-“

“I doubt as they shall try to interfere with a corpse being carried towards its one-time wife in the North of England!”

“No,” agreed Hal. “But such dishonesty? We might have bargained for a truce or even have prevailed upon the familial duty of our Tudor cousin in allowing peaceful passage of such a caravan. Instead we have deceived him and, should the King recover and Arthur therefore learn of this deception, he will have cause always to doubt our word, a circumstance that may prove lethal in future. And, to be sure, when King Richard hears of this ruse, he shall not be pleased, either.”

“There will be no future for that cur, Arthur,” spat Dickon. “I shall wet my blade with his blood and then Uncle Richard will be pleased, indeed, for I will have rid this world of that evil.”

“He is our cousin!” exclaimed Hal. “And I am convinced he truly believes in his cause. Is he not therefore the same as you and me? Evil, ha!”

“He is a traitor – I should think a one of your heritage should know the meaning of that – and I shall not allow him to overcome England as our gentle Uncle has done. I shall break his back against my endurance and drive him back into the sea there to drown, but not before I take back our grandfather’s helm from his thieving head. And then, Hal, then England shall be safe. Then England shall see me for who I truly am and our uncle at last will be proud.”

Hal collapsed into a nearby chair, staring bleakly ahead. “God in Heaven,” he prayed.
Green And Gold

Chapter Summary

“Mistress Carey,” called Catherine softly. “Do you think it true?”

Chapter Notes

So I've messed up my timeline a bit!! Rather than going through and changing all the dates, however, I'm just going to say that we're still in May, as of the past few chapters, and Arthur performed a minor miracle in transporting an army across most of the length of England (he does, after all have ships! :D) in the span of a month but...he arrives in June. So sorry about any confusion!

ARTHUR II, KING OF ENGLAND
York, England
May 1521

Belief hovered at the edge of his imagination, fluttering like a butterfly – soft and crushable, but strangely elusive for all that. Arthur had been but a boy when the Usurper had expelled them from England and had seemed, always, a half-surreal figure: a nightmare draped in black. To think that, after all this time, he had at last fallen, at last he was expelled from Arthur’s life…It was half unthinkable, yet at the same moment the thought was elation, itself, jarring, yes, but overwhelming in joy. At last, he thought. At long last, my father may rest easy.

Now it was only to beat back the Usurper’s heir (given the display at the gates of York, Arthur didn’t credit that as much of a struggle) and England would be, once again, restored to the reign of the House of Tudor. Justice would at last prevail. Saying another little prayer – the second dozen of them – Arthur blessed the happy thought and, yanking quickly a sheet of parchment towards him, dipped his pen in the inkwell. It was time to write to his mother and sisters that soon, very soon, they might safely join him here in England. His stylus hovered midair above the parchment, suspended as thought pressed over him.

Outside his tent birds twittered and his men moved about their siege camp. Arthur’s pen paused, held upwards, drip, drip. He glanced down to see blotches of ink dotting the clean page. Sighing, he returned his pen to the inkwell and pushed the paper aside. “Harry,” he whispered.

If the rest of his family was to come to England, he must first secure London and, with it, his brother and heir. Standing, he went to the flap of his tent and opened it. “Pack my things,” he instructed a servant. “I and a portion of my army ride this day for London.”

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MARY CAREY, LADY TO QUEEN CATHERINE OF ENGLAND
Tower of London, England
June 1521
The page had hastened, scuttling across the floor towards Queen Catherine’s side, seeming to slide even as he dropped into a low obeisance. “Your Grace,” he had said, never rising from his kneeling position on the floor. “I have heard, of late…His Grace the King…is dead. He fell in battle against his mortal foe, the would-be King Arthur.”

It had been nearly a month since the frenzied news had reached them. It had been only as rumor, but with more and more similar rumors cropping up, Mary gave it greater and greater credence. After all, most every report agreed about the manner of his death, a thing uncommon in fabrication.

And now, this. Mary glanced up from her embroidery to see Catherine hovering still by the window, no doubt watching the sea of red rim the crest of the hill like a bizarre sunrise. Once again, a Lancastrian army was at their door.

“Mistress Carey,” called Catherine softly. Dutifully, Mary got up, approached, curtseyed at Catherine’s elbow. “Do you think it true?” Slowly, she turned towards the eldest Boleyn. “Do you think my husband the King dead?” Mary’s eyes were soft; a sympathetic look, and she was reminded of the first time she had comforted Catherine in widowhood. Reaching out, the Queen touched the stone edge of the window.

“From what little I know of him from our time together in France…it would not be like Arthur Tudor, I imagine, to circulate false reports of such a nature. He might spread rumors about his own actions or something like…but not about the death of a man, particularly – if you will forgive me saying – his ancient enemy’s demise. When that event occurs, I believe he would think, it must be without the stain of past lies and therefore rise above doubt. Tudor’s lack of involvement does not, however, necessitate the King’s…passing, of course-“

“But it does suggest it,” said Catherine, nodding. Slowly, she bowed her head. “I believe you are quite right, Mistress Carey. He would not do that.”

Mary’s throat was tight and raw. She stretched out a hand, wanting to touch the Queen’s back comfortingly; snatched it back, unsure if Catherine was in a mood for such unsolicited intimacy. “Your Grace,” she began, again, bit her lip. “Rumors are strange things and do not always bring truths-“

“I am very tired, Mistress Carey,” said Catherine, glancing out the window, again. “So very tired. Pray, return to your sewing.” Catherine’s eyes were blue as a cloudy day when she turned them on Mary, again. “I ought not to have disturbed it.” Holding out her hand, she gestured towards Mary’s former seat and the lady curtsied, knowing she had been dismissed.

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ARTHUR II, KING OF ENGLAND
London, England
June 1521

He had not seen these walls in twenty-two years. Arthur peered quizzically upwards, taking in the stark grey of London’s city walls as he approached. Dust and grime accompanied every feature of his ride with his army (he’d left brother Henry’s army in York to lay siege there under the command of John de la Pole), but he hardly saw it now: took in, rather, the things that were different, yes – but the things that were the same more so.

Each stone was in place, its soaring height (though leaving a different impression on a man riding thither with an army at his back than they had upon a child whose father commanded them) was the same. The gates were closed and barred, yes, but upon the parapets he saw the same stock of
Englishmen as had always served their posts and within the city was the same hubbub that he’d known there as a child. The warm sun slanted downwards and Arthur blinked past it, watched the world suffuse in yellow-gold warmth, and rode on towards London.

His herald returned nearly as swiftly as he had ben sent, rushing to the King’s side and falling to one knee to address him. “Your Grace,” he began and Arthur nodded benignly. “Her Majesty the Queen Dowager of France and Infanta of Spain who calls herself Queen of England, hearing that you are come to this place, wishes to meet Your Grace in person to discuss the future of London.”

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CATHERINE OF ARAGON, QUEEN OF ENGLAND

Tower of London, England

June 1521

She felt like a breathless girl again: sixteen and blushing at the notion of seeing him. It had almost happened, once: the Tudor court had almost come to Spain, at the invitation of Catherine’s mother, Queen Isabella, but her mother had taken ill and her father had not felt the same degree of kinship towards Elizabeth of York as had her mother. If only he had, Catherine thought, glumly. Perhaps then I might have been spared all of this.

She was careful in her adornment as she prepared to meet him: wore regal rubies upon her fingers and her throat, but not upon her brow; wore a gown embroidered across the bodice with the pallets of Aragon and the castle of Castile, but not the sun in splendor of Richard’s England. She ordered for one of her gable hoods to be brought, thinking to be discreet and modest, but at the last her vanity won out and she had brought to her, instead, the more flattering French hood from which her burnished red-gold hair peaked at the top. She wore burgundy velvet, with sleeves cut at the elbows to reveal costly brocade cloth-of-gold: the closest she came to wearing a scrap of armor.

Catherine sucked in a deep breath before the gates opened to meet him. She sucked in a deep breath and cast a glance over her shoulder back towards London, back towards her ladies. Mary Carey offered an encouraging look and Catherine ordered the gates be opened.

A great gathering awaited her and Catherine of Aragon squared her shoulders to meet them. Whatever she was – Queen or courtier – she was an Infanta and ambassador of Spain. She would act the part.

Riding to the arranged meeting point, Catherine gazed curiously at the assembly: some she recognized, most she did not, but she searched for a particular set of features. Before the Tudor regime had been ousted, while she was still betrothed to him, she’d been the recipient of a portrait or two depicting the young Prince Arthur as a boy, and she’d met in person his brother. From this, she told herself, she had enough: from this, she could recognize him. Still, even as she scanned each passing face, she did her best to conceal her curiosity….and her disappointment. None of these were he, she felt sure: not a one had the green-gold eyes she remembered well, the Roman nose, the chestnut locks native to his family. Not one.

A page announced her. Catherine listened to her own name and titles rattled off in a distant way. She did not demurely lower her gaze. She stared proudly, fiercely ahead. “Where is your king?” she asked when the page grew silent.

“Here,” she heard the response as a few other riders approached. She stared at the speaker as his own page rattled off his titles (or presumed titles – she no longer knew which she should think). Arthur paused until the page had ceased and then bowed his head. “Pray forgive me my tardiness, Your Highness.” He cleared his throat, glanced down and back again. His voice was softer when he spoke
again: “I am informed you wished to meet?”

“I did,” replied Catherine, directing her conversation somewhat at his horse’s ears for a moment, as well. It was hard to look at him: to look at him, to hear him. His voice was different, his visage different, from what she’d tried to picture: first she’d imagined the boy he was, later she’d put his eyes in his brother’s face…and the voice, the voice she realized now she’d fancied quite Spanish in accent without ever considering it could not be, but it was him, after all these years: this man before her was finally, finally Arthur Tudor…and she was not permitted to be pleased to finally meet him. Catherine raised her eyes again, dared direct them at the green eyes – yes, green with the softest hue of amber, as she’d been told, as the paintings had portrayed – and began again. “I have heard many rumors regarding the outcome of the recent battle in York, but have heard nothing of the truth. Tell me, in Christian charity…” she swallowed hard, glanced towards Arthur’s assembly who now quite refused to look her in the eye, as though afraid to face her – an answer in itself. No one wished to tell a widow of her bereavement. “Is my husband dead?”

Silence, stony silence for the breadth of a moment, and then Arthur urged his horse forward, across the distance that separated them. He came close, to look her in the eye, and she found – small as she was and tall as he was – that he quite towered over her, even as they were both mounted on horseback. “I am sorry to be the one to tell you this,” said Arthur, gently. “I had assumed the news would proceed me.” He paused; she edged her face up towards him, watched as he searched for the words. “I saw him fall from his horse, myself, and heard the pronouncement of his death from his nephew’s lips. Your husband perished in York a month ago. I am truly sorry, my Ca-“ he stopped, a look of stormy confusion, looked quickly away.

Catherine stared at him, his turned face, and felt her heart rattling like a caged bird against her ribs. My Cat, she thought. That is what he nearly said. After all, it was what he had always called her in his letters. She swallowed, glanced down at her horse, back up to him. “You told me,” she began in Spanish and he turned quickly to look at her, green eyes glowing golden. “That you learned Spanish to better speak with me.”

He blushed red, glanced heavenward, then back towards her. Nodded once.

“Do your men speak it?” she asked in the same language. “Mine do not.”

“Not a one,” he replied in Spanish.

“Good,” she replied, swallowed hard. Her mouth was dry and her head suddenly blank of all the words and words and words she’d always, always wished to say to him in person. Glancing at those around them, she cleared her throat, arched a brow, and resumed in English. “If Richard is dead,” she said, glancing towards her entourage. “Then I am now, by no account, a Queen of England and, therefore, my duties are entirely towards God and Spain.” She turned back to Arthur. “I shall not deny you this city, if it is your wish to have it, so long as you treat the good people within those walls as your own people. You may have it in peace and goodwill.”

She watched as Arthur raised his eyes towards London and the horizon. She did not say another word.
Harry pushed himself up to his feet, tilted his head as though he could peer around the opening door.

As soon as the rumors of another invasion had made their way south, it had spelled a return for Catherine of Aragon’s retinue to the royal apartments in the Tower…and for Henry a too-early reunion with his sad little cell. This time, however, there would be no stolen visitations from Anne: no hope of seeing her, whatsoever. Occasionally, Mary would come to him with a letter or some shred of news, but even that was precious little compared to the hours passed and passed and passed. He spent his time in solitude etching an astrolabe with the words: le temps viendra into the wall by the window slit and, beneath it he carved her initials: AB and a heart round them.

The heart swung upwards and down, round the letters he had inscribed and he hacked away, chrrk, chrrk, chrrk, busily. Outside, the occasional boot swept this way or that and, he had heard, an army even now approached, but it was not here, yet, he was sure for there were no signs of battle. He did not look out the window, did not care.

The heart looped downwards to meet its end, enveloping her name in an embrace he was no longer free to give. Where is she, now? He wondered. What is she doing? He pictured her with a book cradled in her lap, in the sunshine, but he had never seen Hever – if she was indeed still in that place – and did not know what to imagine. She’d spoken, he recalled listlessly, of vines clinging to the walls… but he realized each time that it was always their time in France that he pictured: now she was at Fontainebleau, now at Blois, now at Amboise. Sometimes she strolled the rose gardens as they had often done, other times she hurtled merrily across the countryside on horseback, still others he saw her sitting in the many chambers they had once occupied. He tried to think of her happy, conjure the image of her smiles or the sound of her laughter, but his sadness seemed to bleed into his imagination like teardrops on a page, blurring these fond visions with a facsimile of his own misery. I pray God she is happy, he thought, but there was no way to be sure. He clenched his teeth and feverishly scratched at the wall. Chrrk, chrrk, chrrk, the edge of the heart veered towards the floor.

Footfalls stopped outside his door. Henry paused, casting a curious glance towards it. It was not
Mary, of this he could be quite sure because there were multiple feet and she only ever came when there would be no one to witness the event. Harry pushed himself up to his feet, tilted his head as though he could peer around the opening door.

His mouth fell open as the door swung wide. “Arthur?”

“How now, Harry?”

He hardly knew what he was doing before he threw his arms around his brother.

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ARTHUR II, KING OF ENGLAND
Palace of Westminster, England
June 1521

“So Catherine…simply surrendered?” inquired Harry. Together the two brothers supped privately, Arthur sipping sedately along at his wine, Harry’s attentions temporarily diverted from the meat on his plate to stare at his brother. “God’s thumb, Arthur, if she’d only done that for me you might have been crowned even earlier.”

Arthur chuckled, set his glass down. “But instead she took to the field against you…and you lost,” he said softly, teasingly. “That cannot sit well, I’d wager.”

Harry narrowed his eyes fiercely. “I can hardly be blamed; I was knocked quite unconscious at the time.” He returned his attentions to his plate.

“Did they not feed you, Harry?” Arthur asked, watching his brother tear into a piece of bread. Of course, he was a prince and he ate like one: all manners and decorum, but his eagerness could not be disguised.

“Not as a free man!” responded his little brother, grinning. “And, in any case, I mean to fortify myself before my journey.”

Arching his brows, Arthur tilted his head. “Your journey?”

Fixing him with a bright grin, Harry winked. “Aye, brother. It’s time you met my wife!”

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HENRY TUDOR, DUKE OF YORK
Kent, England
June 1521

The day was hot, but Harry thought he’d never seen a more glorious one. Beneath him he drove his horse hard, laughing as the wind blistered past his ears and assaulted his eyes. The sun sparkled down upon him and he found he could not wipe the smile from his face. He did not wish to. It was as he was riding hard, cresting a hill, that he saw it upon the horizon: a small, square, and moated castle…flying the dragons and rose banners of his House.

He came to the drawbridge quickly, saw servants fluttering nervously about as he clattered across it and vaulted from his horse. “Nan!” he shouted, half-hoarse, laughing even as he called. “Nan, where are you?”

Above him, a boy stuck his window out a window and Harry glanced up towards it just as a door on
his level flew open.

“Henry!” shouted her voice as she hurtled from the door and Harry’s heart gave a clench to see her to hear her, to watch her run towards him. Tossing his horse’s reins aside carelessly, he rushed towards her, sweeping her up to him. Laughing, laughing, he swung her around and held her close and felt her hot tears bleeding through the linen of his shirt as she rested her head on his chest and his own leaking across his face. He tasted the salt; he could not stop smiling.

“Oh, Nan,” he whispered, leaning back just far enough to look into her face.

“What means this visitation?” asked Anne, and he found that she, too, was grinning brightly as the hot sun above them. She shook her head. “How came you here?”

“It was the work of a great magician, Nan: my brother changed all: felled the Usurper in the north, set me free in the South, and thus came I to be here, my love. No sooner was I freed than I began my preparations to come here to you…to bring you home. To our home, Nan, to be my wife, properly, for good and all. What say you, Anne? Pack your things! If you’re in fit state to travel,” he began, gingerly placing a hand over her abdomen. “Then we shall away, if you will it, upon the morrow.”

Anne grasped both his arms, staring at him incredulously. “Can this be? Then…the war is over?” she whispered. “We have won?”

Harry heaved a sigh. “Not quite, sweetheart,” he admitted. “There is still trouble in the north, led by the Usurper’s would-be heir, but…Nothing as needs now trouble us. Not on this day.” Reaching out, Harry took her face in both hands. “There is naught on earth or in heaven that may spoil this day, for today am I in my sweetheart’s arms and she in mine.”
ANNE BOLEYN, DUCHESS OF YORK
Palace of Westminster, England
_June 1521_

She woke up to him: Henry breathing softly, head turned towards her, propped up on a legion of feather pillows. She woke up to him, watching his chest rise and fall, for the first time. Always before, she had been forced to scurry back to the chambers she shared with the ladies of Queen Catherine, reduced only to stealing an hour here or there with him. But today, bless the day, Anne Boleyn woke up to her husband sleeping peacefully beside her in her childhood bedroom at Hever. She held her breath, watching motes of dust dance through the light on their way towards him. She watched and gently, gently, leaned forward to press a gentle kiss to his brow.

The rest was all a blur: packing and harrying. Her father and brother making promises to visit her very soon, her horse prepared and then the ride: riding and riding and riding. But it was not so much a burden as it might have been, because it was – all of it – done with Henry at her side. Henry’s impatience, yes, but his eagerness too.

A shadow loomed, however, on the trek towards London. Anne bit her lip and cast a glance towards her husband. “Have you told him?”

Henry didn’t answer immediately, glancing away to the horizon. Anne stared at the back of his head with the dissatisfied confidence that he was attempting to conceal a grimace. “That I am married,” he said, at last. “Yes, I told him.”

“But failed, I may assume, to mention my identity?”

“I wanted to surprise him!”

Anne laughed sardonically. More likely, she decided, he’d wanted to avoid a confrontation in that moment and had opted for the drama of an unveiling to do it, instead. “Doubtless you’ll succeed.”

Henry’s expression was then a picture of consternation. “Perhaps the surprise shall be yours. Arthur was in France with us, you’ll recall. He knows of our…attachment.”

Anne’s gaze was steady, impulse divided between the wish to take his hand – sweet boy that he was – and the desire to shake her head ruefully at his addle-headed idealism and ride ahead to hear the
counsel of the wind, alone, instead of his naivety.

“If I recollect,” Henry continued, his eyes taking on a stubborn glint so familiar to their expression. “You last encountered my brother in France when he thrust upon you the dangerous charge of delivering some letters to our de la Pole cousins, which letters enabled Dickie to take up our cause. If I am not mistaken, my brother owes you a debt of gratitude that cannot be forgotten. It is true that this marriage was undertaken without his express royal consent – or even his knowledge – but undertaken it has been and there’s an end to it.”

“I do not imagine he meant to offer you when he said he should owe me,” Anne pointed out. “More likely, he meant to bestow a title or perhaps some land upon my father or brother and a wealthy or titled husband upon me but—” she added quickly, seeing Henry starting to speak. “Not his heir to the throne. I imagine he had hoped to gain, by your marriage, alliance or at least fortune. I doubt as he would give two figs about Hever, Blickling, or the disputed Irish title to which my family may lay claim. No, do not deny it! By comparison to his goals, my personal charms and the loyalty of my family are as nothing to him.”

Henry fell silent behind her but, at last he reached out to lay the flat of his hand upon her now-visible pregnancy. His eyes met hers. “You are my wife, Anne. Wherever you go, I go; let the rest of the world be damned.”

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CATALINA TRASTAMARA, PRINCESS OF ARAGON, QUEEN DOWAGER OF FRANCE AND ENGLAND

Palace of Westminster, London

June 1521

The day was wet and rainy. Catalina perched by a window watching the grey day dribble by, great sad clouds hovering overhead. Distantly, she wondered what her family would make of her actions, here…and what she, herself, made of them. She’d told herself that she was saving the city and all the people therein – and she was probably correct in this. She knew well enough that London could ill afford to weather another siege, particularly without the hope of King Richard appearing to break the backs of the offenders. Yes, she had told herself these things: but was that truly the crux of the matter? Catalina flirted with the fear that her feelings had influenced her actions. After all, she had long believed in Arthur’s cause and…she did not think she, for all her formidability, could wage war against the man she had so long…so long…Catalina glanced away, back into the room. Absently, she ran a finger across the top of her book of hours, felt the leather binding move supply beneath the pressure of her fingertip. She turned back to the window.

The sound of the rain was soothing, a balm on a wound she nursed like a babe at the breast. Yes, a wound. The defense of London had felt the longest months of her life, but these days now passed quickly in the cloud of surreal confusion. She could hardly believe that her husband had ridden away to battle and died and now Arthur – her Arthur, yes – ruled London in his stead. Being in his presence was strange, seemed to thrum like the chord of a harp recently plucked, and thrill the air with its twang, half inspiring, half discordant.

She felt listless. She wished neither to disturb the equilibrium of the moment nor to let it continue this way. She was dreamy and she wanted to wake up but she feared that, if she did so, it would be to more pain rather than to the joy she prayed for.

A small knock on the door. Catalina started, laughed, formed a bemused smile at herself, and turned to face the door. “Enter,” she called.
Arthur appeared as the door opened and he formed a small, self-conscious smile of greeting. That was another surprise: he was strident and sure in his writing: his ideas forceful and diligent, but in person he was more hesitant, flustered more easily. She wasn’t sure if this was the difficulty of… whatever their relationship was, or if it was his usual carriage, but regardless, it was a trait that took her quite by surprise.

Catalina returned his smile – just as hesitantly – and shrugged. “Do you knock in your own home?”

The grin reached his eyes and he laughed. It pleased him, as she knew it must, to hear his birthright finally, finally labeled as his own and Catalina found herself grinning along with him. He shrugged. “I always knock when a lady is inside.”

“That is polite of you.”

“I believe that politeness is a sign of respect,” he replied.

Catalina nodded. “As do I.” She shrugged, lost as to what to say, and watched him gesture towards the window.

“Are your new chambers comfortable?”

“Very,” replied Catalina. “It was very kind of you to furnish me with them.”

Some of his men, after her surrender, had pressed for Catalina’s arrest as a traitor for the part she had played in the earlier battle, but Arthur had forbidden it, insisting that she was a princess, an ambassador, and an honored guest notwithstanding her grave error, which must be excused in light of her marriage vow to obey her husband. He had, however, asked her to vacate her chambers when he had assumed the chambers of the king (anything else would have exposed her reputation to insult) but this was a request Catalina had anticipated and, in fact, already had her things ready to move. He had set her up in very fine quarters afterwards and it was about these that he now asked her.

Arthur started to speak, so did Catalina. He fell silent, so did Catalina. Finally, she started again. “I appreciate that there is some…difficulty about how I should be treated,” she began. “Given both my current and late status. I’ve meant to express to you my gratitude to you for handling my circumstances with such kindness.”

Arthur shook his head. “There is no need.” He paused, glanced down at his hands. “You cannot have imagined I would have seen you accorded anything less than respect.”

Catalina glanced up in surprise. His eyes were fixed on hers and he’d taken a step forward. There was that seriousness in his countenance that rarely seemed to leave it, but there was, too, something else present in his attributes, something worrying at the space behind his mind. “I did not mean to imply,” she bit her lip. “It is only…where things were left…I did not know how you might…”

Catalina sucked in a deep breath, eyes flicking away from his and back again. “Indeed, I still do not know how you now think of me.”

Arthur swallowed, took a step back again, but his eyes were steady, steady, and fixed on her own. He was pensive, grim, but there was that softness still in the way he looked at her. “I tried not to think of you.”

She nodded slowly. “Likewise.” Catalina stepped towards him, was relieved when he did not step back. “But to no avail.” She smiled softly. “Your name was forever on everyone’s lips, anyway. I could hardly have forgotten you, had I really wished so to do.”

He laughed softly. “I heard of you, as well, of your deeds here in the defense of this city.”
Catalina glanced away. “Do you hate me for that?”

“No.” She looked back to him. “I don’t believe I’m capable of hating you, Cat.” He paused. “Besides...I respect you for what you did. You did your duty, just as I did.” He swallowed hard. “In a way...I was proud of you...though your husband ought never to have abandoned you to such a position.”

She shook her head. “You ought not to place the blame with him, as it was you who pushed him to it.”

He arched his brows. “So I did. I did not anticipate the position into which it would thrust you.”

Catalina took another step closer. “You ought to have done,” she said. “You ought to have considered me.”

“I told you, Cat. I tried not to think of you.”

She licked her lips, studied his face. “Did you succeed, Arthur? Did you banish me entirely from your mind?”

His eyes seemed to glow as he approached, closing the distance between them altogether. She wondered what he saw as he looked at her, focusing now on her eyes, now on her lips, and she felt the breath go out of her as though the thought of breathing was entirely foreign to her. Arthur stretched out a hand, paused inches from her skin. His voice, when he spoke, was a whisper. “I could never.”

Impulsively, Catalina grasped his hand, found his eyes with her own, and raised his hand to her lips. At once, he bent down, gathering her close with his free hand. His breath was hot against her cheek and he was tall, so tall. His mouth was warm, when it found hers, and eager. Pushing up onto her toes, she leaned against his chest, curled her fingers through his chestnut hair. He tasted of mint; he smelt of fresh rain. Catalina felt herself giggling, felt him smile against her lips in response. When he pulled back, she threw her arms around his neck, laughing against him, with him, for happiness. He held her tight, lifted her up for a moment, set her down again, laughed with her.

“Oh, Cat,” he murmured into her hair. “My Cat.”

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ANNE BOLEYN, DUCHESS OF YORK
 Palace of Westminster, England
 June 1521

Arthur was resplendent, clad in the costly raiment of a king and surrounded everywhere by red—dragons and roses—where once white sunstroke banners had stood. After his brother, Arthur was also the tallest person in the throng, making him stand out all the more, particularly as he stood half a head taller than the next tallest man in the room.

Anne felt the tug of nervous energy as she strolled in on her husband’s arm. She had been an occupant of this very room a hundred times over, yet always as an able ornament. Now, she walked these corridors in her own right and the thought was at once filled her with pride—and anticipation. She paused at the doorframe, sucking in a deep breath. She felt Henry still beside her, waiting, and glanced up at him with some trepidation. His smile was reassuring and Anne felt a smile tug at her own lips. After all, what was there in this world that she could not face at his side? Squaring her shoulders, Anne favored him with a stout nod and, as one, the pair entered the Great Hall.
“His Grace, the Duke of York!” declared a page, who peered curiously at her, paused. “And a lady,” he added, finally.

All eyes turned to peer curiously towards them and Anne raised her chin imperiously, gazing beyond them towards the throne and Arthur, whose eyes found hers. He stood arrested at the spot, staring at them. His eyes seemed to glow amber in the light, but his face was a mask and unreadable even to Anne’s keen observational powers. She sucked in a deep breath.

She had already been banished from court by the old king, and she felt sure she was about to be banished again by the new king, but now, walking towards him, Anne held her head high, whatever pronouncement he may make. Let others tremble and gawk: Anne had nothing but pride.

The crowd seemed to part between them, their curious eyes glued to the stately figure of the Duke of York leading an unnamed pregnant lady towards the King, his brother. The entire congregation seemed to hold its collective breath. When they reached the King, Henry bowed, Anne curtseyed, and the silence was half-claustrophobic until Arthur spoke.

“You’ve returned, little brother,” he noted, turned to Anne about to bow, when her family condition caught his eye. His mouth opened, but Henry spoke quickly.

“I trust, brother, you remember my wife.”

Arthur’s eyes swept back to his brother, his mouth closed. Anne peered at the firm, hard line of it. His lips were long, not so full as his brother’s or mother’s, but not so thin as the paintings of their father’s, and seemed to balance out the height of his cheekbones. He breathed out a moment, casting his measuring glance first at Henry, then at Anne, then back again. At last, his lips turned upwards. “Sister,” he said in greeting, coming forward to embrace Anne. “I am most pleased to welcome you home.”
Arthur’s expression was somewhat bemused. “Good morning, brother, sister. I am sorry to have disturbed you. I trust you are enjoying breakfast?”

HENRY TUDOR, DUKE OF YORK  
Palace of Westminster, England  
June 1521

Anne Boleyn was sitting in his lap and he could still hardly believe the fact, even as she kissed his cheek and even as she plucked a strawberry from his plate and ate it, even as he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her closer to him: he could hardly believe it. All this time, all this time, and here at last they finally were. He leaned forward, tenderly kissed the spot behind her ear, heard her giggle.

They’d dismissed the servants and were now left quite alone. As soon as they were gone, Anne had stood, walked over to him, commanded him to push his chair out, and perched herself here on his knee. Now she was taking another strawberry, grinning at him.

“Do you favor strawberries, Nan?”

“I adore strawberries,” she replied, licking her fingers as she eyed him in a particular way.

Harry licked his lips. “Then,” he said, slowly. “They are a most fortunate fruit.” He paused. “When the war is truly won and we properly settled in our home, you shall have strawberries whenever you desire them.”

Anne grinned. “And apples?” she touched her pregnant abdomen with her hand. “I daresay our child is most extraordinarily fond of them. Ever since the happy event, I’ve had an inestimably wild desire to eat apples such as I’d never had in my life before.” She grinned brightly, leaning over to kiss him.

Harry reached out, cupping his hand around the back of her neck as her lips brushed his, pressed hard against him. Her urgency matched his own and he kissed her eagerly. She was warm and needy and tasted of the strawberries she so loved and Harry’s hand was traveling, traveling…when he heard the door open.

Anne sat up immediately, gasped when she spotted the intruder, and hastened to stand on her own two feet.

“Who in-” Harry stopped, also spotting the intruder.

Arthur’s expression was somewhat bemused. “Good morning, brother, sister. I am sorry to have disturbed you. I trust you are enjoying breakfast?”

Anne bobbed a curtsey. “Very much, Your Grace,” she replied, casting a wicked glance towards Harry, who was in the middle of throwing a napkin in his lap for decency’s sake.

Quickly approaching, Arthur took Anne’s hands in his. “Dear sister, I am sorry to interrupt yet again,
but I wonder if I might venture a word in private with my brother?"

“Of course you may,” replied Anne, smiling. She quickly curtsied and withdrew, shutting the doors behind her.

Harry cleared his throat, watching Arthur assume the seat that Anne had, earlier, cast off in preference for his lap. “Was that…entirely necessary?”

“It was.”

Harry shifted uncomfortably. “Do you so disapprove of her?”

Arthur’s sigh was laborious. He glanced towards the center of the table, where food was heaped and, taking Anne’s clean plate, gathered a little food for himself. When he set his plate down in front of him again, he stared pensively at it, his right hand dancing just above the wooden surface of the table. Finally, he turned to look at Harry again. “It is a quandary, Harry, and one I do not know how to solve.”

“Anne is?”

Arthur shook his head. “Allow me to ease your mind on that subject. I am displeased. It was reckless and hasty and done utterly without my permission and, God knows, I meant to make much of your marriage…but I find these concerns mean less to me than they ought. In truth, I did owe Mistress Boleyn – that is, Her Grace the Duchess – a debt and I had somewhat dangled you before her to make her agree to what was necessary-“

“What?”

“So I can hardly fault her for her actions and you, my brother, always so impulsive in matters of the heart: that can hardly surprise me, either.”

“What do you mean you dangled me before her?”

Arthur shrugged. “Quite simply, brother, I told her that, if she would not take the risk for me, she might bethink herself to do it for you.”

“You-“

“Peace, brother, I know well now how you disapproved of my ever asking such a favor of her, but it is all quite done, successfully I may add, and the lady is well. In any case, you now have the certainty of a wife who would quite literally risk her very health and freedom to help you. Is that not a fond notion? It is not something most people in our position can ever claim, is it?” Arthur broke off a morsel of the bread on his plate and ate it.

“So,” began Harry, slowly, pushing back his anger at the charge Arthur had given Anne. “You do not disapprove of my marriage?”

“Yes. I am not pleased, but I do not disapprove. And, in truth, my displeasure is based more in selfish conceit than in anything much touching the realm.”

Harry frowned. “What do you mean?”

Arthur sighed, shoved his plate away from him. “Harry, I need you to be the voice of reason, here.”

Harry arched his brows. “Well, here’s a first,” he declared. “Much of our lives you would have had
me believe I was incapable of reason.”

“Nonsense,” responded Arthur and Harry laughed. “I may tease and, yes, worry about your judgment from time to time, but I have always relied upon your counsel.”

“What troubles you, Arthur?”

Harry watched his brother carefully, watched him shift, watched him glance down at the table below sightlessly, watched his jaw clench. “Harry,” he began. “I wish to marry Catalina of Aragon.”

Harry leaned forward. “What?”

“I never told you this, Harry. I’ve been in love with her from afar since I was little more than a child. Even in exile, she and I continued to write one another endlessly. It broke my heart when she married and when she married again to our old enemy, God, I thought I might—” Arthur broke off, jumped up from his chair, heedless how it scatted backwards across the floor. He went to stand before the hearth. “Harry, finally meeting her in person, being with her after all these years, I can’t tell you how it feels! There are no words to describe it, to clap eyes on a person you already adore for the first time it’s…” Arthur licked his lips, glanced back into the fire. “But I can’t marry her, Harry, can I? I cannot!”

Harry’s mind felt blank with shock, as though he’d been swaddled all in a white curtain and couldn’t think much passed it, senses fuzzy and indistinct. “Her?” he bit out, at last, stunned.

Arthur rounded on him. “What does that mean?”

Harry shook his head. “No, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I see how that must have sounded, it is only…I am all taken aback. Please understand, brother, none of my interactions with her have been particularly…favorable.”

Arthur glanced down. “No,” he admitted. “I can’t imagine they have been. But you must know, she was only doing her duty.”

“Was she?” Harry stood from his chair, walking over to the massive fireplace. “I cannot pretend to know the Infanta well, but, as you have asked me to be rational, I will tell you this: I do not trust her. When first I met her, Arthur, I asked her how she could countenance first accepting you as prince to the point of becoming engaged to you, and later so refusing your claim as to make war upon it. She told me that the circumstances had changed and, with them, the facts. You’d been a prince, then, later you were not.” Harry shook his head. “How can you be sure that such a woman would stand beside you, were our situation ever to shift again?”

Arthur stared hard at his brother, turned away, then back again. “You understand, brother, that whom she married was not her choice.”

“Of course I understand. Just a moment ago you were reminding me that such a marriage had been your intention for me. I understand well and good, but I also understand that she might easily have surrendered London to me, and made excuse of her femininity.”

“That would be an act both cowardly and dishonest!”

“I’m saying, Arthur, that Catalina chose to fight me. I asked her to surrender with reasonable terms and her response was to send me her glove!”

“Was that all the message she gave?”
Harry bit his lip. “No,” he replied. “Her message was to send her glove ‘in place of a gauntlet,’ and to tell me: ‘Even a woman must do her duty.’”

“There, then! Duty! You see, brother, it is as I said.”

Harry sighed. “All right, say that it is…If you were to wed her, such a union would certainly vex François.”

“Of that there can be no doubt,” agreed Arthur, nodding. “It is for this reason that I sought your counsel. I know, in my mind, that to wed her might prove a grave error…but my heart speaks more loudly still.”

Harry sighed. “And she is the woman you have loved for your life over, then?”

“Yes,” replied Arthur, his voice seemed to shake and his eyes were beseeching, beseeching and searching.

Impulsively, Harry reached out to touch his brother’s shoulder. “Write to mother, ask her to smooth it over. Engage one of our sisters to someone of François’ and marry her, Arthur. Marry her, or you shall never be happy. My match was not a prudent one, no,” he admitted. “But it was the making of me, Arthur.”

“A wedding with France and one with Spain.” Arthur clapped Harry on her shoulder. “It will be a sign of perpetual peace.”

“Yes,” agreed Harry, grinning. “Perpetual peace!”

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SISTER PAULINE, QUEEN OF ENGLAND
Holystone, England
June 1521

“And he will not wake?” asked Sister Pauline, taking up a little stool by Richard’s cot.

“No, madam,” replied the page. “But he breathes.”

Pauline reached out to take his hand in hers, covered it with her other hand. “Then we shall make him well again,” she promised. “We shall make him well.”
Say My Name

Chapter Summary

She smiled softly, leaned forward to kiss his cheek. “I love how you say my name.”

Chapter Notes

note: not yet edited my apologies!

CATALINA TRASTAMARA, PRINCESS OF ARAGON, QUEEN DOWAGER OF FRANCE AND ENGLAND

Palace of Westminster

June 1521

June swept hot winds across the English countryside, but inside the high-roofed castle, the heat did not seem quite so abominable, though the English seemed to feel it greatly. Catalina, however, had insisted on a walk today. To her, the heat served more as a gentle reminder of home: a picture of her Spanish heritage nestled within the scope of her new home…if this were indeed where she was to stay. Without a husband binding her here, she no longer knew what her role was or where her future might next lead.

She’d thought once to live out the rest of her days in France and, later, had thought the same of England. Now…now that, at last, she did not want to leave it seemed that she must. At least she knew that Spain awaited her. Spain, she supposed: that must be her true home. But when and how would she get there? She was now in her mid-thirties and still childless and therefore not the most marriageable prospect.

Perhaps she would retire to a nunnery and there be troubled no more. She did not think that was what she wanted: Catalina preferred to live in this temporal realm a little longer, but it would be a respectable life, and a holy one, and there she might pray over all that she had seen and all that she had done. Still, she detested the thought, detested the idea of being cooped up somewhere as though to be stored: an inconvenient aunt to a great man: to live in storage until she was dead and they might store her underground. She detested the notion of being trundled off, dusty, forgotten, untouched… There was still so much of life she wished to savor. She knew, however, that she’d do her duty, just as she’d always done. She’d not wanted to marry either of her husbands, either, and she’d not wanted to raise an army and fight against Arthur’s forces, either, but she’d done them all because it had been her duty. She would take herself off somewhere quietly as well for the greater good of Spain, because she had no children, but for no lesser cause would she ever do so.

Her ladies – their own positions at court left quite uncertain – trailed behind her like half a score of ducklings behind their mother. They chattered amongst themselves, fanned themselves, and complained now and then of the heat, but Catalina pressed on ahead of them. She wished she could outrace her concerns, have some certainty of her future. Still, the hubbub behind her only seemed to increase and Catalina heard it as an irritant across her flesh, rippling over her like armored scales:
weighty and uncomfortable to bear. Crossly, she turned to face them. Catalina stopped short.

Arthur came across the lawn, quite alone, walking in quick strides, his long legs carrying him most of the distance. Each of her ladies curtseyed in turn as he passed, but he seemed to notice none of them. His eyes were on Catalina alone.

He came to stand before her and Catalina began to sweep an obeisance of her own, but Arthur caught her hands. “None of that,” he said, gently. “You need never bow before me.” Turning to her ladies, he said, “Stay here, within distance of sight.” Offering his arm to Catalina, which she accepted, he led her out of the range of hearing.

“Is aught the matter?” asked Catherine.

Arthur stopped short, released her hand so he could turn and face her. He looked nervous, but he smiled. “Not at all,” he assured her. “Quite the opposite, in fact. I have come on business, both of a personal and political nature.”

Catalina caught his gaze quickly, searching his eyes. “You mean…”

He glanced down, licked his lips, and found her eyes again. “I speak to you both as yourself and as ambassador of Spain.”

Catalina locked her hands together, trying to suppress the quickening of her heart rate, her breathing. “No,” she said, shook her head. “If that is to be your question, speak to me not as Infanta, not as ambassador…Speak to me, Arthur, as a woman.”

His eyes were vulnerable, searching. “I don’t know where to begin,” he said, at last.

Impulsively, Catalina reached out and took his hands in her own, watched a smile blossom across his face. “Yes, you do.”

“Then,” he began and he clutched her fingers, raised them to his chest where she felt his heart beating furiously. He cupped his hands over hers. “I think you know already, Cat…My heart is yours. It has always been yours. Will you do me the great honor of consenting to be my bride, to rule at my side, yes, but first…to live. I need you. I need you, Cat. Will you do that? Will you marry me?”

“Yes!” exclaimed Catalina, heedless of her tears. “Yes, I will marry you, Arthur! I will marry you!” Laughing, she kissed him; laughing, she threw her arms around him; laughing, he swung her around; laughing she kissed him again, again, again. Yes, yes, she would marry him. “At last, at last!”

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ARTHUR II, KING OF ENGLAND
Palace of Westminster, England
June 1521

Night had set upon their glorious day, but their news had yet to be broken, though certainly rumor had no doubt already spread. After all, Cat’s ladies had certainly seen their embrace and could be left in no doubt as to what they couple meant to one another, now. Still, neither Arthur nor Catalina had told them the news, instead processing back past them as though nothing had occurred. These were stolen moments, now, just the two of them before anyone knew.

“As soon as I’ve told my brother,” said Arthur. “We should make an announcement of our intention to wed.”
Catalina shook her head. “My heart, we cannot. We have yet to so much as send word to my nephew, the Emperor, or even a Papal dispensation…”

“But you forget,” replied Arthur. “As to the dispensation, our fathers have long since procured it for we two.”

She broke into a smile, took his hand happily. “I had forgotten, but you are quite right. It has been so long, Arthur, so long…”

He nodded. “But at last we are together again.” He raised her hand to his lips, watched the smile blossom upon her face.

“As to the Emperor,” began Arthur, rubbing his chin. “That is another matter, but I believe we may trust in his consent. After all, your marriage to the Usurper is proof enough of his intention to secure an alliance with England, is it not? His real objective in this quarter is to corner France, not England. He has no particular quarrel with me or with my House.”

“I do believe you are right,” replied Cat, nodding. “But there is…another matter.” She bit her lip. Her face was a shadow and she lapsed into silence.

“What troubles you? You may say anything to me, Cat, anything.”

She smiled softly, leaned forward to kiss his cheek. “I love how you say my name.”


“It is only…I do not mean to bring up a sore subject, but…I am only lately widowed. It would not be seemly for me to wed again so soon, whatever the circumstances.”

Arthur bent his head, cleared his throat. “Yes,” he said, hastily. “Yes, of course. Forgive me, it was unpardonable of me to so quickly, so thoughtlessly bring this matter to your-”

“No, no,” supplied Cat, quickly. “I’m glad that you did. Please, do not be unsettled.” Her hand on his, her limpid blue eyes searching. “Are you angry with me, Arthur?”

He shook his head, quickly. “With you? No.”

“But you are angry?”

He sighed. “Not angry, exactly, Cat, I’m…” He cast his glance away, staring blankly at a spot in the wall across from him. Before him a half-imagined image of the Usurper rose up, shadowy and unsure as any person one had often imagined but never seen might be, but it was he…always, always. “It is only that, even if death, the Usurper still stands between me and what I most desire. He stands, still, between you and me.”

Cat’s fingers tightened on his. “Perhaps I was not clear.” He watched her swallow, glance away, then back again. “Arthur, I meant only…perhaps, until it is seemly to announce it…We’ve a dispensation in hand, already. Perhaps we ought to keep our marriage secret until we are ready to tell the rest of the world.”
Your Soul And Mine

Chapter Summary

“I remember the first words you ever spoke to me.”

ANNE BOLEYN, DUCHESS OF YORK
Palace of Westminster, England
June 1521

“So this is the library?” Anne held the book Yvain in one hand, a playful smile ringing her lips. The book was open in her hand and she cast a mischievous glance towards Henry. “The library from which this book came?”

He walked along the aisle, sweeping his fingers across the titles thoughtfully. “One of them,” he remarked. “This book traveled with me often, even when all was well. When all is well again, I shall show you each library we once claimed. Should you like that, sweetheart?”

“Very much,” replied Anne, sweeping her gaze across the page. The words were printed in a dutiful hand, each sweep of the pen like a work of art. Anne, herself, had spent many pensive hours practicing each letter in turn, renewing and renewing again her penmanship. Scanning the page, her eyes flicked to Henry’s when she came across a passage. She laughed.

“What is it?”

Eying him thoughtfully, Anne returned her attentions to the book, reading aloud. “‘Once my lady sent me on an errand to the King’s court…There was not a knight there who deigned to say a word to me except you alone who stand here now; but you, in your kindness, honored and aided me. For the honor you did me then I shall now reward you.’” Anne arched her brows, closed the book with one hand, and approached her husband. “Well, then, my love, you often showed me kindness and honor and aid when I was but the lowliest of Queen Claude’s ladies. How ever shall I repay you?”

“Read on,” he replied softly, so softly she thought almost that he had missed her teasing intent. “Do you know what it says next?”

Anne tilted her head. “‘You may be sure and certain that if you take my advice you will never be caught or treated ill.’ Oh, yes, I most certainly agree with that.”

He laughed. “No, the bit between that.” Reaching out, Henry took her hands in his, raised them to his lips. “She recognizes him. As you, my own sweetheart, were first to recognize me.”

Anne laughed. “Hardly! I went on most stubbornly ignoring your claim for some time. Do you not recall it?”

Henry shook his head impatiently. “No, no. Not that. I don’t mean…titles or thrones or anything of the sort.” Taking her hand, he laid it flat across his heart. “Your soul, Anne, recognized mine from the first instant we spoke and mine knew you from the instant I set eyes upon you. For all the trials and tribulations we have faced, that can never be taken from us.”

She touched his cheek, smiled softly. “Oh, my Henry.”
“I remember the first words you ever spoke to me.”

“‘Well met, Master Tudor?’” suggested Anne.

He waved his hand. “No, no, the first real words. The first words that were for me, and not for law or order or England or, indeed, for any other than myself.”

“And what were they?”

“I’d said something which you found very rude.”

“You said that I had hungry eyes; you asked if ever there would be enough for me.”

“So you remember.”

“One does not forget such a comment, particularly when made by a stranger to your face.”

“Do you remember what you said to me?”

“Something witty, perhaps? Something biting, more like.”

Henry smirked. “You suggested that I would do better to ask that very same question of a mirror.”

Anne laughed. “And these are the words which won your heart?”

“No, indeed,” he replied. “I was quite put out at the time, till you fearlessly reminded me of what I’d said to you. No, not yet enamored but, rather, I was impressed with your manner and you did win my mind, for it was true. And, today, I see all the more that you understood that about me…even at a time when perhaps I did not fully comprehend it of myself.”

“Then what it is you now look to have?” inquired Anne, softly.

Gathering his arms around her, Henry took the book back from her and pulled her tight. “Why, Nan, everything with you.”

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HENRY TUDOR, DUKE OF YORK
 Palace of Westminster, England
 June 1521

Arthur beamed. He approached Henry in several quick steps, grasping his arm.

“She agreed?”

“By Heavens, little brother, she agreed!”

Henry’s smile broke into a laugh and he threw congratulatory arms around his brother.

“All is by no means settled, however,” said Arthur, at last, when the brothers pulled apart again. He began to stroll along the garden path and Henry hastened to match his pace.

“What do you mean?”

Arthur sighed. “It is only that she is but lately widowed and there is, besides, the matter of Carlos’ consent.”
“Carlos’ consent!” exclaimed Henry. “What need have you of the Emperor’s consent? You’ve hers and you’ve your own and you’ve even the consent of the Holy See. What matter is it of Carlos’?”

“Now you sound like François,” replied Arthur, chidingly.

Henry shook his head. “You are the king here, Arthur, not Carlos. And, at any rate, we’ve been the both of us denied so long! It seems a dreadful thing to deny—” Arthur laughed and Henry broke off. “What’s this?”

“Nothing, only I’d nearly forgotten how you can go off on such tirades as these when matters that touch your heart or your pride arise.”

“My pride!”

“In any case,” Arthur continued breezily. “You need not concern yourself in this case. I’ve no intention of allowing any more obstacles to part Catalina and myself. We intend, still, to be wed; we’ve merely decided that we shall follow in your own footsteps, my brother.”

“Oh?”

“Catalina and I have decided to be secretly wed until such time as it may be seemly to announce our union. Well, what about it, Harry? Will you and your lady serve as our witnesses? We mean to have it done this very evening.”

Clasping his brother’s shoulder, Henry laughed. “Do you imagine I would turn you down? Arthur, it would be our dearest delight so to do.”
Distant Embraces

Chapter Summary

“The past is gone. We have now happiness before us. What else matters?”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

CATALINA TRASTAMARA, PRINCESS OF ARAGON, QUEEN DOWAGER OF FRANCE AND ENGLAND

Palace of Westminster

June 1521

Birds twittered their farewells to the day as dusk stole across the sky in brilliant scarlet and tangerine. Catalina hardly saw any of it. Anne, Duchess of York, helped her into her dress just as they had always done: gold petticoat covered in crimson damask with rich sleeves to match and gold jewelry sporting rubies: rubies, the jewel of kings.

“How wonderful you look,” said Anne, warmly, taking Catalina’s hands.

“We shall be sisters after this,” remarked Catalina. She watched Anne’s face carefully, the setting sun casting its hot rays across the other woman’s face: the sharp curve of her brows and nose, the high cheekbones, and her eyes that seemed always to glow with their own power. “I regret some of the things I said to you.”

“I see now,” responded Anne. “Why you reacted as you did to the thought that I might have wed his Grace the King. Henry explained it all to me: how once you had been betrothed, how always you have loved one another from afar. I’ve had but a small dose of such love myself and cannot imagine how it must have felt to endure such passion under these circumstances for so very long.”

“The past is gone. We have now happiness before us. What else matters?” She knew very well, as did her companion, that many other things mattered: that their problems were not over – there was still her nephew and France and besides the pesky rebellion to the North… but there was joy, too. Whatever they might now confront, at least she and Arthur could now confront it together. “God and justice are with us. What better allies could we possess?”

Anne smiled. “No better. I think, now, all is prepared. Never fear, I told the servants that Henry and I were quite set on a night of it with some close friends to finally celebrate our marriage, so there is no reason you will be suspected in the course of preparations, and I may assure you the priest is very discreet. Are you ready to meet your husband at the altar?”

She felt warm. My husband, she thought. My husband, my husband, my husband! Never before had the prospect brought her any joy. Today the word was transmuted into the earthly ideal of love as she pictured Arthur waiting for her. Catalina nodded, felt her face light up as the sun sank beneath the horizon. “I am ready.”

Everywhere, candlelight. Torches blazed in their sockets against the walls and priceless beeswax candles brightened every surface, coupled with woven bowers and garlands of June blossoms. Roses
and peonies and sweet peas and cornflowers and nigellas and aquilegias tangled everywhere in abundance, completing the dreamy effect. Drawing a deep breath, Catalina took her place beside Arthur. He turned to her with a warm smile and misty eyes to match her own and, when he took her hand, he bent to kiss it first. His green eyes burned with their native amber and Catalina had never seen anything so dear.

The words they spoke were soft and low and sweet, the priest’s expressions benign. Beside his brother, Henry’s eyes were rimmed with red and at her shoulder, Anne’s smile was bright, but Catalina hardly saw any of them. She filled her eyes with her Arthur, watched him as though he would at any moment vanish. His hand were warm: the tether that connected her with the certainty of this reality, though his presence felt like a dream she could not quite trust. And all at once, it seemed, the priest closed his book and pronounced them wed. All at once, Arthur gathered her close. Hands on his chest she paused, savored the moment, reached upwards to touch his face. He leaned downward; she leaned forward. His hands were sweet upon her face and his lips sweeter still. She did not want the moment to end.

He led her by the hand; he shut his – their – bedroom door firmly behind them. Catalina was trembling but she did not mind. She particularly did not mind when he turned to her again, pulled her into his arms.

“I can hardly believe it,” she whispered, wrapping her arms around his neck, felt him chuckle as well as heard it.

He nodded, touched her face again. “And yet it is true, finally true, after all this time.” He paused. “Are you nervous?”

She laughed, buried her face in his chest for a moment, before looking up to him again. “A little,” she admitted. “Silly as it may be.”

He smirked. “I confess, I am as well. I think it is well that we are, Cat. We have waited so long.”

“So long.” She paused. “Are you…are you quite certain you do not want someone else? Someone who…” Catalina bit her lip. “Someone pure? I’ve been wed before…I am not a virgin, Arthur, I-“

“Stop, stop,” urged Arthur. He shrugged. “That makes little matter to me, I assure you. I am not a virgin either, but I’ve not the excuse of marriage. I am a sinner, Cat. How could I judge you?”

“But you are a man. In this world, men may sin as women may not, men may-“

“Peace,” murmured Arthur. “Hear me now for once and for all. I want you, my Cat. I want you and no one else.”

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RICHARD OF SHREWSBURY, KING OF ENGLAND
Falkland Palace, Scotland
June 1521

For a moment, he believed he had not awakened, yet, but strayed into another sort of dream. Yes, this was a chamber he knew in a palace he knew in a nation he knew…but none were his own. Richard peered at the familiar tapestries, their blue-green hunting sequences were to him before lost to the mists of time: muddled into caricature, but his dream-gaze breathed new detail back into them, so lifelike he almost believed he could reach out and touch him. The coffered ceiling was known to him with its diamond pattern and, yes, even the sight of white blossoms on trees outside...
was known to him. Yes, this was the place, the chamber of Falkland Palace that once ensconced him. But it was strange, too, because he felt the sheets beneath his finger tips, smelt the clammy smells of summer. When he narrowed his eyes, he felt them crinkle. He’d been a child here, before, but he’d been too young, then, to know it. He knew it now.

Richard sat up groaning, leaning heavily against his elbow, body creaking as he moved. In all his years, he’d never felt older, more decrepit. He grunted as he got to his feet, felt the cold beneath them, but it was not possible, could not be: there was no way that he was here all the way in Scotland when he knew well and good that he was even now within the walls of York City with his nephew savaging him beyond the ancient gates. He remembered well the field of battle. Yes, the arrows, yes, the impact on his helm, yes, an explosion of color before his eyes, followed by nothing but a black void like sleep but danker. And now this. Richard peered around him, pondered in uncertainty whether to stagger towards the window or the door.

He’d been Perkin Warbeck in this room, but that fool boy was dead and gone. Only Richard remained.

He moved for the door. He’d not moved two paces when it opened of its own accord, squealing as it gaped inward and then, there: his own Catherine Gordon standing before him, a bowl tucked under her arm. She was not the girl that had once shared this chamber with him, no, she was a woman and worn as he was, and she wore the nun’s habit in which he’d last seen her dressed. Her eyes were wide saucers, shot through with red veins, and she stopped dead when she saw him up.

“Richard!” breathed Cathy. The bowl slipped from her arms, clattered to the ground, sloshing water in every direction. He watched it flow across the floor, expecting that it was not real, but he felt it as it rushed up to meet his bare toes. Richard stared at the water pooling around his feet, stared, and stopped only to stare at her.

“Cathy,” he whispered, shook his head. “What on earth?”

Chapter End Notes

I can hardly believe it! As of this chapter, we are up to Chapter 50!! Fifty weeks (ignoring the period I had to take off ofc hahah) of this fic! That's eleven and a half months!! All I can say is thank you so much for sticking with me through all of this so far I am speechless at how amazing you all are and I'm so honored to share this story with you <33333 Love you all and thank you so much for everything!! I never would have made it this far without all your care and support so here's to you, my friends, THANK YOU <333333333
This Green Earth

Chapter Summary

“Please understand, Your Grace, I did only my duty.”

ARTHUR II, KING OF ENGLAND
Palace of Westminster, England
June 1521


“I know who you are,” said Arthur. The priest was draped in red, showcasing his status as a high-ranking servant of the Lord. “I know who it was that you once served and, were you other than a man of God, you should even now be shut up in prison.”

Wolsey’s smile was tepid and insincere, but a smile he attempted notwithstanding. “Please understand, Your Grace, I did only my duty.”

“Your duty?” asked Arthur. His chambers were emptied of all but a few servants and the occasional guard, but it was as alone as Arthur now had liberty to be. It stifled him, this nearness to all when he had grown up abroad and unwanted, but it did not surprise him. He remembered well his father’s reign. “Is it not your duty to uphold the Will of God? How does an anointed priest turn a blind eye towards an anointed king?”

Wolsey fell to his knees. “Your Grace, I pray you, is it not also my duty to watch over the Good Shepherd’s flock here in England? It was to them that I turned my eyes, it is to the realm that I turned my loyalty!”

“The realm? My father was the king. My father was the realm. Did you not think of him?”

“Bless my soul,” whispered Wolsey. “In truth, Your Grace, I did not. I thought only of England and the good I might do here upon this green earth.”

Arthur blinked. Here, upon this green earth. His travels seemed a kaleidoscope before his eyes: flashes of nonsensical color whirling in meaningless striations, beside the solidity of the good green of England now, at last, beneath his feet…and his father, his father who would never see it again, separated now in every way. Arthur’s mouth was dry as dust in a mill and he leaned back against his chair, suddenly, felt the tug of a smile at his lips. “Your honesty does you credit,” said Arthur at last. “As does your loyalty to Our Lord’s flock, though I confess I’ve little love of your actions. Rise, priest,” he added, waving a hand. “I’ve said already: I’ll not lay a hand upon a man of God.”

He clambered to his feet, gazing at the king, paused. “Your Grace, I-”

Arthur held out his hand abruptly. “The letter?”

“You said, when I had you brought in here, that there was a letter.”
“Oh, of course.” Wolsey glanced to Arthur, lowered his eyes again towards the parchment crushed in his hand. Slowly, he unfurled his fingers. “I had imagined at first, Your Grace, that it was the cause of your summons.” He put the letter into the king’s hand. “Your Grace, I have had this letter sent to me through secret channels. It is from young Dickon, Duke of Gloucester.”

Carefully, Arthur smoothed out the edges. “What?” he demanded. “That whelp holed up even now in York under siege?”

“The very one,” replied Wolsey. “It begs for assistance. He says, Your Grace, that York is nigh forfeit. They can endure little longer.”

“Already? Has he no stomach at all?”

Wolsey’s sigh was laborious. “None at all.”

Arthur arched his brows. “I can’t say I’m altogether surprised. You do well, Cardinal, to bring this to me. I wonder why you do it, however?”

Wolsey spread his hands. “Your Grace, I confess my motives are manifold. I wished, first, to perform some useful act of service to Your Grace in testament to my true loyalty to Your Grace.”

Arthur nodded blandly. “And second?”

Wolsey heaved a sigh. “I beg Your Grace understand that I am a servant of God and through Him, also of England, as I have said. I can see no bright future for the realm if there is no end to this ruinous war. Therefore, I beg Your Grace see, it is my hope that battle shall cease and, in so doing, it is incumbent upon one to select a champion. When rival kings war, it is not one side or the other who bleeds, Your Grace, but the kingdom and thus one side or the other must be vanquished. Therefore I beg you, Your Grace: let me help you heal these wounds once and for all by an end to bloodshed.” He pointed towards the parchment. “Allow this letter, I pray, to be a token of the truth of my intent. Your Grace, it is you, and no other, I hold fast to be the one true champion of peace in the realm. It is Your Grace I pray God shall vanquish all your foes and be proclaimed victorious King throughout all of England.”

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HENRY TUDOR, DUKE OF YORK
Palace of Westminster, England
July 1521

“Do you trust him?” asked Harry, turning over the letter in his hands. “Wolsey, that is.”

Folding his arms over his chest, Arthur peered into the flames. “No. He has proven, by taking my part, that his loyalties to the King are not so very constant. Notwithstanding, I believe him. I believe that he wants an end to this war and I even believe that, for the time being, he’s thrown in with me.”

“Even over Perkin Warbeck who was, at one time, his champion? Raised him above all the others.”

Arthur shrugged. “The Usurper is dead. Wolsey now looks either to serve that dread child, the so-called Duke of Gloucester…or to serve me and, it appears, I am prevailing in this conflict. There is but one stronghold still to Gloucester’s name and Wolsey knows as well as we that the North has been conquered before. Spain will not trouble to aid them, either, if my alliance with Cat is confirmed by Carlos the Emperor,” he added, smiling towards his wife. “Granted, Wolsey can have no knowledge of that aspect of things.”
“But he may have an inkling,” began Anne.

Everyone turned abruptly to look at her.

“There are rumors, you see. Though they of course did not hear what was said, all the Queen’s ladies saw the two of you embracing when you asked her to be your wife.”

Silence. Harry swallowed hard. “So there are rumors that they are wed?”

“None that I’ve heard,” replied Anne, quickly. “But there are certainly rumors I’ve overheard myself that you look forward to that eventuality.”

Arthur shifted, turning his back to the fire. “That is perhaps inconvenient,” he admitted. “But not so very bad a thing, as all shall soon be resolved, though I am truly sorry if I have done any damage to your reputation, my Cat. Nevertheless, I doubt as this shall prove an obstacle to us, as I imagine rumors shan’t do anything to dissuade the Emperor and I’d wager he shall be glad enough to have maintained his foothold here in England, whomever may reign.”

“Particularly,” added Catherine. “Given that you’ve made your friendliness with France quite obvious, I imagine my nephew will be all the more grateful not to have an enemy here, so he may turn his eyes entirely towards France, itself.”

“That may be a delicate subject,” added Anne, softly. “I doubt as this marriage shall much endear François to either of you.”

Arthur nodded slowly. Harry watched him. His brother was well aware of this fact: that was no mystery to anyone, but it was not something he’d been especially happy to bring up. “There was a suggestion,” he said nodding to Harry. “That my sisters are still very marriageable and a becoming alliance might still be made in France, so that both parties might be satisfied.”

Anne nodded slowly. Harry did not see much conviction in her eyes.

Harry cleared his throat. “What of this letter, then, Arthur?”

“It would seem, brother, that it is time to press our advantage. It is time to march against York.”
Catherine of Aragon, Queen of England
Palace of Westminster, England
June 1521

His arms looped around her and Catherine, again today, felt none of the drive to get about her morning that usually harried her from bed. No, today there was no spot more in need of her attention, no notion or space more urgent, none more luxurious, none more tempting, and none more cherished than the space she occupied beside her slumbering husband. His breathing was steady and even: the breathing of peaceful sleep, healing sleep, and she adored the feel of his chest rising and falling, his arms locked around her. Here, nestled together in the haven of secrecy, they were safe and warm. The world outside, they both knew well and good, was cruel, and Arthur was soon to leave her.

Yes, settled here beside her beloved husband was the best thing. Let the world have its own problems! This was their time. Smiling to herself, Catherine snuggled a little nearer to Arthur. Morning rays washed their chambers in golden light, bathing him in its radiance. This, yes, this, was how she would remember him when he had gone. She traced his face with her fingers, watched his lips curl into a lazy smile.

“Are you awake?” she whispered.

“Mmm,” Arthur did not open his eyes, but he pulled her closer, settled a sleepy kiss on the top of her head. “I’m not sure.”

She laughed softly, settling her head on his chest. “It seems we’ve strayed into a glorious dream.” And this, Catherine thought: this was it, this was the reason she feared a shift – any shift – in their equilibrium. Life had been unkind in its instructions to Catherine. Change, in her experience, was the mother of heartache. They’d trapped a gilded dream in these moments and, now that she had it, she feared its loss more than anything in the world. “I…I don’t want anything to change, Arthur,” whispered Catherine, finally. “Not now. Not ever.”

His soft slumbering breath was her only reply.

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Arthur II, King of England
Palace of Westminster, England
June 1521

“You’ll be good to her, won’t you, Harry?” asked Arthur. “I know because it is a secret that she is still regarded by many of our men as an enemy, but Cat remains your sister. You will remember that,
won’t you?”

Harry clasped his shoulder. “Of course I shall. I will love Catherine very well for your sake, though I confess our first encounters were hardly endearing,” he added, rubbing at his now-healed leg unconsciously.

Arthur laughed, clapping Harry’s arm, and shook his head. “If only I could take her with me.”

“Yes,” replied Harry with a mischievous grin. “Perhaps you could send her out into the field, as her last husband did, and she could win the day for you.”

Arthur smirked. “Much as it smarts that she was once wed to the Usurper and, much as it smarts that he used her so, I confess I am proud of her achievements.”

Harry laughed, rolled his eyes heavenward. “Of course you are.”

“Would you not be proud of your Anne if she so gallantly fended off an army?”

“The deed, in itself, may not be unworthy but I do not think I would be very pleased with her for ensuring the capture and injury of my only living brother,” replied Harry ruefully.

Arthur chuckled. “I can hardly blame Cat for that. There have been many times I’ve been tempted to knock you down, myself.”

Arthur grinned at the sound of his brother’s mirth, his merry laughter ringing to the ceiling. He glanced down towards the floor, strewn with rushes. He had missed the sound during their long separation. He prayed the parting would not prove so very long this time around, yet it was crucial that Henry remained here, not only to hold London, but because, as he said, he was Arthur’s last living brother. He could not risk him. “I shall miss you, brother.”

“As I shall miss you,” responded Harry, pausing in their steps. Arthur stopped with him and Harry drew him into a tight embrace. “It is well, I suppose, that this time we part under such positive conditions. The Usurper is at last dead! Only one last whelp stands in our way and our Father shall at last be avenged. Last time, when we left France, the future was all uncertainty. Now, the world is ours for the taking.”


Harry’s lips turned upwards playfully. “We shall see. Onward to glory, brother!”

Arthur nodded. His voice was soft when he spoke. “Onward to glory.” He paused before the door behind which his wife waited to see him off. “Harry, tell me one thing,” he said, looking to the floor again, before turning slowly to face his little brother. “How did you ever let her go – your Anne – how did you bear it?”

He watched Harry intently, the fall of his features, the soft shift of weight as he glanced away. He laughed, again, but now it was a sound of dejection. “I could not have done had she not been so determined to go.” He paused, smiled at the floor before looking back to Arthur. “I could not have done, had I not known she was going home. I bore it because there was no other option and I bore it because she wrote to me when she had gone.”

Impulsively, Arthur reached out to grasp Harry’s shoulder. “She’s home now,” he assured. “And all is well.”

“All is well.”
Arthur nodded for the doors to be opened. He walked through to greet his wife alone one final time before he left again for York and war.

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CATHERINE OF ARAGON, QUEEN OF ENGLAND
Palace of Westminster, England
June 1521

He strode in with the world’s confidence behind him: youth and bravado and certainty: her Arthur smiling before her, accompanied by his brother, himself all roguish grins.

“Our King is off this day to prevail, sister,” said Harry, reaching for each of the double doors as he pulled them closed, stepping backwards outside all the while. “Wish him well.”

The wide doors shut and they were alone, at last, alone. Catherine went to him instantly, folded her arms around his neck. “Don’t go,” she whispered. “I know it is selfish of me to ask, but send another: your brother or some other able lieutenant: only do not leave me when we’ve just begun. So much time lost, pray: do let us never part again.”

Arthur’s brow against hers. Catherine watched his eyes shut as he pulled her close, moved with her. “My dearest love,” he whispered. “Do you not see? When I have done with this one thing, there will never be another article which may part us. Always, always something had stood before us, but no longer. At last, my Cat: at last, we shall be free.”

She nodded, grasped his shoulders tightly, and raised her eyes to his own hazel-green orbs: “Then,” she charged. “Swear to me, my love, swear to me that you shall not return until all our enemies are dead.”

“Cat,” he whispered, running his fingers through her hair. “I swear it.” His kiss was sweet nectar and she longed to be drunk with it.

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HENRY TUDOR, DUKE OF YORK
Palace of Westminster, England
June 1521

Catherine of Aragon and Anne surrounding him comprised a strange group, perhaps: a former Queen and a former lady-in-waiting: now a true Queen in a hiding and Her Grace, the Duchess of York, respectively. Harry’s expression as he peered across the parapet, watching his brother ride into the distance to take back to the city that was Harry’s, by right. A part of him felt that their roles ought to be reversed, but there was this: last time Arthur had sent Harry to conquer, he had failed. Arthur, himself, had never done so. Next time, Harry swore, watching the armor flare in the sunlight, he would prove his worth to his brother: never again would Arthur doubt him.

Just now, however, there was much to be done and above them all, soaring over the White Tower, his father’s dragon banner smartly snapped like the firecrackers that had announced to the world the union of Harry’s father and mother in Holy Matrimony. As a child, Harry had pictured them often: brilliant scarlet and white lights shrieking through the night sky and bursting into hues of vermillion and snow as if the very heavens sung of the union of the roses red and white. Harry’s eyes trailed across the red dragon banner, watched as the mythic creature clutched the red-and-white rose in one scaly hand: two creatures so long held merely to be legend, now returned to England.
Harry felt impatient with Arthur, as he often did, felt impatient even as he watched him ride away. *York is mine*, he thought. *York is mine and I ought to fight for it.* But Anne had been right: ‘England entire is your brother’s,’ she’d murmured, sweet tones soothing his rancor. ‘If he does not fight for it, who will accept his rule? Few are those kings who have reclaimed their birthright, fewer still are those who have reclaimed it without first giving their all.’ Harry released a breath he had realized he was holding and reached out quickly to take his wife’s hand: felt her eyes on him. He felt the pressure of her fingers as she squeezed his hand, mistaking the direction of his anxiety.

“All will be well,” she whispered. “He’s not failed us before.”

But it was not that which pained Harry, no. There was a Prince amidst them who had yet to fight for his birthright. Oh, Harry had tried, but his ordeal had been cut terribly short. Would he be accepted in his duchy when the fighting was all over? Harry released his wife’s hand; tried to ignore her worried eyes on him.

“What sort of prince am I to hide behind these walls? What sort of man? What sort of husband? Or father?

The only answer was the searing heat of June wind.

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CATHARINE OF ARAGON, QUEEN OF ENGLAND
Palace of Westminster, England
July 1521

“Do you think they’ve gained York by now?” inquired Catherine softly. The gardens had all wilted, their flowers singed by the sultry blaze of summer. Catherine glanced towards Anne, who strolled beside her, watching carefully for her sister-in-law’s progress. As her pregnancy advanced, Anne struggled more acutely. She’d concealed it well enough until now, but these days the occasional flash of discomfort across her face or the paroxysm of suffering was unmistakable. These final months were dire hardship and Catherine found herself holding her breath, praying that God deliver both mother and child safely from their ordeal. “They may be close now.”

There was quiet and Catherine glanced anxiously towards Anne, wondering if it was the sudden onset of pain that halted her speech, or doubt in Arthur’s progress. Catherine was unsure which possibility frightened her more. “Perhaps,” said Anne, at last, studying a naked rose bush, its blooms as burned away by the fury of the sun. Catherine watched Anne grimace towards the sky, the sun’s magnificence retreating beneath her gaze towards the cover of charcoal clouds.

“You doubt it?”

“I doubt it,” confirmed Anne, softly. “Certainly, His Grace the King has performed similar feats ere now, but such an achievement is always to be counted unlikely. Granted, there is no season more favorable to such an accomplishment than this, the driest of months, but I think it unlikely notwithstanding. Such a journey is often the result of many more months than that.”

Catherine glanced towards her hands and away again. This was, she found, quite disagreeable. “It is only...” she began, stopped, stopped walking as well. Catherine glanced back towards the castle beyond them, turned to look ahead again. All ears were too distant to hear, yet still words hovered unspoken upon her lips. Catherine clasped her hands tight against her abdomen. “I wish he were already returned victorious,” she said, at last, knowing it was true but still wishing she’d made the other confession instead.

Anne’s expression was all sympathy: soft and comforting, those dark eyes seeming to have eased into warmth till they felt an inviting space to rest. Anne smiled and Catherine half forgot that once
she had not thought Anne an ally…After all, though neither had known it, they’d each been allies all along from a certain perspective…Catherine smiled a little ruefully. “I’ve a secret,” murmured Catherine, finally, half against her own will.

“What, still?” inquired Anne with a roguish smile. “After all this time?”

“It is a recent secret, but no more potent for all that.” More so, perhaps, she thought, and smiled nervously towards her competitor. “I want to tell you, but I do not know where to begin.”

Anne walked beside her, eyes trained upon Catherine’s face, but she paused then to glance away again. “What secret is this?”

Catherine fidgeted for a moment, feeling the silk of her dress as though it were a foreign fabric before suddenly darting ahead of Anne. She stopped dead in her tracks after merely two steps, turning back to Anne. “I do not know where to begin,” she said again. “And I am afraid even to start.”

“What can frighten you?” inquired Anne. “His Grace shall allow nothing to befall you and-“

“It is not that,” replied Catherine, shaking her head quickly. “What I fear is change. At last I am happy,” she sighed. “I fear that the time is coming that I shall not be.”

“Why?”

Catherine laughed, pressed her hands to her abdomen once again. “Because that has always been my experience that change is but a harbinger of sadness and because, even should Arthur triumph, I fear things are about to change…forever.”

“What do you mean?”

“Anne,” Catherine stopped again, held up her hands as if in a shrug, as if in prayer. “Anne, I fear I am with child.”

Chapter End Notes

The title refers to the prophecy of the Abbot of Garadon that a queen of England would burn by 1539: “When the Tower is white and another place green, then shall be burned two or three bishops and a queen; and after all this be passed we shall have a merry world.” You can read a touch more about this prophecy (but mostly about a historical event) here: https://www.theanneboleynfiles.com/anne-boleyn-and-the-fire-in-her-chamber/

Additionally, I’m taking my computer in (at last!) to have its brain transferred to a new one so ~hopefully that’ll go well but I’ll def keep you posted if there are any developments that will impact the flow of this story ;D
Peace Or Victory

Chapter Summary

“Soon, my friend, soon all of England shall at last be united in peace and prosperity.”

Chapter Notes

Beware! I've not yet had the opportunity to edit this chapter... ;D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

ARTHUR II, KING OF ENGLAND
York, England
August 1521

The great walled city loomed before him as Arthur and his small accompaniment rode up to the hill towards it. York’s walls were as tall and as thick as he had remembered and he nodded to himself. They’d arrived the evening before, but the dusk hadn’t allowed for a proper inspection or consultation and Arthur formed a small smile of greeting as Richard de la Pole strode up to him.

“We must thank you for your diligent efforts on our behalf while we were attending to matters in London.” Reaching out, Arthur placed the letter Wolsey had received into Richie’s hands.

Richie glanced at the address and turned his eyes towards Arthur in earnest interest. “Your Grace-”

“Read it, my friend. It is good news.”

Hastily he opened the letter. “This is from the so-called Duke of Gloucester within those very walls,” he said pointing to York.

“He calls for aid. He says their resources cannot last long and they are in dire need. Should no succor arrive, they will have no other choice than to surrender.” A smile lit Arthur’s features. “Soon, my friend, soon all of England shall at last be united in peace and prosperity.”

A grin cracked Richie’s lips. “Victory at long last!”

Arthur shook his head. “Not quite yet,” he warned. “As yet, there is no surrender,” he added, reaching out to clasp Richie’s shoulder. “I shall not forget all that you have done in my name.” He paused. “My lord, will you do me the very great honor of arranging an meeting with our combatants? If this is true, they may now be amendable to terms.”

“And your Grace, I made so bold as to make such inquiries of my own, when word of your coming arrived here. I know already that those within are ready to talk, but on the one condition that it be done with directly with Your Grace, rather than a representative.”

Arthur nodded. “Let it be done.”
The portcullis creaked and groaned as it rose and Arthur was carried away upon a wave of nostalgia, back to his last meeting here with this same group. They were different, however, upon appearance than they’d been at the last meeting. The same group, once magnificent, was now sullied and ragged and lean, terribly, terribly lean. Arthur bit his lip. They certainly looked ready to concede defeat: Richard, Duke of Gloucester now wore a look of resignation and Henry, Earl of Devon could hardly bring himself to lift his eyes above above Arthur’s hands.

“Cousin,” greeted Dickon of Gloucester, eyes narrowed as he regarded Arthur. “You want this,” he said, gesturing behind him to the walled city. “You imagine we’ll just hand it over?”

Arthur grimaced. “Are you then unready to treat with us? Why, then, I wonder, did you agree to this meeting?”

Dickon glowering, his horse tossed its head, and Gloucester glanced towards Devon.

Meeting his glance, Hal licked his lips, stole a glance towards Arthur, and dismounted his horse, only to drop to one knee. “Pray forgive us, Your Grace. It is an easier thing to steel ourselves against the swallowing food – of which there is so little – than to swallow our prides, and having inured ourselves to one it is nigh impossible to accept the other. I pray Your Grace see that this determination of will in our cousin, Gloucester – though now perhaps a point of vexation – is also a virtue that may in some future date prove to be of service to Your Grace.”

The ghost of a smile tugged at the corner of Arthur’s lips and he inclined his head. “Well said, my lord cousin. May God, in blessed charity, smile upon your wits and wisdom. I have but one errand here, as you know. The terms I offered, when last we met, no longer stand, but I’ve much reason for joy of late and so my anger wanes. If you will now lay down your arms, surrender York and all else unto us, and swear fealty to me, I shall extend to you some of the mercies I promised at our earlier meeting. I will protect this city as my own, and its people, also. Your armies I shall allow peacefully to disband, though its lords, lieutenants, and captains shall return with us to London to be confirmed in the sight of all in their fealty to me as king. And you, my lords, shall be given a fair trial by your peers and, if found by the grace of God to have been acting only in the interest of the realm, shall be therefore judged innocent of treason. What say you, good my lords?” Silence. Arthur swallowed, exhaled slowly. Softly, he began again: “I want now only to heal the great injuries done to the realm by this ruinous cataclysm and leave old strife long behind us all. I want peace. My lords, will you not help us achieve this end?”

“You want victory,” spat Dickon. “Not peace.”

“They are to me one and the same,” replied Arthur. “What of you? If you do not want peace, do you also eschew mercy?”

A glint in the eyes, and Dickon glared down at the mane of his horse. “Do you remember what you said to me, last time?” asked Dickon, catching a clump of the horse’s mane. “I want you to remember. You said, ‘I’ve no need of mercy from a child.’ Do you remember? I want you to remember.”
A flare of temper rumbled up in his gut and Arthur smiled a cool grin, so condescending it was nearly a sneer. “I remember,” he replied. “I also remember the things you said upon that occasion and I mark them well, if you would have me remember. I counsel it better forgotten.”

“I’ve no need of counsel from a usurper,” spat Dickon.

Summer’s heat was upon them all, blazing from the furious sun, yet for all that, Arthur felt a sudden chill that was not cold, but clammy and oppressive. His skin prickled beneath his garments, running along him like goosebumps. *Usurper*. His mouth was dry and he repressed the shiver that threatened to tumble through his spine. Usurper: it was the word that belonged to his old enemy: the word for Perkin Warbeck, the traitor who had ousted his father and turned a kingdom on its head for the sake of a crown. Yes, it was for Warbeck, not for him, not for him, not for him. Arthur was reclaiming his birthright, bringing England back to the order of law, the will of God, and all things right and true. The lines of his mouth spiked suddenly downward and Arthur’s glare was all the heat of summer.

“And what would they have called your grandfather, I wonder,” Arthur bit out. “Had he succeeded in ousting his own brother as King? And what of your own petty attempts to seize a crown? I am no usurper, cousin, but as much cannot be said of you.” He glanced around the party from York, alternately gawking at either Dickon or himself, and nodded slowly. “There is a right and a wrong,” he said. “Will you accept my terms?”

Hal, who had risen again, fell once more to his knees. “I pray you, cousin, give us some little space of time that I may talk sense into our cousin, here. Grief clouds his senses for, though we now know the truth of his deceit, the King Richard that was was, to us, our very uncle and raised us from children as such. It is no easy thing to conquer the natural loyalties and affections of such a bond.”

Regarding him coolly, Arthur finally nodded. “You have until noon tomorrow. Good evening, cousins. We shall soon meet again.”

Chapter End Notes

Arthur’s following comments - “And what would they have called your grandfather, I wonder,” Arthur bit out. “Had he succeeded in ousting his own brother as King? And what of your own petty attempts to seize a crown?” refer, firstly, to George Plantagenet's attempted (but ultimately ill-fated) coup against Edward IV during his alliance with the Kingmaker which you can read about here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Plantagenet,_1st_Duke_of_Clarence

The second part - his own attempt for the crown - is an in-story reference to the last time they met when Dickon declared himself king. You can read that here: https://archiveofourown.org/works/11122776/chapters/33236436
Arturus Rex

Chapter Summary

“They King!” they took up the call. “The King!”

Chapter Notes

trigger warning for graphic depictions of violence and death! If you don't want to read that sort of thing, skip the first section, the last paragraph of the second to last section, and the last section. I will furnish a synopsis of the events at the bottom.

The title means "Arthur the King," or "King Arthur," in Latin.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

ARTHUR II, KING OF ENGLAND
York, England
August 1521

He was awakened by the sound of screams.

“What the-” Arthur scrambled out of bed, pushing aside the sheets as they attempted to cling to his legs, half-tripping as he staggered towards the entrance of the tent. The edge of the horizon had turned a brighter shade of ink as the sun threatened to rise, the walled city of York outlined against it. Closer, much closer, camp fires still burned, silhouetted against the violet sky. Arthur squinted, hoping his sight would adjust to the dark, rubbing sleep from his eyes. He heard the shriek of metal and the shriek of men and turned towards his pages. “My sword!”

Outside, voices shouted, “The King! Secure the King!”

His pages scattered, after one piece of armor or another, his helm, his sword, his breastplate…and outside, crashes, shouts, moans.

“Now!” demanded Arthur. The sword was put into his hand and, swiftly, he drew it from its scabbard.

“Your Grace, please wait! Allow us to put on your armor. The battle would be lost if Your Grace were.”

Arthur glanced out at the carnage. “Quickly!”

Only one of his greaves was on, his helm he held in his hand, and his arms were entirely bare below the shoulder save for the chainmail and one gauntlet. He had on no faulds or culets, no besagews, but he could wait no longer. “Enough!” insisted the King. “Battle is engaged and I must attend! It cannot wait!” One of his pages nodded and fastened the crowned barbute of his grandfather on Arthur’s head.
Flinging the flap of the tent back, he rushed out. The scene was confusion. Half-dressed men, and a few fortunate souls like Arthur, who had some smattering of plate or mail, battled those in full armor. This had Gloucester all over it: a sneak attack while the army slumbered.

“Fucking bastard coward,” growled Arthur. Order, what they needed was order, and they could still take the day, Arthur told himself. Glancing around, Arthur seized hold of the nearest horse and mounted up. “To me!”

“The King!” they took up the call. “The King!”

Arthur laid about him furiously, blade screaming through the air. “To me! To me!” His horse reared up; shattered the jaw of an assailant. “To me! To me!”

Campfires overturned; the assailants drove the assailed towards the thick walls of York. The world narrowed to a single instant. Bleeding and screaming, screaming and bleeding.

“We must stop them here!” shouted Arthur to his men. “We cannot allow them to press us within arrow range of the city! We must stop them here! Arise! Arise and fight!” Dawn tinged the sky slowly, too slowly. Arthur could barely see. “To me! To me!”

Confusion. Men in their nightshirts fighting men wearing full armor. And fire, fire was burning everywhere. Campfires leaped to life, roaring with the wind, spreading like Greek Fire across the scene. Arthur threw up his hand to shield his face as it leapt towards him; screamed as it scalded his arm and fell backwards from his rearing horse. He lay flat on his back, dazed. He stared at the sky. Rolling himself over onto his stomach, he stared at the battle. Everywhere people ran madly and without any trace of order, everywhere blood and screams and fire. Arthur clutched his burned elbow, pushed himself back onto his feet.

“God’s name,” whispered Arthur, grasping his sword, again. He squinted around the bright flames into the oceanic blackness of the night. He didn’t know who was whom: friend or foe. He did not know who to fight and who to defend. His head swam, his arm screamed with pain. Arthur groaned and brought one palm to his forehead, felt the helm and the crown upon it with his bare hand. The crown was cold and the cold shuttered through him, shocked him back into what he was doing. They are dying, he thought. My men are dying and they need me. “My God,” he whispered, and raised his sword. “Lancastrians!” he shouted. “To me!”

“Seize that man!” shouted a Scottish accent, pointing at him. “He wears a crown!”

Arthur nodded. There were no Scots in his ranks. A sure enemy, at last, he thought. Squaring his shoulders, he brought his sword into position. The Scot rushed at him. Arthur stood his ground, slashed with his sword when the enemy approached. The Scot raised an axe over his head, brought it crashing down. Arthur leapt away, swinging his sword outward. He had neither armor nor shield to catch such a blow. But because of that he was faster than the burdened Scot. Arthur nodded to himself. I will have to be swifter, he thought.

Arthur got to his feet. “You’re Scottish!” he shouted to his opponent. “What brings a Scot to this battle? This is not your fight!”

“King James has formed an alliance with King Richard,” said the Scot and Arthur bristled to hear Dickon called such. “Yield! I want you alive. You’d fetch me a handsome ransom, but I’ll kill you if I must.”

“Kill me, then, if you can,” growled Arthur, raising his sword to catch the swinging axe. He caught it, both of their arms raised in a tremendous blow. The hit rattled his bones, searing up his arms and
shoulders and neck. Arthur staggered back, shook it off, rushed forward again. “I will never yield!”

Around them, horses and men alike screamed. Arthur darted forward; the Scot raised his axe; Arthur feinted to the side just at the last moment, slicing sideways with his sword. He watched the Scot fall forward.

The horizon was a little brighter, now. Arthur scanned his surroundings. “Oh, fuck me,” he murmured. Just yards away, the walls of York reared up. Whizz, whizz!

“Arrows!” screamed Arthur. One slipped past his head, embedded itself in the ground by his foot, and Arthur fell backwards.

The arrows were afire and Arthur reached out to pull the one closest to him out of the earth, holding it up before him like a torch. York lay before them, a bulk of stone, and those beneath it screamed as scalding sand and oil and water were poured down upon them from the high walls. Flaming arrows shot from the walls, burying themselves in Arthur’s army.

“Pull back!” commanded Arthur. “Pull back!” Turning to face that direction, however, his face fell. An army hemmed them in, trapping them between a curtain of spears and a wall of ancient stone. “My God,” prayed Arthur. “Is this Your Will?”

All around him, his men screamed and wept as they died. Arthur dropped his hand to his side, the tip of his sword hitting the earth. Tears pricked his eyes and he thought of his father, moldering away in exile. He, too, lost a battle he seemed destined to win. It cost him everything. Arthur squeezed his eyes shut. Men were dying, dying, dying and there was no escape. They would all die here in this place. Forgive me, Father, he thought, opening his eyes again. I have to save them. Arthur released the hilt of his sword, let it fall to the ground. “Yield!” he shouted. “We yield! Lay down your weapons! We yield!”

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HENRY COURTENAY, EARL OF DEVON
York, England
August 1521

Hal followed quickly on the heels of his cousin, half-trotting along behind Dickon.

“We took the day!” declared Dickon, grinning brightly. “We took the day! Arthur Tudor, they all told me this Arthur Tudor was something to be feared, but he is the dirt on my shoes! I have trampled him beneath my boot!”

Hal cleared his throat. “We can hardly claim this victory, ourselves. It was the doing of His Grace, King Richard, and His Highness, King James. We played a part, aye, but anyone might have done what we did: camped out behind high walls, firing arrows. It was the King riding in with the Scots to pin them in that brought off victory for us.” He shrugged. “There was hardly anything to what we did here in the city.”

Dickon turned a furious glance upon him. “Are you utterly determined to steal this from me, too?”

“I cannot steal it from you, if it was never yours to begin with,” pointed out Hal.

Dickon’s glare was baleful. He stopped mid-step, turned back to his cousin. “Well, still, it’ll teach that ingrate some manners, I should think. The things he said to me!”

“The things you said to him, Dickon! Don’t you see?”
“I hated doing that, hated it!”

“We had to meet with him to ensure that he was here in person, or it might have all been for naught. Now that we’ve captured their so-called ‘king,’ we have a hope of reclaiming England from the enemy. Merely subduing their army would not have been enough: we had to have Arthur Tudor in hand. I know it was humiliating to pretend a surrender – I hated it, myself! – but what else could we have done? He would hardly have come to meet with us to discuss the color of the sky!”

Dickon’s eyes were steel, but flatter: they were like lead as he glowered at his cousin. He turned his back, suddenly, shaking his head. “It worked. I told Uncle Richard to strike before dawn, didn’t I? And it worked. It worked! I may take some credit for that.”

Hal sighed, releasing his breath slowly. “Of course.”

“There!” he exclaimed. “Do you think Arthur knows? That it was me? That I was so integral to this plan?”

Hal shrugged. “How would he? In any case, I doubt it much matters to him who decided upon what minutiae of the plan, Dickon.”

“But don’t you see? Hal, I was integral to bringing him to his knees! I want him to know. I want him to remember what he said to me and I want him to know that it was I who brought him down!” Dickon’s face was a thunderclap blackening his brow and lighting his eyes such that they gleamed with unnatural light. “I want to speak with him, I want to speak with Tudor before Uncle Richard arrives. I need to speak with him.”

“Dick-”

Dickon waved his hand and began walking again. They gained the courtyard, quickly, where many of the most valuable hostages were bound and being held till suitable quartering could be settled upon.

Dickon walked up to one of the guards. “Where’s the Tudor traitor?”

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ARTHUR TUDOR, KING OF ENGLAND
York, England
August 1521

The day was very fine: fair skies above seemed endless as the clouds wandered the heavens. The sun was a bright, gleaming amber that sent pale shafts of light through the clouds, illuminating them in vibrant glory of golds and oranges. Arthur closed his eyes and thought of Cat. Was she gazing at this same sky, on the other side of England, and thinking of him? He wasn’t sure how long he’d been here, but they’d led him to this place and then obliged him to wait…and wait and wait and wait. Arthur wondered, idly, if this was the treatment Harry had received upon his capture…but then, Harry had been unconscious, hadn’t he?

Arthur exhaled slowly, focused on the breath, that single plume of air as it released from his lungs. He could think of no good alternative to this mess. If he were ransomed, it would certainly be at a cost designed both to cripple the Tudor coffers and to imbue new hope into those of the Gloucester regime. If he were held, instead, without hope of return, that left Harry in charge – he could do it, but this was still cause for worry, in and of itself, by Arthur’s estimation. It also left Cat in a difficult position: a kind of limbo reserved for Queens who were not Queens, as Cat was viewed, Arthur
imagined, from very nearly every perspective on the board. It also left both their relations with
France and with Spain in a very precarious quandary without hope of any immediate resolution,
given that the marriage between Cat and himself would inevitably by hampered by the distance and
captivity.

All these concerns left off the very significant question of the army – what on earth would Dickon of
Gloucester do with them? Arthur glanced about those being held with him – those who were of
enough value to have potential ransoms – and wondered what would become of each of them, what
would become of those too lowly to be held here in this yard, at present? Arthur had surrendered to
protect them all – was that not the duty of a king? – but in so doing, had he not merely postponed the
inevitable? At least on the field of battle they had had a fighting chance of escape. Here, they could
linger and molder, all at the whim of a capricious child. Arthur thought of his mother and his sisters
and his father’s bones –trapped forever in exile, and his brother across England with no other
options. Had Arthur only made matters more dire? Had he doomed the only cause he had ever
served: the cause that had formed and led the progress of his entire life?

Arthur gazed down at his hands, manacled and useless, and exhaled again, slowly, focusing on the
act…on anything but the thoughts that rattled through his weary brain. He’d gone to bed the night
before an anointed king…today he was a cast off just as much as he’d ever been growing up, only a
little closer to home.

Arthur was baking slowly in the armor he’d put on, felt perspiration trickle down his neck. His arm
screamed where it had been burned and a hundred little wounds and bruises complained to his brain
of their condition. He shifted slowly, attempting to ease his discomfort, when he heard a voice saying
his name.

“Where’s the Tudor traitor?”

Arthur’s jaw set in annoyance and he surveyed the two young men who approached measuringly.
Dickon of Gloucester and Hal of Devon, his cousins…and his foes. Arthur tilted his head. “How
now, Dick?”

“That helmet!” exclaimed Dickon, stopping in his tracks, before coming suddenly closer. “Take it
off!” he demanded. “That is my grandfather’s helmet and you’ve no claim to it!”

Arthur glared at the child, nodded towards his manacles. “Well you may believe I’d have removed it
ere now, were I so able. Having been so tersely addressed, however, I find my desire to have it off
waning.” He paused. “I’ve every right to it, both as the first grandchild of Edward IV and, similarly,
as king.”

“That,” cried Dickon, pointing to it. “Is my grandfather’s helm!”

“And my grandfather’s as well,” sighed Arthur, wondering if it were the heat addling his brain or if
he truly had been compelled to repeat himself. “Inherited thusly through my mother and through my
father by conquest, as well.”

Dickon sneered, looked towards one of the guards. “You, there! Remove the traitor’s helm!”

Arthur grunted as the guard roughly tugged at it, at its straps, and finally yanked it off. Cool air
assaulted his head but Arthur felt no relief, watching the crown put into Dickon’s hands. “What you
have taken, you have stolen, and therefore is not yours, however long it may remain in your hands.”

“I might have said the same of you.” He paused. “Do you recall what you said to me when we first
met? Do you recall?”
Arthur glared, felt heat assault his cheeks again. He seethed, watching this arrogant fool, who ran his fingers clumsily across the crowned barbute helm of Edward IV as though holding it in his hands might alone make him king. Arthur’s stare was baleful. He did not reply.

Dickon reached out, suddenly, roughly seizing Arthur’s jaw.

“Dickon!” exclaimed Hal. “For pity’s sake!”

This close, Arthur could clearly see him. Dickon’s eyes were bloodshot amidst the deep, dark bags beneath them, and Arthur wondered distantly when his last restful sleep had occurred.

“You said, ‘I’ve no need of mercy from a child.’ Do you remember?” He squeezed hard against Arthur’s jaw. “I want you to beg. I want you to beg for my mercy!”

“Dickon!” cried Hal again, this time reaching for his cousin’s arm.

Grunting, Dickon released Arthur. “Beg.”

“Uncle Richard will not approve,” muttered Hal.

Arthur felt the blood drain from him. “What?” he whispered, swallowed hard, realized the word had been hardly audible. His mouth was dry and horror seeped into his skull, icy in the summer heat. It chilled him to hear his old enemy, Warbeck, spoken of in the present, as though…alive. “What did you say?” he asked, a shade louder.

Hal shifted uncomfortably, looking between Dickon and Arthur. “Has no one told you?” he asked, finally. “It was a ruse – the King was not dead, only wounded. It was he who returned with the Scots to entrap you.”

“It can’t be,” murmured Arthur. He felt ill, suddenly, his gut seizing as he pictured the Usurper – the Usurper and his Cat. Cat, Cat, what have I done? A wave of panicked nausea swept over him, and he leaned forward, tried to push the feeling back. The nightmare creature who wore Perkin Warbeck’s features slithered at the back of his brain and Arthur wanted to run from this, run from it or shut it up forever. It can’t be, he thought. It can’t be. I saw him fall from his horse with my own two eyes. It can’t be! “You’re lying!”

Hal shook his head. “We’ve lied before, but that was a stratagem. There is no more need of such actions anymore. I say to you in all veracity: Richard IV, King of England, is alive and well and it is he who pulverized your stand against York.”

“God in Heaven!” cried Arthur. “Are we never to be rid of him?” Memories swirled through his brain: exile tracked across Europe like the Biblical Flight to Egypt, his mother hiding her tears, his father staring stern-faced towards England as though he could control his own fear, Arthur’s own desperate flight to meet his father before sailing to Europe sprang before his memory: the cold fear of conquest, the blank uncertainty of the future, the horror of long exile. No, no, no, he thought, desperately.

“It was my notion,” said Dickon, glibly. “To conceal the truth of his survival from you, thereby allowing him to escape.”

“You fool!” spat Arthur, picturing Cat again. “You do not know what you have done!”

Anger seized Dickon’s features as his grin turned to a snarl. “Say that again! Say it and know that it was I who told the King to attack you before dawn!”
Arthur laughed, though he felt no humor. “Knowing that we would not yet be arisen from our beds. Aye, you’re the coward I thought: sending an old man to fight your battles, while hiding behind a great wall, all the while knowing your enemy slumbers! No, I see, now. You’re not quite the coward I’d imagined: you’re an even greater one.”

“You will pay for that! Beg for my forgiveness, traitor.”

“No,” Arthur glanced away, again, turned his eyes towards the dirt beneath his feet. “I will beg for nothing.”

Dickon slapped him. The blow smarted, and Arthur rocked back with it a moment in stinging surprise. It was a sudden shock that reddened his cheek and left him prickling as it rushed across his face. Arthur started towards him, but his bonds prevented him. He glared, sneering at his attacker.

“Beg!”

Hal stared in horror. “Dickon! Check this senseless violence!” He turned pleadingly towards Arthur. “Cousin, will you not do as he says, for your own good? Dickon is the Duke of Gloucester and the future King of England: a man best made friend and ally by one at his mercy. Beg him, for your own sake! Abandon your pride! It will do you no good, here.”

Arthur turned slowly to glance at Hal, felt the vague sense of carelessness. He half-choked on swallowed pain. Harry’s words in France, all those years ago, whispered through the dark blackness of his mind, ‘Everything, everything we use is his!’ Was it not true here, as well? Arthur’s nation, his birthright, his home, even his queen all belonged to the Usurper, the deathless Usurper, the whirring horror that would haunt him, he felt sure, all his days. Arthur almost laughed, but it was anguish that wheezed between his aching ribs and he thought, mercilessly, of his own words to Harry ‘A little less pride might do you good.’ Exhaustion stole over him like a numbing blanket.

“How can I?” asked Arthur. “You’ve stolen everything else from me. All I have left to me, now, is my pride and I’ll not abandon it for anything in this world. No,” he added, turning towards Dickon. Unshed tears stung his eyes, but he willed them back, felt the rawness in his throat. “I shall never beg you for anything, cousin, but I shall pray God spare England from so loathsome a fool as you, and I shall pray that our family may ably bear the shame of having you for a relative.”

A strangled sound erupted from Dickon’s throat, his face turned to scarlet, and suddenly a knife slashed from the scabbard at his side. Pain flashed at Arthur’s throat and, suddenly, his world was filled with red, red, red, and everywhere people were shouting.

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HENRY COURTENAY, EARL OF DEVON
York, England
August 1521

“What have you done! Dickon, what have you done!” screamed Hal in disbelief. Blood spurted from Arthur Tudor’s throat as he raised his manacled hands towards the wound as though to stench the flow. He staggered backwards, collapsed onto the ground. Rushing towards him, Hal put his hands to the wound, as well, trying to stop the bleeding. “Oh, God, no, oh God, no!”

Useless, useless, his own voice sounded foreign in his ears: as unreal as this moment. Hal’s throat was thick with horror and nausea clouded his thoughts as sick panic screeched in his ears. “Please, no, please, no,” he pleaded, looked into Arthur’s eyes and saw tears leak from his eyes.
Arthur’s eyes closed, opened wide as he pushed off the ground, throwing his hands down as if he could push himself up to breathe, as though he could stop the blood. But the blood was all draining away and the fight in him was going with it. Arthur’s head slammed back and blood bubbled from his mouth, gurgled as he tried to speak or breathe.

“Shhhh, shhhh,” whispered Hal, feeling tears of his own. “It’s all right, cousin, it’s all right. Peace, peace.” Arthur seized at Hal’s jerkin with one hand, looping his fingers around it, then his hands fell away, he reached out...out...his gauntleted fingers scratched in the dirt, rolling through clumps of it. Hal gasped, realizing what he wanted, unlatching and yanking off the gauntlet. Arthur’s bare fingers curled tenderly around the earth of England, his eyes turned towards the sky and then he was still, forever still.

Hal heaved, felt as though he would retch and, slowly, slowly, stood; slower still turned towards Dickon. Tears ran down his face. “What have you done?” he demanded, desperately. “That man was our kin and he was a prisoner, taken in honor! This act has besmirched us all! That was not a battle death, Dickon! The battle is over! Dickon, that was murder, you murdered him! What has happened to you? Have you not a shred of decency left in you? He was bound and defenseless! God!” Hal slapped a hand to his brow, nervously raked his hair back with shaking fingers. “I do not know you, anymore.”

Dickon was shaking, blubbering, he turned towards Hal, gesturing with his bloody knife. “No!” he screamed, hoarsely. “No, it was honorable! It was necessary!” he laughed, laughed madly. “I did, I did what needed to be done, I did what,” he pointed with the knife at everyone: all those staring and staring and staring at him. “What none of you had the guts to do! I-I was the brave one! I,” he laughed, pointing at himself with the bleeding knife. “I stopped that menace. Our uncle will be so proud! The traitor is dead! Never, never again will he have to face, to face Arthur Tudor, never,” Dickon shook his head, pointed towards Arthur’s body with the knife, slapped his free hand absently to his mouth and glanced away. “It’s not my fault,” he murmured. “It’s not my fault.”

Chapter End Notes

In the first section, Arthur is awaked before dawn by the sound of screams. When he ventures outside, he quickly finds that a surprise attack has ben launched against them in the dead of night, massacring the sleeping army. Arthur’s forces are quickly pinned between a literal rock (the walls of York) and a hard place (the steel of their enemies) and it is revealed that the Scots have rained down from Scotland to round out the Yorkist forces besieged at York. Seeing that the battle is already lost and hoping to save his surviving army, Arthur surrenders.

In the last paragraph of the second to last section, Dickon slits Arthur’s throat. In the final section, Arthur passes away, wanting only to touch the green earth of England and gaze up at the English skies, which he does with the help of his cousin, Hal of Devon.
When Arthur has died, Hal rounds on Dickon, demanding to know why he has perpetrated this deed on a bound prisoner, and telling him that his act was dishonorable and murder, to boot, the battle being over. Dickon raves that he did the right thing for England and that it was not his fault, to which Hal replies in the final lines of the chapter:

“Even if this hateful crime were of no matter, Dickon, even if he deserved to die, how does this serve our cause? Moments ago, we held our enemy’s so-called king and stood in a position to return England, whole, to her rightful ruler. Now, because of this heinous act, their king is safe in London and we have just murdered his only brother. Precisely how do you think he will react to that?”
Long Live the King

Chapter Summary

The words seemed hollow and unreal, greeted by a silent throng.

Chapter Notes

tw: grief, mentions of death

See the end of the chapter for more notes

HENRY TUDOR, KING OF ENGLAND
Palace of Westminster, England
August 1521

“The King is dead!” the messenger collapsed to his knees before Henry, turning exhausted orbs up towards him. “Long live the King!”

The words seemed hollow and unreal, greeted by a silent throng. The words hovered in the ether, swirling between the held-in breaths of everyone present, and wreathing the rafters in tension. Everyone grew still, still words caught in tense confusion. Harry felt his wife come to his side, reach out to touch his arm. Heat radiated through him, and he wanted to laugh inanely – what an absurd thought! – it could be nothing more. Nothing more. But the laugh was caught in his windpipe, choking him, choking his brain of air.

Beside him, he heard Anne speak. “What does this mean?”

Harry wanted to step back and away, swerve for some doorway from this room. He did not want this moment, this place. If he could leave, he would leave this behind and forget it. The unreality could belong to this room and he could escape it. Yes, he could not be here, but his feet were rooted to the spot and he’d lost all power of motion, even his tongue was tight and taut in his mouth and his jaws squeezed together as if molded together.

The messenger was dirty from his trek and bruised all over. Anne nodded quickly nodded to one of the attendant ladies to bring him a cup of something to drink. He took it hungrily, gulped it down at once and bowed to Anne. “Your Grace,” he began, squeezing his hat between his fingers with nerves. “His Grace, King Arthur, has perished in York.” He glanced about at the assembly, suddenly all nerves as the tension permeated. He smiled sickly, sadly, turned back to Harry. “Your Grace, in York we were treated with falsehood! Those who had claimed that the pretender, Perkin Warbeck, was dead were but liars! He lived and went unto Scotland, there to bring back fresh troops to aid his cause in memory of the alliance England and Scotland had shared during his usurpation, given the pretender’s former wife: a cousin of King James of Scotland.”

Harry’s head was whirling, he swayed, felt Anne’s hands tighten around his arm. “Everyone out!” commanded Anne. “Bring His Grace refreshment and a chair, at once!”
He did not know how he got there, but soon he was sitting, Anne kneeling at his side, her hand on his brow. “Anne,” he whispered. “Anne, I-”

She looked up to him and he saw her eyes were filled with tears. “Oh, my love,” she whispered, wrapping her arms around him, placing a kiss upon his temple. “Darling, darling.”

The hall was empty of everyone, save them two, but Harry hardly felt sensible of any of it, wanted to pretend that there was nothing but the feeling of her arms holding him. He touched her arm, then, looping his fingers around it. “Did…did you hear what happened to him?”

“Didn’t you?” she asked with some concern.

“Did I?” Henry turned towards her, his glance blank, and he watched a tear trickle down her face.

Anne nodded slowly. “He told me everything. I will tell you, and then we must tell Catherine. She wasn’t in the hall just now…she has not yet heard.”

Harry leaned forward where he sat, his chest was caving in and he was choking once more. Emotion felt removed, but it was misery that was coiled in his stomach and his chest and around his heart. It was not the emotion that was gone, no, it was he, himself, and he was lost in the shuffle. All he could think was his brother, crumpled and alone and betrayed. And the cold reality that he would never see him again. Harry’s shoulders shook as the tears ran hot down his cheeks. Arthur gone, gone, gone forever. Gone. “Nan, I can’t,” he sobbed, burying his face in his hands. “I can’t, I can’t, I can’t.”

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RICHARD IV, KING OF ENGLAND
York, England
August 1521

Thunderstorms. The cooler weather was good for the body of his nephew and the torrents suited Richard’s mood as he gazed at the young man who had been, for five months, a king crowned. Richard’s eyes felt as heavy as his head as he stood leaning on his two fists against the table where Arthur Tudor’s body had been laid out. Richard had ordered for the body to be displayed, not as a doomed traitor, but as a deceased nephew, with all the reverence and respect due the firstborn son of his eldest sister: a princess royal.

“I wish,” he began, looking towards Arthur’s face, now gone strangely waxy in death. “That we’d had a chance to meet. All these years I’ve regretted that I never met your father, but now we are here, I rue still more deeply that it came to this with you.” He paused, stretching out one hand towards Arthur’s: clasped around the hilt of the sword that laid across his prone figure. Richard’s hand hovered there for a moment, then he retracted it, turned away from the body, his hand to his mouth. Unshed tears pricked his eyes.

“My God, Lizzie,” he mumbled. “My God, how you must hate me, now! But I never, I never meant any harm to come to your boy. God knows, I saw your little family as a reflection of ours and this, this young man,” he added, turning tearfully back to face Arthur. “A second chance for our poor dead brother – God!”

Richard buried his face in his hands. He felt the hot tears on his face, felt them clogging his throat, racked his shoulders. He leaned against the table for support. “God, where did I go wrong? Tell me what to do! Tell me!” He’d led them all down this merry path. Henry Tudor had told him so, himself. ‘Perhaps,’ he had said, all those months ago, locked in the Tower as Richard, himself, had once been: ‘You ought to have let us all live in peace.’ If he hadn’t, wouldn’t Arthur be alive, now? And
Dickon…well, Dickon probably never would have been born if it had not been for Richard, himself, as he had industriously set the marriage of Dickon’s parents into motion and raised the lad as if he were his own. And this is how he’d come out. A liar; a murderer. Perhaps God had been right in depriving him of children. Richard was no fit parent if this were the result.

Richard put his head in his hands, again. Hal had told him the whole truth, even as Dickon cut in, shrieking his own side. Richard had been loathe to believe the dread tale, yet, each witness – Yorkist or Lancastrian – had bolstered Hal’s side of events. There could be no doubt. This, this his heir, this his intended future King of England, was a witless, thoughtless coward and murderer, slashing up bound prisoners. Richard remembered his own father in the way he always did: warm, yes; loud, yes; brilliant, yes; intimidating…most of all, yet the figure all who met him most wished to emulate. And Richard remembered one of the very few times he had ever seen his father cry: recalling the death of his brother, Edmund: wounded, bound, surrendered, stabbed to death by an enemy. This murder was an unforgivable act, but Richard had no choice but to forgive it. On top of all this fighting, he could now not possibly afford to loose resolve in his heir. Richard III had proven what happened to a king, and kingdom, with no certain heir and an army against him. No, he could not put England through that turmoil, again.

Richard turned back to Arthur’s prone form. “I did not know you, but trusting in your mother, I may say I think you, too, would do what you think best for the realm. I, too, must do the same. I pray you forgive me. It is a miscarriage of justice, but I can help him, I can reform Dickon: show him his error and heal this rifts. He wants nothing more than to please me and when he sees…when he sees…” Richard broke off, staring blankly away. His father’s helm rested beside Arthur’s head and, crossing to the other side of the table, Richard put his hand on it.

“Father,” he whispered, bowing his head, feeling the steely certainty of Edward IV’s helm beneath his hand. He pictured the man: tall and sure and ingenious and everything a king was meant to be. “Father, tell me what to do,” he begged, squeezing his eyes shut. “I feel so lost…Tell me what to do. You always knew, every time, you knew just what to do. Just…tell me what to do. Please. Someone, help me.”

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CATHERINE OF ARAGON, QUEEN OF ENGLAND
Palace of Westminster, England
August 1521

Anne Boleyn’s eyes were red and puffy, but she knocked gingerly, stepped into the room, curtseyed. Some unquiet thing lurked in her eyes, flickering uncertainty, and Catherine’s throat felt tight.

“Something is wrong,” said Catherine, getting up quickly. “What is wrong?”

Anne pressed her hands to her abdomen, stopped, started towards Catherine again, stopped again. “Your-Your Grace, I-” she broke off, her lips trembled, and Catherine crossed quickly to her, taking both her hands.

“Say it, at once! Say it, please, whatever it is! I cannot bear this waiting!”

Anne nodded. “Arthur is dead,” she said, quickly. “He fell, he-”

“Wha-” Catherine shook her head, snatched her hands away from Anne. “How can you say so?” she demanded, felt temper flaring hot against her, fear creeping in every shadow and tingling across her skin, brushing every tiny hair along her body as it eased up her spine. She wished to push Anne away or slap her for saying something so cruel, but Anne’s eyes were afire with horror. She could
see the truth glittering in her tearful gaze. “No, no,” she whispered, shaking her head, voice growing in strength as she spoken. “He can-he can’t, he can’t, he-” Catherine’s legs gave way. As though from very far away, she felt herself crumple to the floor. “He can’t, he can’t, he can’t leave me here! He can’t leave me, God, he can’t! He can’t!” Catherine clutched at her abdomen. “Why? Oh, God, why?”

Anne eased onto the ground beside her, reaching for her hand. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered. “But there is more.”

Catherine wanted to get up, wanted to throw up, but nothing came save the flood of nausea and the sound of the blood rushing in her ears. “No,” whispered Catherine. “Not now, not today. There is no more than that. There is nothing else if he is gone. Don’t tell me this, don’t say another word, Anne. There is nothing, I-” she paused, squeezed her eyes shut. “He can’t be gone, not yet, not now,” she touched her belly again. “We’ve hardly begun. I’ve not even told him of the child, I…He will write. He will write to me, soon. Please, merciful Lord, I beg You! He will write! It must be some mistake!” Catherine bowed her head, raising her fisted knuckles to her lips and bit down hard on them, heard a strangled noise from her throat, and felt Anne’s arms wrap around her shoulders tightly, protectively.

“So if it must be said-”

Catherine shook her head, quickly, felt every limb tensing. “If it must be said, then I pray you be quick with it and say what ill news you may bear straight off. Please, straight off.”

Anne nodded. “Richard, or Warbeck…he is alive.”

Chapter End Notes

Hello, there, my friends! I just wanted to let you know that I'm publishing this real quick before I rush off out of state! I'm so sorry, this is REALLY not a chapter that should've been rushed, but there was no other choice if I were to publish this week.

Also, directly related, I haven't been able to reply to all of your wonderful (and much appreciated!!!!) comments but I have seen them and I thank you all so heartily for the outpouring! These have been two of the most difficult chapters to write for obv reasons and having all your support makes the difference <3 I look forward to responding to each of you as soon as I return!!

Finally, personal milestone: this marks approximately 350 pages of this fic!!!!! Which has been going on over a year now, as I published Chapter 1 on 6/7/17!!!!!!!!!
Thunder rumbled across the fields beyond; the skies above the Thames darkened. The sultry heat was about to break over their heads.

HENRY TUDOR, KING OF ENGLAND
Palace of Westminster, England
August 1521

The day was hot, hotter than hot, or perhaps it was his ill-humor that made the heat sweltering and the loneliness absolute any time Anne left the room. He felt as though he’d strayed into a ring of hell – which ring precisely he did not care to speculate – where the keen torment was not of body or of mind, but all the more acute, for it was a torture of the soul. His spirits, usually soaring, were numbed to nothing, and he stared in listless ennui out the window. For all that, however, he hardly wanted his emotions to spring forth. Beneath the icy stillness lurked the horror of loss.

Henry’s desires were all of the immortal variety: fame and glory and love and glamor and paradise. There was no room for death in these, none; yet it peered over his shoulder, inhabited every shadow of the room and there was no light strong enough to drive the shadows away. Dead, yes, they told him that he dead and gone. Yet, Henry felt every moment that surely Arthur would cross the threshold with his usual wry comment and long, deliberate stride. It was not possible that he was dead.

This was not the first loss Henry had endured. First there had been his little brother Edward, and then his youngest brother, Edmund, but neither had survived the cradle and, in truth, Henry hardly remembered them. The next deaths had been harder: his grandmother, the indomitable Margaret Beaufort, who had been a constant in his life and his own father, Henry VII, a man who Harry had half-supposed until that moment, to be too stubborn to die. Still, both had been older generations, and had ended their lives at the normal rate. None of that could be said for Arthur, cut down in the prime of his youth: murdered in the attempt to put down a rebellion. Yes, that was what this was: a rebellion that had lasted over two decades and stolen away the crown for most of that time, but a rebellion nonetheless.

Thunder rumbled across the fields beyond; the skies above the Thames darkened. The sultry heat was about to break over their heads. Henry wanted to go out into the coming storm, to walk into the wall of water cascading from the skies, to loose himself amidst the tempest. The world whirled before him, dark and deep, and he turned slowly, casting searching eyes around him.

“Anne!” came the half-whispered shout and he stood; lost his energy, sat down again.

He could not sleep. At night, his brother’s fate played itself out in imagined horror: blood and gore and gore and blood. Sometimes Arthur wept, sometimes he begged, sometimes he turned and looked directly at Henry as the blade fell and those, those were the moments Henry woke suddenly in wild horror, covered in cold sweat. He couldn’t help but think of it, think of what might have been.
Perhaps, if he’d gone with him to York, Henry might have somehow spared Arthur; perhaps if at the start, Henry had gone to Wales and Arthur to London; perhaps if Henry had said this word here, or done that deed there…perhaps even now Arthur might be living. It was no use, Anne told him, gently, the fact was that God had taken Arthur to Himself, but Henry resented God as he might have resented a thief: one who stole what was not rightly theirs to take; as he resented the Usurper, who by stealing their father’s throne, had murdered them both.

Blackly, Henry thought on their brief interview in the Tower – Warbeck’s pretended sympathy. “You remind me of my brother,” he had said.

Replied Henry: “You do not make me think of mine.”

“I want to tell you something, Henry,” the Usurper had said, at length. “I want to tell you something I wished could have been said to me, here, once: You need not fear, Henry. Your brother is still alive,” he had said. “He is alive and he is marching this way. Your cause still has much reason to hope.”

But it was not so, now. Henry had reason to fear. His brother was dead and far from here. His cause…Henry buried his head in his hands as if they could shield him. Your brother is still alive. He is still alive, he is alive and marching this way, marching this way, still alive and has much reason to hope…The words fluttered on windy wings, nuzzling at his brain with confused persistence.

“Stop,” whispered Henry, and tears trickled down his face. “Oh, God, please stop.”

Arthur was dead, dead, dead: final and gone, and there was nothing in this world Henry could do about it. He was denied, even, the chance to say goodbye. It was always a possibility, of course, when one road off to battle that one might not return…but that had never felt real to Henry. He had never thought for a moment that he might never see his brother, again. He wanted to go back, to rewrite the past. He wanted God to descend from the clouds and give him a miracle. He wanted Arthur back. He wanted Arthur back and for all of this to be over. He wanted Arthur back.

The storm cracked. Lightning lit up the room and Henry’s vision flashed with shocking brilliance. Behind him, the door creaked. Anne stood in the doorway and Henry made no attempt to hide his tears. She came to him quickly, put her arms around him.

“Yes,” she replied stoutly. Anne moved to look into his eyes. His cheek, when she touched it, was scratchy with his unshaven beard and dewy with the tears that coursed down his face. “Yes, my love, you can. God knows it will not be easy, but I’ve no doubt in you. I know you, Henry, and I’ve...
seen your unflappable determination, firsthand. Oh, Henry, if you wanted something deeply enough, you’d defy God, Himself, to have it. You can do this, and you will do this. You will survive and you will succeed and you will thrive, no matter what happens.” Taking his hand, she squeezed it tight. “Promise me, Henry, promise me that you will try and that you will not give up. Promise me.”

Leaning forward, he rested his brow against hers. Despite himself, he chuckled, a sad sound, raw and unguarded. “Oh, but my sweetheart, now that I’ve you by my side, what on earth could I possibly want so badly as all that?” His lips were soft and sweet and earnest when they met hers and when the kiss was over, the lovers stayed as they were, brow to brow, sharing in the comfort of each other until, finally, he pulled away. “My brother was born to be king, Nan. How shall I ever match up? I fear I do not know what to do. What will they all think of me?”

“That, my love,” replied Anne. “Is entirely up to you. You must decide and, when you have, show them all just what kind of king Henry VIII is going to be.”

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EDMUND DE LA POLE, EARL OF SUFFOLK
York, England
August 1521

Edmund walked the high walls of the city, following King Richard as he made his circuit. From here, all the countryside was laid out before them like a tapestry: a ribbon of river running here, threads of earth there, strings of trees rising boisterously along the peaks. Yes, the world lay at their feet, but hardly a pebble of it was within their grasp. Within the walls, soldiers prowled and prisoners waited. The air felt close and clammy, even from this height, and Edmund thought of his own home: the stretches of unrestrained land that awaited him there. He remembered what freedom had been like.

Scurrying feet. Edmund turned quickly to glance towards the sound, watched a page hurtle, gasping, up the stone steps that led to the parapet. He sank to his knees before the king, doing his utmost to conceal his winded condition.

“Your Grace,” panted the boy. “A letter…from Henry Tudor.”

Richard’s face was a mask of white, suddenly, milky and pale as if his blood ran cold when he reached for it, snatched the parchment from the page. It bore the white-in-red bloom that was the badge of the Tudor dynasty and, quickly, Richard broke the red waxen seal.

“What does it say?” asked Hal, eagerly, from beside Edmund.

“It is an order,” replied the King, mechanically, tiredly, putting the thing into his nephew’s hands. “Surrender the body of his murdered brother, surrender York…” he paused, leaned with two fists against the bulwark opposite and bowed his head. “Surrender hope.”


Chapter End Notes

History notes! Henry VIII did, in fact, have three brothers! Arthur, Edward, and Edmund; however, irl Arthur died at 15 years old and Edward and Edmund both died
within their first years of life.

Anne Boleyn was, in fact, very ill during her pregnancy with her first child, to the point where there was fear that she might die. You can read about that here: https://www.theanneboleynfiles.com/the-birth-of-elizabeth-i/

Finally, by styling himself "Henry R," Henry is establishing himself as King, as the "R" stand for "Rex," meaning "King," and this was the common signature of kings. It was also how Henry signed himself as king irl. You can see his signature here: https://www.pinterest.com/pin/575405289869678692/?lp=true
All Or Nothing

Chapter Summary

She would not weep, not today, not while anyone was watching. She must not weep.

Chapter Notes

note: not yet edited! please forgive my mess!

CATHERINE OF ARAGON, QUEEN OF ENGLAND
Palace of Westminster, England
August 1521

Trunk after trunk and pack after pack, Catherine watched all her belongings bundled up, directing the process as though from very far away. It was efficient, it was necessary, and it was the last thing she wished to be doing. Her gowns, her jewels, her books, every little bit of everything which was hers. Henry had sent a letter demanding the return of Arthur’s body and the return of his generals and Catherine knew very well and good what Richard would require in return for the prize: his wife. God, how had this happened? She was pointing, saying, ‘No, in this trunk,’ but her voice belonged to someone distant. Her mind was absorbed in the only husband she had ever wanted, the only one of them who had never, she knew now, truly been hers. Yes, Arthur had been right: the Usurper had denied him even that.

Tears threatened but Catherine exercised her will. She would not weep, not today, not while anyone was watching. She must not weep. There must be no trace of horror or sorrow. Catherine of Aragon must not be seen to mourn. This, this was the last gift she could ever give Arthur. No one must know. For the sake of their child, no one must ever know.

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RICHARD PLANTAGENET, KING OF ENGLAND
York, England
August 1521

Richard poured over his nephew’s letter for the umpteenth time, scouring every line for a trace of… he knew not what, but he must write back. He must. He’d picked up his pen a thousand, thousand times, and every time he’d put it back again. Henry demanded justice, justice, justice, but Richard had none to offer. What could he do? If Dickon was to be punished, it must be by his own hand. To turn him over to Henry amounted to acknowledging that it was Henry who dispensed the King’s justice…which was the same as acknowledging Henry as King. It would not do.

There was one alternative, but it was physically ruinous where the other was symbolically so. Henry called, also, for the return of Arthur’s body – something easily done – as well as for the return of Arthur’s generals. He had demanded, too, the return of Arthur’s army but that was commonplace bluster: both Richard and Henry knew that was not going to happen. To give to Henry Arthur’s most
seasoned generals amounted to suicide. Though Arthur, himself, could never be replaced, his generals had all his experience and capability…and Richard had only York.


But the answer came to him, quickly. Yes, his father, too, had faced an invasion from his family…he had even been ousted from England. Yes, Edward IV had been sent out from England as surely as Richard, himself, had once been set abroad as Perkin Warbeck. He, too, had returned.

Richard had York, yes, and fresh troops from Scotland, he considered. Yes, this was a possibility. Even Henry’s French troops were war-weary, by now. Only Richard had fresh soldiers.

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RICHARD DE LA POLE, DUKE OF SUFFOLK
York, England
August 1521

“Well, brother, looks as if you chose the winning side of this little gambit of ours,” observed Richie, darkly, picking at the straw that stuffed his filthy mattress. He’d been given his own tiny room for quarters, due to the intercession of his Yorkist brother, but he found it little comfort, even now that his brother had come into the room to see him.

“We knew there would be a victor…as well as a loser, that is why we chose this means of addressing the issue. I confess, for a spell, I thought it would be I who would rely upon the kindness of a brother on the other side.”

Richie chuckled. “In truth, dear brother, as did I. Is it too harsh to confess I’d begun to hope it would be so? Not for the sake of your misfortune, brother mine, but…when I came to know him well, I found I wanted Arthur to win. Is that not strange? I find I am heartily sorry for his loss.”

Ed came to assume a seat beside Richie on the bed. “You think he would have been a good king? Better than King Richard?”

Richie shrugged. “I suppose we shall never know, now. Perhaps he would have proven merely a copy of his father…though rather austere, I suppose that would not have been so bad a thing, either. Our King Richard has a goodly conscience but little sense for this thing of ruling. He has rather the opposite problem as had his predecessor, I’m afraid.”

Ed chuckled. “Well, you’ll perhaps be glad to hear that your King Arthur’s heir is even now negotiating for your release.”

“Is that so?”

“Well, you are one of Arthur’s top generals, are you not?”

“I daresay, I’m the leader of the pack of this new generation. Those who were his father’s men take rather natural precedent, I suppose, but he left them over in France to safeguard his mother and sisters.”

“Do you imagine Henry shall call for them?”

“I do imagine it,” replied Richie, thoughtfully.

“I shall alert King Richard.”
Richie held up his hand. “Wait. Give it some little space.”

“You think Henry can prevail?”

“In truth, brother, I do not know, but recall that we’ve more to gain from a Tudor dynasty than the continuance of a Plantagenet one. Arthur offered us a dukedom. All you’re protecting here with Richard is what we already had.”

“That,” said Ed, softly. “And your life, should the Tudors fail. You know it’s treason.”

Richie nodded. “I know, brother. I know. Just as I protect yours, should Richard fail.”

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HENRY TUDOR, KING OF ENGLAND
Palace of Westminster, England
August 1521

“He’ll have received by note, by now,” said Harry, staring out the window off towards York. “He’ll be making his mind and sending me a response. What shall he tell me, Nan? Will he send back to me the body of my brother?”

Anne was ensconced by the hearth. The physician had whispered that it was about time she, now a queen, retire to her confinement, but Anne had proven most resistant to the idea.

“I’ll go when there is no other option,” she’d retorted, sharply. “And not a moment before.”

Harry was glad to have her here, with him, but he knew that that font of joy would soon dry up. The birth approached, nearer and nearer, moment by moment.

From by the fireplace, Anne glanced towards him. “I think you should call for your mother and sisters,” she began, gently.

Harry glanced up in alarm. “And remove them from the safety of France?”

Slowly, Anne nodded, slowly, she tried to get up from the chair. Harry came to her side in an instant.

“Peace, sweetheart, stay where you are and say your piece.”

Anne’s expressive eyes lit but she stopped, sat back in the chair. “Very well,” she murmured. “But what I have to say…it is most important.”

“Say it.”

“Henry, Arthur has died for this cause. After this, there can be no turning back. Always before your brother was cautious to keep a foothold in Europe…a route of escape should all effort fail.” Anne shook her head, grasping his hand. “Henry, if you are going to do this, I pray you give it your all. Look not back to some past or possibility of retreat: give this effort your all or sue at once for peace and renounce your claims altogether because if there is,” Anne wetted her lips and Harry saw that she was fighting tears. “If there is even the slightest possibility that you might share in your brother’s ill luck, then give me the peace of knowing that it meant everything to you. And…if you are not willing to take such a bitter risk, then give me the peace of seeing you safe. Will you do that, Henry? No half-efforts, no trifles. All,” she said, firmly. “Or nothing.”
“Henry!” hissed Anne, clutching at her pregnant belly. “Peace! How can you say such things?”

RICHARD OF SHREWSBURY, KING OF ENGLAND
York, England
August 1521

Light from the full moon spilled across Richard’s face, but he was not mindful of it. His dreams absorbed him. He was Perkin Warbeck, again, sailing to distant Jaloff. The Senegal river soaked into his boots as he trudged along its banks, hefting his master’s goods here and there and pitying, (as he sometimes did when he lifted something particularly heavy,) his own boyhood servants. The river’s dusty banks were covered over with vibrant verdure such as he’d never seen before: plants with spiky leaves like the forked tongues of serpents: long and tapering and pointed at the end; bark on trees like the sliding scales of armor. And the animals! Lions and tall, spotted creatures with long limbs and longer necks and strange deer with tawny-and-white coats and long, straight horns sporting hard rings all the way up. He gawked as he trailed back and forth with Pero’s possessions, hurrying this way and that at command.

His reverie was interrupted. Further up the bank, Pero was arguing loudly with someone. It was not Bemoi, now, but instead it was his father. Edward’s long limbs sheathed in armor and head crowned with his barbute helm, but it was he, unmistakably he, and Richard had never known such relief.

Richard gasped with joy: he’d come, he knew: his father had come to take him home! Dropping Pero’s things, Richard cupped his hands around his mouth to shout to his father, but no sound came. He tried to go to him, but his feet were trapped in the sludgy Senegal, its waters encroaching, and Pero reached for his knife.

Richard’s heart sprang into his throat. “No!” he screamed, useless. No sound came. “Papa! Papa, look out!”

Edward’s long limbs were bound now and Pero was shouting. Richard screamed. Richard screamed and screamed. No one heard. Pero raised his knife. Edward tried to move; the bonds held him fast.

“He must be silenced!” yelled Pero. He raised his knife.

“Papa!” shrieked Richard. “No! Papa!” His feet would not budge. The water was rising. Hot tears ran down his cheeks. He choked on the words.

Pero turned to look at him, but it was not now Pero, no. It was Dickon. A hard grimace came over his mouth. “Watch,” he commanded.

The knife whistled as it slashed Edward’s throat. Richard shrieked. Edward’s blood poured; his head toppled from his shoulders, bounced, rolled to Richard’s feet. He knelt to look at his father’s face one last time, but it was no longer his. The face that stared up at him belonged to Arthur Tudor.
Ed sat up bolt upright in bed as his door crashed open. “What in the name of-” he demanded, but the ghostly figure that came inside killed the words in his throat. Vaulting out of bed, Ed knelt. “Your Grace!”

“Arthur Tudor’s body is to be release at once,” commanded Richard. “At once! See to it, Ed, forthwith, and tell me when it is done. Give the dolorous caravan whatever it will require on its journey to London. And...and Tudor’s generals...I will relinquish the Tudors’ generals in exchange for my queen. Here,” he added, thrusting a scrolled letter into Ed’s hand. “Here is the missive commanding Arthur’s release. Go. Go, now.” Richard put a hand to his brow. “See to it, now.”

“As Your Grace wills,” responded Ed, bowing low even as he bolted once more to his feet. “And...and the letter to Tudor?”

“Already sent,” responded the King, wearily. “With any luck, we will soon have young Henry’s response and this bitter suspense will be at an end. I wish to have the death of my young nephew behind me.”

Ed quirked a glance towards him, chewing at his lip. Privately, he doubted that such an easy action would put Arthur Tudor’s ghost entirely to rest, but it was not worth saying aloud. “As do we all, Your Grace.” Ed swallowed hard, thought of his brother, moldering away in a prison cell. “As do we all.”

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CATHERINE OF ARAGON, QUEEN OF ENGLAND

Palace of Westminster, England

August 1521

Henry stabbed an angry finger through the air. “Desist in this intention at once; desist and it shall be quite forgotten.” His anger seemed to buzz throughout the room, alive as an electric current thundering from storm-dark skies. His wrath might have rattled smaller cages, but Catherine colored ruddy as her hair and clenched her jaw. No tempests had ever diverted her from her course, once set, and this one would do not worse.

“Do you command me?” she asked, balling her fists, hidden away in her skirts. Save for the pallor which overtook her, she struggled to remain outwardly calm. Whatever her fate here, she reminded herself, she would always be an 

Infanta

of Spain. “By what right do you make such demands? I am an 

Infanta

of Spain and you are no king of mine.”

Henry, too, was crimson and his eyes shifted towards Anne. The three of them were alone in the room, but it felt as though they were alone in all the world. Henry swallowed, took a step forward. His hands, she noted quickly, shook at his sides. “If ever you loved my brother,” he began, more softly, his voice level and controlled. “Do not do this to him.”

“No, do this to him?” whispered Catherine, her voice catching. She paused, collecting herself, clasped her hand to her chest. “I do nothing to him! I do all...all I do...I do for him!”

Henry’s lips curled into a sneer. He turned away, towards the door, paced that way, then came directly back. He held his hand out, pointing towards her, dropped it again, and Catherine saw his eyes were red now, too, red with unshed tears. “Do you know...” he stopped, swallowed hard, and
Catherine was aware that it was his tears he suppressed. “Do you know, before he proposed, Arthur came to me. He asked for sense.” Henry swallowed again, his voice cracked when he spoke again. “He asked for sense and got none. I was the fool, oh yes, but you were the harlot to lead him upon a merry trail! I told him what I thought of you, but he dismissed it out of hand and I trusted in him. I ought to have insisted, for he admitted he could not see the situation clearly. God, I am a fool!”

“Henry!” hissed Anne, clutching at her pregnant belly. “Peace! How can you say such things?”

Tears clogged Catherine’s vision, but she snarled. “Do not dance about it! If you’ve aught to say to me, take manly courage and speak the words at once! What do you imagine of my conduct? ‘Harlot?’” she shook her head. “If ever I have so been, it was in ignorance and only for the love of your brother! How can you say so as if it was he who had been betrayed?”

Henry took a step towards her, again. Tears leaked from his eyes but he wiped at them impatiently. “Let me then speak freely, if you so command. When my brother asked my opinion of you as a potential bride, I told him that it was an unfit match. I spoke to him of those hateful things you had said to me when I was your prisoner in the Tower. Shall I remind you how you told me that, our father having been driven out of England, Arthur had lost his status as prince, as though the divine right of kings were not an immutable quality? And that, having lost his right, Arthur had therefore lost you as well? Yes, I say that you are faithless and now, being so set to return to the Usurper, your true colors are proven! When you thought Arthur might win this war, you seduced him and now that you have lost that faith, you return to the Usurper, selling yourself to the highest bidder! Even as you carry my brother’s only child. Yes! I name you harlot!”

Catherine felt cold, the tips of her fingers running like ice that went up and up and up across her hands, her arms, her chest, up to her head and grappling around her heart. She felt as though she might sway upon her feet, but she held steady by force of will. Now was no time to show weakness, but her eyes betrayed her. Tears leaked down her cheeks. “So this is what you think of me?” She shook her head slowly, glanced away towards the empty hearth as though there she might find answers amongst the blackened heaps of ash. Her hands fistion to tight balls at her side and fiercely she met Henry, gaze for gaze. “Hear this, my one-time brother, hear this and understand. All my life, all my actions have been in the interest of my country. Can you say the same? Yes, I have wept and bled and sweated for the good of my country, sacrificing all my own wants and desires. I see why this confuses you, as it is a woman’s tragic course to, perforce, shift allegiance when she weds: as a maiden, I was for Spain; later as Queen of France for that place; and later as Richard’s wife and then Arthur’s for two separate Englands; but always, always, I have remained mindful of my duty. It was duty that sundered me from Arthur as implacably as now does death, and it was duty that once forbade me from recognizing Arthur’s claim in which, in my heart, I have always believed.

“Can you not see? Can you truly not see that what I do, now…” Catherine choked, looked away, turned back. “It is only now, after all that has been, that I play the traitor. It is only now that I choose my own wants and desires over the good of my nation and over my Christian oaths as wife and as Queen. I damn myself, now, for love of Arthur, betraying my true husband not once, in lying with another man, but now twice, in raising another’s child as Richard’s own! But I know that God shall forgive me for it was He who set me upon this path and it is He who has chosen me as the vessel by which to set all to rights. And, besides, I know Richard. He will demand me in trade for Arthur’s generals and you need these generals to win your war. Without them, and with Arthur’s army dispersed, you’ve before you a sorry state. Do you not see? I can win this war for you and I can convince Richard that this child is his, yes, as my condition does not yet show and, when the time comes, I can further convince him that the child has merely come early and when my child is crowned…This way, Henry, whether you should win the fight or he does, Arthur shall be avenged, for his blood shall sit the throne of England, for good and all, whatever happens, and then, at last, his weary soul shall know peace.”
Blank-faced with shock, Anne and Henry both stared at her and Catherine gulped a fresh breath, steadied herself as she glanced away. Finally, Anne came forward. “There is another facet to this question,” Anne began, slowly. “It is a fact that both you and the late King Arthur believed you were married under God at the time that your child was…conceived.” Anne bit her lip. “It is just possible, then, that the Church might uphold the legitimacy of your child as a child born in good faith.”

Catherine felt her gut leap and swallowed hard. “In another case, perhaps, but…my true husband still lives!”

Anne shook her head. “Lies brought you – brought us all – to the conclusion that he was dead!”

“We made no effort to verify these claims, foolishly accepting them at face value, instead.”

Anne shrugged. “It was a time of war. There was no viable means of confirming his death save by trusting in the word of one you knew and who had, you so believed, no cause to lie on this point.”

“And if that is the case,” began Henry, softly yet forcefully. “If the Church should uphold the legitimacy of your child then, he being a boy, it is your child, as Arthur’s son, who is the rightful King of England and not I.”

“And if she is a girl,” pressed Anne. “Then still she remains a Princess of England, true and declared. In fact, the law is unclear…she may even be King of England in her own right, still. Is it not worth suing the Pope for legitimacy?”

“There is no guarantee it shall be granted…In fact,” added Catherine. “The probability is that the outcome would be unfavorable to our cause, and our child would be ruled illegitimate. Particularly with its father being unable to testify one way or another and the marriage having taken place so hastily, it may appear that the wedding was undertaken as a precaution to shield us from whispers when the condition of pregnancy was discovered. Besides, even if the Pope did rule in our favor, the child’s reputation would be forever besmirched for there would always be those who would not recognize the Pope’s ruling. There would always be questions and I think we may all agree that questionable heritage in a potential monarch is the last thing England needs as now. No, the route I have outlined is surer. If the child is seen as Richard’s, there can be none to question the child’s rights.”

Henry’s face looked almost blue with emotion and he turned quickly away from her. His whole form seemed to skip with emotion, as though he trembled, though he did not move, not one inch. At last, Henry met her eye again. “Then, there is at the last this: though you claim that these actions you undertake are on Arthur’s behalf, know this: there is no horror to him greater than to think that his own child should be raised and believed to be the Usurper’s. In this action, you undertake to fulfill the worst dreads of Arthur’s spirit. All that was his by rights was stolen from him, in life, by Perkin Warbeck. Do not give the Usurper, too, Arthur’s own child in death. Do not do that to him. Please, on Arthur’s behalf, I beg you,” and tears filled his eyes and ran down his cheeks. Henry steepled his fingers as in prayer. “I beg you, do not take even his child from him.”

Catherine took a step back. Her heart gave a desperate shudder and her lips quivered. A sob escaped her. Hot tears poured down her face and she sat, suddenly, unexpectedly even to her, on the seat nearest her. Catherine clasped a hand to her mouth. “But I’ve no choice,” she wept into her hand. “There is no other option that would preserve honor…for us all. None.” Catherine buried her face in her hands.

She did not see the stern cast creep over Henry’s face. “Then hear this, Catherine of Aragon. Should you take this child away, I shall not own it, I shall not make any motion to the Pope to consider this child. If you take it away, you forfeit its rights and you forfeit its position of Arthur’s. If you are so
intent that it not be his, then it shall never be. I will not recognize your child as any blood of mine, for I can see only that there must be some other reason you wish to make this movement and, harlot that you are, suspicion whispers in my ear that perhaps there was another…perhaps this child was not my brother’s at all. Your precious honor will not stand and your child shall profit nothing of it. Do you understand?”

Catherine raised her eyes slowly to meet his. Henry towered above, his full height seemed to billow out around them all and Catherine felt now that she was in the midst of the storm, indeed. “If this is the threat you level now, I’ve a mind that you shall not prove true, should I stay. No, at last you’ve made up my mind for sure and certain. I shall not stay.”

Henry’s face was red and blotchy with rage and now he did tremble, indeed, but he turned slowly away. His voice was a shock of controlled emotion when he spoke to her, again, still turned away. “I shall not stop you. If you stay, you remain as my sister, but of your own free choice. If you leave… you, of your own volition, choose forever to be my enemy.”
Come Back

Chapter Summary

The month waned; a new one approached.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CATHARINE OF ARAGON, QUEEN OF ENGLAND

London, England
August 1521

Beneath her, the horse stepped lightly, but Catherine knew that would not last long. Soon, the journey would harden each step and bungle the spirit. Burying one hand in the horse’s mane, she gripped some of the hair, held onto it for comfort, thought inanely: Horses have no feeling of their hair. She could rip at it, yank with mad fury, and the creature would never notice. Catherine felt a flash of envy and laughed. She wished beyond hope that she, too, could not feel a thing.

Some of Anne’s parting words whispered through her weary mind: ‘Make no such wishes, my friend. It is a fearsome thing, and of no comfort, to feel numb, to feel truly numb.’

But it was true. For all that Catherine wished not to feel what her last parting with Anne and Henry had entailed, she did not entirely want to take leave of her pain. It was the mark, the cruel mark, of what she had once shared with Arthur, and she could not bear for all traces of it to be erased.

Henry’s words haunted her. ‘There is no horror to him greater than to think that his own child should be raised and believed to be the Usurper’s.’ Catherine shivered. It could not be so. Henry had grown up alongside Arthur, yes, but Arthur had told her all in his letters: laying bare his very soul to her. Oh, she knew well of his hatred and his anger and his sorrow…but no word had ever been made of his fears. This meant either that Henry had misread this perceived horror…or that Arthur, himself, had thought so little of it that it did not bear any telling and thus he, himself, had dismissed it. She could think of no other conclusion. In either case, Catherine could not think that these were the things he would wish carried out upon his death: the tolerance of his fears. No, no, the achievement of his goals would mean far more.

There was nothing else in this world Catherine could do for him. They’d had only one month of bliss, one month in all this turmoil, and so soon ended: one cruel month of bliss. All those years of longing, all those years of crushed hope, all those years…and all they’d wrung out of it was a single month. Catherine crushed the reins in her hand, bowing her head. All those years, and she could not even be seen to mourn. All those years and she was to be denied even the awful relief of tears. All those years…All those years and he was all she had ever wanted. No, this had to be done. There was no other way to bear it. Arthur was dead and she still living and now, now it was her duty to find a way to bear it. Catherine was sick to death of duty, of loss, of sorrow. Was one month’s time all the happiness she would ever squeeze out of life?

No, she told herself. No, she thought, a hand over her belly. There was one joy left that Arthur had given to her and, for both Arthur and the child, she would assure that their baby had all in this earthly life it could possibly want. She would care for it, slave for it, if need be…It was all that was left of its
father and she would not see his last opportunity wasted.

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RICHARD OF SHREWSBURY, KING OF ENGLAND
York, England
August 1521

“A letter from Her Grace, Queen Catherine!” came the announcement.

Richard hurried forward to receive it, snatching it from the bearer in eagerness. Concern rattled through his bones – How had she been treated? Was she well? Was she to be sent home, at last? – and hastily he broke the seal.

Hal spoke up after a minute, exchanging glances with Edmund de la Pole. In the weeks since Arthur’s murder, Hal was hardly ever seen with Dickon, his former bosom companion.

Distantly, Richard wondered what his heir was doing with his time, but Dickon was a subject he found painful, these days. He chose not to dwell upon it.

“What does it say?” asked Hal.

“Henry Tudor has released her. She was kept in fine condition, treated as a Princess of Spain, and bears no complaints against her captors. She is, even now, making preparations to come to us in exchange for the Tudor generals who we are to convey to London.”

Hal nodded, exchanging another glance with Ed. “And it is still your intent to release them, Your Grace?”

Richard looked up from the letter in surprise. “I said that I would. I want it seen to, at once.”

Hal nodded to Ed, who got up immediately and left to see to it. “I am glad,” replied Hal, at last. “We have, until now, met the Tudors only with injustice. If we are to win, that is not how it should be done.”

Richard bowed his head. “I am sorry for the things that…occurred while I was…indisposed. I am more sorry, still, for the killing, especially because I was here, then, though I knew nothing till it was too late. Can you imagine, Hal? I was here, but I knew nothing…and did nothing.”

Hal licked his lips. “Something can still be done.”

Richard felt the weight of his years, suddenly. Already his elder siblings had – all but one – died and he felt weary enough of the world to do so, but God had not yet called him. No, there was more still to do. Besides, his nation hung from a thread. He could not leave England like this…and Dickon as the future King in such an event. “I cannot strip Dickon of his rank. There is enough uncertainty of the succession as there is and such a crisis at such a time…our England would never survive. I’ve too many nephews and no sons of my own. Dickon is the only one of you with a clear hierarchy because he is the eldest son of my eldest sister.”

“No,” said Hal, very softly. “That was Arthur.”

Silence. Richard bowed his head, felt Lizzie’s arms around him, swaddling him in safety. ‘My own sweet one,’ she had whispered. Richard shook his head, dispelling the image. He continued. “Hal, we must think of England as a whole. To unloose Dickon from his high seat…His fall would topple us all. It would only lead to infighting which would utterly destroy our cause. I refuse to be the last
Plantagenet king. No, I will not let down my father that way. He fought long and hard to ensure that
the madness of the Lancastrians would die with them and England would find herself safely in other
hands. I cannot allow that dream of England’s to die.”

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HENRY TUDOR, KING OF ENGLAND
Palace of Westminster, England
August 1521

“So Catherine has gone,” observed Harry, casting a glance towards his wife.

“It need not have been so contentious,” pointed out Anne, softly. “The things we do in grief know
little of reason and I suspect Catherine must do something, now, to assuage her grief. Rather than
casting her out, we might have made of her an ally from within. But, then, as I say, the things we do
in grief know little of reason.”

She eyed him as if to say ‘You should know,’ but Harry glanced away as if to dispel the notion. He
did not want his grief, he rejected it, but the cold shiver of it ran up his spine notwithstanding. Harry
ran his two fingers along a comb on the table, idly. His tone was gentle when he at last spoke. “What
griefs have you known, Nan?”

He did not need to look at her to feel her sweet, sad smile. She came to him from behind him, leaned
her hands and her head against his back. “The usual griefs, I suppose,” she murmured. “We buried a
number of my little brothers and sisters when I was a child and then there were the griefs of parting:
leaving behind England for so many years; leaving behind Burgundy and all I’d known there,
knowing I should never see them again; its twin grief in France…loosing you, if only for a little
while…”

“Ah, Nan,” he murmured, turning to take her in his arms. He pressed his brow to hers. “I pray you
never know more sorrows than these.” He raised one hand to touch her soft cheek, leaned back just
enough to look into her eyes. “And there is this: you need never be parted from me again.”

Anne smiled slowly, returning the caress. “My very sweetest blessing.” She paused. “But, Henry,
you must know…there will be more sorrows for me. That is a part of living. It is only, when we
suffer, that we must focus on the fact that there will be more joys as well. That is also a part of living.
You…remember that, don’t you?” She smiled, resting her head against his broad chest and Harry
sighed. Holding her was the only joy he knew.

She grew heavier, heavier in his arms. “Nan, what-?” She nearly tumbled, though he clasped her,
head lolling suddenly back, her limbs going limp. “Anne!” he shouted. “Anne!”

The doors burst open, servants rushed in.

“So summon the physician!” bellowed Henry, lifting his wife into his arms.

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ANNE BOLEYN, QUEEN OF ENGLAND
Palace of Westminster, England
August 1521

Anne opened her eyes, but the world was still dark around her. She blinked a few times, hoping that
she could push back the darkness in favor of streaming daylight. Hadn’t it been daylight, when…
when…She frowned in confusion. “Where-”
“Nan?” It was Henry’s eager voice and, suddenly, his face came into view, leaning over her, touching her face. He grinned despite tears which now leaked from his eyes. “Oh, Anne,” he whispered, kissing her. “God, God, oh, Anne!”

“Henry, what happened?”

He shook his head. “You collapsed. Fortunately, I was holding you so you did not fall, but…God, I’ve scarcely known such terror. I called for the doctor and he told me all. Anne, how could you hide from me your hardship, this past month? How…and why? Are we not wed? Do we not now share all? God,” he added, touching her hair. “I-I thought I would loose you and I…I…Oh, Anne,” he buried his face in her breast and Anne kissed the top of his head; realized she was crying, too.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I’m so sorry! It’s only with…with Arthur…I thought it would be best not to worry you.”

He looked up to laugh bitterly. “I may fairly say that if that was your aim, you failed most spectacularly.”

“You bear so much already. I wanted to bear this for you.”

He shook his head. “Anne, don’t you see? We are together, now. We may at last bear all together. I needs must extract an oath from you, now, sweetheart: swear to me that you will never again conceal something like this from me, no matter your intentions. Swear it, Anne!”

She nodded. “I swear, Henry. I swear.”

He pressed his brow to hers, running his fingertips across her cheek. “God, I thought…I thought I was loosing you, Nan. I couldn’t…I couldn’t bear it. I could never bear to loose you. I couldn’t. God, if it came to it, I pray God we may loose the child if God but spare your life, I-”

“How dare you say so!” Taking his hand, she put it on her belly. “This child is not some thing, it is us: you and I, bound forever. Whatever may happen to either of us – and I hope, especially as my time approaches, you bear this is mind – our child is our eternity together.” Reaching up, she touched his face. “Never hope against our baby. Promise me?”

Henry leaned forward to kiss her again, Anne’s fingers winding through his hair. “I love you most tenderly, Anne. Please, never scare me like that again.”

“Speaking of which,” added Anne, glancing around. She found she was in a bed, Henry lying beside her, but the room was so very dark, it proved nearly impossible to discern any more than that.

“Where are we?”

“I know there is usually a ceremony, but under the circumstances…the doctor advised you go into confinement, immediately. You are not to leave this bed until the baby has come.”

Anne gaped, first at him, then at the dimly lit room. “But…but…” she swallowed. “What are you doing here?”

“I could not leave you until I saw you aright, my own sweetheart. Do you blame me?”

She chuckled. “Of course not. Truth be told…I’m glad you’re here. It is only, men are not permitted in the confinement chamber, save physicians. Who let you in?”

It was Henry’s turn to laugh. “You ask the wrong question, sweetheart. Who was going to keep me out?”
Catherine of Aragon, Queen of England
Leicester, England
August 1521

The month waned; a new one approached. Catherine wished she could stop it, put an end to the change of days. She could not welcome the coming of anything new: a day, a month, a year that Arthur would never see. She traveled onward.

Ahead of her, a member of her entourage pointed. “What’s that?”

Catherine, along with the entire assembly, craned her neck forward as though the half inch would transmute the movement at the horizon into something they might easily recognize. A few miles told the tale. It proved a funerary procession: headed towards London from the North. Catherine’s gut clenched, she gripped her reins till her knuckles turned white.

No, she thought. It cannot be his. But whose else could it be? She was not sure whether she wanted, desperately, for it to be Arthur’s body traveling towards her…or whether, desperately, she hoped it was not. How terrible to meet him again this way; how terrible never to meet him, again.

It proved to be his. Richard had seen the procession honored as might be the funeral of a Prince of England, complete with honor and a few chief mourners. Catherine stared blankly as it approached, ordered her own entourage to halt. She was glad of the black riding mantle she had chosen. There was no other color that would suit. Dismounting, she walked the few more paces towards the procession which was, too, halting.

Her herald darted forward, singing out her titles, but Catherine hardly heard, staring at the sad caravan beyond. A hearse carried his remains, sealed in a lead coffin. The carriage was drawn by horses hung with black cloth. Catherine felt trancelike as she strode forward, reaching out to touch the soft muzzle of the nearest horse, the soft fabric that covered the poor beast.

“How hot you must be,” she said to the horse, run a hand beneath the fabric. “How awful, to further burden so sad a charge.” She glanced towards the hearse, felt a nauseous tug. She wanted to bury her face in the horse’s mane. She wanted to fling open the coffin lid and hurl herself inside with him. She wanted to wake and find this all an awful dream. She could feel the stare of Richard’s curious men upon her, and Catherine shifted, turned towards the nearest one.

“Master, would you open the coffin for me? I’ve a wish to look upon the face of the man who so long tasked my husband the King.”

His mouth fell open, he stepped back, sweeping a bow. “Your Grace,” he said. “I’ve no desire to do other than fulfill Your Grace’s wishes, but the coffin is already sealed and I was given order by His Grace the King, himself, to open this for none other than Henry Tudor in London, should Master Tudor require sight of his brother as proof of his identity. I pray Your Grace forgive me…in any case, by now, I doubt there is much of the face to look upon, if you’ll pardon my saying so, leastwise as it appeared in life. It has been a very hot season, though I suppose the body was embalmed…” he went on talking, but Catherine felt sick. She did not hear.

Catherine nodded, walked past him towards the hearse. “Twilight nears,” she said, at last, turning towards both her party and this. “I suggest we all make camp here together. How do you tend the body at night?”

“Your Grace, we, uh, keep vigil as is proper. We set up a little tent around the hearse and we keep
watches with torches.”

Catherine nodded. “Very proper,” she commented. “I will watch with you…”

“Your-Your Grace, we keep watch all through the night by shifts. No one may sleep in the presence of the body.”

She nodded. “I will keep watch with you,” she repeated. “Now, pitch the tent. When it is done, I shall require some privacy. This man threw all our lives into disarray. I’ve need a few moments with him alone.”

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The world was quiet, but she could hear at a distance the soft hum of conversation by the campfire. She was alone in the tent, with a torch. Arthur’s coffin, she saw, had been draped with a tight black fabric. She reached out, her hand hovering over the top. She thought of him, sealed up inside, trapped within those close walls. Lead, heavy as gold. Her hand hovered above the cloth, trembling.

“All those letters,” she whispered. “All those letters you wrote me…I would to God I’d answered every one.” She took a step closer to the coffin, her fingers touched the cloth, balled around it. “Oh, God, Arthur, Arthur.” Catherine swallowed hard, but she couldn’t stop the flood. “I supposed, after you were cast out of England, you’d stop writing.” She choked out a laugh. “You’re so…so stubborn. Even when I stopped responding, you wrote me every week, remember?” She placed both hands on the coffin, leaning against it, bowed her head. “Oh, I wish to God that He’d send you now to me, just once…send you to me just to…” her brow against the sarcophagus. Hot tears ran down her cheeks. “Why must we ever part? God, we longed for each other for twenty years, twenty years, but God kept us apart…only to sunder us. Why? What did we do wrong? We did not know! We did not know our sin! Why must we be so cruelly punished? Why?” She sniffled, wiped her nose against the back of her hand.

“I want nothing more than to hear your voice, feel the touch of your hand. You know, my heart is constantly searching for you,” she added, laughing. “I half-imagine I see you all the time, only to realize it was but a shadow or a thought or some such thing, and the memory rushes over me again, again…that…that you’re gone. Arthur, there is nothing more painful than having to remember the one you love is dead, because your mind fools you. It rebels. It sees you in everything. I cannot escape it. You are present everywhere I go.” She shook her head. “Why did you leave me, Arthur? Why? And why did I not stop you? I could have! I could have stopped you, I’m sure. Instead, I sent you out with an impossible promise. Slay all our enemies? God, if I could take it back, I would. Please, please, please come back! Come back, Arthur, come back and tell me…tell me it was not my fault! Please, God, tell me you did not fall in the attempt to fulfill the oath you made me! Please, just…please, come back, even if to accuse me, even if to harm me, to haunt me if you must…take any form, just please…come back.”

Beneath the ebony cloth, the coffin was cold and Catherine groaned, regaining her own footing. She stood still for a moment, head bowed. “Was it true, Arthur? Tell me, was it true, what Henry said? That…that…our…” The breath hitched in her throat again and Catherine reached out again to the coffin. She heard a strangled sound, felt it bubbling in her chest. “God, you never…you didn’t know…I wanted to be sure before I told you. Sure. Foolish thought! Of what, in this life, can we ever be sure? Is there anything? Anything at all? She ran her hand up the coffin, thought of how it felt to touch his chest. Her eyes ached with streaming tears and her lungs, her chest entire, was sore for weeping. She could hardly draw her breath. “Oh, Arthur, let me tell you, then, now, late though it is. I carry a child, I carry-” she broke off with tears again.

“Tell me what you want me to do, Arthur, only give me a sign. I’d do anything for you, anything at
"all. I have,” she pressed her fist to her heart. “I have this awful fear, Arthur. Please help me, please help me bear it.” She curled her fist around the fabric over the spot where his heart must lie. “Please help me. There is no greater horror than to think that you…to think you died in vain. If you must die, my love, let it mean everything, let it change this world.” She shook her head. “But to be…to be murdered…I cannot bear it and I do not believe that you could, either. God knows you’d give your life willingly, if need be, but to die for nothing, no! I will set it to rights, my love, I swear to you. I will see your dearest wish fulfilled. I will restore justice and you will, at last, be able to rest easy. The House of Tudor will reign again, my love, I swear it.”

Chapter End Notes

According to Dr. Eric Ives, “For some time after the coronation, reports of [Anne’s] health continued to be good, but there is reason to believe that the advanced stages of the pregnancy were, in fact, difficult. Henry, it was later said, was at his wits’ end, even hoping for a miscarriage if it would save Anne’s life.” Credit to @boleynqueens for helping me find the source for this! <33333
Weariness seemed to cover him like a blanket, his bones aching with it.

HENRY TUDOR, KING OF ENGLAND

Palace of Westminster, England

September 1521

He could not bear to hear Anne’s agony, knowing there was nothing he could do about it, but even now he could think of nothing else. At first, he’d wanted to be in the chamber with her, for the birth, but the physicians and midwives had stressed some danger and, thus, he had taken his leave. Harry had come here and sent everyone out; he had come here and shut the doors behind him. Harry paced, first this way then that. The day was long, longer than any day had been until now. Under other circumstances he would seek distraction, but there was none to be had while the nation was at war with itself and, besides, he wanted to be close…close in case he was needed, close in case something happened. He’d taken to his brother’s war room – what could be more distracting? – far from his wife’s chamber, intent upon the plot of war, but no inspiration came.

His brother’s things were still where last he had lain them: tidy and awaiting his return faithfully. Arthur’s pen sat in stillness, his inkwell beside it, with sheaves of paper stacked tidily to one side. Harry drew nearer to the little desk. Impulsively, he plucked up the first blank sheet of paper…only to see that a half-begun letter had been penned beneath it. Putting the first page aside, Harry half-stumbled into the chair.

To the most illustrious and excellent princess, Elizabeth the Queen, Queen Dowager of England, Princess of Wales, &c., my most entirely beloved mother, read the opening salvo: directions for the messenger who was meant to bear this letter to France, a last communication that would never be between mother and son. Harry ran his finger along the neat-and-spiky script of his brother. He did not realize until that moment that his hand was shaking.

He read past this, to the words meant for their mother. They were few: the letter unfinished, and Henry paused, sucking in a deep breath, before he began to read.

I have read the most sweet letters of yours lately given to me with feelings of great joy that Our Lord Savior sent me to be your son and shall soon grant that I may be with you again, soon. I write now with faith that in your kind regard for myself, you shall overlook the dreadful tardiness with which I respond, putting the question of my unfulfilled letters to my conscience and your understanding with a loving heart. Duty has been much on my mind of late, barring the dear correspondence with yourself, and giving rise to many questions as muddle the mind and rile the spirit. I cannot tell you what an earnest desire I feel to see you, to put to you the confusion that falls over me; for so long as I have been king, never before these months have ever I ruled. Guided by the wise example set down by your worthy self and by my memory-reverenced father, I make my way, but yearn for your
guidance in more immediacy. It is as though I am now cast off, set aside, a figure alone upon an isle
with only those to command and none as yet to share, and ever hesitating to show weakness to any
in my midst. Yet, I hesitate to summon you across the waters, tearing you from the safety of our
friend in France, and the safe place you secure for us all there, failing in these trials at home, when
all is not yet secured here.

The letter, as such, ended there. Beneath it, the paper bore scribbled notes, also in Arthur’s hand, but
Harry decided to save them for another day. He had not the heart to have nothing new left of
Arthur’s, just now. The body of the letter, itself, had stirred enough. Harry stared blankly at the proof
of Arthur’s uncertainty, wavering over the pamphlet as he might over a liar. He glanced towards the
date, saw that this was before Arthur’s conquest of London, and placed a hand over the words.

“God grant,” whispered Harry. “My presence brought some relief.” He did not know whether to
think it may have done…or rather whether it may have increased the burden. Arthur had seemed
over burdened, to be sure, but he had in his possession now proof that his feelings had been
otherwise.

Harry buried his face in his hands. Weariness seemed to cover him like a blanket, his bones aching
with it. He longed to weep, a weary sort of weeping, but found he had no tears left. Sad, yes, but he
found a queer comfort in thinking that, well as he had concealed it, Arthur had been unsure as well.
Worse, Arthur had also been lonely, but Harry had been spared that. He had Anne.

Jumping up again, Harry leaned against the desk. He had Anne, yes, but Anne was wailing on the
other side of the palace, now, and after her, there was nothing and no one. And it was she who had
given him the advice: all or nothing. He turned away from the letter, paused, and seized up the blank
page. To Her Grace, Elizabeth the Queen, most wise and honorable lady…

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RICHARD DE LA POLE, DUKE OF SUFFOLK
York, England
September 1521

“Hold,” said one of the guards, placing his palm upon Richie’s chest as he tried to pass.

“I was told I was free to go,” objected Richie.

“His Grace the King desires a word with you first.”

Minutes later, Richie found himself ushered up atop the great walls that rounded the City of York.
Suspiciously, he cast his glance around. There was no one there, save the guards: not his brother or
any lord or peasant, and certainly not the Usurper. Richie glanced surreptitiously over the side of the
wall, to the long, long drop below.

Do they mean to throw me off? he wondered, shifting his gaze towards the guards, gripping their
spears tautly. Perhaps Arthur’s murder had not, indeed, been an action of passion, but rather all part
of a plot to cripple the Tudor army by being rid of its more experienced captains. Richie swallowed
hard, feeling his throat constrict. It was a far fall from where he stood to the ground. If he were lucky,
he would survive though much of his body would be broken. If he were not lucky…

“Richie,” sang out a familiar voice.

He turned quickly to spot the Usurper. The tightness of his throat died off slowly, but his heart’s pace
eased not a beat. “Cousin,” he greeted, impulsively.
“Ahh,” murmured Richard, nodding. “So you do recognize me, for what relation can Perkin Warbeck, if I am he, be of yours: nephew of not one but two kings.”

Richie’s teeth set and he glanced irritably away. The trees within the city gates were turning to rich crimson and deep orange, their leaves flaking off slowly, and some little memory reminded him that this time of year was Arthur’s: it had seen the dawn of his life and now summer had claimed his early winter: snatched away in the peak of life. “I trust you will forgive the habit,” he said at last, glancing back to him.

Richard’s face was a picture of misery. “What was it I did to loose your faith, cousin? Your friendship? It has been you, after all, who has been so instrumental in swaying victory towards the Tudors, besides my late nephew, Arthur, himself. How ever did I so offend?”

Richie shifted, uncomfortably. Sudden guilt stole into his cheeks, burning his face, and he wished, suddenly, for his uncomfortable little cell. There, at least, there had been no difficult questions. He felt full, uncomfortably full, in his chest, as though all his organs were stuffed there and his lungs could not expand enough to give him breath. Truth, he thought. It can be now only the truth. Richie licked his too-dry lips. He felt emptied out and filled up, at once, like used-up, discarded fabric stitched sloppily together and stuffed to make a hideous doll, but he was hot too, hot with rage that swarmed his mouth and lips and eyes. “Why, it was you who doubted in us,” he began, slowly, softly. It was strange to say these words at last aloud, as if he’d rehearsed a thousand times but only ever as an understudy in some great play, with no expectation that, now, upon this day, he would be called upon to perform them on stage. “Why else did you steal away from my brother his duchy, awarded otherwise in faith and in blood, merely to reduce him in the sight of all? It was meanly done! And why, with so little air of trust, did you summon us – and none other of your kin – to make homage before you as though already we had faltered? When you showed yourself to have no faith in us, I realized that we could have none in you, for already you had judged us and found us wanting. And why, why was it ever the case that you trusted in the discretion of your nephew, Dickon, where never in ours? It was your doubt that lost me. I confess, I am proud and loathe to be humbled, but moreso, to be doubted. Do you, now, feel the pang of my loss? I assure you, I once felt dearly the loss of your trust.”

Richard swallowed hard. The air hovered between them, hot and heavy with the last breath of summer, as the two Richards gazed at one another earnestly. “So,” began the Richard of Shrewsbury. “Had I never doubted you, I should never have lost you?”

It was Richie’s turn to swallow hard. His mouth was dry, dry as the heat, and he wished he could summon the words. But they were simple, really, simple and concise, and Richie’s smile was sad. “You were the king and cousin I’d loved. I would have died for you. Now…perhaps I may die for another.”

“If I were publicly to apologize, if I were to restore your brother’s dukedom, perhaps even to give one to you in your own right…might that sway you?”

Richie laughed, a humorless sound that escaped into the arid breeze between them, and he shook his head dispiritedly. “I ask you, my one-time brother, are you so able? Dare you take any tack that undermines your own judgment or authority?”

Richard was quiet, quiet and still. The day turned slowly towards dusk.

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MARY CAREY, LADY TO QUEEN ANNE OF ENGLAND
Palace of Westminster, England
“One, two, three, four, five…” Anne counted the tiny fingers again, feeling their softness against her own. “Can you believe it?” asked Anne, angling her expression towards her sister. “My own daughter! God knows she is the most beautiful angel I have ever beheld!”

Mary smiled softly, sinking onto the bedside, dipping her brow affectionately against her sister’s. “She is a miracle,” agreed Mary, extending her pinky finger for the baby to grip, which she did with great alacrity, tiny fist wrapping around the digit and earnestly pulling it into her gummy mouth. Mary chuckled. “A little explorer, this one. Minutes old and already she wants to know and understand all the world!”

Anne giggled, an exhausted sound, a happy sound. “Like her father.”

Mary nodded. “Like her mother, too, I daresay,” she added, planting a kiss on Anne’s temple. Reaching towards the dish of warm water one of the maids brought, Mary dipped a soft cloth in it, dabbing at Anne’s brow. “Now, speaking of the father, let us clean you up a bit before he arrives, hm? Your labor is past: let us now leave it entirely behind.”

Wearily, Anne nodded. “What do you think he will say, Mary? What a thing, to meet our child, at last! How excited he must be.”

“And worried, too,” commented Mary, softly. “These months have not been easy for you, though I daresay, the delivery went as well as might be expected, praise God.”

Anne turned quiet as Mary gently sopped at her brow, whisking away the sweat that beaded it. “Do you think He watches over us, Mary, even now? I think Henry has a fear He abandoned us when He stole Arthur up to him, but maybe…maybe there’s a plan to all of this, maybe…”

Clearing her throat, Mary paused, her hand stilled in its motion. It seemed a strange thing to think of Arthur, at once stoic and vital in her mind’s eye, and so suddenly, so unceremoniously dead. Murdered. Anne caught her eye and Mary pushed herself to respond with a reassuring smile. Reaching out, gently, she passed an affectionate thumb over the baby’s tender cheek. “Of course,” she whispered. “Of course there is.”

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HENRY TUDOR, KING OF ENGLAND
Palace of Westminster, England
September 1521

His wife was propped up by a legion of pillows, chatting amiably with her sister. The bedding was all of white and her robe white and the little bundle in her arms arrayed in white, too, till Anne looked the part of an angel fluttering through the clouds and Harry paused in the door to drink in the scene. He had not been seen yet and he felt as though to interrupt the moment might be to shatter its tranquility. Anne was pale, paler than ever before, but upon her cheeks was a kiss of scarlet from exertion, and her eyes shone with a bright light, contented and excited. His heart twirled with his lungs and his ribs and his gut fluttered gently. Anne’s voice was soft but exuberant and her laugh tinkled gently as she cooed over the bundle in her arms.

Harry drifted forward, as if drawn on wheels, the equilibrium of the scene summoning him into its heart, and he was down on his knees at her side before he knew he’d entered the room at all.

“Henry!” cried Anne, her face brightening with a grin as tears came into her eyes.
“Oh, Nan, my own sweetheart,” he murmured. He felt half-scared to touch her, now, as though she were a delicate thing he might shatter in his grasp, but he could not resist, tenderly wrapping his arms around her, gingerly putting his lips to her cheek, her brow, her nose. “My own one, my darling! Anne, Anne!”

Her laughter was warm and she pecked a kiss to his nose. “Will you not look upon our child?”

He felt the bundle pressed into his arms and gasped at the tiny weight, moving as Anne instructed to support the little head. Two huge eyes dominated the diminutive face and the little lips pulled back as though in a smile as two little fists reached upwards in curiosity.

“We have a daughter, Henry,” said Anne, softly, very softly.

His mouth and throat and ribs felt full and his eyes seemed to gush with the fullness. He nodded, blinking to clear his vision. “Oh, God, is she not the most beautiful daughter ever born to man and woman?” He laughed, turning to Anne. “Nan, what shall we call her?”

“Our mothers share a name, do they not? Let us call her Elizabeth.”

Chapter End Notes

Some notes!

The name of the chapter, 'my God is an oath' is the meaning of the name Elizabeth, hence that is what I called the chapter ;D

Arthur's letter is based loosely on one of his alleged surviving letters which you can read here: http://www.tudorsdynasty.com/prince-arthur-katherine-aragon/ Note that Arthur wrote to Catalina in Latin and therefore that this text is a translation.

As a reminder, since its been some time since I've referenced it!, Richard de la Pole and Richard of Shrewsbury were cousins, as de la Pole's mother, Elizabeth, was the sister of Edward IV. As a result, Richard de la Pole was the nephew of two kings: Edward IV and Richard III, which is what Richard references in the chapter.

Lastly, Elizabeth I was born at approximately 3pm on September 7, 1533. Obv, our timeline is v different here, so she was born in 1521, but everything else I kept as it would have been. Please ignore along with me the basic biological fact that any child born at a different time would, in fact, be a sibling, and enjoy w me this little fantasy that it might be she ;DDD
Harry shifted his gaze, glanced out at the crimson and gold leaves wafting towards the ground.

HENRY TUDOR, KING OF ENGLAND
Palace of Westminster, England
_Sep 1521_

His hands were folded behind his back as Harry stared out the window, gazing into nothingness. Cardinal Wolsey was speaking behind him, man of God, speaking and speaking and speaking. Carefully, Harry watched him in the reflection on the window, watched the motion of his lips; the gesture of his ringed hands. A clever man, a capable man. A man of God.

Harry shifted his gaze, glanced out at the crimson and gold leaves wafting towards the ground. Just like his own little daughter, Arthur had been born in this month. How odd, it seemed to Harry, how odd and how fateful it should be that Arthur was stolen away a month before, only to receive Elizabeth at his very time of coming into the world.

Harry held up his hand, abruptly. Abruptly, the Cardinal fell silent. Turning, Harry faced him with a smile. “Your Eminence,” he began, half-grimace, half-smile. “I recently recalled something pertaining to your good self. Would you be interested to hear it?”

Wolsey licked his lips. His eyes narrowed and he folded one hand into the other. “Of course,” he said. Belatedly, he added, “Your Grace.”

Harry felt a slim smile thin his own lips. He stepped towards the Cardinal deliberately, watching his expression. “It occurred to me, you see,” began Harry, running his two fingers along the edge of the nearby tabletop. Its grain was clear, though smoothed with use, and it occurred to Harry that people were quite the opposite. He tapped his two fingers against it, glanced up to Wolsey again with that pensive smile. “Yes, it occurred to me that you intercepted a letter from the Usurper, hm?” He met Wolsey’s eyes, held them. Here was an intelligence man, this man of God, but was he true? The smile died on Harry’s frozen lips. “You presented this letter to my brother before he went to his death.” His voice was a snap; his eyes a trap. Harry leaned forward, baring his teeth. “Where did you get it?”

Wolsey dropped to his knees, steepling his hands as in prayer and Harry eyed him, jaw set. “Your Grace,” pleaded the red priest. “Your Grace, pray-”

“No,” growled Harry. “I’ve told you what I wish to know. Tell me.”

“It-it was sent to me through secret channels, Your Grace…as I explained to His Grace the late King Arthur, it was sent from Dickon of Gloucester-”

“But where did you get it?” Harry swallowed hard, his eyes focusing on Wolsey’s. “You see, my late brother, of blessed memory, intimated to me the contents of this letter. He said that it was a call for aid but, as we now know, Dickon of Gloucester already knew help to be on the way…I’ve a
notion that it was a ploy, this letter, meant to lure my brother to York, hm? And if that is so, well, where did the ruse begin, I wonder?” Harry tilted his head, peering down from his height at the priest still on his knees. “What think you, Eminence? Who devised the plot that murdered my brother? Was it Dickon? Was it you? Was it someone in between? Tell me, now, priest, who conceived this letter? Be honest, Your Eminence. I do not feel gentle.”

“Your, your brother, the King,” bit out Wolsey. “He promised me…he said that he would not lay a finger upon a man of God.”

Harry turned slowly away. Outside, the heavens had turned dark; rain thundered from the skies. “My brother is dead.”

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GEORGE BOLEYN
Palace of Westminster, England
September 1521

George’s favorite season was the summer, which made this change of seasons bittersweet for him most years. This year was different. Elizabeth was tiny, tinier than he’d expected somehow, and he broke into a grin as she vainly swatted at his hands, curious to catch them and investigate.

“She’s very persistent, isn’t she?” he remarked, cocking a brow at his sister. “Rather like her mother, no?”

That felt unreal. Anne was a mother, his sister, a mother! Naturally, he’d had time to prepare, had been with her for a portion of her pregnancy, but it still seemed unreal. But here she was, little Elizabeth, with a ruddy tuft of silky curls atop her head, and a surprisingly vice-like grip for a newborn. George quirked another grin. Also like her mother, he thought, affectionately.

“I’m glad she’s tenacious,” said Anne. “She may need it. We women most always do and, it seems, none more so than royal women.”

“Is the crown then already so burdensome?”

A glance of mischief suffused his sister’s features. “It is when its shared with our Elizabeth’s father,” she said in a tone half-teasing; relented almost instantly. “It’s not the crown, as yet, so much as the natural sorrows of life.”

“The late King Arthur?”

Anne nodded. “But I think Elizabeth is a balm, at least.”

Leaning forward, George kissed his sister’s brow. “As is, I am sure, Elizabeth’s mother.”

She squeezed his hand and continued. “Henry has sent for his mother and sisters. I’m glad. I hardly know how to console him, but in truth, I hardly knew Arthur and, in my experience, grief is best shared with…well, those who share in the grief.”

George nodded slowly. “I’ve no doubts that will be a fine thing for His Grace the King…but how shall it be for you?”

“Oh, no fears on that count, fortunately,” replied Anne. “You forget, I met with them in France and Henry’s mother, at least, quite approved me.”
“And his sisters?”

Anne paused. “Well, I’ve not had much experience of them, but what experience I have had has been affable enough.”

“These are glad tidings, indeed! I cannot tell you how it relieves me to see my sister so merrily situated. All this time, I’ve feared for you. I thought I’d never persuade our father to come here to you, but when we heard that your child was soon to be delivered, well, I made certain we did not tarry another moment. I regret, however, that we did not arrive in time for the birth, but I’m glad we’re here, now.”

“Bless you, George,” whispered Anne, kissing his cheek. “I could not be more delighted to have you here with me.”

“Yes,” replied George, lightly. “I am delightful.”

The chamber door opened abruptly and George swiveled to spot Henry entering hastily, only to stop in his tracks when he spotted George.

Quickly, George swept a bow. “Pray allow me to congratulate Your Grace on the birth of so beautiful a child. May Our Lord God in His charity send you many more.”

“Thank you,” replied Henry, nodding in acknowledgment. “Your well-wishes are most welcome, but, pray, as we are in private, do not address me so. Are we not now brothers? How like you your new little niece?”

George grinned. “Why, I believe she is the loveliest little maid that ever I have beheld. No doubt she shall break a dozen hearts.”

Henry laughed. “If she’s any trace of her mother’s spirit, I daresay she shall do much more damage than that.”

“Henry,” broke in Anne, softly. “What did he tell you?” Elizabeth was now asleep in her cradle and she leaned cozily over it, from her own bed, watching dreams roll across her daughter’s face.

“Who?” inquired George.

“Cardinal Wolsey,” replied Anne, running the pad of her finger delicately across Elizabeth’s soft cheek.

Henry opened his mouth to speak, glanced towards George, fell silent.

“There can be no harm in speaking freely before my brother,” pointed out Anne. “You may trust in him as you would in me. For myself, I’d trust him with my life.”

Henry’s smile was small. “A testament, indeed.”

“I may assure you,” George added, reaching into the cradle to take Elizabeth’s little hand in his own. “The House of Boleyn, such as it may be, has now a very vested interest in your triumphs. I can no more do you or yours harm than do so to myself and mine, for they are all now one and the same.”

Striding closer, Henry came to stand at the foot of the cradle, smiling towards his daughter. “Very well,” he replied, glancing between his wife and her brother as he spoke. “Wolsey told me that he received Dickon’s letter from a man of his called Thomas Cromwell. I’ve had both Cromwell and the good Cardinal placed under house arrest until such time as their loyalty may be more readily…”
discerned.”

Henry paused, “And as for you, George, I do believe it’s time I elevate you, in your own right, to the peerage. You are, after all, the brother to our Queen. How does Rochford strike you?”
A Princess Bride

Chapter Summary

“My brother trusted you with his life,” began Henry, softly. Richie’s throat felt suddenly close. Henry continued, “I can do no else than rely wholly upon his good judgment and upon your tireless faith to this, our good realm of England. That paired with your injury, and I can see only one errand for you, as now.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

RICHARD DE LA POLE, DUKE OF SUFFOLK
Windsor Castle, England
November 1521

Richie felt as though, within the span of these three months, he’d aged as many years or more. His arm, wounded in the Battle of York, screamed in its socket and his limbs felt lame and bendy, like a vegetable too long boiled, and no matter how many times he bathed, the dirt and grime of the road would not seem to wash off. He’d traveled nearly the length of England, again, but the first time it had been as with hope, his friends and companions at every side – now it was alone and in defeat. He’d been generously given a few days to sleep and to bathe and to recuperate, but now the new King had summoned him.

The truth was, Richie felt nervous. He’d not met Henry, in person – though he’d led Henry’s army when the then-Duke of York, himself, had been captured by the enemy. Richie had heard many reports: Henry was energetic; Henry was affable; Henry was generous…but he’d heard contrary reports as well: Henry was slothful; Henry was waspish; Henry was stingy. Richie fought to distill in his mind what Arthur, himself, had said of his brother; to leave behind mere rumors and conjecture. Arthur knew him; Arthur loved him. What had Arthur thought?

The doors at last opened and Richie was ushered into the Great Hall at Windsor. He’d been here, before, but it felt different, now, draped in reds where usually he’d seen it white: decorated with roses where once the emblem had been the sun. Still, the arched windows towered over him and the arched wooden ceiling stood in all its grandeur, sporting the coats-of-arms of hundreds upon hundreds of great English families. Richie tried not to crane his neck up as he passed beneath his own. He knew it was up there. That was enough. At the end of the long hall was the dais, and upon it, two throned figures. Henry, he thought. His brows contorted. But who is the lady? A French princess, surely, he thought. But why was such a fortuitous match not made more of by Arthur?

Pushing these thoughts aside, Richie dropped to his knees when he’d come near enough, only raising curious eyes towards the throne when addressed.

“Our dearest friend,” said a male voice, higher than he’d expected, and a large foot descended each step of the dais in turn. “Rise,” said the voice, offering Richie a hand. “We take no pleasure in seeing you upon your knees.”

Richie raised humbled eyes to the speaker. He saw Arthur in that face; yes, Arthur was present, but he was not so very like Arthur, either. Where Arthur’s eyes were Woodville green, these orbs were a
deep oceanic blue, and where Arthur had been tall, his brother seemed to soar; where Arthur had been thin, Henry bulged with muscle; where Arthur’s expression in such matters would be serious, Henry’s was jovial. Richie, who shared the Plantagenet penchant for height, got to his feet. Still, he looked up at Henry, this ‘little brother,’ as he’d often heard him called. Richie glanced down again, concealing a bemused grin.

The King spoke, again. “I suppose you have already met my wife, Anne the Queen.”

Richie’s brow contorted and he glanced up again, wracking his brain for a Princess Anne – were the potential Princesses already of age not Renée or Marguerite? His mind seemed to fizzle when he beheld her face. “I recall a cloaked maiden,” he began, half-dazed, as he gazed at her. “Passing letters by candlelight.”

The Queen chuckled, tilting her head to one side. “I recall her, as well, Your Grace.” Anne inclined her head. “But it has been long since last we met under such pretenses and I am a new woman, as you see. Well met, Your Grace, and welcome home.”

Henry winced. “Not for long, I fear.”

“Your Grace?” inquired Richie, urgently.

“My brother trusted you with his life,” began Henry, softly. Richie’s throat felt suddenly close.

Henry continued, “I can do no else than rely wholly upon his good judgment and upon your tireless faith to this, our good realm of England. That paired with your injury, and I can see only one errand for you, as now.”

“What errand is this, Your Grace?”

“My brother, the late King, penned a last letter to his mother, and I’ve decided to bring home all those good men of England abroad. My mother, the Queen Mother, and my sisters, the Princesses, will require someone to conduct them here. I wish to charge you with this most precious of errands, also entrusting to you my brother’s last letter to put into Her Grace, the Queen Mother’s own hands. How sounds this to you?”

“You…” Richie swallowed hard. “You wish me to go to France…to bring your family here? And to deliver a letter…from Arthur?”

“Yes,” replied Henry. “I can send no other than my most trusted man upon such an expedition as this, both for the honor of conducting my family, relaying my brother’s last message…and for another special matter.”

“Your Grace?”

Henry cleared his throat, glancing towards the Queen. Anne rose from her seat and walked towards them, remaining on the last step of the dais to give her a closer semblance to the height of the two men. “There is the matter,” began the Queen. “Of His Majesty, King François.”

Richie cleared his throat. “You wish me to treat with him on your behalf?”

“My father, the Earl of Wiltshire, and my brother, Lord Rochford, will join you. My father has long known His Most Christian Majesty and my brother,” she smiled softly. “Has a way with people. He will know how to smooth things over between all parties concerned.” She paused. “And, better yet, His Majesty will like him. Upon that you can rely.”

Henry wetted his lips. “It is our wish, you see, that a most glorious marriage be brokered between my
sister, the Princess Margaret, and whichever of His Majesty’s male relations as best suits him…or, if this match is not deemed suitable, a union between the Dauphin and our daughter, the Princess Elizabeth.”

“Your Grace,” began Richie, broke off.

“Go on,” instructed the King. “My brother trusted you. Please, speak freely.”

“As it please Your Grace,” replied Richie. “It is only…if you’ve a notion that a marriage between the Princess Margaret and someone of the French royal lineage may not be met with pleasure, why suggest it at all? Why not simply offer up…” he paused. He’d not heard of…whoever…He swallowed hard. Was Henry offering up a bastard to wed the future King of France?

Henry laughed, suddenly. “Ahh, I perceive the issue. Seeing as you so clearly had not heard of my felicitous nuptials, I doubt as you have heard of the celebrated birth of our daughter, these few months passed. You need not concern yourself: the which took place at the due time after the marriage.” He paused. “There are many reasons for approaching the French marriage this way, I may well assure you, but I shall leave it to Lord Rochford to explain. He is privy to all such deliberations between myself and the Queen, concerning the futures of both the Princess my sister and the Princess my daughter. I must know, first, do you accept this charge?”

Richie swept a bow. “Your Grace, I do.”

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GEORGE BOLEYN, VISCOUNT ROCHFORD
Windsor Castle, England
November 1521

“Oh, that,” laughed George, raising his glass to his lips. He had invited Richard, Duke of Suffolk, to sup with him, that they might become acquainted before the long voyage to France. Richie had put to him the question of why the Princess Margaret’s wedding was to preferred over that of the Princess Elizabeth. “The question is really twofold. The first part is a strategy; the second a failsafe. With a keen negotiator like His Most Christian Majesty of France, it is always best to have a superior fallback position, that he may feel that rather than coming to a compromise he has achieved a victory.”

“What do you mean?”

George laughed. “I suppose you’d best know the background. You see, when François sent Arthur across the water with all those ships and all those men, it was with the understanding that Arthur would wed a French princess and, thus, England would have a French Queen, thus sealing the alliance between the two nations. Failing that, it was Henry who was to wed a French princess. Given the recent tragedy coupled with the advent of my queenly sister,” George shrugged. “Neither option remains possible. Therefore, it is necessary that a…solution be found. Naturally, François may see the rise of my sister as a slight upon his French princess, but it’s a thing which cannot, now, be undone, so there’s paid to it. However, François’ precious pride and that of France must be preserved. England cannot now afford to affront the French. He will feel cheated when we arrive with the news of Henry’s previous marriage. He will feel cheated that he has no opportunity, now, to put a Queen of his own choosing upon the English throne. This is the certainty we face. That he feel this way is not ideal for England. After all, the French fight with us upon his pleasure and may at any moment, upon any whim be recalled. With the Scots having engaged in this battle on the opposite side-”
“It is absolutely critical we not lose the French,” supplied Richie, nodding.

“Particularly when it becomes evident that we wish to bring home all Henry VII’s old vassals, and even his family. François will feel England slipping between his fingers.”

Richie nodded, rubbed his chin. “How does withholding the Princess Elizabeth at all help at this? That is hardly a reasonable thing.”

George laughed. “Reason has little to do with it, I may assure you. It is any King’s most vulnerable aspect to which we must here appeal: emotion. François will be quite displeased, which will mean he will need to feel that he’s asserted a win, despite everything. And win, he shall, regardless.”

Richie frowned. “How will you achieve that?”

“As I achieve everything: artfully. Whatever happens, I will make François feel that he has wrung out of me the best deal he possibly could and that it is England who walks away with the…lesser part of the bargain. We must let him feel that he has out-maneuvered us and thus scored a victory for France. When François prevails over us, it is England who wins. Hence, the two-point strategy to present the King’s eldest sister, the daughter of King Henry VII, and once-intended Queen of Scots, as a prize for one of François’ relatives: a prize which also duly seals relations between the two nations rather prettily.”

“And if François is content with that arrangement?”

George shrugged, grinning. “So much the better for us, Your Grace. We shall never even breathe the name of the Princess Elizabeth in that context, should François prove amenable to the first option and England will profit for it.”

“Oh?”

George sighed. “While, of course, His Grace the King is optimistic of having many healthy children, the recent passage of the late King Arthur has proven nothing if not the impermanence of life. Until such time as a son is born to my sister, the Queen, little Princess Elizabeth remains the heiress of England, entire. Therefore, in the unlikely event that there should be no heirs male, England may find herself in the unsettling position of becoming the greatest dowry in all Christendom if Her Grace the Princess Elizabeth weds the Dauphin.”

Richie sucked in a deep breath. “I see. Surely, that…must be avoidable.”

George nodded. “Hence why we withhold the greater prize that is the Princess Elizabeth until such time as we see no other options. We hope it will not come to offering her, at all. If it does, however, already in England they have begun investigating certain laws and litigations that, it is to be hoped, would avoid England becoming but a French province in the event of such a marriage. I am confident it is doable, but it could well prove very messy, notwithstanding. Hence, we shall dangle Princess Margaret like a suckling piglet before a ravenous lion. Ahh, yes, we shall make him salivate for her, do not you fear,” added George with a wink. “These French are not the only ones who are quite wily, I may assure you. One way or another, we shall save England.”

Chapter End Notes

Hi! I just wanted to announce that I'm taking comments off posting moderation. I fear
that is only causing anxiety. I am still concerned that I will miss some comments, this way, but many of you have objected to the current set up and I'm slow in answering, as it is, so I'm shifting the way I handle comments. Please bear with me. Thanks, as always, for your kind patience and I'm so sorry if I made anyone feel ill at ease because of the way I had comments set up before. This is my first fic and I'm still very much learning how this website works. Thank you, as always, to my lovely readers, for bearing with me!!
Daughters of Dead Kings

Chapter Summary

“Adaptation, Your Majesty, is the best tool of any man of sense when what is right no longer lies upon his path.”

Chapter Notes

Happy early 485th birthday to Queen Elizabeth I of England!!! <3

I’d wanted to post this tmrw in honor the day (not that she figures v prominently in this particular chapter, sadly), but then I learned that the site will be down so...here it is a day early! Enjoy <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

FRANÇOIS I, KING OF FRANCE  
Chateau de Fontainebleu, France  
*October 1521*

The King’s eyes glinted with bemusement as the English envoys bowed and scraped before him. “Well met,” he sang out, descending from the dais to greet the party, lips curling into a wide grin as his glance took in Thomas Boleyn. “Why, it seems to me, my Lord Ambassador, that we’ve met on this topic ere now, yet from altered perspectives. How come you here now under the Tudor banner?”

Thomas’ smile was brittle, seeming to crack even as it formed, but his movements were swift as he came forward. “Adaptation, Your Majesty, is the best tool of any man of sense when what is right no longer lies upon his path.”

“Perhaps so,” responded François, nodding. “In any case, it pleases me to acknowledge you here in this altered capacity.” He chuckled. “No doubt you’ve already divined my sympathy for the Tudor cause.”

“It is our purpose, Your Majesty, to renew the sentiments of faith and devotion so profoundly felt by His Grace the late King Arthur, now expressed by His Grace, King Henry.”

François swallowed hard, glanced away. He remembered Arthur as last he’d seen him: young and spry and ready. He’d been heading off to war when he’d left: his death had always been a possibility; his murder had never seemed so. “The grievous news of His Grace King Arthur’s tragic loss has long since reached us here in France. We hope that you will convey to England our sincere sorrow at so devastating a loss. We did regard His Grace the late King an ever true and beloved ally and friend of France. Further, we see the late King’s trusty benevolence well represented in his successor who is also right well beloved of France.”

“His Grace King Henry will be very glad to hear this report, Your Majesty, for the love of France is very near to his own heart and will bring him much comfort in his grief.” Thomas paused. “Now,
Your Majesty, if I might present my companions each in turn.” He gestured to the elder of his retainers. “May I present His Grace, Richard, Duke of Suffolk?”

The man, whom François noted was somewhat similar to the Tudors in appearance – ruddy of curls and pale of cheek with light eyes and tall, to boot – swept an obeisance. “Most Christian Majesty,” he greeted as François nodded to him.

“And this goodly youth,” continued Thomas. “Is my own son, George, Viscount Rochford.”

“The son outranks the father?”

“Oh the contrary,” said the Duke of Suffolk. “Might I present anew my Lord Ambassador: Thomas, Earl of Wiltshire?”

“Well then,” replied François, nodding. Such a profound rise must account for the shift in Thomas’ loyalty, François considered. “I see. This is a goodly assembly, indeed, that His Grace of England sends to me. Good my lords, will you not sit to eat with me? I suspect there is much to discuss.”

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MARGARET TUDOR, PRINCESS OF ENGLAND

Chateau de Fontainebleu, France

October 1521

“What do you think they’re discussing with Mama?” Mary asked, eagerly, casting her glance across the table towards her sister.

Shuffling the cards, Margaret hummed softly. “Something much too sophisticated for we mere females to grasp, I’m sure.” Margaret tapped the shuffled stack savagely against the tabletop before beginning to pass the cards.

Mary pursed her lips bemusedly. “Then I wish them luck in telling Mama,” she replied in the same sarcastic tone.

“Truly, I don’t see why we shouldn’t be privy to such conversations.”

“I suppose,” Mary began with a shrug, gathering up her desk. “Mama is a Queen; we are only princesses.”

“As if that’s a reason! At the rate the House of Tudor is dropping, we’ll be all that’s left before too long.”

“Oh, hush.” Mary flashed a glance of irritation towards her sister. “You mustn’t say such things. Harry is well and so shall we be. You’ll see! We’ll all be back in England soon enough and all this forgotten.”

“I shan’t forget,” said Margaret. The cards felt flimsy in her hand, small and flimsy, but at the right angle they could cut all the same. “I won’t ever forget.”

Arthur was dead; everyone said it. Arthur was dead but she couldn’t believe it. He was simply gone, away. He wasn’t gone, dead, couldn’t be, but the knowledge that he was had made a deep, dark pit in her stomach; made it hard to breathe. She regretted their parting, now. It wasn’t that she’d said something she wished she could recall: she merely hadn’t said nearly enough. He was her favorite brother and she thought he knew it, but she wished she had said it. She should have said it. He had been the most like their dear Papa.
Papa owned another dark pit in her gut and into that chasm fell all the futile fears and disappointments. Life hadn’t been meant to go this way, she felt sure. It had gone all wrong and that had started, not with their expulsion: it had begun for Margaret with the loss of her father. She cast her regrets into that pit; she cast them in and covered it in dirt but disappointments were never gone: only buried.

“I will,” responded Mary, flatly. She slapped down her card, face up, but hardly seemed to see it. Her eyes were rimmed with tears. “I will forget just as soon as I may and I shall never think of it, again.” Mary swallowed hard, stretched her neck. “Your go,” she said, and reached for her cup of wine. Red wine; Lancaster red.

Margaret sighed, staring blankly at the card: a queen of diamonds. She felt queer, watching it, staring as if she could see through it, through the table, through the floor. She didn’t want to say it was impossible because Mary was on the verge of tears; she did not want to deny it because she did not want to set her up for that. Margaret tapped her own card absently, clubs and spades and diamonds and hearts, and laid down one without thinking.

“Oh, what are you doing? Such an awful card!” exclaimed Mary, reaching out to pluck it from the tabletop. “Try again. Surely you’ve a better!”

Clearing her throat, Margaret looked towards her deck. She thought of Harry, so far away, without a single member of their family to council him. Oh, she adored Harry as well, it could not be denied, but he would always be her little brother and, as a big sister, it was Margaret’s duty to question his judgment; as his subject, it was her duty to trust in it. Margaret laughed dully, rubbed her temple. “Mares, what do you think they’re discussing in there?”

She sighed, glancing towards the door that separated them – Thomas and George Boleyn and Richard de la Pole and their mother – and wetted her lips. Mary glanced back towards her cards. “They’re scheming, of course. Some plot is afoot, naturally.”

“But what?” demanded Margaret, laying her cards aside. From the corner of her eye, she saw Mary pluck impatiently at her own deck, annoyed with the pause in their game.

“Well, you seem as if you’ve some theory.”

“Hardly! I only know it must be important, but I can’t think why Harry should be bothered as to something here, as now, when there’s so much to be done in England! Wasn’t de la Pole one of Arthur’s foremost generals? Whatever can he be doing here?”

“Perhaps Harry wants more troops,” suggested Mary.

“I doubt as he’s like to have any more than he’s already got,” pointed out Margaret. “François has been exceedingly generous as it stands. Without good reason, he’s not likely to supplement anything, particularly as his faith is no doubt shaken by…by…Arthur.”

A pregnant pause, both sisters stared at their cards as though within the deck stood comfort. They found none.

“Well, what do you think, then?”

“I told you, I don’t know,” said Margaret. “But aren’t you curious?”

“Of course I’m curious,” replied Mary, narrowing her eyes. “But I’m also curious to see how this game of cards goes. Won’t you even try?”
“What’s the point?”

“It’s something to do!” exclaimed Mary. “Would you rather sit about and fret, pointlessly? Not I! And if you’ve no mind to continue with the game, I’ll find another distraction,” she added, starting to stand from the table.

“Peace, Mares,” sighed Margaret. “Settle yourself; I’ll play. I just...”

Mary nodded. “I know. If it concerns us, they’ll tell us.”

“And what if they imagine it does not?” demanded Margaret.

“Mama won’t withhold anything of import.”

“All this waiting, I detest it! It’s always like this, always! Now things are so urgent, how can it have remained so? By God, Mares, I always imagined that once we’d actually undertaken to do battle for England that something, anything would happen! How is it that nothing has changed for us?”

Across the table, Mary nodded her sullen agreement. They said no more.

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ELIZABETH OF YORK, QUEEN MOTHER OF ENGLAND

Chateau de Fontainebleu, France

October 1521

“Sit, girls,” instructed the Queen. The men had gone and, at last, she had precious moments alone with her daughters. She’d stuffed Arthur’s letter into her sleeve unread. She could not face it, now. Now was a time for smoothing things over. Margaret and Mary would be rattled, she knew. No ambassador had come from their brothers until now: Elizabeth, herself, had served that purpose till now. The girls were clever: they would know that something was happening.

“What news from Harry?” asked Mary.

“Momentous news, darling,” replied her mother. “Harry is wed. To Mistress Anne Boleyn.”

Silence, stunned silence.

“That...that shrewish ambassador’s get? The dark, skinny one?” demanded Mary. “What on earth was he thinking!”

“Oh,” said Margaret, smiling. “I quite liked her.”

Mary shook her head. “Of course you did.”

“I suppose,” interrupted Elizabeth. “He was thinking that Arthur would wed the French princess.” A shared moment of silence. “You see, he has been sometime wed in secret and...they have had a daughter.”

“A daughter?” exclaimed Mary, stunned.

“Well, he lost no time, did he?” said Margaret.

“Has she been christened?” asked Mary.

“Yes, and they’ve named her Elizabeth.”
Mary’s face brightened into a smile. “Very appropriate.”

“But,” continued the Queen. “Harry desires us not to speak of little Elizabeth for some little time. You know, with infants, health is never assured, and Harry’s no wish to excite the French with the news till matters are more certain. Will you keep the news to yourselves?”

“Strange request,” commented Margaret.

“If that’s what he likes,” said Mary, shrugging. “Though I confess I’d much prefer to dote upon her.”

Elizabeth smiled softly. “Wouldn’t we all? There has been enough loss. Little Elizabeth is a balm, is she not? But, in any case, there is more. A marriage alliance between France and England is still much to be desired. In addition to this joyous news from your brother, it is our King’s wish, Meg, that you be wed here in France.”

“What? Oh, Mama, please, do not ask it of me. Already I’ve been wed and widowed! Have I not done my part? It’s Mares’ turn, not mine! Please, I just…I just want to go home. If I wed here, I may never…”

“Meg!” exclaimed Mary.

Taking Margaret’s hands in her own, Elizabeth smiled softly. “Do you know, Meg, that my father had once intended me for France? Yes, I was to wed the late King Charles and become Queen of France. You, like me, Meg, are the King’s eldest daughter and therefore, after your brothers, it is you who stands to inherit England, as once I stood. Because of this, it is you who brings a more valuable asset to your husband than your sister.”

Margaret shook her head. “No, now its Harry and then little Elizabeth and then me, Mama! What have I to offer? Please, if I wed here, now, I shall never go back to England again. I shall never go home! How could I? Please, you cannot ask that of me, Mama! Mares hardly remembers England at all, so it would be no great loss for her, but I remember well, and want nothing more than to return!”

“My dear, it is not I who ask it, or even your brother, but the realm.” Reaching out, Elizabeth touched her daughter’s chin, gently. “The realm gives us much, but asks much in return. It is our duty to do as we are called upon to do.”

“Arthur believed that. Look what happened to him!” Standing abruptly, Margaret pulled away. “Better yet, save your wisdom for Harry and Anne Boleyn! Why must I pay the price for his fun?” Turning, she fled the room.

Mary jumped up.

“No,” said Elizabeth, softly. “Let her go. It is all right. It is all right. There is time and she will come around.”

Mary glanced down at her white wrist. “Meg’s marriage prospects…That’s why we are not to speak of our niece, isn’t it?”

Elizabeth nodded very slowly. The parchment of Arthur’s letter rubbed against her finger and she caressed it gently. “Yes, my dear. I suspect so.”

Chapter End Notes
Mary and Margaret's comments about Anne are in reference to the fact that, historically speaking, Mary and Anne did not care for each other whereas Anne and Margaret were quite friendly and exchanged letters frequently. Both relationships were, of course, deeply impacted by the very different political dynamics in which each of the women found themselves, so how it might have gone in this au is ofc open for interpretation, but I wanted to at least reference the sentiments the historical counterparts had borne...
Leap of Faith

Chapter Summary

He lay awake staring through the gloom towards his luxurious canopy and thought of his brother’s face.

Chapter Notes

tw: thoughts of death, decay, and depression

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

HENRY TUDOR, KING OF ENGLAND
Windsor Castle, England
October 1521

He wrestled demons at night. They came to him in the form of doubt and fear and suspicion, whispering in his brain when the lights were put out and he was alone, save for his wife slumbering beside him. They came pricking at his spirit, piercing his heart and his brain. He told himself, It is only an imbalance of the humors, but when the demons came, he scarcely believed it.

He lay awake staring through the gloom towards the luxurious canopy above him. The feeling of luxury escaped him. He lay awake staring through the gloom towards his luxurious canopy and thought of his brother’s face. He’d known that visage well, each of its quirks and miniscule motions meant something. He’d known the secret language written there in the softest lilt of a brow or tug of the lips. He’d spent years filling out his comprehension of it: conjugating its verbs and sorting its nouns. He’d learned and learned and learned, but it all meant nothing in the end. He’d stored up knowledge that now had no foundation and no outlet. What was the point?

Harry gasped, rolling over, his back to Anne. He thought of the ruin that must be Arthur’s face, now, and felt sick. Would he even recognize him, today, given what nature must have done to him? Harry rolled over again. Where was he, now, his brother? He knew where his body now was, lately received in London. He did not know where his spirit was. If, if they had been wrong, if there had been some grievous error and the Usurper truly was their uncle…would God damn a man who truly believed for rising against his ordained king? After all, it was God who selected a ruler. In addition to treason, was it not also in that sense blasphemy to question a King’s right?

Harry sat up, swung his legs around the bed. There was another thought, too, a horror that flashed through his brain: what if they were all deceived? All of Christendom? What if the ancient Romans or the Greeks before them or someone else were right? Or, worse still – the unavoidable, hateful fear – what if there were no gods of any sort at all? Harry trembled. Heresy! he thought, heart racing in panic-stricken horror. Yes, yes, his brain whispered the black thought. What if there were no God at all and all of this, all of this were fleeting? There was no Arthur in heaven and none in hell: now that he was dead, there was no Arthur at all. Harry’s lip quivered, his fingers fisted and ran through his hair as he bowed his head. What if there was nothing beyond all of this, nothing but black, and all
that they did, all their travails were for naught? He glanced towards the ceiling, the black nothingness that seemed to lay like a suffocating sheet above his head? If that were so, what then would be left of him when he, too, was gone? What if all he was were flesh and bones and, at the last, he would molder in the cold earth where worms would eat the flesh that once had cradled his wife and his newborn daughter? What if the only eternity there was, was rot?

Trembling, Harry sprang from bed. Light, light, he needed light! Scurrying towards the desk, he fumbled in the darkness for a candle, for light, for a spark. Soon the candle glowed, fluttering in the slight breeze, and Harry stared towards it, felt its warmth against his palm as he shaded its flare from his sleeping wife.

It was alive, that flame, and so was he. So was he. Yes, still alive and, whatever eternity held, it would have this too: Harry would make them remember him. Yes, future generations would remember him and all would know his name. He did not know how, but there were more than one type of immortality. For good or for ill, he would be remembered. Glory, he would achieve glory, and therefore, whatever earthly fate he might receive, he would never die.

The bed creaked and, turning, Harry spotted his wife craning her neck from the pillow. “Henry?”

“Here, my love,” he replied softly, carrying the candle towards the bed and slipping beneath the covers beside her.

“You are trembling,” murmured Anne, her voice thick with sleep.

He felt tears in his eyes, tears he hadn’t realized till now were there. “I am afraid, my love.”

“Afraid? Of what?”

“Of death.”

Anne swiveled to look at him, her black eyes shining in the candlelight as she gazed. “Of death?” she whispered.

“Does it not frighten you? Death has stolen into our own home, my sweet. Where might it rest its head next? On this very pillow, perhaps. Are you not afraid, sweetheart? Afraid of death…of death and what happens after?”

Anne’s gaze was deep but she was still, terribly still, save for her eyes which searched his mercilessly. “Are you…Do you fear hell, Henry?”

“Not hell, sweetheart. Nothing.”

Anne licked her lips, sat up in bed. “You…fear nothing? Then, why are you afraid?”

“No,” Harry laughed tautly. “I don’t mean that I fear nothing, as in I have no fears, I mean that I fear the…the possibility of nothingness, of a loss of eternity, of…” he sighed, rubbed his shoulders. “Am I a heretic, Nan? Tell me true! Am I a heretic?”

“Henry, what are you talking about?”

“I think of my brother, lying cold and dead in Westminster Abbey, awaiting his funeral, and I think…I think what if he has not gone to heaven? Because what, indeed, if there is no heaven? What proof have we that there is a God, Nan? Only the beauty of the world around us, which is much I grant, but…what if God cares nothing for us or what if He cast us out of heaven forever, or…aloud, I can hardly think…”
“Henry.” Anne’s hand on his arm, firm and steady. “It is all right to doubt.”

“What?”

She bit her lip, rubbed his arm soothingly. “What is belief if not faith? Of course there is no proof! That is why we call it such. If there were proof, if it were easy, there would be no need of faith. That is the leap. Great saints have struggled with belief in God and heaven and all of those glorious, beautiful things. If we have no doubts, it is not faith and, therefore, if we do not doubt, our faith is not pure. It is the struggle, the uncertainty, but the continuance in the face of that which proves our souls. This doubt, in itself, is not heresy, though to proclaim it as fact would be. When we doubt, but place our trust in God anyway, that is when we have proven ourselves as true Christian believers, for that is the definition of both trust and faith.”

“Just as when you came to me in the Tower and wed me, though I was then a defeated prisoner with nothing to offer you…that is faith.”

Anne smiled softly, nodding. “Yes, and just as you saw a mere girl as something more, though you were a prince and I the granddaughter of no one. That is faith.”

Harry squeezed his eyes shut, nodding slowly. “All right,” he said, softly.

“All right,” said Anne, touching his face.

His eyes fluttered open. She was lovely in the candlelight, her whole face seemed to glow and her eyes most of all, black embers that, rather than reflecting the light, seemed to produce it of their own power. He touched her cheek, warm and soft, and leaned his head into her shoulder. “God, Nan, what would I be without you?”

Her warm arms enveloped him, her fingers tangled soothingly through his hair. “Oh, my love,” she whispered. “My dearest love. It is a boon to see that, even when your faith in Our Lord is shaken, your faith in me never wanes.”

Harry pulled her closer, shaking his head. “Never,” he bit out, fiercely. “Never.”

“Do you know, there are many things I learned of true devotion in France?”

Slowly, he lifted his head to gaze at her. “What do you mean?”

“Shall I tell you of it in the morning, my love?”

“Yes,” he murmured, kissing her cheek, her neck, the hollow of her shoulder. “In the morning.”

She giggled as she fell back into bed with him.

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CATHERINE OF ARAGON, QUEEN OF ENGLAND
York Castle, England
November 1521

Catherine drifted listless through York. She’d seen the place where Arthur had fought for his life and she’d seen the spot where he had been slaughtered. She’d been to the spectacular Minster, seen its glorious windows, heard Mass. She’d walked the long parapets around the ancient city. She felt nothing, nothing at all, as she climbed, strolled, knelt, nothing at all save the chill that was not the weather. She thought of his arms enclosing her and felt only pain. Time was hollow, pointless;
existence narrow and bleak. Darkness that was not shadow hovered in every corner, heavy and breathing. Whatever she did, whatever she did, well, what did it mean? Perhaps she could save her soul, perhaps she could not, but it frightened her more to think that she could, for Arthur had not had the chance. Was he damned for the sin they had unwittingly committed together? And if so, could there be a paradise for her where he was not? And, God, did he burn? Surely, there was no joy left for her in this dried up husk of earth, none save the hope of the child that grew within her.

York Castle, itself, was in a state of disrepair, though its denizens now spent their time going about the repairs. One of the more recent kings – Richard III, perhaps? – had had the foresight to have much of the decrepit parts removed which allowed the work to progress, but it was slow and tedious labor all the same. Fortunately, funding was not much of an issue here, given the presence of the still-running mint in the castle, and work eased by the existence of the hospital mills. Still, the castle yet supported a few rooms which had not yet been entirely destroyed by time and the so-called King Richard, even now, conducted extensive works to revive them.

Catherine drifted through the halls, faintly aware of the noise, her hand brushing gently over ancient tapestries as she passed. She turned into the library, absorbing the rich volumes dotting its shelves. Drifting, drifting, she had drifted here a dozen, dozen times; no doubt she would drift a dozen, dozen more. Having arrived here in September, many now suspected the fact of her pregnancy and Richard had been quite persuaded of his paternity. There was nothing, now, for her to do but wait. Wait and wait and wait.

She ran her fingers across the spines of the books, but one title stopped her: Le Morte d’Arthur. Sick dread ran frozen fingers along her spine. Her chest was full, too full to breathe. She stopped, finger resting on the tome as though it were caught.

“Must be left over from the Usurper’s time,” commented a voice behind her.

Confusion washed over the Queen before she realized that, once again, here the Usurper was Henry VII. It was difficult to keep track. She turned to face the speaker. It was Dickon of Gloucester. Catherine felt suddenly as though she would loose her breakfast before him. She stood as though carved from stone, staring.

He offered a small smile. “Apologies, Your Grace,” he said, sweeping a shallow bow. “I did not mean to startle you.”

Catherine placed a protective hand over her belly, smiled faintly as her hand fell away from the book. “You did startle me,” she replied. “But it is of no consequence. I do not often see you in the library. What brings you here?”

“No,” he said, shrugging. “I’ve little fondness of books, really. Of course they’re all quite beautiful and costly, but reading strikes me rather dull. I prefer a sword in my hand.”

Catherine felt another wave of nausea as she turned back towards the books, catching the shelf with a supportive hand.

“Is Your Grace all right?” cried Dickon.

Grasping the shelf with both hands, Catherine nodded. “It is only the child,” she said, quietly. “You know, it is a part of woman’s illness.”

“Oh,” replied Dickon, tone antsy. “I-Is there anything I might do?”

She swallowed, wanted to shout, ‘Get out! Get out! Get out!’ but mastered the impulse. “Distract
“Tell me, have you ever read Le Morte d'Arthur?”

“Can’t say as I have, Your Grace.”

Catherine nodded. “Neither have I,” she admitted. “But I’ve heard the stories. Did you know my great grandmother was English? She passed down many English legends.” Catherine swallowed hard, turned slowly. “I heard that it is the tale of a great English king whose right to rule was contested by a traitorous relative. Coveting all King Arthur had, the betrayer murdered him. But Arthur was not dead, no, not truly.” Catherine rubbed her belly. “He waits, sleeping, to return and rule England once more.”

Dickon paused, shrugged, laughed — Catherine hoped a tough nervously. “Ah, yes, that is the story,” he replied. “Rather like Uncle Richard, don’t you think? But have no fear, Your Grace, we shall destroy these traitorous Tudor dogs once and for all.” A slick smile stole across his face. “The work is already begun.”

“Yes.” Catherine breathed in deeply, the air seemed fresh now, fresh with promise. “The traitors shall die. It has already begun.”

Chapter End Notes

According to Lord Mountjoy, writing to Erasmus: "Our King [Henry VIII] is not after gold, or gems, or precious metals, but virtue, glory, immortality."
https://books.google.com/books?id=oSuFAwAAQBAJ&pg=PA12&lpg=PA12&dq=henry+viii+%22Our+King+is+not+after+gold,+or+gems,+or+precious+metals,+but+virtue,+glory,+immortality%22&f=false

You can read more about the condition of York Castle in the 1520s here:
Days On Earth

Chapter Summary

“He wishes to know what Arthur would do.”

Chapter Notes

sorry, my friends! this chapter has not yet been edited. please bear with me!

ELIZABETH OF YORK, QUEEN MOTHER OF ENGLAND
Chateau de Fontainebleu, France
November 1521

Henry, her pen paused over the word, leaving a blot at the end of the ‘y.’ Lizzie stared at it, watching the blank ink pool around the tip of her stylus, thick as blood. She heard a small sound in the back of her throat, realized she had made it, and set her pen down. She was grateful, much of the time, that she’d named one of her sons for their father. It was a fine name, a name of which to be proud…but it felt a weighty name, just then.

When she’d sent her boys away, she’d fancied that, somehow, their father’s spirit went with them. She’d thought of them often, her three boys, away in England, fighting the good fight, just as once, as a little girl, she’d pictured her father across the water, gathering his forces to come home and save them all. Lizzie stopped, glanced downward. She picked at her sleeve, the expensive silver threading that she’d plucked from an old dress of her mother’s. Husband, mother, father, brothers, sisters, son…all gone. She now had only her daughters and her Henry and only one sister left living: it was all that was now left of two great dynasties.

Licking her lips, Lizzie got up. It didn’t do to sit idly and spin maudlin tales of the past: she was perpetually telling her girls this. She ought to take her own advice.

“How goes the letter?” asked Mary, watching her mother stand.

Lizzie crossed to the window, settling her arms upon the sill. “Not so very well,” she replied softly, smiling out towards the daylight.

“What letter’s this?” inquired Meg.

“One to Harry,” informed Mary.

“What does he say?”

Lizzie breathed a sigh. “He wishes to know what Arthur would do.”

Her girls fell silent. Lizzie glanced over her shoulder to see Meg poking at her embroidery blindly and Mary’s eyes hovering just beyond the pages of her book.

“In terms of figuring out a military strategy,” supplied Lizzie.

“Oh, that’s easy!” declared Meg. The other two turned to stare. Meg laughed, shrugged. “Why, don’t be silly, you all know this and so does Harry, if he’d just stop for two minutes put together and actually think about it.” Meg gestured with her chin to the library behind them. “He’d consult his history.”

Lizzie’s eyes dawdled, languidly glancing towards the shelves. She thought of Arthur, so studious, always bent over one tome or another or scribbling out something on a scratch of paper. “You’re absolutely right,” replied Lizzie, softly.

Meg placed her embroidery aside. “What’s the trouble he’s in?”

“He wants to take York.”

“Oh, he’ll have to go aways back for that! When was the last time York was conquered?” asked Mary.

“My father did it,” murmured Lizzie. “But timing was with him. He won because Marguerite of Anjou withdrew. He’d have been the first to say as much to either of you.”

“Further back than that, then,” said Meg, strolling towards the shelves. “I’m sure we can find something here. Goodness knows we’ve travelled with these books half a hundred times! There must be something in them worth reading. Certainly, something that would’ve drawn our Arthur’s eye… He was so careful and precise. I can’t believe he would have gone into so great a battle without some inkling of a plan. He simply never had the chance to execute it…” Meg ran her fingers along the spines, spine after spine, taking in each volume and Lizzie felt a great swell of pity. If Arthur had been her Henry’s pride, surely Meg had been his joy…and that made her the last remnant of that sweet trio. Lizzie’s chest was tight and she quickly unlatched the window, let in the breeze.

“Mama, whatever are you doing?” demanded Meg. “It’s frigid! Shut the casement, please!”

“One moment, darling.”

“Wait,” commented Mary. “What about that Suffolk fellow? Was he not some darling compatriot of Arthur’s? I can’t imagine Arthur would fail to inform one of his very own commanders of his plan! Silly Harry ought to have asked before sending him away,” she huffed. “That is just like him! He will listen to advisers, when it occurs to him, but when it comes to it, Harry believes firmly that no one knows better than Harry.”

“I do believe,” said Lizzie with a quirk of the mouth. “That is a family trait.”

“I’ll talk to Suffolk,” volunteered Meg, suddenly.

“You? But it was my idea,” complained Mary. “And I long for something to do.”

“And I suppose you imagine I do not,” huffed Meg. “I think if I do not, I shall combust!”

Mary rolled her eyes. “I’m in as desperate a want of occupation as you, Meg.”

Meg bit her lips, her eyes turning glassy. “It’s not that! Don’t you see? Suffolk-Suffolk was the last person to see Arthur alive! He was the last, to…Oh, don’t you see? I must speak with him, I must…”
“Do you think that, because you have lost a brother, Meg, I have not? How can you forget I suffer, too! Do you ever think of another creature besides yourself?”

“Girls!” Turning from the window, Lizzie arched her brows. Both her daughters fell into silence. “I know neither of you mean to give offense, so I shall overlook your hurtful words this time. We all suffer, but rather than lashing out with the pain, we must let it gentle our hearts with love. As for His Grace of Suffolk: it would not be seemly for either of you to entertain a gentleman alone, so you will both attend upon him here, make no worries of that. In addition, I will peruse our books…also here. Arthur may have made notes in any of these, but in truth we all know he took his most prized tomes with him to England. Now, go along. Send for His Grace. It is he who is most likely to hold the key to our success in this venture. Remember, my sweet girls, both Harry and England are counting on us.”

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RICHARD DE LA POLE, DUKE OF SUFFOLK
Chateau de Fontainebleu, France

November 1521

Richie swept a bow as he was showed in to the ladies’ chamber. In the corner, the Queen Mother sat with a book in her lap, but she rose to greet him. When she walked, she seemed to glide, so much were all the world’s graces at her command.

“Well met, Your Grace,” greeted the Queen, smiling towards him. “I bid you welcome.”

“I am honored, Your Grace.” He kissed her hand and smiled towards her. Richie remembered well the Queen Elizabeth that had once been. Splendid, always, robed in all earthly adornment and crowned with the most regal of diadems: her father’s daughter, but her mother’s also: radiant and capable and unflinching. He had respected her, before she’d fled across the Channel. He found, that for all her tarnished splendor, he respected her even more now. This was not the same Queen Elizabeth, no: her red-gold hair had turned red-grey and her once-smooth skin now wore the marks of care and time, but her eyes were as lively and intelligent as ever they had been. Her gowns were old, made of hand-me-down raiment from other queens and princesses, but she wore them with a carriage that marked her, unmistakably, as both Princess and Queen of England. And there was a pang, too, in that: this woman who had fought so hard for the space she had in this life, had raised four children despite all adversity…only to watch them leave and hear of their deaths. Richie bowed his head. He had never wished Arthur any harm, yet here they were.

“I hope you will excuse me, Your Grace,” said the Queen, disturbing his reverie. “I’ve some investigation I must do here amidst these books but my daughters, Her Grace, Princess Margaret, and her Her Grace, Princess Mary, have much about which they wish to ask you.”

Princess Margaret smiled softly and led him to a seat. “I will be direct, Your Grace. We mean to ask you about Arthur and his last days on earth. Will you tell us about them?”
“In any case,” said his wife. “We must forgive them because, the deed being done, there is simply no other alternative...”

Francois I, King of France
Chateau de Fontainebleu, France
November 1521

The King rapped his bejeweled finger against the tabletop. “I am most cross,” he informed his wife. “At the sheer ingratitude of the Tudors! I contrive to give them a kingdom and they contrive to deprive me of any benefit thereof! Such a grossly unjust return for my generosity is nigh unpardonable!”

He watched as the corner of Claude’s lips quirked upward. “Fortunately,” she said, pointedly. “It is only nigh unpardonable and therefore there remains some room to move past it.”

Arching a brow, Francois regarded her. “Do you sometimes say things deliberately to vex me?”

Claude’s needle disappeared beneath the fabric; peaked out again: a little gleam of silver pricking, pricking, pricking. Her eyes met his and the smile widened. “Yes.”

François’ head snapped around to look at her, mouth falling open and suddenly he barked out an astonished laugh.

“There,” she said, returning her attention to her needlework. “I know you thought I was past being able to surprise you. I hope in future you’ll check such notions, hm?”

“I am quite proven wrong,” he responded, settling into a seat near hers. His eyes twinkled with surprised bemusement. “I am impressed,” he responded. “And chastened.”

“In any case,” said his wife. “We must forgive them because, the deed being done, there is simply no other alternative, unless you now mean to make war on England but I would strongly advise against such a stratagem as it would defeat our entire purpose in ever backing them.”

“Hmm,” said Francois, swirling his cup. He agreed, truly, but the wound the Tudors had dealt his pride remained too fresh to admit to being wrong on top of it, just now. To soothe his ruffled feathers, he took a sip of his wine – dark and red and deep – before making any response. “What, then, do you suggest, wife?” He formed a querulous expression, awaiting her response.

“We continue to pursue our purpose. We turn even this unfortunate turn to our own advantage,” she replied, evenly, continuing to stare at her embroidery.

“Ahh,” whispered Francois. A smile turned his lips upward. “I begin to comprehend your meaning.”
MARGARET TUDOR, PRINCESS OF ENGLAND
Chateau de Fontainebleau, France
November 1521

“There was a plan,” began Meg, eagerly. She leaned forward in her seat, felt the table before her biting into her ribs in a distracted way, as though it were happening to someone else very far away, rather than to herself. “When Arthur attacked York, though he never had a chance to see it through…”

“He did have a plan,” replied the Duke of Suffolk carefully. Meg watched his fingers curl around the stem of his chalice, watched with detached distraction, watched as though her eyes were not her own.

“Surely he shared it with you,” pressed Mary.

Suffolk nodded slowly, a smile tugged at his lips, half-bemused. “I suppose Your Graces wish it explained to you?”

“We are not children,” grumbled Meg, irritably.

“No,” said Suffolk. “But long have you ladies lived abroad. Your Grace will forgive me, I trust. I cannot imagine you were trained in military matters.”

Meg rankled. “Not directly, sir, but our brothers had such an education and we were by no means entirely separate from them. I believe I may understand quite as well as any other educated person, be they of either sex.”

Suffolk swallowed hard. “I pray Your Grace forgive me: it was not my intent to question Your Graces’ powers of understanding. I meant only to discover by what means I might best convey the information. Not having sisters or such an upbringing, myself, it remains to me a great mystery how far your education may go.”

“Quite as far as may the male education,” responded Meg. “But I fear you mean only to be delicate and thus dance around the true subject. Perhaps it is not our sex per se which you believe may have limited our knowledge, but our exile. You’ve met our brothers, Your Grace. Did you find them to be lacking in terms of comprehension? No. Our education, Your Grace, was of the most superb variety, I may assure you. If you had presumed that our father had afforded so fine an education for his two sons in exile by barring his daughters from the same, you are quite mistaken. Our father was most generous in that account, and even in exile, saw to it that each of his children had the education due their true rank and standing.”

“I consider myself most chastened. Pray forgive me, Your Grace.”

Glancing towards her sister, Meg watched Mary grin.

“We forgive you, Your Grace,” said Mary, finally, glancing towards him more soberly. “Pray continue in your account and, as to allay your fears on the subject of our comprehension, I may assure you that we shall ask any questions that may occur to us.”

“Have you heard of the Battle of Towton?” inquired the Duke.

The book tumbled from Queen Elizabeth’s hands.
Meg felt sick. “No,” she bit out. Sudden tears sprang into her eyes, unshed. “No, Arthur could not have hoped to recreate such a slaughter! He could not have! He was a good man! He could not have planned! Tell me it was not so!”

The Duke fell into silence.

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GEORGE BOLEYN, VISCOUNT ROCHEFORD
Chateau de Fontainebleau, France
November 1521

The French king presented himself in the full magnificence of which only a king was capable: adorned in yards and yards of rich fabrics and jewels and enthroned upon a chair some inches taller than any of the others around the table. He glanced about him, smug beneath his mustaches, and George turned confident eyes upon him. France had at last reached a decision, George felt sure.

“Good my lords,” greeted François, spreading his hands in a gesture of munificent welcome. “It is well that we meet upon this day. We call you here upon the great business of state that long we have considered and wish, now, to present an alternative that may be to the benefit of all.”

“Glad we are to hear this, Your Majesty,” replied George’s father, seeming to bow his head beneath the weight of such an honor. George’s lips curved upward in bemusement.

“Well may we suggest unto you, my lords, the hope we maintain of a marriage uniting the House of Tudor with one of our own choosing near to our own realm and heart, both.”

“Well it is to hear,” replied Thomas. George glanced at him, watched the lines around his eyes tighten with an impatience he dared not express.

“We wish that the royal hand of Her Grace, the Princess Margaret of England, may be given unto His Grace, Henry, King of Navarre.”

Chapter End Notes

You can read more about the brutal Battle of Towton here:

You can read more about Henry II, King of Navarre here:

This fic has now broken over 400 pages!!! I can't believe it!!! Thank you so, so, so much for all your continued support and encouragement and sticking w this story so long!!!! It makes all the difference <33333
You do not miss a beat, do you? Rather like your sisters in that, I daresay."

Chapter Notes

Please forgive me as I’ve had no opportunity to edit this chapter.

I hope to post another short one tomorrow, which will stand for next week's edition, as I will be away next week. If I can’t make that work, I'll post it next week as usual but either way...standby for that!! ;D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

GEORGE BOLEYN, VISCOUNT ROCHFORD
Chateau de Fontainebleu, France
November 1521

“I dislike your penchant for cards,” commented the King of France, wryly tossing down his deck before his opponent. “I think as you shall ruin me and my kingdom besides.”

George chuckled. “I think, as I am a charitable man, Your Majesty, I may be relied upon to salvage the kingdom, if not the king,” he teased.

The King chuckled. “Not unlike your queenly sister, I suppose,” commented François. His glance was measuring, though concealed beneath a playful smile. “She may yet preserve his kingdom, yet we hear she had no mercy in her assault upon your king’s heart.”

George swallowed, met the gaze eye for eye, wearing his own roguish grin. “To whit, Your Majesty, I daresay you would know more of the matter than I, having been in witness to it, yet I heard that the wooing went the other way and that it was the king who pursued, rather than being pursued.”

“Mmm,” hummed François, gathering up his new deck. “I own that sounds quite in character for your young ruler.” He smiled. “You know, I once had the dubious honor of jousting with your new king. No sooner did I pull up my own lance than he knocked me off my horse without a thought to my defenselessness.”

George bit out a smile. “A quality which, I believe, will serve our new alliance well in Navarre.”

The King of France chuckled. “You do not miss a beat, do you? Rather like your sisters in that, I daresay. How…” the king plucked absently at his deck of cards. “How fares the Queen of the English and her sister?”

George’s eyes narrowed. He watched François’ fingers toy mindlessly with this card, now that, nervously, nervously. Reaching into his own deck, George laid down a trap. “My sisters do very
well, Your Majesty. Her Grace the Queen attends upon His Grace the King even now at Windsor Castle. They make quite a happy scene, I gather. My dear sister sends me many missives detailing her joy in at last being united with His Grace the King.”

Still, the nervous fidgeting.

George chewed the inside of his lip. Was it then true? Had François shared Mary’s bed? George had teased her about it often enough, but he’d scarcely considered whether it were true till now, watching the King of France reduced to this nervous behavior. George laid out his next card and waited, as though he’d quite forgotten Mary: waited for the trap to spring.

“How grand,” said François, distractedly. He laid down another card, waited.

George did not speak.

François opened his mouth, closed it again. Finally he cleared his throat, said as though with a breezy air (an idea belied by his sudden unwillingness to meet George’s eye). “And…your other sister? How fares the eldest Mistress Boleyn?”

Mimicking the breezy air, George shrugged. “Mistress Boleyn, no longer.”

“What?” the King was now still, eyes locked upon George.

So it was true.

François lowered his gaze, licked his lips. “That is…how well a thing for her.”

“Yes, she is wed to William Carey, whose grandmother was a first cousin of the King’s own grandmother, the late Margaret Beaufort, Countess of Richmond, and who is, himself, a Gentleman of the Privy Chamber and Esquire of the Body to His Grace the King.”

François fell silent, pressing his lips together. He seemed to peer past his cards, past the table beneath them, past the floorboards that held up the table.

George watched in curiosity. A weakness perceived, yes, but what did it mean? Unlocking that would prove key to achieving anything from it. Guilt? Jealousy? Love? Something else, altogether? George was not certain, but clearly this knowledge aroused an emotion in him – and not an entirely favorable one.

“She…wed quickly, then?”

“Almost as soon as she was home,” replied George, honestly.

The King’s eyes flicked up to George and he smiled, then, a smile that never reached his eyes. “Good,” he said, waving a hand as if it all mattered nothing. “Then, as it appears a favorable match, her time here served her well.”

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ANNE BOLEYN, QUEEN OF ENGLAND
Windsor Castle, England
November 1521

“Why would François want Margaret to marry the King of Navarre? How could an alliance between England the Navarre possibly profit him?”
Anne glanced up from where she was reading her father’s letter. “I imagine, if you allow me to read further, he’ll illuminate us.”

Henry huffed with impatience and, despite herself, Anne felt a smile tugging at the corners of her lips.

“Aha, yes,” she said, at last. “The Princess’s dowry, including the more usual incentives, is to consist in troops which will be used to help shore up the borders between Spain and Navarre.” Reaching out, Anne proffered the letter to Henry. “There stand on one side now but two pieces of land between France and Spain: our English holdings and Navarre and, of course, Catherine of Aragon’s father, Ferdinand, laid claim to the title of King of Navarre: and through him, so now does Emperor Carlos.”

Henry nodded slowly. “It is wise of François to garner as much support on that front as possibly. Spain is powerful and Carlos not one to back down from a challenge.”

Anne nodded her agreement. “It would be in the interest of England, as well,” she pointed out. “To suppress any such ambitions of the Emperor’s before they reach English soil, as well. So far, despite giving his aunt in marriage to the Usurper, Carlos hasn’t made a move against England. Better to engage him, now, but indirectly, and divert his attentions.”

Henry bit his thumb. “I disagree,” he said, softly, turning towards her again. “I fear that this battle we now fight is as indirect a conflict with Spain as Carlos will brook. In truth, I fear that to raise banners against him of any variety, even in the name of Navarre, would be enough to incite provocation in the Emperor. Particularly with mine own sister as Queen of Navarre, he could not avoid reading our actions as antagonistic. To do as François demands is, in fact, to invite open war between England and Spain.”

Sinking back into the cushions – heaped upon the chair – Anne exhaled slowly. “England can ill afford another war atop this one,” she mused. “But neither can we afford to loose the support of France.”

“How is it,” growled Henry. “That either way, it is we who loose!”

“How is it,” growled Henry. “That either way, it is we who loose!”

“Is there another option?”

“One,” admitted Henry. His tone was weary, weary and half-sick. “We offer François something he cannot refuse: we offer him a stake in our claim.” He swallowed hard as he sank into the seat beside her. “We offer him our Elizabeth.”

“No,” breathed Anne. “No, that only as a last resort. To wed Elizabeth to the Dauphin, as no doubt François would want, is tantamount to making England a French colony, when their child inherits both the French and English crown. No, as yet they know nothing of her. She must be held back until there is a male heir.”

Placing a hand over her belly, Henry sighed softly. “The question cannot wait so long.”

“Then we must proceed as planned. We must wade into battle with Spain.”

“We will loose all. We cannot hope to win a war on two fronts!”

“François is not unreasonable and, having invested so much in our dynasty, he will not like to see us fail. I am certain he will accept that we can only send troops to Navarre once the war here is won. You write to him and I shall write to his wife and his sister and his mother and all the other ladies he knows, besides.”
“Better yet,” commented the king. “Have your sister write to him. That will arouse some interest, no doubt.”

“I will ask no such thing!”

Henry snorted. “I’ve fed my sister to the dogs: do not imagine I mistake what I ask, but I do ask it. Perhaps not yet, however, but I do not forget that someday it may be.”

Anne nodded slowly. “So then, we each write to France.”

Henry sighed. “I do hate to write with mine own hand.”

“Then best begin now and have it done with hereafter. No details can be neglected in this case. We owe all to the King of France.”

Chapter End Notes

You can read more about William Carey here:
The Remnants of Dreams

Chapter Summary

“And if I do not return, Harry, what then? What then?”

HENRY TUDOR, KING OF ENGLAND
Windsor Castle, England
November 1521

Arthur was speaking to him, voice full of pleasant tones. Harry watched his brother’s face carefully, watched each motion, each reflex of his painfully familiar face. Harry was aware that something was wrong – something was wrong with Arthur. He had to warn him that something, something was amiss. He remembered, something, something…he could not think what but the sound of Arthur’s voice was a balm to some faraway ache.

“You’ll protect them while I’m gone, won’t you, brother?” Arthur asked him, placing a hand on Harry’s shoulder. “You’ll protect them all – all of England – so they’ll be safe when I return. You’ll do that for me, won’t you?”

“I’ll do it,” swore Harry. “Whatever it takes, I’ll do it.”

Arthur searched his brother’s face, his eyes turning suddenly sad. “And if I do not return, Harry, what then? What then?”

The voice caught in Harry’s throat, choked him. Memory bubbled up, fresh and putrid: Arthur is dead, dead, dead…

“What will you do, now, Harry?” Arthur’s face turned, his voice a strange reedy sound as the wound in his throat opened, gaping, and blood and blood and blood poured from it.

“No,” gasped Harry. “No!” shouted Harry. “No!” He rushed forward, pressing his hand to the wound, but the blood would not stop. He pressed harder, harder, harder, willing the flow to end… felt his brother grappling with his hands, skeletal fingers raking Harry’s fleshy ones as choking sounds bubbled from Arthur’s throat. He was not helping him, Harry realized too late, as all movement ceased. He had strangled him. “No! No. No, no, no, no, no.”

Arthur slid, lifeless and cold, to his knees. “You’ve killed me, brother,” his voice seemed to say, though his lips did not move in his dead body. “You’ve killed me. Who will avenge me, now?”

“No!” shrieked Harry, weeping. “No!”

Harry sat up in bed, drenched in cold sweat.

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RICHARD OF SHREWSBURY, KING OF ENGLAND
York Castle, England
November 1521
“So you say my nephew has rounded up our contacts still in London?” inquired Richard, rubbing his chin. He gazed out the window, watching the growing storm as it screamed from the far north in Scotland. He had given orders that they should winter here. He doubted as this year held in it a single other campaign, now. There might still be marching in the south, but none could be done here once the storm had reached them in earnest. Snow, building icy fortresses of its own, would allow none to cross the threshold of the Peaks below him. No, Henry Tudor could no longer reach him here. He was safe behind his deep stone walls…for now.

“Rounded up or else converted,” Hal replied with a sorry shrug. “We’ve not been able to make any contact, whatsoever, with Cardinal Wolsey or any of his household. Last I heard, Henry was questioning him, personally, as Arthur had done before him. I suppose our Tudor cousins may suspect him.”

“I suspect him as well,” owned the King with a sigh. “Who can say what side the Cardinal has taken? In truth, I’d wager he, himself, wonders as much, even now. These are troubled times, my friends, troubled and unsure.” He paused. “My dear,” said Richard, reaching out to place a hand over his wife’s. “Might I ask that you write to your esteemed nephew, His Highness the Emperor, on our behalf? It would be well if Spain were to remember its bonds with us.”

Catherine’s blue eyes found his, the limpid blue he recalled but distant in thought. Her orbs hovered, searching his for a moment, and she nodded, laying a hand upon her pregnant belly. “Of course,” she replied, softly. “I will do my all.”

“If Spain assists us,” began Hal, softly. “There is a much greater a hope that we may prevail.”

Ed de la Pole nodded. “Yes, but we must not rest all our hopes on this. We must make our own plans, also. We are strengthened with the aid of Scotland and, though winter will be hard on us all, it also gives us an opportunity to regroup…an opportunity we need dearly, now. We have lost the advantage we once had when we knew better our enemy and his methods in battle. Henry Tudor, in these respects, is a total unknown, having been quickly rendered unconscious in the only battle he fought.”

“Once Arthur was as much a mystery to us,” said Hal, running his hand across the map of England before them. “We may yet tease the information out of him. Much land lies between London and York: valuable land and valuable time taken to cross it.”

“You suggest he comes to us?” inquired Ed.

“Oh, he will come to us wherever we may go. That is the beauty and the difficulty of his position: though he may claim that he seizes the throne by ties of blood, by necessity of the fact that there is already a crowned king ruling over England, he must also be a conqueror. He cannot possibly allow us to rest if he wishes to be King for all and true.”

“What do you propose?”

“His brother already has shown us the way. We know where he must go and therefore, we can guess the path he must take, or at least help divert his forces towards the path we wish them to take. As once Arthur did to us on our way to Lincoln, we shall harry Harry Tudor on his way north and we shall, thus, take the mettle of the man while also weeding out his supporters. Besides, we seized Arthur’s ships, giving us an ease of speed we did not previously have.”

“This is no honorable scheme,” said Ed, softly.

“But at least, at last,” replied Hal, softly, very softly. “It is not dishonorable.”
François’ smile was thin and veiled as he closed the missive in his hand, again. “Very well,” said the King of the French. “If Henry is amenable to this marriage between Her Grace the Princess Margaret and His Grace the King of Navarre, then nothing waits but to secure the bridegroom.”

George accepted the letter as François returned it to him, nodding slowly. “And the King of Navarre?” he inquired. “How does Your Grace imagine he shall react to this proposal.”

“His position is a most complex one,” replied François. “I can only imagine he will prove glad of supporters, from whatever quarter they may come.”

“Then,” said George. “You do not foresee any troubles?”

“Perhaps he might have preferred a French bride, but a lady who brings a dowry of fresh, loyal troops is never to be lightly turned away. No, I think we are safe in imagining that, as Carlos grows more determined to conquer his neighbors, those very neighbors – such as Navarre – shall grow all the more pleased to accept such a lady. Fear not! Navarre will accept the Princess’s hand, I am quite sure.”
Bated Breath

Chapter Summary

She grasped the armrests below her, willing an outward calm to belie the way her stomach and her heart riled in hopeless confusion within her.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

ANNE BOLEYN, QUEEN OF ENGLAND
Eltham Palace, England
March 1522

“Word at last from York,” said the runner. He had arrived in a bedraggled state, claiming to have important news and was quickly conducted to the presence chamber.

Gazing down from the height of her throne, Anne fixed the messenger with a curious glance, feeling rather than seeing her husband lean forward ever so slightly in his seat beside her.

“We are pleased that you have come all this way to deliver it,” said the King. “Pray, say your piece.”

Anne’s breath gathered in her throat, caught there like a baiting bear, ready yet unwilling for the fight ahead. She grasped the armrests below her, willing an outward calm to belie the way her stomach and her heart riled in hopeless confusion within her.

This day had been inevitable, she’d always known, yet some part of her had hoped that it would never arrive. Perhaps Richard would die up there in York amidst the ice and snow and his hideous heir with him; perhaps the cold gnawing at their bones would give the Usurper cause to surrender at long last; perhaps, when winter was over, everyone would simply forget to fight again. She’d never believed any of this would happen. She’d never believed it, but she’d hoped, anyway. The winter had unfurled into days of peace, curled up amidst the warmth of cushions and fires and luxurious tapestries, caught up in her husband’s arms. The world had seemed to fade from them, cares melting while the earth froze and the snow fell like merry white petals from heaven. But the snow was melting now and, with it, Anne felt the peace she’d so loved slipping away. This messenger, whatever he had to say, carried with him its death warrant.

Hat doffed, the envoy hardly dared raise his eyes towards the dais. “Your Grace, it is said that the pretender, Perkin Warbeck, at last has an heir of his own body to back his claim upon Your Grace’s true throne.”

Anne’s nails dug into the chair. She felt ill, suddenly, gut and throat and mind clenching like a wounded insect. Quickly, she turned her eyes towards her husband. Arthur’s child is born at last, thought Anne. Her mind spun, dizzy with color. She felt sick and shivering all at once; she could not imagine how Henry felt.

Yet his face was cool, cool and seemingly impassive. He stared at the envoy, no, stared through him as though all that lay before him were the tapestries on the opposite wall: ancient and time-harrowed.
Anne placed one hand over her belly, as though to protect the innocent life that had begun to grow there, and reached out another to touch her husband’s fingertips. They felt cold, but stirred at her touch. His face flushed a hue or two and he turned to look at her, took her fingers in his, and brought them to his lips. Henry turned back to the messenger. “Tell us all.”

“Your Grace, Her Highness, Catherine, Princess of Spain was delivered of a healthy girl on February the 18th. The Pretender claims this is a great miracle and a mark of the favor of God, for the child, though born too early, is as large and as healthy as any child born at the natural time. In thanksgiving for this event, the child has been called Mary in honor of the Most Blessed Virgin who against all odds, bore a healthy and living Child who was to be rightful ruler of both heaven and earth. This same little Mary is now Pretender-Princess of Wales, and therefore rival to our own true Princess, Her Grace the Princess Elizabeth.”

Henry’s fingers tightened around Anne’s own, but his face shone forth a smile. He laughed, hand pulling away from Anne’s as he stood, towering over all before him. “How contrived these pathetic pretenses of a Pretender! Know this, good people of England, the Usurper’s lies shall no longer stand! As soon as the last snows melt, we march again to make truth of lies and show all the world what is truly God and My Will!” he paused, reached out to claim Anne’s hand, once again. “And know, ye good Christian people, that my lady, Her Grace, Anne the Queen, is even now enceinte and like to bear us many strong and healthy children in future. Know that, even now, England lies upon the brink of at last being saved!”

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HENRY TUDOR, KING OF ENGLAND
Eltham Palace, England
March 1522

Anne was pale white, even her lips seemed to have lost color as she followed him into the privy chambers. She ordered everyone out and the doors shut behind them.

“You told them that I am with child,” said Anne, voice quiet. “Should you not have consulted me?”

Henry felt the wind go out of his lungs, a great whooshing release as he collapsed into the nearest chair. Before him, a fire burnt cheerfully in the grate. Henry stared, watching the merry wreaths of flame licking upwards like the eager tongues of serpents. It felt wrong, the joy that seemed to radiate from the grate: a strange betrayal twisting by his feet before him. His mouth felt slack and Henry absently ran the pad of his finger along his lips. He was weary, weary as ever he had felt, as though the travails of kingship had all fallen upon him at once. A spell cast by winter had broken, cresting up from within. He hadn’t thought the maelstrom was still there, sucking inward as it screamed to all sides, but it remained, whirling in his ruin of a heart. It remained and he no longer had the strength to fight it.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart,” murmured Henry, brushing the careless fingers of both hands through his hair. “I believe I hardly consulted myself.”

She was near him, he realized, nearer than she’d been before, and he felt her hand upon his arm. Slowly, he tilted his gaze upwards to meet hers. Her eyes were alive as ever, alive and all his, intent upon him. Her whole soul seemed to open from within those dark orbs, outpouring to him. Kneeling, she took both his hands in hers, open eyes revealing an open heart.

“It’s strange, Nan,” murmured Henry, half-leaning forward to be closer to her. “All my life, all of it, I’ve known that at any moment I may be eclipsed, passed over. All my life I dreaded it, did you know that? Yes, I’ve dreaded the eventuality that one day a mere squalling baby would uproot me
from all that I’ve known and held dear and cast me into history’s oblivion for the forgotten sons of kings.” He nodded slowly, eyes darting away towards the jolly flame and back again to Anne’s eyes. “Yet, today, Nan, today…It was always Arthur’s child, his eventual son, who would overcome me simply by drawing breath. Though I clung to hope that it may not occur, I know now that it never truly occurred to me but that such should not be my fate. Yet here, here and now, I know for a certainty that all my concerns were false, foolish imaginings.” He pointed outward, shaking his head. “It is the judgment of God, Nan, His own judgment that Arthur should have but one child and that a girl. It means that God in His wisdom has looked down upon us and ordained that it is I, me and mine, that should carry on the proud legacy of all my fathers, reaching back and back and back through all the ages of history…” Henry licked his lips. “Do you know how that makes me feel?”

Anne’s eyes were a question; her smile tight-lipped and unsure. She squeezed both his hands, kissed one, and found his eyes again. “How, Henry?” she asked. “How does this make you feel?”

Henry’s eyes crinkled as he sank back into his seat, laughter bubbling up from deep inside: frantic, uncontrolled laughter, laughter that brought with it tears. “God, Nan, to think I once imagined this would make me free!” The laughter vanished, but tears remained, salty upon his lips. He pulled one hand away from hers to brush at his face. The hand fell away again and Anne’s eyes were upon him still. He cradled her hand in his. “Nan,” he whispered. “I’m terrified.”

Chapter End Notes

"Dieu et Mon Droit," translated: "God and My Will" is the traditional motto of the Kings of England.

You can read more about Anne's second pregnancy here: https://www.theanneboleynfiles.com/anne-boleyns-mystery-pregnancy/ I, personally, tend to be of the opinion that Anne miscarried but that is something of which we can most likely never be sure.

As with Elizabeth, obv having a child with a different father at a different time would not produce the same child...but we can pretend bc its so much more interesting to have an au which includes Mary and Elizabeth! haha Thanks so much for bearing with me in this, my friends!!
Chapter Summary

To see Mary was to see Arthur in some way alive again.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Catherine of Aragon, Queen of England
York Castle, England
April 1522

Her little Mary tugged at Catherine’s unbound hair. It tumbled and shuddered and bounced back, mesmerizing the tiny child. Catherine giggled, stroking the baby’s soft skin. Mary was to Catherine the most beautiful creature in all the world. Like Arthur, Mary’s hair was more a chestnut than Catherine’s own strawberry blond but its tone was a brighter hue than his had been, as though sunshine had infused it and still flowed from within. Her skin was milky white, utterly new to this world. Mary’s eyes were still the brilliant blue of infancy but Catherine hoped, in her heart of hearts, that they would someday turn to the shade of green Arthur’s had been. To see Mary was to see Arthur in some way alive again. It was a marvel she couldn’t help but wonder at; one which did not dull despite the months that had passed since her birth.

A gentle knock at the door. Catherine glanced up. One of her ladies entered, curtseyed. “Your Grace, His Grace the King.”

Catherine steeled herself as her ladies curtseyed and filed out for the King to attend upon his wife in private. Morning light filtered through the windows and tossed a spot of brightness against the door and his face as he entered. From her bed, Catherine formed a small smile.

“How fares our dear Princess?” he inquired, smiling towards the tiny bundle in Catherine’s arms.

“She is enjoying playing with my hair,” replied Catherine, laughing softly. “She loves to watch the curls bounce.”

Richard smiled, coming slowly around the bed towards her. His grin was a proud, paternal one. “Curious, already,” he began softly. “Perhaps, in time, she will be as clever as her mother.”

Catherine wound her fingers through Mary’s downy tuft of hair. “And her father,” she said, softly. Arthur had spoken many languages, studied many maps, read many books. Catherine wondered if Mary would exhibit his scholastic aptitude. She swallowed hard, realizing again that her auditor was meant to be the father. Catherine licked her lips. Fortunately, Richard was an intelligent man as well.

Undisturbed, Richard laughed, placing a hand to his chest. “You flatter me, my dear.”

She glanced up, smiled, reached out to touch his arm, but thought, still, of Arthur. “Anyone who could survive being cast out and not merely survive exile, but flourish there enough to raise armies, to come back for all that is his own…” she glanced back to Richard. “There is a clever man.”

Richard smiled softly, a little sadly. “Let us pray it never comes to that for our darling Mary.”
Catherine nodded, glancing up towards him. “Yes,” she replied. “But I have few fears for her.” There was Mary uncle; there was her foster father; there was her cousin, the Emperor. Catherine ran a tender finger along Mary’s brow. “One way or another, our dear girl will wear a crown all the days of her life.”

He exhaled. “Because she is a Spanish princess as well?” he paused. “Have you…sent the letter to your nephew the Emperor?”

Catherine glanced down towards the child, stroking her cheek. “Not yet,” she confessed.

Richard’s exhalation was slow, terribly slow, and he nodded. “I…I understand that the too-soon arrival of your travail and the recovery after the birth precluded the writing of the letter at the time I’d originally requested, but you have been quite well now to the point where I have finally convinced you to write it. Why, now that it is written, do you delay so in sending it? Particularly now that the lives of two great princesses of Spain rely upon it? Our treaty withstanding, will the Emperor not be moved by your words to send us aid?”

Catherine sighed, raised her blue eyes towards him. “In truth, Richard, I do not know. For quite some time, my own father was content to leave me at the mercy of the French when my future was uncertain because my husband had died. I see no reason why my sister’s son might do more than my own father, particularly given how Carlos has treated that very relation who links us. Why do you think I did not write to him when I was in London, alone and surrounded, besieged? In truth, I hold this letter because, so long as it is not sent, there is firm hope that aid may come. Once it is sent…we must expect an answer…of whatever kind.”

Richard shifted, reached out to touch Catherine’s arm. “Surely, this is different. While your position and finances were uncertain in France, after you had been widowed, all your woes of the kind were ultimately seen to and, in that case – forgive me, my dear – but you’d lost any claim you might possess to the Queenship of France. What foot would your father have had to stand on in making such a claim? Here you are Queen and mother of the heir presumptive to the English throne. Here, your very life and hers stand in peril, where always it was safe in France. Here, if Carlos fails to act, England may fall to our enemies and if it does so, it shall then be an ally and foothold of France, Spain’s greatest rival. Here, action is required where there, perhaps it might have been easier to overlook. Spain cannot afford for France to gather more power,” Richard paused, studying her face. “Can it?”

Catherine shook her head, slowly. “I hardly know. In truth, I doubt as Spain shall consider England to be much of a threat unless it looks towards Spain with war. I fear my nephew’s gaze is set directly upon Italy, now, too much to see much else with his usual clarity.”

Nodding, Richard glanced towards Mary, running a tender finger across her silky cheek. “I will allow no one to trespass upon her rights as others trampled upon mine. You need have no concerns for her future, my dear. No, send the letter to Spain, Catherine. We will see what comes next, one way or another, when they respond. Then we shall know how to proceed.”

***

HENRY TUDOR, KING OF ENGLAND
Rutland, England
April 1522

Far from home, Henry dreamed of his wife. Anne in the summertime, morning sunlight splashing across her face, half-blinding him as he gazed. Her hands reached for him, her lips smiled invitingly, and he rushed up a hill towards her, pumping his legs as fast as he could. He could not crest the hill;
could not reach her. Harry extended his arms, called to her. “Anne! Anne! Come to me, my darling! Come meet me!”

She walked towards him, but the distance did not close. Her smile remained undisturbed; her hands outstretched. Sunlight enshrouded her, yet he grew cold in the dark far from her.

“Please, Nan, meet me,” he pleaded. “Please, my own sweetheart, I beseech you! I need you here beside me. I need you, I need you, I need you!”

He woke in a state of confusion, in a tent far from everything. Sitting up, he hurled the covers away from him and felt the cool air of early spring rush over him. Everywhere, he saw his men preparing, pulling up their tents and feeding their horses: preparing for another day of travel. A month’s journey had brought them a third of the distance from London to Yorkshire and already Henry was impatient to be home.

“Any news from Her Grace the Queen?” Henry asked the page.

“I’m sorry, Your Grace. No word from London, this morning.”

Harry nodded slowly, gnawed at his lip as he glanced northward and tried not to think of Arthur making this same trek: his last. *My journey will end better*, thought Henry. *It must.*

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CATHERINE OF ARAGON, QUEEN OF ENGLAND

York Castle, England

April 1522

Catherine paused. She held the letter pinched between her fingers, ready for delivery, but something stayed her hand. Yes, she was doing this for Arthur’s daughter…but at the same moment it involved acting against Arthur’s brother, Arthur’s men, and Arthur’s remaining family across the sea still in France. Of course, it was true that her nephew might do nothing. In her experience, Spain was slow to lift a finger for the daughters of the House of Trastámara…and then there was the matter of the other letter sent from England to the Emperor: the letter regarding the potential marriage between Catherine and Arthur. She prayed it had never reached him, else, she feared, her plea now would beg many harrowing questions.

The Queen dithered, taking a single step backwards again.

“Your Grace?” inquired one of her ladies with concern.

Catherine touched her chest, laughed. “Here,” she said, holding the letter out. “Give this letter to our riders. It *must* reach Spain. Our little Princess’s fate hangs in the balance and there is nothing more important.” *Nothing at all.*

In Mary, Arthur was still alive. In Mary, they were still together.

Chapter End Notes

The reference to Catherine’s uncertain times in France are, of course, a reference to her historical uncertainty after the death of Arthur, in England. I think it makes sense that the same sort of circumstances would have played out there at that time.
The mistreatment by Carlos of Catherine's sister is a reference to her imprisonment for 'insanity,' designed to strip her of her rule in Castile and thereby provide her heirs with its regency. Ferdinand was the first to imprison her but her son continued the policy after his death. Whatever her true mental state is still a matter of debate, but you can read more about Juana here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joanna_of_Castile
RICHARD OF SHREWSBURY, KING OF ENGLAND
York Castle, England
May 1522

“Do you know,” began Richard softly. “When I became King of England, I had all the portraits I could find of my usurping predecessor, Henry Tudor, destroyed…all save one.”

The York outside his windows was deceptively lovely, its trees unfurling budding green leaves as new flowers showed their vibrant faces to the sun. The orb shone bright in the sky, suffusing the scene. Yet Richard thought of the soil beneath: supporting all but dark and deep and black, crawling with worms and creeping things. His father’s sun-in-splendor banners had always aligned with more solar comparisons in his family but now he wondered how apt they were. Waiting here behind thick stone walls for his young nephew to come fight him and avenge the murder of his brother…Richard did not feel particularly glorious.

He felt Catherine’s eyes on him and glanced towards her with a smile. “Do you wish to see it?”

“You have it here?”

He nodded. “I carry it with me.”

Richard watched Catherine’s features contort in badly confusion, lips parting and pressing back together again, brows crouching only to rise again, and most of all the questing look in her bright blue eyes gave her away.

The King chuckled. “Strange, isn’t it? Go to the cabinet just there and open it. You will find it on the second shelf, there.”

He watched her as she drew it out, carefully, curiously, bent slightly to access the shelf. He watched as she straightened gradually when she found it. Her neck, however, remaining craned over it. It was small, even in her diminutive fingers, a framed miniature.
“My great enemy,” said Richard, and Catherine looked back up to him again. “In his youth. I believe it was a gift to my sister either for their betrothal or their marriage. Perhaps that is why it is so honest.”

Catherine’s glance was quizzical, one brow looping slightly higher than the other.

He approached, standing by her shoulder. “You see, it does nothing to soften his edges or even the lines that were already scoring his face. This, this, my dear, is the face of a survivor.” Henry VII, as he had once been known, here was shown with watchful, suspicious eyes under brows that slanted sharply towards a too-prominent nose and cheekbones and jawline both so sharp they looked half as if they could slice anyone who might dare touch him. “When I set out, it was against the hideous monster who had lain low my family and their friends; it was to fight for right against wrong and restore honor, glory, and joy to England and to my family. When I arrived, I found that the monster I’d long abhorred was only a man after all. A sharp, suspicious man, but a man of flesh and blood; a man that my sister loved.” He paused. “I never imagined this, any of it. I thought that only good could come of the end of my long exile. Now I know…Henry Tudor most like thought the same thing.”

“What made you change your mind about him?”

Clearing his throat, Richard ran a finger across the top of the image. “When I was shown into my sister, Elizabeth’s, chambers in the Tower which she had so lately and so hastily vacated, I found a number of objects which I knew to be quite dear to her, some from my own experience, that – in her great haste – she had left behind her.” Richard’s finger fell away from the portrait. “This was amongst them. I know my sister, Catherine. She would not have brought it with her to the Tower were it not of great moment to her and, furthermore, I discovered it by her bed, something to keep her company during the long nights apart. It was a practice I knew well, carrying a similar emblem of my own beloved wife with me, and something we’d both learned from our parents. No, she loved him, I am sure. Lizzie could not have loved a monster.” He ran a hand across his face. “Tell me, does he greatly resemble his sons? I once met Henry but never knew Arthur in life, while you have some experience of each.”

Catherine glanced towards him as though startled, her large eyes going wide. She swallowed hard, turning back to the portrait, clutched in her hand. “Yes,” she replied, slowly. “A little. Henry’s mouth and eyes and are smaller but his lips fuller and all of his features softened by comparison, but he has a jaw that, beneath his beard, appears to be squared like his father’s and his brows long and narrow and fair. The nose is similar in that it arches ever so slightly at the center. Arthur, however, Arthur was much more in his father’s image.” Catherine shifted the image in her hands, peering deeply into the face. Like Henry, his mouth was smaller and fuller than his father’s, but most of his other features, other than his hair, were owing to him, save his eyes,” she added. “His eyes were all their own: green that flashed amber.”

“Green,” murmured Richard. “Green like the Woodvilles.” Faces swam up before him: aunts and uncles and cousins and siblings…gone, gone, gone. Richard felt old, older than ever before. “What might he have been, Catherine? What might he have been if he had lived?”

Silence pounded in his head louder than drums. Richard felt sick, recalling the savage, bloody rent in his neck, the too-pale face drained of life and blood.

Catherine turned her hands over in her lap, and glanced towards little Mary’s crib. “And what will his brother be,” she asked, at last. “Now that Arthur is dead?”

***
The rain had not abated for days. Sheets and sheets poured over them, cloaking the land in its patter. For two days, they trek towards York had been completely halted, the rain and flooding proving too much even to move. But Henry was not a patient sort. He did not wait until it was all over; he did not even wait until the rain relented. He pressed and pressed until it was firm enough that the wagon wheels would turn.

Nottingham felt desolate in the rain, Henry thought as he swayed atop his horse. Perhaps a more relaxed mind might have endowed the countryside with beauty: sweeping and climbing hills, tangles of unfettered trees peaking out from the pastures, divided by the usual short stone walls. Yes, perhaps it was beautiful: leafy and green with cheerful flowers dotting the landscape, but it was not beauty Henry was in any frame of mind to appreciate. The travel wore on his senses: his chafing thighs burned where the saddle touched and his back was stiff and complaining. His extremities, too, were a sad affair: wet and cold and cold and cold; cold till the damp seemed to have soaked into his bones; cold till its icy breath seemed to seep from his marrow to suffuse the rest. His sleep had been ill, too: too loud or too quiet by turns. He missed his bed at home: any of his homes, the finest, most luxurious fabrics enfolding him and drawing him towards sleep…and he missed his bed’s other occasional occupant. He missed his wife.

Henry thought of Anne often, pictured her sewing or reading or penning a letter – perhaps to him! – or (most often) he pictured her pretending to do any one of these or other activities, all the while utterly distracted by the thought of him. Yes, this was his favorite pastime, but the cold damp drove it from his head whenever a frigid rain droplet spewed down his head and onto his face, despite his hood, to dribble down his brow, his nose, his cheeks and lips and finally roll, eventually roll down his very neck, were it not arrested before that time by the swipe of impatient fingers, leaving a wet trail of cold down his face. He wondered if it were raining where Anne was. He pictured her peering out one of the great windows, with little Elizabeth snuggled in her arms, wondering if it rained on him as he wondered of her. He wondered, too, if little Elizabeth had grown. He acknowledged, too, that he would never know unless he returned to their loving arms again.

“We pitch camp here,” commanded Harry as the curtain of night sloped over the sky. The sun’s grandeur slumped against the horizon, shuddering towards the last breath of gloaming. Rain blurred the sun’s last rays, as well, as the shroud of fog crept across the ground and the first glittering stars winked awake in the sky.

Harry was still watching the horizon when he heard the first cry. It was a squawk, half-choked, half-shocked, like a startled bird. He turned slowly towards the sound, frowning. “Strange,” he whispered.

“Tis but a bird, sire,” said a nearby guard.

“Strange, still,” commented his fellow. “Given the hour.”

Another sound, like the whispered howl of far-away wind, a spluttered gasp.

Harry tensed, clenching his fists by his side.

“What in heaven’s name?” demanded the second guard, leaning forward, hand on sword hilt.

“Look alive, Masters,” instructed Harry. From another direction, a shriek cut short. It seemed to echo, ringing through the air sharp as a knife, fierce and high and plaintive. Harry trembled. He did
as his father would do: he put his hand to his sword. He did as his mother would do: he made bold his face. “Steady, steady, and be alert!” Harry drew his sword. The sound of a thousand swords unsheathing pierced the air.

He took a step forward. The fog was a sheet around them and no enemy appeared, only a quick blur of deadly sound: one here, another there.

“There must be an army!” cried a soldier, voice tremulous. “But where? Where?”

Harry grit his teeth. Cold that was not in the air seeped into his bones. “Must there be?” he whispered. He rushed towards the highest spot amidst his men, raising his voice. “Do you mean to frighten us, you cowards?” he shouted into the swirling darkness. “Come out and fight us like men!”

Only the darkness answered, looming and deep.
Distinguishment

Chapter Summary

“I seem to recall hearing something,” began Harry, grin widening. “Of you distinguishing yourself.”

Chapter Notes

Thank you, everyone, for your kind understanding during my hiatus. I am back, now, to a regular schedule and chapters will be coming regularly, again!!

Note: this chapter has not yet been edited. Thanks so much for your understanding, my darling ones <3

HENRY TUDOR, KING OF ENGLAND
Nottingham, England
May 1522

Morning light peaked, gold and rosy, over the crest of the next hill. Harry breathed in deeply, inhaling the wildflowers and the herbs and the scent of rain. Morning brought hope, he’d learned, and he welcomed it with renewed vigor, watching as the sun scoured the shadows clean. Harry pressed his eyes shut and bid adieu to the harrowing night, as he did, now, every morning. Nights were full of horror: shouts and cries of horror ringing out from the midst of his men. Bodies would be found, come morning, of those who had straggled too far from the others, but the silent raiders who murdered them remained unseen and elusive. Henry’s corps had passed the space of two weeks, this way, harrying their progress often even as they marched when the weather was poor or misty. Harry feared those attacks almost more than the night ones, as at night, sentries were now posted entirely surrounding camp, each two within sight of the next two. Yes, it had been a brutal journey, and Harry already cringed to think what would come with the night.

Now, however, as daylight streamed upon him, he embraced its warmth in the clear day. Camp was buzzing with activity as the men gathered their goods and prepared for another hard day of travel – and the forbidding uncertainty that would come with nightfall. He had just concluded his breakfast when a page bowed his way in.

“Your Grace, Sir John Dudley humbly requests an audience.”

Harry glanced in surprise towards him. “Sir John?”

“He informed me, Your Grace, that your late brother His Grace, King Arthur, did knight Sir John upon the late king’s coronation in Winchester.”

Harry waved a hand. “No doubt he did,” replied the king. “Well, show him in. Wherever did he come from?”
“I’m afraid I can’t say, Your Grace. He made no mention of it.”

Harry nodded, quickly, wave a hand. “Show him in, show him in.”

John Dudley had grown since Harry had seen him last in France, rearing to fight for England. He was young – even now no more than nineteen, Harry would wager, but looking rather tough with a bristling beard and a scar across the face to boot and gleaming eyes that bespoke horrors seen.

“How now, Sir John?” boomed Harry, striding across the tent to greet him.

“Your Grace,” said John, dropping to one knee.

“None of that, none of that, up you go. Now, I pray you satisfy my curiosity. Last I saw you was back in France when you set sail for Wales with my brother, in the September of ‘20.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” replied John and he glanced aside, laughed hollowly. “It seems longer ago than that, now, doesn’t it?”

Harry’s smile was taut and he extended his hand to indicate a chair where John might sat, as he assumed one of his own.

Taking the seat, John swallowed hard as Harry’s page poured them each a cup to drink. “I fought alongside the king until he fell, Your Grace.”

“I seem to recall hearing something,” began Harry, grin widening. “Of you distinguishing yourself.”

John couldn’t prevent the grin that widened his face. “It is generous of Your Grace to say so,” he replied. “I can only report that His Grace the late King Arthur was pleased with my deeds and therefore knighted me in Winchester and gave me Jane Guilford for a wife.”

“Pleased I am to hear it. How came you to be wandering the South Yorkshire fields? You look half-starved,” he added, gesturing to his page to bring some food.

“So please Your Grace, I was released by the Usurper.”

“Released?”

John nodded. “In penance, I suppose, for the wicked slaying of His Grace King Arthur, the Usurper released some number of his captains, myself included. I confess, I became quite lost, but when I caught sight of your host coming this way, I felt Heaven had saved me.”

“Please, eat,” said Harry, as the page set down some food before him. “You’ve been living off the land, I suppose?”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“Do you know what became of the other captains?”

“No, Your Grace,” said John. “I was only told that this was the reason and taken from the cell and released outside the gate. At first, I thought the archers above would shoot me dead once outside, but they let me go as well, only warned me not to tarry and set me on my way with a skin of water and the clothes upon my back. I decided to make for London.”

“So,” began Harry, softly. “You’ve been inside the walls of York. Tell me of it. Tell me everything.”

***
Settling into the chair by the desk, Anne sorted through the letters that had filtered in for Henry from France. She glanced towards her sister.

“Thank you, Mary, for keeping me company while attend Henry’s correspondence. Most of it is really quite tedious. Can you believe it? The kingdom not yet won and already a thousand, thousand favors asked. I can hardly imagine where they find the courage to ask.”

Mary chuckled. “Oh, come now. You, yourself have asked favors of a crown not secure.”

Anne scoffed. “What favors are these, pray tell?” she inquired, smirking, as she laid a hand on her belly, already protruding. “I can think of nothing, so certainly it is nothing so great as all of that.”

Mary’s brows shot up. “Why, Anne, you’ve asked the greatest favor of them all! You wed the last prince of the House of Tudor and are now a queen when you’ve nothing to offer but your love.”

Anne stiffened and turned back to her letters. They seemed to flutter with her harried motion, and she sorted through them half-nervously. “Is that not enough?”

Rising, Mary crossed the room to touch her sister’s shoulder. “More than enough, I think. More, certainly, than Henry could have asked of any arranged match…Indeed, for him it was a great boon, but it was a great deal to ask of England. Have compassion when you answer your letters,” urged Mary.

Nodding slowly, Anne licked her lips. Her sister was right, of course, but she did not especially like to admit it out loud. She smiled a bit shallowly, arched a slender brow. “Well, then, Lady Carey,” she replied with a soft laugh. “I shall bear that in mind.” Anne cleared her throat and turned towards the letters at the desk.

“Who has written?”


Mary shrugged. “Where would Henry start?”

Reaching out, Anne plucked the letter bearing the seal of Elizabeth of York from the stack.

“What does she say?”

“So far the usual – she loves him dearly, hopes he is well, prays for myself and our little Elizabeth… wait…”

Mary leaned forward. “What is it?”

Anne glanced up. “Mary, I think she found something that may help Henry in the coming battle. Anne stood so quickly her chair sputtered and creaked to the floor. Whirling, her page rushed towards her.

“Your Grace! Are you well?”
“Where is the King?” demanded Anne. “Where is the King now?”

“I-” spluttered the page.

Anne stuffed the letter from Queen Elizabeth into the page’s hand. “See to it that these reach the King before he reaches York. See to it at once! Go, now!”

Eyes widening, the page turned and flew out the door. She listened to the sound of his feet stamping as he rushed away.

“What is it, Nan? What did you read?”

Placing a hand to her breast, Anne offered up a silent prayer that the information find him before Henry’s battle began. “York has a weakness and, if we’re very, very lucky…perhaps Henry can exploit it.”

Chapter End Notes

John Dudley is, of course, the same Duke of Northumberland complicit in the Jane Grey affair. You can read more about him here:
The Changeling

Chapter Summary

“God,” said the King. “Has a perverse sense of humor.”

Chapter Notes

Note carefully the dates in this chapter, as this is largely a flashback chapter, bookended by present moments!

Also note: in this chapter, as a result, Dickon = Richard of Shrewsbury and Ned = Edward V.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

RICHARD OF SHREWSBURY, KING OF ENGLAND
York Castle, England
June 1522

Mary’s baby-fat fingers curled around Richard’s, soft as satin. Catherine sat by the crib, perched on the edge of her chair as she smiled down at her daughter. They made a vision together, Richard thought, looking at them. There was so much of Catherine in the child: that same chestnut hair, the same nose and lips…but her eyes, her eyes were all green-and-amber, bright and lustrous, as they lost the blue hue native to infants. The hue seemed familiar to him, somehow, reminiscent of something, something he’d seen or something once said, something he could not quite recall. Richard touched the top of Mary’s little fist tenderly, very tenderly, and the answer presented itself. Lizzie’s boy, he remembered. The murdered boy: the son of his own sister.

“What color, my dear, did you say Arthur Tudor’s eyes were?”

Catherine’s look was astonished. Her blue eyes were clouded like the sun on a wintry day, and he felt a quaver of guilt. “What?”

Richard smiled softly, half-queasy, and shook his head. “Nevermind, my dear,” he replied, laughed, a half-strangled sound. “It is of no consequence.” Richard bent to kiss Mary’s little hand. “God,” said the King. “Has a perverse sense of humor.”

The doors drew open and Hal Courtenay rushed in, sweeping a bow. “Forgive me, Your Grace, Your Grace,” he said first to Richard, then to Catherine. “I bear dread tidings. The Tudor host has been spotted, at last. They have almost reached us. For all our hindrance, harrying their troops in the dark of night, it has done little to slow their progress. They are here at last and we must now face them.”

“Or flee,” suggested Edmund de la Pole, sardonically, walking in behind Hal. “These are our only options.”
“We are safest behind these walls,” protested Hal.

Richard shook his head. “No safer here than behind the walls of the Tower.”

Even Edmund looked stunned. “I did not truly mean to suggest we flee, Your Grace. Where would we go?”

***

SIR EDWARD BRAMPTON
London, England
July 1483

“You have heard the King’s command,” hissed the first officer. Brampton did not know either of the three officers’ names and he did not care to. It was better this way.

“I have heard it,” replied Brampton. “In full.” He stretched out his hand and was quickly rewarded, a hefty pouch placed into his upturned palm.

“£350,” said the second officer.

“And here the deeds to your Northamptonshire estates,” said the third, putting the papers into Brampton’s hands.

“How is the expense recorded?” inquired Brampton.

“For services…unspecified. And hereafter you will receive a stipend of £100 a year for your continuous unspecified service to the crown.”

Brampton inclined his head. “Unspecified,” he agreed, glancing beyond the officers. The night was full and dark, even the moon mostly hidden away behind spongy clouds above, and Brampton had to squint to see the little boat with its little passenger beyond. Flicking his eyes back towards the officer, Brampton shrugged. “That’s it, then,” he said.

“Remember,” said the third officer. “The boy is still convalescent from the illness that killed his brother and nearly claimed his own life. Treat him with all possible care.”

“How else?” quipped Brampton, pocketing the purse and turning away from King Richard’s officers. He trudged down to the bank of the Thames.

“Tyrrell!” shouted the boy, suddenly, turning from the spot where he was huddled in the boat back to face shore. “Forrest! Dighton!”

The first officer hunched his shoulders as the others turned to glance at the first. “Hush!” he called from the banks. “Hush, now, and do as this man says! No doubt we shall see you again, soon, but for now, hush!”

Brampton stopped where he was, turned slowly to the three officers. “What does the boy know?”

“Nothing,” said the last officer.

“Too much,” said the first.

***

RICHARD OF SHREWSBURY, KING OF ENGLAND
“Who’re you?” Dickon narrowed his eyes as the stranger stepped into the boat. “Where are Tyrrell and his men going?” Dickon glanced towards the little trio as they stalked away from the muddy Thames shore, back towards the Tower.

The evening had comprised a strange turn of events. Bustled out of bed in the wee hours and hustled to the river gates by Miles Forrest and John Dighton, (two of James Tyrrell’s lackeys), they had at last pulled up on a nearby shore away from the Tower where they’d met with Tyrrell, himself, and now this stranger.

“In light of Buckingham’s betrayal of His Grace, your Uncle the King,” Tyrrell had told Dickon. “The King deems it best you be sent to safer shores, so that both yourself, my lord, and the kingdom may rest at ease. If you were to fall into enemy hands, there should be safety for no one. If the enemies of the realm know not where to find you, however, you can hardly be in harm’s way, and the King has many allies, elsewhere, who may be trusted in these difficult hours.” It was all Tyrrell would say.

“But who do you mean?” Dickon had asked. “My brother is dead. Am I not the King?”

To that, Tyrrell made no answer.

The man sitting across from Dickon in the boat, gave the boy a long look. He lifted the oars and pushed off from shore.

“Where are we going?” asked Dickon. “Please, Master, take me back to Mama and my sisters. I wish most dearly to see them.”

“I’m a knight, lad,” said the man. His eyes seemed to glitter in the slanting moonlight, orbs reflective like the blackened water’s ripples, and Dickon could not see past the surface of either.

“Please, sir,” Dickon corrected himself. “Take me home.”

The oars made slopping sounds as they folded into the water, wet and dripping, and swept them along. The man studied Dickon intently and said nothing and time dripped on with the squelching of the oars.

“We’re not going home,” observed Dickon, finally, holding either bulwark of the boat with his hands. “Are we?”

Only the oars made answer, swoosh, swoosh, swoosh. Dickon felt a tremor run through him and the man stared on and on and on.

Dickon’s fists wrapped tight around the bulwarks of the boat. “What are you going to do with me?”


“I hardly know what you mean, as these are the first words you’ve spoken.”

The man nodded. “You knew who those men were. I don’t think I’ve a wish to tell you my name, if you mean to be as free with it as you were with the others.”

Dickon licked his lips. “You don’t want me to say your name?”
“Not just now. As it happens, you are traveling, lad, *incognito*.”

“Incognito? Why?”

A pause. The man licked his lips, pulled the oars again, again. “I knew your father,” volunteered the man, at last.

Dickon sat up a little straighter. “You did?”

“Aye, lad. He was a good – a *great* – man. Do you know, in some sense, you and I are kin?”

Dickon gave the man a dubious once over and the man cracked a smile. “We are?”

“Not by blood,” said the man. “But in the Lord. As the King, your father was my godfather when I accepted Christ and His Church as the one, true God and Faith.”

Smiling slightly, Dickon glanced down. “Did you ever meet?”

“Oh, aye, when your father made war with France, I went with him and I competed in the tourney in Burgundy. I fought so well there that your father granted me arms.”

Dickon’s lips quirked into a smile. “He must have enjoyed that fight.”

“He did,” replied the man. “*Immensely*. Do you like a good fight, lad?”

“I don’t know,” replied the boy. “I’ve never been in one. Anyway, you shouldn’t call me ‘lad.’ I’m the King.”

“Are you, now?” inquired the man, smiling indulgently.

“You mustn’t laugh at me! It’s true! My brother’s dead and my father’s dead and that leaves me.”

“Is that so? I hear talk of another king, you know. A King Richard.”

“That’s me,” stated Dickon, puffing out his chest. “*My* name is Richard.”

The oars sang, slipping underwater and back and back and back. “I see,” said the man. He offered a smile, then. “This King Richard,” he said, at last. “Has also inherited his throne from his deceased elder brother, Edward. However, it is another Edward and another Richard, I am afraid, good my lord.”

“What do you mean?” Dickon swallowed hard. “What do you say? That there is a usurper upon my throne?” Dickon felt a wave of panicky nausea. Often his father had talked of the wars for the throne, once been cast out of England; but Papa was no longer there to protect any of them. It all fell to him. Creeping horror slithered along Dickon’s spine. He was 9 years old. How could he protect them all? He had to be strong. He had to be strong like his father, like his mother, like Lizzie. He had to be strong. “What of my mother? My sisters?” He shook his head. “They cannot do this to us!” Dickon slammed his fist. “I am the *King*! You cannot *do* this! I hope very much you are taking me to my mother,” he added, glancing around him at the black water. “I command you to! I *command* it!”

“You cannot command me, my little lord, because I received my orders from the other king, and, as I am bound to him through my loyalty to your father, to his orders I must adhere.”

“If you are loyal to my father, you should do as I say. It is what he would want.” Dickon hunched his shoulders, leaning backwards against the sturdy bulwarks behind him. But other words hovered in his head, swathes like black lace to obscure his thoughts and sour his belly. Dim fear cloyed all
around him, whispering foul deeds into his skull. “What other king?” Dickon whimpered, hugging his arms, and thought of his brother’s foaming breath when he’d gasped out his last. Dickon’s voice cracked, sounding small, very small, in his own ears. “Do you mean to kill me?”

“No, my dear little lord. Did I not tell you that you and I are kin of the spirit? No, I take you somewhere safe. It is not safe in London for you; indeed, there is no place in all of England that is safe for you, now, little lord. But I will make you safe where we are heading.”

“I want my mother,” said Dickon. “I want Lizzie! Where is Lizzie?”

“Mayhaps you will see her soon,” said the man, rowing on. “Doubtless, your uncle will soon recall you or else send her to you. He needs must make safe the borders of England, first, and he cannot do that if any rebel lot may snatch you up.”

“Snatch me up?”

“Already great lords of England have made efforts to capture you from the safety of the Tower. But the Tower is not safe as King Richard discovered to his sorrow, during the illness of both yourself and your brother and the plotting of the nobles. Now, they will not know where to find you. You will be safe.”

Tears flowed unbidden and Dickon glanced into the darkness of the night. Beside him, still, Ned gasped, foaming at the mouth. “Dickon!” Ned screamed, casting out his hand. Dickon whimpered, felt his tears drowning him as he stared into the water all around. “The Tower is not safe,” he agreed. “It is not safe. It is not safe. It is not safe.”

“And neither is England, little lord.”

Dickon turned slowly to look at the man. “Where will you take me?”

“Across the sea to Tournai,” he told him. “And from thence onto Antwerp. After that, little lord, wherever else fate may bear us.”

“Tournai?”

“Yes, and there no one will recognize you. You will be safe, at last.”

“Why will they not know me, there?”

“It is all arranged, little lord. The comptroller of Tournai is a friend of your father and of your uncle, from their time in exile there. You will now be his son, Piris.”

“Piris?”

“Or Piers, if you like.”

“Perkin,” said Dickon. “I want a nickname like my own. Call me Perkin.”

The man smiled softly. “As you like, my little lord. Richard of Shrewsbury no more. From this day forth, you will be Perkin Warbeck.”

**

RICHARD OF SHREWSBURY, KING OF ENGLAND
York Castle, England
June 1522
“There is no safe place in all the world,” said the King. “We will stand and we will fight till there is no life left in us.”

Chapter End Notes

So obviously this is the final piece of the puzzle in linking Perkin Warbeck with Richard of Shrewsbury in this story. So I tied a lot of things in here. For example, I made James Tyrrell, Miles Forrest, and John Dighton the ones who took Dickon from the Tower, as they are the men accused by Thomas More of the actual murder of the Princes in the Tower (that is, according to More, that Richard III ordered Tyrrell to take care of it, who disposed of the matter by dispatching Forrest and Dighton to do it. According to More, the men confessed to smothering the boys and then burying them "at the stayre foote, metely depe in the grounde vnder a great heape of stones." After the immediate burial, the bodies were moved by a third party, according to More, and their ultimate location lost forever).

Ok, on to Brampton!! While, again, I don't actually believe that Richard of Shrewsbury and Perkin Warbeck were, indeed, the same person. I also wanted to use a believable premise so!! I have some evidence that can support this theory. It is VERY difficult to find any actual writing about Perkin Warbeck, the historical figure, so most of this info comes from The Perfect Prince by Ann Wroe, a biography of Perkin Warbeck.

According to Perkin Warbeck's signed confession (after being taken a prisoner by Henry VII, so this "confession" is of a highly suspect nature but anyway), when Perkin was 9 or 10 years old, he went from Tournai to Antwerp, where he fell very ill for about five months. Perkin's exact birthdate is unknown, of course, but is generally considered to be c. 1474, which would make ten years later c. 1484, with the Princes having disappeared from the Tower in the summer of 1483. This timetable matches up pretty well with a scenario like I've created here, where Richard of Shrewsbury was spirited away under a false name, particularly if Edward V did die of an illness (which I truly think he may well have done) and his brother was also infected (again, I think Richard of Shrewsbury probably died of illness with his brother in the Tower but outlived Edward by some months as people seem to have been more certain that Edward was dead and not as sure about Richard).

Perkin was convalescent at an inn right beside the house of English adventurer-merchants, an apt description of Sir Edward Brampton, a naturalized English citizen, who orginally hailed from Portugal and maintained a healthy relationship with England, the Low Countries, and Portugal, to keep a lively business of trade between those various places. In fairness, in this scenario I've generated, it is more likely that someone else would have taken Richard from England to the Low Countries (though if anyone could reliably smuggle a royal boy across the Channel, I certainly wouldn't put it past someone like Brampton). However, here, I made it Brampton just to streamline things.

The "Piris or Piers" thing is in reference to the fact that Brampton called him "Piris" while the confession called his "Piers." It's likely, as in keeping with the period, he was known by both as well as by "Peter," another translation of the name. In any case, Perkin was a nickname for any of those. His last name is similarly up for translation, known as Warbeck, Warbecque, Osbeck, Uberque, etc.
The money!! So Richard III did indeed award Brampton the very handsome sum (to keep this amount in perspective, the lucrative wardship of James Tyrrell and custody of his lands was purchased from Cecily Neville, Duchess of York, by William Tyrrell's widow in 1463 for £50) of £350 + lands in the year 1483 for reasons unspecified. Now, it is likely, that this was, in fact, awarded to him for services performed in defending Richard III's claim during the Duke of Buckingham's rebellion, as Brampton was a warrior recorded as fighting in tournaments, on the field, and in the water for Edward IV. However, since the reasons aren't noted, I made this a payoff here. Additionally, and more mysteriously, he was granted an annuity of £100 a year for twenty years by Richard III. Of course, the annuity didn't last beyond Richard's lifetime, but no one could have predicted that. Likely, this was simply a retainer for Brampton's continued services both mercantile and warlike, but, as that is also not noted, I made it a retainer for his services re: Richard of Shrewsbury.

In any case, whatever version of Perkin Warbeck's you most trust (Brampton's account to the Spanish, his account to the English - accounts which vary! but you can't really trust Brampton: he loved making outlandish claims for example he claimed to be a Knight of the Garter, but he was not), Perkin's confession or the tale Perkin told before he was captured by Henry VII...all agree that traveling with Brampton is how Perkin wound up in Portugal, a chapter in his life I wrote about already.

If you have questions, (I'm out of room here) hit me up in comments!
Fighting Fit

Chapter Summary

He offered a small smile as he took those letters, too; felt the smooth, dry parchment beneath his fingertips.

Chapter Notes

Note: this chapter has not yet been edited! My apologies!!

HENRY TUDOR, KING OF ENGLAND
Yorkshire, England
June 1522

The day was vast, huge skies arching up and up and up overhead as the soldiers pitched camp. The sounds were familiar now, a drudgery born of expectation rather than out of the work of it, itself. Henry swung one leg around to dismount, sliding from his weary horse’s side. He gave the steed a pat of gratitude.

“I know,” said Henry, running a soothing hand across its weary withers. “I feel just the same.”

“Make way!” came a shout from the edge of camp. Henry turned to see a rider baring towards him. “Make way in the name of the Queen!”

Henry’s heart gave a squeeze at that sound and he darted forward, heard someone asking: “Which Queen?”

But Henry knew, he knew in his heart…and he also could see clearly enough that the rider had come from the direction of London. It could be only Anne who had dispatched him. Exultation mingled with panic as the king flew across the field. What manner of tidings are these, he wondered: Fine or foul?

Henry watched his panicked page dart before him to put up the call. “The King! The King!” The crowd parted like the Red Sea beneath Moses’ staff and Henry approached the rider unmolested.

“You grace!” greeted the messenger, dismounting in a single bound and bowing quickly. “Her Grace, Queen Anne, sends her greetings and ordered me to put these letters into your very hand ere battle be commenced.”

Accepting the letters, Henry smiled. “Then you’ve done well by Her Grace the Queen. She will be pleased, as am I.” Henry nodded to his page. “A purse, for your services. And there is another thing,” he added. “Your letters of conduct: I would have them.”

The messenger’s eyes widened. “I swear to you, Your Grace, ’twas Queen Anne who dispatched me
“It is not proof I require,” assured Henry. “I wish to keep them.”

The envoy pulled the papers into view; hesitated. “But, good my liege, how shall I make my way back without letters of conduct? Her Grace the Queen bade me return to her with news of Your Grace.”

“Have no fear,” replied Henry. “I will furnish you with letters of conduct by my own hand. I merely wish to hold hers in mine.” He offered a small smile as he took those letters, too; felt the smooth, dry parchment beneath his fingertips. He imagined they were her hands, instead: warm and welcoming and fond. He loved her hands: fine, tapering fingers made for caressing and soft palms made to be caressed. Biting his lip, Henry nodded. “I thank you, master. Stay, eat, rest your horse and begone upon the morrow with my letters and blessing to return to the Queen. Tell her...tell her that I long for her above all else.” He nodded. “Tell her.”

Turning away from the messenger, Henry held the pack of letters taut in his hand as he walked towards his tent. They were still pitching it, but the structure held fast and he ordered his desk brought straight away. The top was a letter from...Henry felt astonishment settle over him like mornig dew over grass. “Mama?” he murmured, turning it over to break the seal; found it already broken. “Nan,” he whispered, opening the letter. His mother’s penmanship was as familiar as his own – remarkably similar to his own – and he smiled softly, running his fingertips over it. Her salutations were formal and hasty and she hurled herself forcibly into the contents of the letter. His own interest was heightened when he saw other familiar handwriting in the margin. In Anne’s hand, his own name had been written, and Anne had hastily sketched out a hand, pointing one finger towards a few line of his mother’s script.

We have made a discovery, my own one, in records long forgotten, Elizabeth of York had written. There may be no need of your brother’s bloody plot, as there is another in the offing. The castle has been decimated by assault, by wind, by fire, and by water and it wears, today, these scars. In 1360, records show that a massive crack had begun to form along the base of the east lobe of the King’s Tower, along with other structural defects. These issues have not seen adequate repair as, indeed, the entire Castle has fallen largely into disuse and therefrom to disrepair. My Uncle Richard, I recall, had ruinous buildings knocked down. It is possible the Usurper has made some repairs but, the crack of which I hitherto made mention is so ancient a catastrophe that it is entirely possible its weakness has been forgotten, and as such all focus may be aimed towards the more recent collapses that occurred during my uncle’s ill-begotten reign. My darling Harry, said his mother. I wish you well.

Squeezing his eyes shut, Harry raised the letter to his lips. “Alleluia,” he whispered and raised his eyes to his page. “Summon Sir John Dudley,” he commanded. “There is much to be done.”

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SIR JOHN DUDLEY
Yorkshire, England
June 1522

“Have you seen this damage?” inquired the King, rubbing his beard. His eyes were blue as waves and John Dudley exhaled slowly under their keen gaze.

“I espied the Tower,” he replied slowly. “Though, I confess, I was allowed no time to peruse it and saw no sign of damage. My viewing was quite brief, in any case, and I was hardly looking at the tower, as there was much else holding my attention upon being imprisoned.”
Henry nodded sagely and it occurred to him that this monarch, too, had been a prisoner. John need not explain the feeling overmuch. “I understand,” said Henry. “There is something else, however. My brother brought with him our warships from France, I believe.”

“That he did, Your Grace.”

“They were captured with the rest. Do you know where they are now?”

“Unless they have been moved since last I was there,” began John. “They are moored upon the River Fosse.”

The King nodded slowly. “I want them back, Sir John,” he said. “I want both warships back. If I give you a contingent, can you lead the men to the ships?”

“Your Grace, I can do more than that. I can take them back for you.” He paused. “Is it not a risky proposition, however? Will this plot not require a triple division of your army? One to test the strength of the wall, one to draw the focus of the Usurper, and a third to abscond with the ships? Forgive me, Your Grace, but your men are already exhausted by their harrowing trek. Is it a sustainable option?”

The King smiled softly, almost whimsically. “Mayhaps,” he replied. “But however divided, we remain one army.” He paused. “There are two more inside those walls.”

“What do you mean?”

“There is the army we fight: the Usurper’s men, aye, but I confess, I am more taken with the other army inside those walls: Arthur’s. The Usurper released my brother’s captains, yes, but he did not disperse his army. You see, Sir John, we need only divide our forces once and that much may be easily done.”

“I doubt as they shall have been kept fighting fit, Your Grace.”

“All we need, my friend are numbers. We can carry the day.”

Chapter End Notes

The King's Tower - known since the 1590s as Clifford's Tower - does, indeed, have damage. You can read about it and its history here: https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/cliffords-tower-york/history-and-stories/history/ and here: http://www.historyofyork.org.uk/themes/norman/clifford-s-tower
Chapter Summary

“It seems that Arthur wrote to Carlos of his intention to wed Catherine.”

“What?”

“And the Emperor has responded.”

Chapter Notes

Sorry, my friends, but I have not yet edited this! Please bear with me <3 Thank you!!

MARY CAREY, LADY TO QUEEN ANNE OF ENGLAND
Palace of Placentia, England
June 1522

“What is it, Anne?” inquired Mary, coming quickly to her sister’s side. “Your page said that it was most urgent.”

Standing from her writing desk – which had been Henry’s desk and Arthur’s before him – Anne thrust a letter into her hand.

“What’s this?” mumbled Mary, turning the parchment over in her hand, only to gasp. “This bears the seal of the Holy Roman Emperor!”

“It seems that Arthur wrote to Carlos of his intention to wed Catherine.”

“What?”

“And the Emperor has responded.”

The letter was feather-weight in her hand, but it seemed to heart that he may as well have sent them a notice carved in stone. The artifact seemed to bear down heavily upon her and Mary glanced up urgently to her sister. Words suggested themselves in confused certainty, withdrawing again when she opened her mouth to speak.

Nodding, Anne caught her hand, reassuringly. “You know what this means, don’t you? Carlos here gives his consent to the marriage. He has in his possession Arthur’s letter.”

Mary sank into a seat, putting a hand to her lips. “This is a firm basis for a suit to the Pope to contest Princess Mary’s legitimacy.” Mary glanced away. “This stands as proof that Arthur and Catherine entered into their marriage in good faith…it means that, if Arthur’s paternity were revealed, Catherine could ask the Pope to legitimize her daughter. Did Arthur mention that they had married?”

Anne shook his head. “It seems he wrote it before the wedding had occurred, at a time when he was
simply hoping to wed her, but still proves that Arthur knew of no impediment to the marriage, as the Emperor’s letter mentions how Arthur spoke of the death of Richard.”

“God in Heaven,” whispered Mary. “Anne, what are you going to do? Catherine may not even want this, now that she’s convinced the world that Mary is Richard’s, and with Catherine and Mary in Yorkist custody, well, it may put both mother and child in danger, should this get out. Not to mention, the position in which it would put Henry and little Elizabeth…”

“I don’t know!” exclaimed Anne, snatching the letter back and returning to the desk.

“What would Arthur want?”

She shrugged. “I didn’t know him very well…” she paused, turned towards Mary. “You knew him better. All that time I spent with Henry in France, you spent with Arthur. What do you think?”

Swallowing, she shrugged. “Arthur was a much more reticent person than Henry and therefore harder to get to know, but…I can tell you he was immensely practical. I think he would say that the needs of the living outweigh the desires of the dead. And I think he would want his family – all of them – protected. But I cannot tell you what course would best protect any of them: Catherine, Mary, Henry, Elizabeth…And I know he was a creature of duty but, unfortunately, safety and duty do not go hand-in-hand in this scenario,” she shrugged. “I don’t know.”

Anne exhaled slowly. “In any case, I am Henry’s Regent and therefore it is his wishes I must anticipate. And, until such time – if it should ever arrive – as Princess Mary is declared legitimate by the Pope, it is Henry who is Arthur’s legal heir.”

“What will you do?”

“I will keep the letter safe until such time as it is wanted. I cannot see what else to do with it. I cannot send it to York and risk the revelation of Catherine’s secret and treachery against my husband; I cannot send it to Henry as he prepares to go to war – perhaps, even now, is fighting for his life…”

Anne attempted to suppress a sob. “I see no other option than to keep it, especially for this reason: if Henry is dead even now or, or dies, or is captured…This,” she said, holding up the letter. “Is the only bargaining chip I have to save my husband and my daughter and myself from the wrath of the Usurper and his minions. Arthur found out how the Yorkists treat conquered kings.”

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RICHARD OF SHREWSBURY, KING OF ENGLAND
Castle York, England
June 1522

“Who were the ladies that were attendant upon Her Grace the Queen during her Tudor captivity?” inquired Richard, as his armor was strapped on. Two pages glanced between each other and his squires paused in confusion.

“The same who attend her now,” said one of the squires, finally. “Excepting those who chose to stay on with the so-called Queen Anne as her attendants at the Tudor court.”

“Please, bring a few to me.”

“Beg Your Grace’s pardon,” said another squire. “But a battle is about to commence, perhaps now-”

Richard shook his head. “Go. Now. I need not speak to each of them, only one or two. Go!”
Soon enough, Anne Stafford, Countess of Huntindon, a cousin of Richard’s, and Anne Hastings, Countess of Shrewsbury, a cousin of Dickon’s, were ushered in, dropping low curtseys to the king who quickly dismissed his attendants.

“Pray forgive me, ladies, for my intrusion at such a time as this. I hope to see you quickly returned to Her Grace your mistress. It is only I have been much in doubt as to the treatment my wife received at the hands of the Tudors. Please, you must tell me.”

“She was treated very kindly, Your Grace,” replied Anne Hastings.

“With great respect,” said Anne Stafford. “And, even, Your Grace, a degree of…affection.”

“Affection?”

The two Annes exchanged a glance and Anne Stafford continued. “Your Grace, it might even be said there was a…closeness between Her Grace the Queen and, and the Pretender, Arthur.”

Richard waved a hand. “You need not call him that. My nephew, you mean: Arthur Tudor, the late Earl of Richmond.”

The Annes exchanged another glance.

“So you say, Your Grace,” replied Anne Stafford.

Anne Hastings continued. “Your Grace, there was one particular instance, when the Preten-that is, the late Earl of Richmond came upon us while walking. Because we were all to treat him as a King – Your Grace understands that we were his hostages – we all curtsied, including the Queen, but he took her hand and raised her up and bade her make no obeisance to him. He then bid we ladies remain where we were, within range of sight, and took Her Grace the Queen with him out of range of hearing. They spoke for some little time and then-”

“And then?” prompted Richard.

“And then,” continued the other Anne, very, very softly. “They kissed and embraced quite intimately.”

“Quite intimately.”

“They seemed very joyful and did not return to us for some time.”

Richard felt hollow, suddenly, as though he were a skin made of ceramic and empty, besides. He felt ill, sickly ill, and swallowed hard. “Was there anything else?”

“We cannot say,” replied Anne Hastings. “Very shortly after that she took to dismissing us all at night, retaining only the Boleyn sisters as her attendants.”

“Thank you,” replied Richard. “You are dismissed. Please, go find for yourselves a safe place with Her Grace the Queen as battle is about to commence. I have-I have merely one more question for you.”

“Your Grace?”

“When…when was this?”

“Last year,” said Anne Hastings. ”When it was believed Your Grace had died.”
“June 1521,” said Anne Stafford.
HENRY TUDOR, KING OF ENGLAND
York, England
June 1522

What lay ahead was daunting. A massively steep hill led to the thick, crenellated walls of the City of York. A massive gate, closed and barred, met them at the crest of the hill and the walls, themselves, sheer and stout, bristled with wary defenders. Harry gazed upward. He wondered where the Usurper was, now, awaiting him. Let this be over, he thought. Let them die.

Closing his eyes, Harry prayed, prayed and prayed, to see his wife and daughter and unborn child again.

“So this is our plan,” John Dudley said. “We break through the main gates of York, itself, then I break off with my force for the river to take the ships and their guns, which we fire at the weak point in the King’s Tower at York Castle, allowing us to enter and release the late King Arthur’s army from its bowels, as well as drawing the Usurper’s forces somewhere manageable to take them down.”

York was beautiful in the summertime, flowers dotting the fields below it and Harry stared, stared and stared. He felt sick, his heart pounding in his throat. *Is this the last glimpse of beauty my brother ever saw?* He clenched a fist. *Is this the last sight he saw at all?* He thought of his brother tall and wry and smiling and passed a hand before his eyes.

“Yes,” Harry bit out. “Yes, that is the plan.” This is the place, he thought. *This is the place he died; the place of which I was overlord and he died here.* He wondered if it were not, then, in that way his own fault as Duke of York. Another usurpation of Perkin Warbeck, claiming to also be a former Duke of York-turned-King. Harry’s hands trembled, from fear, from horror, from rage.

“*Murderer,*” he spat out, turning away from the walls. He fought not to think of his brother dead on this very earth, fought not to think of him, now, moldering away. “I will tear you off my father’s throne, myself, if it comes to that. I will tear you down and kill you, *myself.* The Usurper cast us out and in so doing, killed both my father and my brother. He will *not* prevail. Come, put on my armor; I am ready to fight.”

***
Fool, fool, fool, thought Richard as he trudged, clanking in his armor, to greet his men: Englishmen and Scots, who eyed him with bald fear in their faces. He understood. He understood them and their fear. It whispered in his own mind, fears with names and faces mingling with fears that were unnamed; fears that were faceless. My child is not my own, he thought, and: I murdered my daughter’s father. He wished to laugh, laugh for the fate that had befallen him. I, Richard, murdered my nephew as surely as my own Uncle Richard murdered his. Laugh, yes, laugh for all the horror that he’d known and all the horror he’d thought never to know. And laugh, laugh still more, for the horrors yet to come.

His other nephew, golden Henry, awaited him outside the gates, lurking not as a shadow in the depths of his fretful mind, but terrible and tangible and gleaming in the sun, surrounded by men and knights, French and English and Welsh and Irish, all. Richard remembered when he’d been young and glorious and sun-soaked and men had come from all across nations to follow him, to make a king of him. Now he was old and tired and grey and the nations slipped away, fading off into the shadows to help his enemies or worse, still worse, to ignore him, to pretend he did not exist, to not see him at all. Was he dead, already?

Dickon had killed him once, already, in the minds of his friends and enemies alike, and lost him even the loyalty of his wife in so doing. Lost him his child. That did merit a laugh: not so long ago he’d regarded Dickon as his only child. Now, because of Dickon, it was true.

Reaching to his side, Richard drew his sword. “Rise!” he shouted. “Men of Britain, rise and cast off the foreign pretensions of these false fools! Show them, show the world, who we are and that we shall not be cast out into nothingness! Show them that we fight, united, for what is ours and we shall not stop until we win or die! Show them!”

The words felt hollow. Dead, he thought, Dead already. Dead in the Tower, dead as a boy, dead when my name was taken, dead when my brother was taken, dead when I taken from my mother and sisters. Dead and dead and long, long dead. He’d been right before: coming back to England had been as nothing. He’d been a golden adventurer, then. Who was he now? All this suffering: I am the cause. I have caused it all with useless hope. Perhaps that suffering is all that I am; all that I have left. Richard grasped his sword tighter in his hand, raised it. Tears blistered his eyes but he did not shed them.

“Long ago,” he began, half-growling, words bubbling up from within, flowing forth like a geyser, long suppressed. “I was sent from these lands, cast as a wretch upon the cold mercy of those who did not love me. We have all felt this: turned out of our homes, denied our rights as our enemies encroach. But I tell you, now, I returned, returned to take back all that was my mine: by right and for justice, and so shall we now! I have thought long that these virtues were lost to me, to England,” he shook his head. “I was wrong. Bring me the helm of Arthur Tudor, the helm of Richard III, the helm of my own father. Bring it forth and let us ride out. Do our false foes imagine that we shall lay low and die for them all? No, I find now that there is only injustice if we fail to fight for what is right; only surrender to fear if we do not rise up to cast it down. There is no safe place, no last retreat where we may bide our time: there is only the fight. Shall we let them win? No! We will fight for what is ours and we shall take it back! Let them remember us well and long. Let them remember our names and this day. We will not abandon all that is ours. England has need of us, yet. Fight, men of Britain! Rise and fight!”

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HENRY TUDOR, KING OF ENGLAND
York, England
June 1522

The barbican gates screamed. The siege engine roared back. Arrows whistled all around and Harry was grateful for his armor. Defenders dotted the crenellated walls of the city where Micklegate Bar soared beyond its great barbican. The wind hollered amidst the trees and Harry prayed that the barbican had no murder holes. Soon enough, they would know.

“We will break through,” swore Harry, pressing his eyes closed. “We will break through and we will prevail. And like the Kings of England, before me, I will pass through Micklegate Bar and touch the stone sword as I enter. None shall ever say that Henry VIII and his brother and father before him, were not Kings of England.”
**Distant Shouts**

Chapter Summary

Ripples trembled across the field, up Harry’s legs; shivered across the field.

Chapter Notes

Once again, please pardon me. This chapter has not been edited!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

HENRY TUDOR, KING OF ENGLAND

York, England

*June 1522*

*Boom! Boom! Boom!* The ram crashed again and again. *Boom! Boom! Boom!* The great gates shuddered. Ripples trembled across the field, up Harry’s legs; shivered across the field. The world spun in colors of grey and crimson. Grey armor and grey walls. Red banners and red blood. The sky was grey, too. Arrows darkened it, red with fire; clouded the sky; studded the fields where they buried themselves. Men fell; men stood; men stumbled. The ram pounded and pounded and pounded and…The world shook at Harry’s command.

“Bring them down!” shouted Harry. “Bring down the gates!”

Micklegate Bar soared overhead, parapets swollen with archers; bristling with soldiers. Harry came prepared, too. His men were fierce; his men were ready. His stomach churned with excitement. His stomach churned with fear. The fight was all. It consumed everything before him like wildfire. Every wrong done him hovered here. His sword flamed with justice. *He* was fierce; *he* was ready.

Everywhere around him the sky belched arrows. Harry swallowed hard. *Boom! went the ram. Sshkk!* shrieked the arrows zipping by. Harry hunched his shoulders. He was ready, ready for this to be over, ready to gut the Yorkist army. This was his city, his duchy and dukedom. The *Duke of York*. Yes, York was his, had always been. Warbeck had cast him out, stolen his home and murdered his brother. Yes, Harry would take back what was his. The Pretender’s usurpation was over.

“Again!” shouted the king. On the ramparts above, men bustled. Harry ignored them. “Again!” Arthur seemed to stand before him, pale and ghostly and Harry bit out, “Again!”

Murdered, his murdered brother. There was no honor here; Harry ignored them. “Again!” Arthur seemed to stand before him, pale and ghostly and Harry bit out, “Again!”

Murdered, his murdered brother. There was no honor here; Harry could risk no surrender as Arthur had. No, there was no honor here at all. Arthur was murdered, his throat a gaping black wound. Murdered and the enemies on the ramparts shouted. The enemies who had murdered him. Arrows screamed through the air ahead.

“Again!” cried the king. The world crystalized. He pointed his sword. “Again!”


York wept and wept and wept and everywhere men died.

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SIR JOHN DUDLEY
York, England
June 1522

“This way,“ hissed John. The trees were tall but sparse and his men moved quickly and stealthily amongst them. *May the King claim all the Enemy’s attention*, prayed John. *And, good Lord, deliver us on our quest.* The river looped close on its way into the city. John crept forward and the world shrunk. This leaf crunched; that one did not. The difference could mark who lived and who died. Distant shouts and volleys of arrows colored their motions. Across the field, men fought and died. Soon, John’s force would, as well. Behind them, the cart rattled, its path cleared by the trees felled to create it.

“On, on,” pressed John. The party lurched forward. The King’s Tower, stout and redoubtable, loomed ahead, commanding a steep hill. A seething black scar rippled its way along her side, a dismal reminder to all who dared besiege her, that the King’s Tower was a survivor. John grimaced. “On,” he said. “On!”

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HENRY COURTENAY, EARL OF DEVON
York England
June 1522

“Only a ram?” demanded King Richard. “Why no more siege equipment than this? Surely a trebuchet or something like must have been built?“

The stench of boiling human flesh wafted up along the walls and Hal fought back a queasy wave. He straightened to face the King. Vats for boiling steamed below. Outside the walls, fresh enemies savaged.

“Your Grace,” said Hal. “It must have been a long journey, harried all the way. Perhaps there was no opportunity.”

“We heard them building something,” pointed out the King.

“And we see clearly enough, they have a stout battering ram. Where else could they be hiding something? See? There upon is their false King Henry. Surely, they would not bring him out into the open while leaving behind their greatest weapon.”

Richard’s eyes were sharp. He said nothing; peered down at the enemy.

The day was gloomy, cloud-streaked sky scuffed with silver. Hal did not see it. He did not see anything but the battle. “For your wives!” shouted Hal. “For your families! More oil!” Today, the
fate of England stood in the balance.

“They can no more hope to take the barbican than Micklegate, itself,” said the King.

“We cannot know what they hope, Your Grace,” said Hal. “But even York’s walls are not impenetrable and, either way, they have already made it further than Arthur had a chance to do.”

“Your cousin’s methods were deplorable,” commented Richard, agitated. “But they were effective. Still,” he said. “Still, I wish it had been you and not he born to my heir. I wish it had been you.”

Hal sucked in a deep breath. He felt cruelly ill, and scrambled. He wished, too, that things had been different, though not that way...not that way. But this, this was not the place. Suddenly, he heard shouts from his men and a distinctive whistle. “Take cover!” roared Hal, ducking with the King under cover as the Tudor army responded with their own volley of arrows. A quivering shaft buried itself by Hal’s foot. He leapt back in surprise. He stared at it with shock and turned back to his own archers. “No more of that!” he shouted. “Take down their archers!”

Reaching out, Hal plucked a crossbow away from a nearby archer and took aim, himself. The shot slung out into the distance, lost in the black cloud that rushed like murderous birds towards the enemy, up and up and up, only to hurtle downwards. Hal turned back to the King.

Richard stood, armor gleaming in the sunlight, and he fastened his father’s crowned helm beneath his chin. “Let us end this bloody conflict once and for all.”

*The sun in its splendor,* thought Hal. *Rises again.*

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SIR JOHN DUDLEY
York, England
*June 1522*

The machine lurched forward, borne by horses and oxen seized from local farms. It was massive, hewn from strong, supple wood, and capable of raining destruction. John’s lips curled with triumph as he watched it roll out from the cover of the trees. They will see it, now, he thought. If they only turn and look. Soon enough, they would hear it, whatever they did.

The trebuchet rolled to a stop, dust settling beneath the wheels of the cart that had borne it so far. His men heaved massive stones into the siege engine and John turned to face the Tower.

“This city has survived much,” he said. “It has survived the Fall of Rome and the barbarians of old. It has survived Danelaw and the Norman invasion. This mighty tower has survived wars and floods and the hoary winters of the North. This false king’s tower has even survived the greatest onslaughts on modern man in the Battle of Towton.” John’s lips curled slowly upwards and he turned proud eyes upon his men. “It will not survive us. FIRE!”

Chapter End Notes

If you're wondering, the trebuchet, or siege engine, was a devastating type of catapult, a superweapon of the age, designed to destroy walls and those defending them. You can read more about them here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trebuchet
1522 was, of course, towards the end of the practical use of the trebuchet, due to the rise of useful gunpowder and cannons. However...I wanted to do a trebuchet ;D No, but actually, the use of the trebuchet was motivated by the fact that they're out so far and they've used up most of their original resources but there are tons of trees and boulders around. I was going to do a whole bit about why they went in that direction but I ended up editing it out bc it drug hahaha
François’ eyes searched her own and he inclined his head. “You may believe so, Your Grace,” he replied, half-smiled, laughed. “Yet every heart has known trial.”

Chapter Notes

note: this needs to be edited v, v badly!! we had an unexpected event at work and i am BEYOND exhausted; i literally wrote this while falling in and out of sleep and alksjdfkljsdfj im just so sorry!! thank you, as always, for being understanding <3

The three sons Lizzie mentions having lost are the two sons she lost in their childhoods, Edmund and Edward, and, of course, Arthur...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

ELIZABETH OF YORK, QUEEN MOTHER OF ENGLAND
Louvre Palace, France
June 1522

“It is well,” said the King of France. “That your daughter has submitted to the terms agreed upon by her brother and myself. This union will not only unite her to her husband, but we three kings – of England, of Navarre, of France – together as brothers in league against a common enemy. Together, we shall vanquish our foe.”

Lizzie turned her blue orbs up to the French king’s. She wore a practiced face, smiling affably externally, but she hardly heard him. “Well, indeed,” she agreed, glancing out the window. Paris sprawled from beneath the windows – so high up as she hovered. All cities reeked in the summer and disease there was abundant, which was much of the reason that royal progresses usually took place at that time, but they were in Paris, now, for that great event which could only be undertaken here in the very heart of Paris. Besides, Lizzie told herself, this high up, she could almost ignore the stench.

“I know it is quite ordinary for ladies to object,” he said. “Even when their hearts are not truly disinclined, for the sake of not seeming too eager and thus damaging their reputation.”

Lizzie arched a slender brow and touched the windowpane.

François swallowed, glanced down at his own ringed hands. “It seems your daughter was one such. What a joy it is to host such chaste royal ladies.”

Shifting, Lizzie turned away from the window towards the king. “Your Majesty, I think it may be that so great a king has not yet been so tested as has my daughter been.”

François’ eyes searched her own and he inclined his head. “You may believe so, Your Grace,” he
replied, half-smiled, laughed. “Yet every heart has known trial. So it is true, then. Princess Margaret has genuine objections to the match. That is unfortunate.”

Contracting her brows, Lizzie formed something not quite smile, not quite frown, but evocative still: an inviting expression, yet guarded, almost unreadable, something she’d learned to wear long ago in the Sanctuary of Westminster and the court of her Uncle Richard. She shook her head. “My daughter will do her duty,” assured Lizzie.

“Hmmm,” François ran one hand across his close-cropped beard. “Of course,” he replied he. “It is, after all, the wish of her brother the king. Or, at least,” he began. “It is the will of his wife.”

Lizzie frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I believe this letter was directed into the wrong hands,” responded the King, innocently, as he handed it to Lizzie.

Lizzie barely suppressed a laugh. They both knew well and good that François had each and every letter they dispatched read. “This is Harry’s seal,” she commented, instead.

“But it is not his hand.”

“Harry rarely writes his own letters, when he need not,” said she, shaking her head. “Now that he is King, he need but rarely ever do so again. It is a very tidy script. No doubt, a scribe wrote this.”

François held up one finger. “You will forgive me, Your Grace,” he said. “But I have already perused the letter. That is no scribe’s scribbling note. That is the hand of none other than,” he opened the letter in her hands, displaying the artfully wrought signature. “Anne the Queen.” It is she who has endorsed each of the official letters of late and it is she who here responds to what I gather,” François gestured.

Lizzie suppressed her thought, He known because he read the outgoing letter as well.

“Was Princess Margaret’s letter begging her brother to abandon any idea of her marriage to the King of Navarre.” François shrugged. “It seems that Henry is away on campaign and has left his lady as Queen Regent in his place.”

“Anne Boleyn wrote this?” Lizzie turned it over in her hand and remembered, once, a note in Anne’s hand that Harry had shown her. “Yes,” she murmured. Suddenly the rest of the words hit her. “Henry is on campaign?”

“My legions currently fighting for him in England confirm it.”

Lizzie reached out to touch the side of the wall for steadiness. “No. Why does he go?”

The King’s face betrayed a look of surprise. “Madame,” he replied, not unsympathetically. “He fights because he must.”

Her throat was tight and Lizzie clasped a hand to her chest, nodding. “Yes,” she whispered. “Because he must.” Her eyes flicked to the King. “You wish to know, I suppose, if – my daughter having written to Henry to be relieved of the necessity of this marriage – she will accept the command of my son’s upjumped wife, the granddaughter of a common country merchant?”

François smiled a smile neither of them believed.

“I will see to it that she does,” replied Lizzie, squeezing her eyes shut. The pause was long, growing
longer, and Lizzie glanced back towards François again. “There is something else,” she observed.

“I pray you will forgive me,” he began and the regret in his eyes appeared almost genuine.

Lizzie almost laughed at that, too, turning back to the window. He sees me as a mother, she thought. He forgets that all mothers begin as daughters.

“Perhaps peace is not real, she thought. Perhaps it is merely an idea, invented to bring comfort to us in our suffering. But she laughed, even in her own mind, at that. She’d known peace and joy and contentment enough to blot out all the rest. It was its presence, rather than its absence, that wriggled stale in her mind. I’ve known it! I’ve known it! I know that it is real, but I cannot reach out and touch it now. It is lost to me, lost, but not forever. Please, God, not forever. Lizzie’s hand flew to her lips. Please, God. If she had not known it, perhaps she would not now know to miss it. Her eyes fluttered to the clouds that hovered over head. “You mean, if Margaret were Queen of England, would she turn against France because of this marriage?” Lizzie tapped the windowpane with her finger. “No,” she said, slowly. “No, because she will not be Queen of England. You need not fear. This Queen Anne is with child.”

“And, God forbid, should the child be lost?”

Lizzie sighed. “You already know about Princess Elizabeth, don’t you? That was the entire purpose of this conversation.”

François glanced delicately at his hands. “I had hoped you would tell me, yourself. Why did you not?”

Lizzie arched her brows. “In truth, we wanted to preserve her from the discussions.”

“Because you did not trust me?”

“Because we did not want you, or any nation, to believe that she might bring you our island as her dowry. England is no one’s bride price.”

“None,” replied the King. “Save yours.”

Her cheeks flared as though he had slapped her and Lizzie turned quickly to stare at him.

“Do not think I make a judgment. I married my own wife for my kingdom; she has come to mean much more to me than that. Salic laws prevented her from inheriting the crown but in England, ah, in England, she might have been a Queen in her own right. Still, it is never advisable to leave room for other heirs who might challenge your claim. No one knows that better than do you and yours. No, I cannot blame you for wishing to keep England to yourself, but you cannot blame me for wanting her, all the same.”

“What will you do, now?” asked Lizzie.

The King shrugged. “The same.”
“My son has summoned me home, hasn’t he?”

François glanced at her, half in shock. “I-”

“Your same errant servant accidentally delivered you *those* letters as well?”

François cleared his throat. “It’s not safe-”

Lizzie laughed. “I know that good and well. I have lost already three sons. I cannot loose my last boy. When Margaret is wed – and that will be, Your Majesty – this very week – I will take Mary and we will make sail for England.” She paused. “There is but one thing I have left to ask,” she added, tilting her head towards him. “What, precisely, do you want with my granddaughter? In addition to what you have already arranged for my daughter.”

Respect danced in his eyes and François managed an affable laugh as he gazed out across his world. “I wish to have her sent here to be raised. Her mother can attest that she will have the best of everything here and she will be perfectly safe. I want her to wed my son. I want to make your granddaughter Queen Elizabeth of France as once your father wished to make you. Fate is a fickle mistress, is she not? Originally, I’d hoped to unite my daughter to Arthur as his Queen, thinking that would best serve the friendship between our two nations. Now, I think this suits even better than that arrangement ever would have. Don’t you?”

The Queen smiled a smile that was not a smile and inclined her head. “I will consider it. Thank you, Your Majesty, for all your kindness to me and to my House. We will not forget the great friendship you have shown us in our hour of need.”

“No,” replied the King. “I am confident you shall not.”

Chapter End Notes

If you’re wondering, you can see a copy of Anne's famous, official, 'Anne the queen' signature here: https://abf-madeglobal.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/06/annebsig-300x187.jpg
Chapter Summary

Death came in the sound of that crash.

Chapter Notes

Firstly, I apologize as I've yet again failed to edit this. Additionally, please note that here 'guns' are canons. It's what they were called at that time.

SIR JOHN DUDLEY
York Castle, England
June 1522

He felt the crack! It shivered up his spine as a branch shorn by lightning. Death came in the sound of that crash. King’s Tower buckled along its wide crack, tripping backwards like a man struck hard in his center. Stones and rubble and dust flew up and out and fell back to earth again. York Castle yawned wide.

“Again!” shouted John. The ships’ guns roared. Massive stones sang through the air, lodged themselves in the earth or in the rubble or in the wide ancient walls that surrounded the city. Tudor forces stormed forward, spilling back out from Arthur’s two ships which they had seized back.

The ships had been relatively easy to storm, their crews minimally, as most of the Usurper’s forces had been recalled within the great walls of York to put up defenses there. It hadn’t occurred to them that, the Tudors already having arrived, they would have any want of the ships. But ships had guns and, anchored on the river banks within sight of King’s Tower, guns, coupled with a mighty trebuchet, could bring down a cracked wall.

“Release the captives!” instructed John, rushing forward in the midst of his soldiers. “Release our brothers and let us smash these traitors once and for all!”

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HENRY TUDOR, KING OF ENGLAND
York Castle, England
June 1522

The gates were open. They gaped like a maw, ready to devour. He drove his mount forward, stretched out his hand to touch the stone sword as he passed through. Beyond the gates, piles of ancient houses and shops crowded upon one another, emptied of their inhabitants. Unfortunate villagers who, he guessed, had taken shelter in the Minster or the Abbey, beyond. But they were gone, gone, gone, and the city, despite its defending host, echoed in the chill like a ghost.

Harry felt breathless and cold, odd as if he were not Henry, not anyone, really, not real at all. He felt
distant from it all, gold and glorious but also dour and drab, like a shadow shading the sun. Rain pelted down from above, bathing his face in cold as its dribs wept into his visor and Harry peered out from the slit towards the reality. Around him, fighting, but for a moment, he was sheltered from it by the men crowding around it. His standard, his brother’s standard, his father’s standard, the red dragon, whipped and lashed against the ferocious wind. He had come here, he had come this far. This was his duchy, this was his York, and this was the high water mark of Tudor conquest. Before them, Edward IV had come this far, and William the Conqueror before that – but none other. Henry did not feel triumphant to realize this; he had done what Arthur did not and the knowledge cloyed in his gut, swelling like pulpy infection. He was a traveler lost in fog. There was no one left to go before him and he did not which way to turn.

This was his duchy, but he’d followed Arthur here. He’d followed Arthur here.

His sword was swift and ready in his hand. Harry slashed and struck and road forward. Ahead, ahead, always ahead that was the route he must take. He knew no other. Harry raised his sword and his eyes. Before him, the path led onward. Before him, in the midst of the fray, his brother’s helm rose above the rest. The Usurper road towards him.

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RICHARD OF SHREWSBURY, KING OF ENGLAND
York Castle, England
June 1522

The crown crouched heavy upon his helm.

Once, he’d tried it on before, his father laughing as he gently lowered it onto his son’s head, still supporting its weight in his hands. “It’s big, Papa!” the child had crowed, to the laughter of the assembly. “It’s so big!”

He’d spotted Edward’s expression, bemused, indulgent, through the slit of the visor. “It narrows,” the king had said, lifting the helmet again and ruffling his son’s hair. “But you need never concern yourself with it. That is your brother’s weight to bear.”

Richard had never worn it again. That, too, had been taken from him by his Uncle Richard. He’d dreamed of wearing it, dreamed and dreamed and dreamed, but then Henry Tudor had spirited it across the Channel with him, again, and Richard had thought never to have the chance. Inadvertent, his nephew had given his life to deliver back to Richard what that uncle had stolen. Richard felt an ill lurch in his gut.

I took it from him as it was taken from me. Even Henry Tudor hadn’t done that: he’d taken it from his dead enemy. That was what conquest was meant to be. Once, Richard had compared himself to his father – what pale reflection was he, now? Words from his education fluttered before his eyes, “This and no other is the root from which a tyrant springs; when he first appears he is a protector.”

A protector was how he’d seen himself, it was true. Had he transmuted to the other, now? Richard had torn across oceans and continents for that one, particular purpose: to protect. He’d believed the dream so long. Where did I go wrong? Where did I go wrong?

York seemed to thunder around him, sounds of battle resounding from the ancient buildings lining the street around. He hardly knew friend from foe, but his sword whistled as it struck. The world was painted in red, red, red, how he hated the color, hated it in every hue hated how it proliferated. Bemoi, one-time Prince of Jaloff’s blood had run red when he’d died beneath a blade, no doubt his Uncle Richard’s had, too, and when Richard had ridden into England, his enemy’s banners had
unfurled in the same crimson stream. Battle raged around him and Richard’s sword bit into the flesh of his opponents. Red and red and red and red. Swarms of men crowded in every available spot around him, friend and foe alike. Richard, saddled above it all, was glad for the height of the horse and, upon that, the extra height his father had endowed him with. His height, his hair, his helm, and — he’d once supposed — a birthright, a legacy, that would caress the edges of history. The sun in its splendor, he had supposed, then, could never set. Now, he saw the sun falling from the red, red sky, blistering all it touched as it toppled from its height like Icarus.

He glanced up and saw the crimson dragon banner drawing near. A tall helm gleamed over the heads of all around them, staring straight towards his own. Henry Tudor, he thought. How fitting that the very name that had once so haunted should return to his own duchy to tear him from his ancestral throne there. That dragon, thought Richard, could swallow the sun. Perhaps it ought to, as well. Richard’s heir had cut the head from the dragon, once, thinking it a serpent. As his own heir, were Dickon’s actions not Richard’s own? Had he murdered his own nephew?

But Richard laughed, then, as the dragon banner drew nearer him. That is no dragon, at all, thought the king. But a Hydra. He’d cut the head off the first Henry Tudor, himself, only to see two more heads spring up in its place and no sooner had Dickon done the same, than three more had sprouted before him: one in Richard’s own nest, it seemed.

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HENRY TUDOR, KING OF ENGLAND
York Castle, England
June 1522

Harry plunged through the streets, warhorse charging ahead. Beneath its hooves fell those before him; in his sights the sun-in-splendor glistened in the streets of York. The crowned helm of his brother turned upon its axis, turned to look at him. Harry lurched forward. He’d often thought it the most glorious helm in Christendom, now it stood across the field gazing back at him. He did not know whether to think it an omen or harbinger. Mounted up on a white horse, the Usurper gazed across the broad cobbled streets of York at him.

Harry screamed. He kicked viciously at his horse; thundered across the divide where his own forces scrambled to overcome the enemy, and burst through the enemy line. I have to get to him, I have to get to him, I have to get to him. Arthur’s helm stared and him, stared and stared, tall as he’d ever been. His brother, healthy and lean and strong, wry and honest, and unflinching. I should have been there, thought Harry. I ought to have been here, at his side. I should have been here, I should have been. He’d been on the other side of the country; he may as well have been half the world away, flung back to exile and France, for all the good he’d done Arthur.

When he’d gone to go fight, Harry hadn’t thought of a single thing to say. Now that Arthur was gone, a whole world of thoughts and words left buried bubbled up to the surface as if all the world sang in his ears, and across the field, Arthur’s helm was looking right at him. Arthur, Arthur seemed to look at him. How Harry wished he would, again. He should have done everything differently. He should have been here with his brother and, failing that, he should have reined in his fury: he should have seen to Arthur’s child, whatever the cost. How could he fling Arthur’s unnamed, unborn offspring, the only child he would ever have now, the only piece left of him in all the world, out into the world, just as fate had once flung Arthur and Harry?

We were together, then, thought Harry. We could have survived anything together. I should have been here. I should have been with him when he died.

Arthur gazed on and on and Harry thought, blankly, blindly, I have to get to him, I have to get to
him, I have to get to him.

The crowned helm looked down again, and the king drew forth again his sword. Harry raised his own. Steel shrieked as the two kings swung their swords.
Inexorable Destiny

Chapter Summary

Death knocked at her door.

Chapter Notes

Unedited!

Also, title credit is not mine. I took it from the Illiad (as translated by E.V. Rieu) where Achilles says, "Look at me. I am the son of a great man. A goddess was my mother. Yet death and inexorable destiny are waiting for me."

See the end of the chapter for more notes

HENRY TUDOR, KING OF ENGLAND
York Castle, England
June 1522

The other king’s eyes were the wrong color. Harry half wanted to shout, to scream, to cry out that something was wrong. He was now close enough to see the eyes blazing within Arthur’s helm and they were grey. Pits of colorless grey; grey like the sky on a wind-swept day, grey like the edge of a shallow rocky pool, grey like winter mornings after snow. The eyes were grey when they were meant to be green. Green like emeralds, like verdant grass, like the leaves of shady trees. Arthur’s eyes were green.

Harry felt gutted. Hacked at his opponent. “Stop it!” he screamed. “Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!”

Green like the storm-tossed sea, green like the iridescence of a peacock, green like the first gown he’d ever seen Anne wearing. Harry gritted his teeth; raised his sword again, again, again. His enemy raised his shield again, again, again. His eyes had been green, flecked with amber, like bunches of broom dotting the green highway. Green, yes. Green like the promise of spring, green like sapling trees, green like lichen growing up over ancient gravestones.

“It should have been you! It should have been you!” Harry railed. Richard took the blow with his sword. The two blades shrieked a volley of sparks and pulled away again. Arthur was young and young men weren’t meant to be mortal. Harry was younger, still, but he felt old, older than the stones that surrounded them, older than the earth that would someday cover them all. It should have been me. A sob burst from his chest. It should have been me. A king was his country. Men were meant to die for their king, not the other way around. How had it been the other way around?

He cut at his opponent, senseless, mad, unseeing. All he imagined was Arthur, Arthur perhaps here on this very patch of street, his blood flowing into the gutter. Arthur, his brother, determined, frank, honorable. His brother, proud and stoic and good. His brother dead, dead, dead. Harry saw him on the ground, struggling away from his foes, his wounds weeping as he died. Harry saw him and he hacked and hacked and hacked with his sword.
“It should have been you! I wish to God it had been you!”

The Usurper grunted, struggling to raise his shield against Harry’s onslaught. Harry could see through the great helm as he gritted his teeth, grey eyes narrowed on the fall of Harry’s blade. Richard parried abruptly, hurling his shield up with all his might to crash against Harry’s sword. “It should have been!” he shrieked back. “It should have been me!”

Harry’s sword was caught, embedded in the splintered wood of Richard’s shield, but he hardly noticed, staring at his foe. Staring and staring.

“But,” hissed the Usurper, shaking his head as Harry yanked against his sword once again. “It was not.”

Hands and army seized at Harry’s legs and ankles. Swords and spears hacked at his armor. The Usurper’s army crowded around, surrounding him on every side. Harry lurched, yanking at his embedded sword but it would not give. The enemy breathed as one. Their fingers locked around him. They tore him down from his horse and beat at him in the streets.

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CATHERINE OF ARAGON, QUEEN OF ENGLAND
York Castle, England
June 1522

Mary’s infant screams resounded as Catherine hugged her close. “Shhh, shhh,” she whispered to the child. Outside, the shrieks and booms of battle rose up to meet her, drowning out both comfort and cries. Catherine’s heart hammered, leaping in her mouth. This is worse, she decided, closing her eyes. This is worse than ever it was when I was trapped in London. There, she had been in command. There, she had known what was happening. Here, she was a useless accessory who would only know her fate once she’d learned her husband’s. There, she had known, at least by some notion, who was friend and who was foe. Here, she held the daughter of two kings in her arms and wondered who would claim her.

“Oh, darling, don’t be afraid,” she soothed, cradling her child close to her. “All will be well.” Catherine hardly believed a single word. Mary’s father had died here, who was to say that any of them wouldn’t follow him to his premature grave? Death knocked at her door.

Hearing a clatter near the doors to the chamber in which the Queen huddled with her ladies, Catherine turned towards the barricaded doors.

“Your Grace!” called the familiar voice of Will de la Pole. “Open up! I’ve come to fetch you to safety! The King’s Tower is collapsed. York Castle is now no safe place. Please, come to the door! Come at once!”

Catherine nodded and her ladies scrambled to do as she bid. Her husband’s cousin entered quickly, with a small assembly of men to escort her. “Quickly!” he demanded, making no effort to gentle his voice. “Speed is of the essence! We can conduct you in safety only if you hurry! The Tudor forces are sweeping across York now that they have breeched King’s Tower. We are withdrawing to the great walls of York, to Monk Bar, where our King Richard still holds sway.”

Catherine bit back on her fear. “We are lost?”

“No, we’ve taken their king hostage, but we pull back. They surround us.”

“We retreat,” said Catherine and clutched her child close.
“We can weather any storm there.”

“This is no storm, sir,” replied Catherine, softly. “This is war and the enemy comes for our heads.”

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SIR JOHN DUDLEY
York Castle, England
June 1522

Coughing and limping, John’s army pulled Arthur’s from the carnage, bearing them into Arthur’s reclaimed ships. John’s army had met up with King Henry’s catching Perkin Warbeck’s between them, and all was going according to plan, but the King, himself, was nowhere to be seen. John scanned the lines, searching desperately for any sign of him or his banner. Perhaps the bannerman was cut down in the fighting, thought John. But then, there ought to have been someone else to pick it up again.

The Usurper’s forces were pulling back, yanking themselves back into the ancient walls and their many barbicans and look outs. John glanced quickly around. If we can capture the Usurper’s false queen or princess, he thought. That would be a victory, indeed. But he saw as much evidence of their whereabouts as his own king’s. Cursing under his breath, John signaled to his men.

“Drive them!” he shouted. “Drive them! No quarter! No mercy! Remember how they treat prisoners!”

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HENRY TUDOR, KING OF ENGLAND
York Castle, England
June 1522

Harry suppressed a moan as he felt his arms and legs again. Light filtered across his face and he flinched away. His head spun as he peeled open his eyes. Harry lay stretched, half-leaned against the nearest wall, seated on the floor and bound. Glancing around him, he spotted a group of war-wearied troops staring at him and, in their midst stood Catherine of Aragon and the Usurper, eyeing him carefully.

“Oh,” groaned Harry, half-laughing as his head lolled back against the wall behind him. “Not again.”

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ELIZABETH OF YORK, QUEEN MOTHER OF ENGLAND
The English Channel
July 1522

Lizzie clung to the ship’s bulwark, half-leaned. “There,” she whispered. “There is it, Mary, there it is! Do you see that shadow on the horizon? It’s England! England!” The Queen licked her lips. Her throat was tight but she fought past it to speak. It felt strange and surreal to gaze upon that blessed, green coast as it edged into view: a view she’d long hoped but never expected again to see. “At last, at last we’re home.”

No one could coax her to go below decks, no matter how the ship rocked on the choppy waves. Lizzie could fix her eyes on nothing else, preferring to watch Dover loom before her, its chalky white cliffs a beacon that rose up before her. It was surreal, seeing them now. Henry, she thought. Henry, at last! At last, we may go home again.
When, at last, they came ashore, a contingent waited to meet them.

“Welcome, Your Grace,” said one of her son’s lords. “I was appointed to escort you upon your journey as Her Grace, the Queen, could not come.”

“I hear she carries another child? Is she in confinement?”

“Indeed, Your Grace, last I heard, the Queen had entered her travail and, pray God, will be soon delivered of a son and heir to good King Henry.”

“And my son?” demanded Lizzie. “He has remained in London to be with Her Grace at this time, I suppose?”

The lord made a stammering sound, glanced to one of his lieutenants, and looked back again. “Your Grace, forgive me. I thought you knew. His Grace the King went to York to drive out the Usurper. The battle was one, but the King captured. There is, now, something of a stand still in York.”

Lizzie’s throat tightened and she felt Mary’s hand slip into her own. “Then,” she replied. “I could not have arrived a moment too soon.”

Chapter End Notes

Monk Bar is the name of one of the great gates to the City of York. You can read about it here: http://www.historyofyork.org.uk/themes/the-york-city-walls/monk-bar

Also, if you're wondering why Anne is giving birth in July after having only announced her pregnancy in March, it's because that's about when the baby was due. She had early notice on Elizabeth because the pregnancy made her so sick, but with this baby it was not so and, short of that, the first notice a sixteenth century mother usually had of her pregnancy was the "quickening," when she first feels the kick. Anne and Henry had also known a little in advance of the announcement, they'd just kept it to themselves.
"That old myth of Perkin Warbeck, first crafted to protect me, was also, I think, meant to protect my uncle from any effort I might ever make at the throne. Now, it protects my uncle’s conqueror and his sons. Ironic,” he commented, almost laughing again. “Is it not?”

Chapter Notes

me, writing this chapter: wHY must everyone in history have the same five names???? ;D Let me know if you were confused by who was speaking, acting at any given time and I will try to clear it up!!

So we have a lot of repeat names, here! As a result, I chose to refer to each character in the narrative, itself, as a particular repeating name:

Lizzie = Elizabeth of York, Queen Mother of England
Elizabeth = Elizabeth, Princess Royal (whom we know as Elizabeth I, Queen of England)
Mary Carey = Mary Boleyn
Princess Mary = Mary Tudor (whom we know as Queen of France and Duchess of Suffolk)
Hal = Henry Courtenay
Harry = Henry VIII

And then there’s Henry which...I used both to refer to Henry VII and Henry VIII but that will, hopefully, be clear in context. Let me know, though, if it wasn’t!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

RICHARD OF SHREWSBURY, KING OF ENGLAND
Monk Bar, England
July 1522

“Why don’t you speak with our prisoner?” asked Hal, softly. “You’ve gone to speak to him half a dozen times, yet you turn back every time. It’s obvious you’ve a wish to say something to him.”

Richard’s laugh was unbidden, a flitting shadow of things unsaid, and humorless at that. Touching Hal’s sleeve, he shook his head. “I do wish to ask him something,” he replied. “But equally, I do not.” At the other end of the room, Catherine was settled with her ladies, leaning over the child. Carefully, he did not look at any of them.

Hal cleared his throat. “Is it to do with Henry’s mother, the Princess Elizabeth?”

Richard’s head swiveled, lips parting to speak before he sealed them again. Another subject that
festered deep in his gut. Richard felt as though he were floating somewhere far from himself, hovering half-surreal, watching his own life flowing out between his fingers like water in a sieve. “I wish I knew what her thoughts were on the entire matter,” sighed Richard. “Yet, I fear I already do. If she believed in my cause, I do not believe she would make war upon it, now that her husband is dead. No, I know well what she believes. That old myth of Perkin Warbeck, first crafted to protect me, was also, I think, meant to protect my uncle from any effort I might ever make at the throne. Now, it protects my uncle’s conqueror and his sons. Ironic,” he commented, almost laughing again. “Is it not?”

“Tragic,” replied Hal, very softly. “Tragic, I would call it, Your Grace. Could you not write to the Princess your sister?”

Richard shrugged. “I have written to her half a hundred times over the years,” he replied. “Never once have I received a reply. I have no idea if she’s even received them. And now, trapped in this Bar, I doubt as an opportunity to so much as dispatch a currier will present itself.”

“It may,” said Hal. “We have a very precious hostage. Both John Dudley, out there on the field, and the so-called Queen Regent, Mistress Boleyn in London, may be prevailed upon to hear you in these circumstances.”

“To what end?” inquired Richard, running a hand through his hair. “So I may attempt to convince my dear sister that her beloved husband and son fought and died for nothing?”

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ELIZABETH OF YORK, QUEEN MOTHER OF ENGLAND
Tower of London, England
July 1522

She hesitate half a breath before the bridge. Lizzie stilled her breath and then breathed in deep, deep, deep, as deeply as she could. Slowly, she raised her eyes to the soaring parapets of the Tower and steeled herself to its ghosts. Lizzie nudged her horse forward.

It’s been so long, she thought, and pushed the notion away again. No, this was not the way to proceed. She was going to meet her grandchildren, not to confront the old horrors that had stalked her past. There were enough, she knew, in the future to contend with: it did not do to dredge up the ones that were gone. It did not matter that she had not been here since she’d been forced to flee England with her children; it did not matter that she’d spent the night before her coronation here with her husband; it did not matter that her two brothers had been sent here to die, before that. It did not matter, today, because she’d been a different person at each of those moments, her past selves discarded ghosts of the past as well, trapped in those moments, and now she was someone else. Adaptation was survival.

Her horse’s hooves clopped as she crossed the bridge and came, at last, into the keep, passing under the high stone walls. Despite the throng of busy servants – each pausing to stoop a bow or curtsy as Lizzie passed – the Tower felt as it always did: hushed and hallowed as any church. She came at last to the place and craned her neck up, up, up towards the spot where she knew she would find her family: the royal apartments. Once, the bed that Anne Boleyn no doubt occupied had been her own and that knowledge, that knowledge did feel strange. She had always thought it would be Arthur’s wife who would replace her. Yet, he, too, was another ghost she would not revisit today. Meeting her grandchildren was too joyous an occasion to mar with former sorrows. Lizzie hastened inside.

Pages hastened to lead her, though Lizzie knew the way. It had been her parents’ room before it had been her own and that, too, had been strange at first. Adaptation was survival. Lizzie rounded the
corners, almost without thinking, and wondered inanely if any of the furnishings had been changed since last she’d been there. No doubt the Usurper’s bride had had ideas of her own, as Lizzie doubted Anne had had any opportunity, as yet, for such domestic concerns. She found she liked fretting about the possible changes, as it gave her mind something else to roll over, though it mattered little to her, now. All of England had changed while she’d been gone, but it was still home. It would always be home.

The great doors and Lizzie was at last here. She sucked in a deep breath and thought of happy things as she stepped inside. Mary Boleyn came forward to curtsy, as did everyone else present, save the child that Mary was cradling and Anne, herself, cradling another baby in her bed.

“Your Grace,” said Mary. “May I present to you Her Grace, the Princess Royal, Elizabeth of Westminster?”

Lizzie gasped, put a hand to her mouth, then stepped forward. Within the bundle, sharp dark eyes under the soft flounce of chestnut hair peaked out with interest. “Oh, my darling,” whispered Lizzie, scooping up the child, who reached for her curiously. Baby Elizabeth was wrapped in the softest linen, but her baby-smooth skin was softer still. Lizzie laughed as Elizabeth grasped at her finger, laughed as she proceeded to gnaw on it. “She looks so like Harry, doesn’t she?” Tears welled in her eyes and Lizzie laughed again, joyfully, holding the pink bundle. “If she has even a breath of her father in her, I know she will be the most glorious princess in Christendom.”

Anne smiled and, slowly, Lizzie approached the bed. “She already is,” replied Anne, with fierce pride. “And her brother the most glorious prince. Mary, will you take the little Princess so that the Queen Mother may meet her grandson?”

Mary Carey hastened to take back her niece, but Lizzie’s own daughter, Princess Mary, hastened forward. “I’ll take her,” volunteered the princess and Lizzie happily bestowed her granddaughter upon her adoring child.

Anne raised her arms so that Lizzie could hold the infant prince.

“Oh,” whispered Lizzie, no longer fighting to hold back the tears. “So light! He’s nearly as light as Arthur was when he was first born.” The little prince had no hair, but his eyes were a match of his mother and sister’s, black and intelligent though he was less than a week old.

“He was born a touch early,” said Mary.

“Only a touch,” replied Anne. “He was born a fortnight or so before he was expected.”

“What’s his name?” asked Lizzie.

Anne bit her lip. “We don’t know, yet. Before he left, Henry and I discussed the names Henry, for your husband and son; Edward, for your father; and Arthur…for your son. We hadn’t decided when Henry road away…” Anne’s expression grew fierce. “I want Henry to come home and decide on a name. He must come back soon so that he can choose, he—”

“Shhhhh,” soothed Mary Carey, sinking onto the bed beside her sister. She looked to Lizzie. “I believe it was the stress of hearing that Henry was captured that…brought on Anne’s travail.”

“Last time, I was able to be with him in his captivity, but now he’s alone!” Anne bowed her head and Lizzie could see the threat of tears, hearing them in the quaver of her voice and remembered her own mother, when her father was away. “He’s all alone…and what happened to Arthur, I, God, he’s alone!”
“No.” Lizzie sank onto the bed, also, and reached out with her free hand. “My dear child, he will not be alone for long. I’ve come here expressly to that end. I mean to ride to York upon the morrow. I mean to bring my boy home.”

Anne raised her head and her face was streaked with tears, but her dark eyes blazed, the very iris seeming to move within the whites of her eyes as though they had a power of motion of their own. “But, Your Grace, Your Grace, it is dangerous, it-”

“Oh, hush, the Usurper cannot afford to turn me away. He cannot afford to imprison me, either. I am the greatest bargaining chip we have left, as I am a lady, and therefore cannot be said to be a danger to him – and thus to be one he might imprison – and I remain the undisputed child of my parents. If he is, indeed, my brother he would not, and if he is not, as we all know he is not, he cannot afford to make such a move. Doubts linger and the international stage may well take note if he refuses to see the woman he calls his own sister.”

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RICHARD OF SHREWSBURY, KING OF ENGLAND
Monk Bar, England
July 1522


There were only four cramped levels to Monk Bar, each already filled to the brim, but in this, perhaps the smallest fortress in the British Isles, Richard was King, and his followers filed out to squeeze themselves into other parts of the place. Richard waited until they had all gone.

“Henry,” he said.

The younger man shot a glare before leaning his head back against the wall behind him. “I have nothing to say to you.” He had been bound and settled on a chair – there being nowhere else to keep even a significant prisoner.

“That’s as may be,” responded the king, pulling up another chair. “But I’ve things to say to you. I need your help.”

Henry turned to stare. His eyes blazed, face wrangled into a sneer. Everything in him screamed to Richard the inescapable message, You murdered my brother: I’ll never help you, but Richard leaned forward. Richard persisted. Henry laughed, humorlessly, and looked away.

“Did your brother fancy my wife?”

Something shifted in Henry’s face, brows drawing back to make the eyes wider, lips parting for a moment before squeezing shut again. Slowly, Henry turned to look at him again, his expression half wonder, half shock, and all pain.

The look sat heavy on Richard’s lungs, blistering his heart. He sank back into his chair, as if physical distance could sever the moment. He knows. Richard stood. His stomach flipped and he felt as if he would lose his breakfast, nausea radiating in waves around him.

“Is that why you murdered him?”

Richard turned again, quickly, to stare stupidly at Henry. “What?” He cleared his throat, shook his head as though to disperse his thoughts. “No, I-No! No, I didn’t…I didn’t…He wasn’t…”
Henry’s face was rage, boiling, but tears streaked his visage and Richard half expected to watch them boil away into nothing from the heat of his ire. If he were loosed from his bonds, thought Richard. He would kill me on the spot. Richard looked at his hands, realizing this ought to frighten him, but instead it sparked and he felt alive again and half a boy, young and wild and adventurous. He felt bold. Richard came back to the chair again, leaning against its back and over it, towards his captive. “I didn’t murder your brother,” he said. “I bear the weight of his death as though I had but do you know the worst of the two? To God, today I wish I had killed him, myself!”

He straightened again, shook his head. That was not true, it was a lie, but the impulse roiled in his brain. Anger him, anger him, anger him! Feel free and whole and wild again! Anger him! Richard did not want to kill Arthur, no: he wished to know the truth, to demand of his dead nephew the question of why. He wished to understand the depth of the betrayal and, most of all, he wanted to know if Arthur had only fucked his wife to get to Richard or if he had wanted something more. And Catherine, Catherine, God, why did Catherine do it? Did Arthur force himself on her? Or had she wanted him, too? And why? Richard laughed. He knew that much, already: Because he was young and hardy and handsome and hungry, not tired and burned out and sated and done. Done, yes, done like a turkey in the oven: dry and roasted and gone, its head lopped off and its body burned up in flame.

Henry leaned forward against his bonds. “Then hear my prayer, Usurper,” he growled. “Would to God I could wrap my hands around your throat and strangle the very life from you. You have taken everything from me! My future, my father, my brother, my crown, and now at last, my life! What more do you want?”

The wild youth flaked away again, fluttering into nothing like dead skin in a strong wind. Richard shook his head, his limbs felt strangely numb and exhaustion settled across him like a warning. Richard leaned against the back of the chair, this time for support, staring blankly at its seat. “I’m not going to kill you, Henry,” he whispered. “I lied…I wanted to hurt you because I am wounded, but it was all a lie. I’m not going to kill you. I don’t even want to kill Arthur, I-I wish I could bring him back. I wish I had died and that he had lived, I wish none of this had ever happened!” he laughed, pushing off the chair again to stand on his own two feet and laughed and laughed and wept. “God, if I could take it all back, I would. Everything! If I could have died beside my brother in the Tower all those years ago, I think I’d choose that or, maybe, maybe, no, better yet, to remain Perkin Warbeck. God, do you know the adventures I might have had? I don’t think I’ve had such fun in all my life as I might have had! I thought somehow, somehow, I had to! I had to reclaim my father’s throne! To save my sisters and my country. I even imagined I’d be thanked and adored. I imagined kingship would be greater fun than any I’d known and I rejoiced in the prospect, poor fool that I was. I imagined that your mother and aunts would heap me with wreaths and my army would parade me through the streets in victory while my people cheered and rained down white rose petals upon me.

“In my arrogance,” continued Richard. “I told myself that all the trouble I’d ever known was your father’s doing, entirely. I told myself that I’d take his head and all the sorrows I’d ever known would vanish like mist before the rising sun. But it’s never that easy, is it? There’s never that lone monster which, once conquered, will give rise to an easy life. No, one must struggle all the days of one’s life, struggle for the next sunrise, struggle then till sunset. There’s no glorious victory that sweeps it all away. The monster of your father turned out to be a just another man, and you and your brother… turned out to be me and mine all over again. All this time I fought to erase the shadows, I was, instead, breathing new life into them with each new stroke. All this time, all this time, the monsters I grappled were of my own making and I wonder, Henry, I wonder: all this time…was the monster truly me?”

Henry’s stare was flint, but his brows crouched as he worked through the things Richard had said and Richard, himself, glanced away again, burying his face in his hands. “I.”
“You want more than this from me,” Richard murmured, weary as he slipped softly back onto the chair across from Henry. “You want from me what I wanted from your father: a climactic battle that, in its intensity, will blaze so bright as to make you feel that the fight was building all along and, therefore, all worth it because, once over that hurdle, you would achieve catharsis and then, then, precious peace. But you forget, Henry, that – whatever name you may give me – I have already lived your life. It does nothing. No victory will expunge the past and no loss, either.”

“Do you take me for your confessor?” asked Henry, finally. “You say you wish to warn me, but the truth is, you look in me, in this moment, for that same feeling you now describe. God knows what is just and if your suffering is of that kind, it was hard won. Think of the lives you have taken and those you have destroyed! Does it mean nothing to you?”

“It means everything to me, Henry. Everything. I thought, once, that in choosing the crown, I was choosing my family, my joy, my God-given fate, but I see now...I chose everything else. I wanted to go back to my people but now, now I am more alone than ever.”

Henry laughed. “Are you so ungrateful? You say this in a fortress crammed full of followers who have chosen a hopeless cause for love of you over everything. There is no victory for you to be won, here. I know how things lie outside Monk Bar. My forces surround you. They have taken back my brother’s ships, they have taken back my castle of York, and they have taken most of the city as well. I know this because that is how I left them and you now tremble here, looking to me for that catharsis you seek. Easily, all of the people in this Bar might well have surrendered, knowing their ultimate fate cannot possibly be victory...but they have chosen to stay loyally by your side. Even Catherine,” he added, shaking his head with anger. “Even she, when she might well have made another decision, entirely. You lock yourself away in your own mind but you do not see the crowds that press upon you have risked everything to do so. You only see mouths that cry out in need of something from you, when it is they who give.”

“Why do you say this?”

“I, too, speak from experience. You claim to have lived my life, but you do not see that you have only ever lived your life. My father fled England conquered, yet many followed him into exile, leaving behind all they’d ever known because of the faith they placed in him to bring them back home. Arthur and I labored long under that burden, but it was never truly a burden. All along, even when I most believed it was, they upheld us and worked towards our homecoming. I sit here, bound like a pig for the slaughter, but outside these walls teem my proponents, surrounding you. Many of them were raised in exile, just as I was and, while their parents lived in hope of return, they themselves knew nothing of England. Yet, they placed their trust, entire, in us. That boy with whom you treat, Sir John Dudley, is one such. He believed so firmly in my brother that he left all he'd ever known and he came here to fight and, perhaps, to lay down his very life, that we all might start anew.

“Whatever fate you may have,” Henry warned. “Remember that your followers have gained nothing, now, from their loyalty, should you fail. Remember that they depend upon you. Whoever you may truly be, whether Perkin Warbeck or Richard of Shrewsbury, you were never expected to be king. Neither was I. But I am and you are, and all I can tell you is something once said to me. I once claimed that I had no choice in my fortune because I had been born to a certain life. But Anne, my darling Anne, rebuked me and told me something I have never forgotten: ‘We have, all of us, a choice. I hope that, when the time comes, it will not be a choice of England or all, but a choice of the man you wish to be.’ That choice lies before you, as well. So tell me, king that you are, what kind of man do you wish to be?”

Chapter End Notes
A bit about Monk Bar! It is one of the great gatehouses of the City of York, built into the ancient walls that encircle the city. It is four floors high and was built to be a stand-alone fortress, which is how Richard is currently making his stand-off, there. You can read more about it, here: http://www.historyofyork.org.uk/themes/the-york-city-walls/monk-bar here: https://richardiiiexperience.com/discover-medieval-york/about-richard-iii/monk-bar/ and here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/York_city_walls#Monk_Bar
Catherine’s ladies crowded around, one removing her bejeweled bracelet and twirling it above Mary’s little head, the ladies grinning brightly as the child watched in wonder.

Someone cleared his throat. Catherine glanced up in surprise to spot her husband. “Ladies,” greeted the King. “Might I speak to my wife in private? Please excuse me for this request. I know matters are cramped, as it already is.”

One bent to take Mary, but the King shook his head. “I’ll take her,” he said and, gently, the child was laid in his arms.

“Ri-” began the Queen, but the King raised one finger and then leaned back over the child, who bathed him in her smiles.

The others filtered out of the floor and, soon, it was emptied of all but the three of them.

“She loves you,” commented Catherine from where she sat by one of the arrow slits. A bonny breeze swept across York, cooling her despite the oppressive heat of the afternoon.

Richard bowed his head over the child, kissing her cheek.

Catherine felt antsy. His behavior was strange and it made her feel on edge. Have we surrendered? she wondered. Has the rule of Henry VIII at last begun over all England? Is my child, then, to be stripped of her crown? Yet, if that were so, why did they all not go, now, out into the greater world? Why was everyone still huddled inside Monk Bar and no one from outside at last coming in? Catherine clasped her hands tightly together, longing for some useful employment to which she might put them, but devoid of any.
Slowly, Richard raised his head. Catherine gasped. Tears streaked his face.

She jumped up. “What is this? What has happened?”

“How is it true, Catherine?” he asked. “Did you fuck Arthur Tudor?”

Her breath felt strangled; her stomach seemed to fall away. Slowly, Catherine got to her feet, half pushing off the chair with her hands to stand. She felt suddenly distant and floating, as if this were all some dream or she had had too much to drink. Catherine put one hand to the cool stone behind her for support. Its solidity stung, and she pulled away again, now feeling the reality of the moment. She felt sick and distractingly put one hand to her belly. “Richard—” Tears, unexpected tears, stung at her eyes, her voice choked. “How—” Her other hand crept to her mouth. “Why do you ask this, wh—”

Mary, still cradled in Richard’s arms, let out a scream and Richard pulled her close, whispering to her.

Clasping both hands to her mouth, Catherine glanced away again. ‘Did you fuck Arthur Tudor?’

Arthur’s lips on her throat, below her ear, his hands on her back, her hips. God, yes, and his tongue, and…

The baby quieted. Richard glanced up at her again. “Why?” he stepped forward. “Why did you do this? Do you hate me? Do you hate me so much?”

“No!” Catherine’s hands dropped away, came up again. “No,” she said, again, approached. “I—” Tears of her own flowed and she pushed back on them. A sob erupted from her, half-shocking her, and she wanted, then, nothing more than to scream. She imagined herself climbing the steps up, up to wherever the top of this accursed building was and, in her mind’s eye alone at least, shrieking a wordless curse to the grey clouds above. But she was here, trapped here by her feet, rooted to the spot, trapped here still more by her own sense of right and justice. She had to explain. She stepped closer to him, reached out, dropped her hand again. “We thought you were dead. It—it had nothing to do with you.” Catherine shook her head, letting the tears flow. She could hardly see them beyond the mist of them, blurring her vision, but she saw the faintest outline of him and of her child cradled in his arms. “I know that must seem hard to believe, but…” Catherine squeezed her eyes shut, weeping a moment without words. Arthur, Arthur, where are you, now? “I loved him,” she whispered. “I loved him, desperately.”

She felt a touch on her arm and opened her eyes again. Richard stood by her. His face was still as stone, and hard too, wearing an expression she’d never seen, before. This is a king, she thought. The king he ought to have been from the start. “Tell me,” he said. Richard raised a hand slowly, traced it along her cheek to clear her tears, the choking, choking tears.

She could not breathe, could not see, could not think for the tears. Her shoulders shook, racked with it, and no breath emerged, caught in the cage of her heart. She’d trapped it, trapped all her grief away, trapped it in this moldering ruin of a castle, of a world, of a life but now she could not stop, feared she would never stop. Arthur was dead and he was never coming back.

“Tell me,” he persisted, leaning close to her and Catherine raised her eyes to him, sucking in breath as she fought to master herself. She owed him that much.

“I hardly know where to begin,” she said. “I hardly know, at all.” She shook her head. “I suppose it begins in childhood,” she added, shaking her head. “We, we were betrothed one to the other with every expectation that we should someday wed and I would become his Queen.”

She heard Richard suck in a breath and glanced upward to see him. His face was a picture of shock
and pain. “So long?” he whispered.

She nodded. “I did not love him at first. Our letters began dutifully, enough, Latin notes sent more as state missives than as anything more, but...but then he was exiled.”

Richard’s eyes sharpened and she paused, studying them.

Catherine shook her head again and looked away. “I stopped writing to him, then, figuring there was no use, but he kept on, kept on and on and on and...I suppose he had no one really to talk to. Perhaps he even supposed I no longer read those letters, I-I don’t know. But he persisted and they became so...honest and personal. For the first time, I could glimpse the image of the person who wrote them, the true and noble heart that felt so deeply, held so much, but kept it all locked up inside. I knew that feeling well enough, myself, and I...I had to write back.” She laughed, laughed because it was strangely freeing to speak of these things, though she’d never breathed a word to anyone in the world. “We began a secret correspondence that lasted years and even, even when I wed the King of France, he continued to write me, though I stopped writing to him again.” She clasped a hand to her heart. “God, I still remember the guilty jubilation I felt when the King died and I could write him again. I knew I was a sinner in that moment, but I didn’t care, I didn’t care, I imagined that I might return to Spain and he might win back his throne and at last, at last we could be together. For years we continued to write. He chronicled all his travels, everything he saw and felt and knew and loved and I wrote to him of the same. I have never been more open with a single person in my life than I was free to be with him. But then-” her eyes widened and she looked back to Richard again.

“But then you married me.”

“Yes,” she whispered. She felt hoarse, suddenly, as if the muscles of her throat had, at that moment, turned all to lead and deprived her of the power of speech.

“Go on.”

Fresh tears trickled from her eyes and Catherine dashed them away impatiently. “I told him that I would never write to him, again. I told him that, from that day forward, we must always be enemies. I knew it would wound him, but...I thought it was only right and...He never wrote me another single letter again,” she added, finally, sinking back into her chair. She reached down, clutching at her belly where it ached. Her shoulders shook and a volley of sobs escaped her. She couldn’t speak, her mouth wired open as the tears took hold. She rocked slowly in her chair, letting them fall. She wanted to scream, to scream, to scream, to scream, but she could not. She wanted to run, so very far away, but she could not. She wanted to forget this feeling, leave it cold and blotted out forever, but it shrilled in her ears and shadowed her eyes till it was the only thing she was capable of feeling: sobbing, sobbing, sobbing. He had not written her after that and, now, she knew, he would never, ever write to her again. She hugged herself, bowing her head. I’ve lost him forever.

Richard sank into one of the chairs beside her slowly. He was not looking at her, now. “My God,” he murmured. “All this time, I’ve suspected, I thought...But I see, now. You did not betray me with him...You betrayed him with me. He came first.” He bowed his head. He paused. “And, then, I made you fight against him and hold London for me. Why did you do it? Why did you not surrender the city, at once, to him?”

She whimpered, lips quivering. “I had a duty,” she said. “I did my duty.”

“But then, when you were told I had died – yes, I spoke to Henry and he told me that you all believed me dead – your duty was done. You surrendered the city to him, at last...and yourself, as well.”
Catherine turned to stare at him. “It’s worse than that,” she murmured. “I married him.”

Richard’s eyes widened. “What?” he paused, squeezed his eyes shut. “I was told,” he began, slowly, opening his grey eyes again. “That amongst Arthur’s last words, when he learned that I was, in fact, still alive…he said, ‘You do not know what you have done,’” he stopped, eyes growing distant. “Now I know.”

Catherine reached out to touch Richard, stopped short. “What were his last words? Do you know?”

Richard smiled a grim smile. “I am told he said that he hoped his family could bear up under the shame of having my heir, Dickon, for a relative.”

Catherine pressed her eyes shut. “And Dickon killed him for those words.”

“And sealed our family’s shame with that one, gruesome act.”

Catherine looked slowly towards Richard. “Why do you keep him on?”

“What choice do I have? Of all my nephews, he has the best legitimate claim. Should I renounce him, who, then, should follow? To open that door was to invite civil war within my own ranks and how was I to fight another war while still trapped within these ancient walls, hemmed in by the Tudor threat? I chose to leave it alone because I thought, at the time, it was the best path. Now I see more clearly, there was never to be an alternative. My fate has always led me here.” He looked at her long, his expression reading only of exhaustion. “Do not think I meant to forget the matter, entirely. It is an issue into which I imagined I could delve once I’d restored peace but…now I see that will never be. No, I expect Dickon will know Henry’s justice as Arthur once knew Dickon’s own. On and on the wheel of time turns, moving further and further into the future but always, always carried by the same spokes.” He paused, touched the baby’s nose. “And Mary?” he asked, softly.

Catherine opened her mouth to speak, but unspeakable terror spoke, instead, arresting her.

Richard nodded slowly. “So she is his, as well. I think I always knew,” he added, flashed a glance towards Catherine. “That portrait I showed you of the first Henry Tudor, his eyes are all flecked green. I told myself that Mary’s were Woodville green, you know,” he shook his head. “And perhaps they are. Arthur was my nephew, after all.”

Catherine sank to her knees, folding her hands as if in prayer. “Your Grace, I beg you. She is but a child, do her no harm, please, please, I beg you-”

“What’s this, what’s this?” Richard shook his head, taking one of Catherine’s hands in his own and raising her up. “Whoever may have given her life, thus far I have raised her as my own. I assure you, Catherine, there is nothing in this world that could induce me to harm my own beloved daughter. I love this child. I love you. Perhaps not in the way Arthur did, but in my own way I did love, do love you. You shall both have my love and name and protection so long as you want it.” He shrugged. “You are free, too, to discard it. Whatever you do, I pray you think fondly of me, from time to time. I can ask no more of you than that.”
Elizabeth of York had borne four sons; now only one was left alive. She was not going to let him die if there was anything she might do to prevent it.

ELIZABETH OF YORK, QUEEN MOTHER OF ENGLAND
York, England
July 1522

The grueling journey reminded her of her trip to Westminster, where she gave birth to Arthur, her firstborn. Everyday, Lizzie climbed into her saddle and everyday she and her allotted band of guards rode and rode until they could hardly bear it. Still, with only a handful of riders – and a very determined traveler in the form of Lizzie, herself – they moved much more quickly than any army could hope to do.

As soon as her party came within view of the walls, a party rode out to greet her.

“Your Grace,” said a young boy she recognized well as the son of one of her husband’s ministers, John Dudley. He helped her dismount as they came within the city. “I pray you will take some refreshment with us. Her Grace Queen Anne sent before you a currier to apprise us of your coming. We’ve prepared the Queen’s chambers for you.”

“Thank you,” she replied, softly, glancing about the city. “May I speak with the commanding officer? I have a wish to acquaint myself more fully with the situation before I meet with the Usurper.”

Surprise appeared upon the young man’s face. “Your Grace…” he looked a touch uncomfortable. “I’m afraid I must inform Your Grace that, with His Grace the King imprisoned, it is I who am in command of this army. His Grace the late King Arthur knighted me at his coronation and placed in a position of command subservient only to His Grace the Duke of Suffolk who is presently abroad.”
“Pray forgive me, sir.”

“It is forgotten, Your Grace. As to the rest of the situation, Your Grace, your son is currently imprisoned in Monk Bar, where the Usurper has contained himself, holed up to make, I suppose, a final stand. Those who could not fit in the tiny fortress have surrendered or ridden back to Scotland, those who were of that nationality. All of his supporters, including his Queen and child, are locked within the walls of Monk Bar. There can be no further hope for them. The Usurper has lost, already…he simply doesn’t know it, yet.”

“I daresay you are right, Sir John, but I pray you be no less than vigilant. An enemy remains and my own father returned to establish, once again, his own rule even after it was said to be entirely lost to him, forever.”

John bowed. “I shall be, Your Grace, I swear it upon my honor, but I pray Your Grace not despair. This man, whoever he may be, is not your father. It is at an end.”

“Lord be praised,” murmured the Queen. “I commend you, sir, for your good and loyal service to both my sons and my house. It shall not be forgotten. Now, if I might trouble you, perhaps I might go to my chambers. I’ve a wish to wash before I go to meet with the Usurper.”

“Your Grace,” exclaimed John. “It may not be safe!”

Lizzie shook her head. “My son is up there. I will go to him, whatever it takes.”

“What if you are refused?”

“Unlike him, I am the undisputed child of Edward IV,” said Lizzie. “He dare not refuse me.”

After she had washed, Lizzie chose a red gown, Tudor red. Her hair, once a glorious burnished copper, had turned chestnut later on in life, only to dull to silver-gold with age, but still there was a trace of fiery red to it and she found she was glad of it, today. Though born Plantagenet, when her husband had picked from the rose bush, a crown, it was the red rose of Tudor she, herself, had selected. She breathed deeply, uttered a thousand silent prayers at once, and steeled her heart.

“If you are ever afraid,” her husband had once said to Arthur. “Do not push it away. Use it, hone it, make fear your weapon.” Lizzie nodded and opened her eyes. She walked forward.

When her page announced who she was at the entrance to the Bar, she watched the Usurper’s man’s eyes go great and wide and, suddenly, sent one of his pages dashing. Soon enough, he returned, and Lizzie was allowed admittance. Monk Bar was dim, lit only by torches and the odd fire, as the windows were defensible and therefore shed little light. Lizzie squinted and followed the lord who led her up and up and up to the top floor of Monk Bar, squeezing her way through the press of people to get past. This level had been emptied, she found, of the other inhabitants and only ranking lords ringed the area, bowing to greet her as, “Her Grace the King’s sister, Princess Elizabeth.”

Just when I thought there could be no new titles for me to wear, she thought with a twinge of irony. Her husband would have enjoyed that ironic twist of humor. She got it, she thinks, from him.

At the end of the crowd, she finds a family setting. An array of ladies to pass through and then a woman holding an infant child and, beside her, her husband the king. Lizzie turns her eyes to him, immediately. Sudden sickness turned her gut and Lizzie clutched her page’s arm as if for something steady to hold. “Papa,” gasped the Queen.

It was her father’s face she looked into – altered, yes, but as she’d always imagined him, should he ever gain such an age, the chestnut locks turned, like hers, to a pale silver gold, whispering of ginger
as it caught the firelight. Strong facial features confronted her like her father’s: a bold jaw and chin, long nose, and pouting lips. Here, there was a scar on one eye keeping it more closed than the other, which her father never had, and the orbs, themselves, were grey where her father’s eyes had been a warm hazel, but the resemblance was unmistakable. *Papa’s exile,* she thought. *This child must have been born from that.* He could not, she was certain, be other than her brother – but could he be Dickon, as he claimed?

“Lizzie!” exclaimed the Usurper, rushing to her; stopped as Lizzie unconsciously stepped back. His beam faltered. “Do you not know me? Surely,” he said. “Surely you recognize me, dear Lizzie. Do you not know your own brother?”

She shook her head. “He died, Uncle Richard murdered him in the Tower. Murdered them both.”

“No, no, he did not. Lizzie, I’m alive, I’m alive.” Tentatively, he reached out, touched her shoulder. “I’m alive. All these years…I’m so sorry.” Tears welled in his eyes and, behind him, his Queen stood and ordered all the observers out. Lizzie hardly noticed, staring at a stranger’s familiar face. “Your son. I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry,” he put a hand to his mouth, eyes clouding up with tears. “I never meant for any of this to happen. Please, Lizzie, please forgive me.”

She stepped back again, slowly, shook her head. “I don’t understand,” she murmured.

He nodded, wiped at his face. “Lizzie, do you recall all those years ago when we fled with mother and the girls to sanctuary at Westminster? I was so scared and I called for Papa over and over again. You, you wrapped me in your arms, you called me your own one. You told me that everything would be all right. Do you remember? You used to call me Dickon, it was really my name, then, more than Richard. When I was no more than six, I’m sure, I fell and cut my leg quite badly. I was convinced, silly child that I was, that the doctors would have to cut it off and you came to me and you teased me till I laughed and felt all right, saying things like ‘You’ll match Papa with a scar like that,’ and ‘The doctors will not have your leg off, but Mama just might if she hears you crying like this.’ Do you remember? When I was eight, Papa gave me a very pretty jeweled dagger which I was very proud of and Mama gave me a cloak with ermine trim which I wore for every special occasion. But you gave me something far more precious, a little troop of soldier toys whom I commanded in mock battle against Cecily’s kitten. Do you remember? Lizzie, do you remember?”

She felt frozen, as if ice had breathed inside her veins and turned her half to a statue. She understood, now, how one glance of the Gorgon Medusa’s eyes could turn a man from flesh to stone. It was not terror, not sorrow but terrible, terrible shock, yes, shock and worse dread and more terrible than any of the others horror for all that had occurred. “No,” she cried, shook her head, heedless to tears that ran down her face. “No, it’s can’t be. It can’t be. Your dead it can’t be you, you’re dead and gone like all the rest. It’s not possible.”

“But it is, Lizzie,” he said, reaching for her again. “It’s me.”

Shock for the truth, dread for the loss, horror for all else. Lizzie clasped his hand in her own, half astonished to find it made of flesh and blood and warm as any living thing. She stretched out a hand to touch his cheek, touch the scar by his eye, clasp his face in both hands. “How? We were so sure, all of us,” she whispered. ‘Mama kept saying, ‘Our boys, our precious boys,’ and I came here understanding how she felt: I’ve lost three sons, as well. Now…” she shook her head.

Richard laughed through his tears, touching her elbows fondly as she felt his face, pulling her into an embrace. “Lizzie, Lizzie, how I’ve missed you. How dearly I have missed you.”
Some notes! Apparently there's some confusion as to whether Elizabeth of York had four sons or three (though, regardless, the only sons to make it to maturity were Arthur and Henry; the other two being Edmund and possibly Edward though some feel that Edward was simply confused for Edmund). I ruled that she would have four, here, bc, while the names are similar, they are different (we know, for example, that Edward IV had a brother named Edmund and the two were clearly not the same person).

I mentioned to some of you that I was doing calculations on how long it would take to ride from London to York in a small party and I kept turning up that it would only take a little over a week for a determined group of riders. I'll admit, that doesn't ~seem right to me, but it works better for the plot so I'm going with it!! :D
Chapter Summary

“Harry!” she came to him at once, bending to wrap her arms around his shoulders and cover his head with kisses.

Chapter Notes

Sorry, my darlings, this has not yet been edited!

HENRY TUDOR, KING OF ENGLAND
Monk Bar, England
July 1522

“Mama?!” Unthinking, Harry tried to rise, only to be reminded by the tightening of his bonds that he could not. His mother had appeared in the doorway, her face was marked with tears and, when she heard his voice, she turned towards him, hastening through the crowded throng towards him.

“Harry!” she came to him at once, bending to wrap her arms around his shoulders and cover his head with kisses.

“Mama, what are you doing here? It’s not safe! Please, you should go, you should-”

“Oh, hush, I’ll go when I please.” The Queen Mother rose to her height, again, and turned towards someone near her that Harry couldn’t see. “May I request that my son’s bonds be loosed? He’ll make no trouble while I am here, I may assure you.”

Pages doubled to the work and Harry chafed at his wrists when the ropes came off, rose when he was able, and pulled his mother close. She bunched his shirt in her fists.

“Oh, Harry, my baby, my sweet boy,” she murmured and he realized that she was crying. He buried his face in her shoulder, careless of who might witness the moment of weakness. He’d not seen his mother since France, since before this fight, before this year, before they’d lost Arthur. He tightened his arms around her. His chest was constricted, tight like unwilling fingers clenched in a glove.

“Mama, Arthur-”

“Shhh, shhh, no, that’s not your fault. It’s not your fault.”

“If I’d been here-”

Elizabeth pulled back, gently taking his face in her hands to look into his eyes. “I’d have lost both of my sons. Don’t wish for that. Don’t you ever wish for that. My mother went through that, but I won’t. I refuse. Do you understand me, Harry?”

He nodded, nodded again and reached for her. She pulled him close, again, fingers curling through
his unruly hair as he wept. He no longer cared who saw. When he looked up, again, the room had been cleared of all save the Usurper who stood a distance away to give them some privacy. Harry stiffened, slowly disentangling to face his foe. “What do you want?”

“Harry,” hissed the Queen, catching his arm. “Do you know why I cam here? To end this loathsome conflict for good and all. I now know a very compelling reason why, beyond even wishing it over, it would behoove us all to end this war and begin the process of peace.” Holding out one hand towards the Usurper, Elizabeth of York took Harry’s with her free hand. “Harry, this is your uncle, Richard of Shrewsbury, Duke of York, my brother. There is no reason now to go on fighting. You see, he and I have fixed it between us. Dickon will name you his successor, as my beloved son, and your newborn boy – yes, Harry, you have a son! – will one day be wed to Dickon’s little daughter, uniting both claims forever to the advantage of all our people, as your father and I once tried to do.”

Harry shook his head, watching the Usurper smile and take his mother’s hand. The Queen reached to put Harry’s hand into the Usurper’s but Harry snatched it away. “No!” he shook his head, backing away, willed this to be a bizarre nightmare into which he’d wandered. “No, Mama, he’s deceived you, deceived you somehow,” he murmured. “He’s a liar, we’ve always, always known that and he murdered Arthur, besides! If you are my uncle, why did you make no friendly attempt to explain, to bring us all back here?”

“Your father made war on me,” said the Usurper. “What was I to do? Put a knife into his hand and offer him my throat? So my efforts became less friendly and, still, your father eluded me at every try.”

Harry sneered, unconsciously chafed at his sore wrists. “Mama, I understand why you should wish to have an end to all of this, but this is not the way.” He raised an arm, pointing towards the walls. “Outside, my armies surround Monk Bar. Inside here, this contained fortress, the Usurper may hold out for some time, but eventually the men will weary and the food will run out and then, then they will surrender. We will have won! We are so close, now, Mama, do not despair.”

Elizabeth of York paused in a way Harry knew well. She was holding herself back, ordering her emotions before she spoke. When she’d been younger, her emotions had been always poised at the edge, but time and care had taught her another way, a way more like his father’s. “Harry,” she began, finally. “I need not remind you that your brother is dead. If such a dire conflict begins and the men begin to starve, do you imagine they will save a prisoner and starve, themselves? They have not spared royal hostages before.”

“Then my son will be king!” shouted Harry, stepping forward again. “And this will be ended for good and all!”

“Or Mary will.” Both Elizabeth and Harry turned to look at the Usurper as he spoke. “For it is Mary who is the true Tudor heir, is she not?”

“What?” demanded Elizabeth.

Harry turned towards the wall, cursing under his breath, then turned back. “She is a girl. Precedent makes me king before her and my son so as well. A female ruler has never been accepted in England and now, after years of unrest, it is not wise to put the thing to the test.”

“What are you saying?” demanded Elizabeth.

“Little Princess Mary is Arthur’s child,” supplied the Usurper. “She is not mine.”

“A report circulated, while Catherine of Aragon was a hostage in London of Arthur’s, that the
Usurper had died,” Harry began slowly, glancing towards his mother. “Arthur wed Catherine in secret, awaiting the Emperor’s endorsement before tempting the wrath of France without it. Anne and I were witness to the event.”

Elizabeth stretched out a hand, half-collapsing into the seat Harry had lately occupied.

“Mama,” he exclaimed, kneeling at her feet.

“Lizzie!” cried the Usurper. Harry glanced over his shoulder at him. Lizzie, it was, indeed, what everyone who knew her intimately called her. It might also have been a lucky guess. The Usurper paused, dropped his hand.

“Arthur,” murmured the Queen. “Oh, my boy. Is it so? Can it be?” She reached out, her hands on Harry’s shoulders. “Have you seen her? Does she look much like him?”

“I haven’t seen her,” said Harry, shaking his head. “I’ve heard her cries – one hears everything in this place – but I’ve not seen the child.”

“She has Arthur’s eyes, Catherine tells me,” said the Usurper.

Elizabeth put her head in her hands.

“Why do you argue for Mary’s rights,” began Harry. “If not merely to turn us all aflutter? You may have blinded my mother, Usurper, but you’ll not fool me.”

“I suggest,” said the Usurper. “We make no address to her true parentage and present her as the Yorkist rather than Lancastrian heir to settle this dispute once she is wed to your son, having of course obtained a dispensation for all manner of cousins to wed, so that it should be legal even if her true parentage is discovered.”

“This is madness!” cried Harry. “After all this fighting, you sign away your kingdom so cheaply. Why? Why do you do it? If this was all it meant to you, why did you put us all through it, to begin with? Why?!”

“Because you were right, Henry, when last we spoke. You were right that the choice is mine and I choose this: to do what is best for England. Is that not the duty of a King? Therefore, I perceive it is my duty, as king, to hand away my crown. Lock me in the Tower – I’ve faced those ghosts before now – do what you must, but let us end this piteous bloodshed.”

“So,” murmured Harry. “I am become King over all in right of my infant sons and my bastard niece, a prisoner with no crown to take and no heralds to laud.” He laughed. “How spectacularly unspectacular. Is this what I have fought for? Is this what Arthur died for?”

“Harry,” whispered Elizabeth of York, looking up, and taking her son’s hand in hers. “It is England for which you both fought. Nothing more, and nothing less. You have prevailed, after all this time. Is that not enough?”

He bowed his head, glanced back towards the Usurper. “I was right in this, as well, but so were you. There is no climactic catharsis, here, but I desired it notwithstanding. Will I have peace?”

The Usurper stepped forward. “You will have it from me,” he said. “You are my heir, my son-to-be, and,” he added, dropping to one knee. “You are my King.”
Chapter Summary

Richard of Shrewsbury, King of England, had been a constant his whole life.

Chapter Notes

TW: violence!! If you do not wish to read this, I will provide a summary in the bottom notes.

Also, once again, this chapter has not been edited. I apologize.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

RICHARD OF WARWICK, DUKE OF CLARENCE
Monk Bar, England
June 1522

“Leave us.”

Dickon peered curiously at his uncle. Richard of Shrewsbury, King of England, had been a constant his whole life. Always, Dickon had been suspended between him and the throne and his own family: a bundle of healthy siblings, a father of little education, and a willful, though now deceased, mother. He’d always been sure of his future, then. Now, things were less certain but even trapped within this lone Bar, Dickon felt no less sure that one day he would wear the crown. It was his.

The throng flowed slowly back like a tide rushing out to sea. Dickon’s lips quirked into a smile. Someday, that power would be his. He, too, would command the seas and the skies and the rains that poured overhead. All that lay before him was his, it was only a matter of waiting.

“Uncle,” greeted Dickon, sweeping a bow. “I am pleased you have come to visit me.”

Richard held up one hand, but Dickon went on speaking.

“I know you may feel…discouraged of our situation, but all is not lost. God wills it. Our trials are meant only to further our glory when we prevail, we-”

“Dickon!”

He broke off, cheeks heating at the King’s tone. “Your Grace,” he replied, stiffly. Dickon did not like to be admonished.

“It is over,” said Richard.

“They have surrendered?”

“No,” replied Richard, wearily. “We have.”
“Impossible.” Dickon didn’t mean to say it, but the word fluttered out as his eyes widened. “Our victory is assured!” Dickon pointed. “We have their so-called king and will gut him before we surrender. You saw how that blow broke their back the last time! How will they ever recover when I’ve killed both their kings?”

Dickon pressed forward, but his uncle put out a hand, stopped him. “You will not lay a hand on Henry Tudor. He is your king, now.”

Dickon shook his head, furiously. “No!”

“The murder of Arthur Tudor did not break the Tudor army’s back. They had already surrendered! The only hope it demolished was our own! Can’t you see that? You destroyed our chances.”

Weariness washed over the face of the king and he let his hand fall to his side again. “But it is no matter. We have lost. I have named Henry my successor and mean to abdicate as soon as all is officially announced. It will all be over.”

Dickon swallowed air, reeled backward, half-stumbling into a chair. It couldn’t be, couldn’t be, God had made Dickon for the purpose of the kingship. No, those dastardly Tudors had done something to his uncle, drained his mind of all sense. Yes, yes, Dickon was betrayed. He raised a hand, rubbing at his chest. Dickon was betrayed and the Tudors would kill him for what he had done. But they could not kill Dickon, Dickon was the king-in-waiting, the king that was meant to be. It was he, and he alone, who could and would sew England back together. He had been born for the single purpose of uniting her and making her the greatest nation on Earth. God would never allow this to happen, never. Slowly, Dickon raised his head. “You lie,” he growled through his teeth, felt sudden tears spring upon him. “You are lying to me! They have, they have poisoned your mind against me. Don’t be so weak! Our Lord ordained all of this for my greater glory. I am to be King, your successor! This world will tremble before my onslaught, because you will have shown them all that I am your true son, not of body, but of soul. Was this not the entire purpose of all these wars? To place you and I, hand in hand, upon the throne? God in Heaven!” he sobbed. “Do you not love me?”

Richard swallowed hard. Dickon watched him through his tears – irate and fervent and tragic – watched him glance away and back again. “You are right in the last. You are my child and I have loved you,” he said, nodding. “And, therefore, you are my greatest shame.”

The tears dribbled, then, flowing down his face and Dickon laughed, laughed and laughed as the tears flowed and flowed down his face. One hand shot out, catching hold of the chair and he held to it as though to an anchor. “Shame?” he whispered. “No, no, I am your greatest glory. You are the only father I love!” he hammered his own chest. “I am your only son! I am the only one amongst all this host, who ever bothered to do something. I am the only one who is not a craven coward! I killed Arthur Tudor! No other dared! Or have you forgotten?”

“I remember it well. I also remember you as a child, a curious little boy, and it is due to my regard for him that I have come at all. You will be taken to the Tower and you will know the cold hospitality once felt by your father, Edward of Warwick, unless they choose to cut off your head. Do not fear, Dickon. No doubt, I shall know the same fate.”

Dickon shook his head, pushed off from the chair and came forward towards his uncle. He seized two fistfuls of Richard’s doublet. “No, no, I will not let them.”

“You will submit to justice, as must we all. You murdered your cousin and I, I had charge over you when you did it. I am as responsible for his death as my own Uncle Richard was for my brother’s.”

“Quiet,” spat Dickon, shaking his head. “Be quiet! Your words are bile!”
Richard nodded slowly, glanced away. “I know you’re angry.”

“Angry?” Dickon laughed, released his uncle’s doublet. “Is that all you feel?”

“Me? No.”

“Henry Tudor is no king.”

“You are mistaken. He is your king and mine.”

“No, I am! I am your heir, not him, not that bastard upstart! I am the king!”

“Thank the Lord, you have never been that.”

The world reeled before him. Dickon cast his gaze stubbornly away. “God is testing me. He knows I will triumph in the end. You will make me your successor again and I will ascend, rightful king, to the throne.”

“How did you ever calculate that after my child was born?”

“She is only a girl,” said Dickon, dismissively. “You will, of course, wed her to me.”

“I never promised you that.”

“You didn’t need to! I already knew that she was intended for me.”

“She was not. She will wed Henry Tudor’s newborn son.” Richard shook his head. “I love her, too, as my child, and I will never allow you to lay a hand upon her. No, she will be Queen of England beside a King of England, but that man will never be you.”

“You are a liar!” shrieked Dickon. “The demons from hell have sprung up to seize your form away!” He hiccupped around his tears. “I thought you loved me.”

“I did, but you killed that love when you killed Arthur.”

“Arthur, Arthur, always Arthur!” shrieked Dickon. “No one congratulates me for that as they should, always, always, they make it as a jibe! You all, you all take and you take and you take from me. I won’t let you! I won’t let you!” He drew his dagger.

“Dickon!”

Seizing hold of Richard’s doublet, he jabbed the dagger into Richard’s belly.


“I loved you,” Dickon whispered again, backing into the shadows.

The King did not stir again.
As promised, here's a brief summary of the chapter:

CHAPTER SPOILER ALERT: Richard of Shrewsbury goes to inform Dickon of the surrender and of Dickon's ultimate resulting future. An argument breaks out, however, because Dickon is unable to accept this information, maintaining that he was formed to be king and that hardships only come to them to increase their ultimate glory. The argument culminates in Dickon stabbing Richard to death.
The Will

Chapter Summary

“What?” demanded Hal, eyes widening. “He escaped?”

Chapter Notes

note: this has not yet been edited. Thank you for your patience, my friends! <3

HENRY COURTENAY, EARL OF DEVON
Monk Bar, England
June 1522

“We’ve tracked the assassin as far as the sea.”

“What?” demanded Hal, eyes widening. “He escaped?” Hal sat slowly, sinking into the nearby chair without even his own comprehension. He was uniquely exhausted, as if all life had crowded in and sapped him of strength. “Has God no mercy left?” he murmured. Life felt unreal, as though he were trapped in a nightmare, unable to wake. Passing a hand across his mouth, he nodded, nodded again and put his head in his hands.

“What now, my lord?” asked one of the men. “How do we proceed? And who…who is to rule?”

Slowly, Hal raised his head, again. Who is to rule? In the days since the his uncle’s body had been found, Hal had grappled with the reality of their desperate situation. With the king dead, Princess Mary an infant in arms, and Dickon disappeared, he didn’t know what to do, but he also knew it was up to him to decide. Richard had made his intentions clear enough and Hal’s first instinct was to honor them, but if Henry Tudor had murdered the king, that changed things. Yet, why would he, when Richard had shown every intention of surrendering the crown?

Hal swore under his breath, standing again. There was no time to indulge his grief – he was grateful, almost, for that reprieve though he knew he’d suffer dreadfully for it, later. Instead, he had to be about his uncle’s business.

“And no sign of my cousin?”

“The Duke of Clarence is still missing, my lord.”

“Then,” said Hal. “I’m afraid the duties of regent fall to me until such time as a more appropriate Protector may be appointed.”

“Yes, my lord,” said the man, bowing.

“Be so good as to summon to me my lord, the Earl of Suffolk.”

“Yes, my lord,” said the man and bowed himself out.
Hal sank into the chair again, sucking in a breath. Unshed tears stung his eyes, but he refused to give them their due. The longer he pushed them off, the longer he could remain sensible – the longer this tragedy could remain unreal. He could not think of his poor uncle alone and fighting for life, bleeding out on the cold stone. He could not face it. He could not face the other possibility, which perpetuated the awful fears: that it was Hal’s own cousin, the man last seen with the King, the one who had disappeared: Dickon who had murdered their uncle.

Hal jumped up; stalked to the nearest arrow slit, peering out into the crowd. He heard Ed enter behind him.

“The King is dead,” said Hal, softly, pushing back the tears, the thoughts, the feelings.

Ed’s eyes widened, mouth opening, shutting again. “Sweet Jesu,” he muttered, half-stunned, half-cross. “Who knows this?”

“I imagine word is getting around. He was found by a few servants, but at present, officially, only you and I and those who found him are aware.”

Ed rubbed his chin. “So…the Queen…”

Hal shook his head. “I have not yet told her. Before anyone knows, we must know how we will act.”

Ed swallowed. “And you are deciding?”

“I am decided,” replied Hal. “It is merely the execution that baffles me.”

“May I be of assistance?”

“I pray so,” replied Hal. “I know what His Grace the late King intended to do before he died. I suspect it is the reason for his death.”

“You mean-”

“He was murdered.”

“My God.” Ed paused. “You said you…you know what the King meant to do?”

“He took me into his confidence.”

“Will you take me into yours?”

Hal nodded. “He meant to surrender his crown, his kingly powers, everything to Henry Tudor and betroth together their two children to unite the claims of both houses: York and Lancaster.”

“And you mean to honor these wishes?” inquired Ed.

“I do.”

“But the trouble is that an interim Protector does not have the power to force a future ruler off the throne in the name of the deceased monarch?”

Hal swallowed hard. “Particularly when there is some lack of clarity regarding who that monarch is meant to be.”

“Then,” said Ed. “I propose we find a will.”
“You think he left one?”

Ed exhaled slowly. “I am confident we will find one…once we’ve written it.”

“You cannot be serious!”

“He told you it was his intent, did he not? It would not be a lie, only a means by which to make others see this was is desire. I would say to suppress the fact of the king’s death and simply put the orders about as though they were his own but, as you say, the secret it already out and spreading. No, there must be a will. It is time we surrender and have peace. It is what King Richard would have wanted. This is a lie, true, but it is a lie that will save many, many lives.”

“And if it is discovered that the document is a forgery?”

“It will not be,” said Ed. “House Tudor has all but won this war, as it is. There will be none to gainsay the outcome: the writ will be accepted and the war will be over.”

Hal eyed him for a time, nodded softly. “Yes,” he acknowledged. “Yes, you are right: we must save as many lives, now, as we can, and I do know good and well it was the King’s intent. This is what must be done.”

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HENRY TUDOR, KING OF ENGLAND
Monk Bar, England
June 1522

“What’s this?” asked Harry. “We’ve been left in bizarre suspense for so long…Does the…does he mean to renege now on his promises?” It still felt strange – nigh blasphemous – to think of the Usurper as his uncle, as legitimate king, as son of Edward IV and his Queen Elizabeth, as brother to Harry’s mother: one of the Princes in the Tower.

Harry was weary of this confinement and longed to go somewhere, anywhere other than here. Even his former imprisonment in the Tower had been preferable to this one, with some degree of privacy and room to move about – even to the meager extent then afforded by the condition of his leg, at that time. It had also had a claim upon his affections that could not be said of this: it was where Anne Boleyn was.

He longed to see her, to hold her again, to speak to her, and to hear her speak to him. He knew that she had borne their child and that it had been a son, but he’d never clapped eyes on his boy and it seemed ages since he’d seen his darling wife. He was impatient for this all to be over and to see his family, again.

Hal Courtenay was pale as death as he gathered everyone of the greater court around him. “There is something I must tell you,” he said. “The King is dead.”
“How do you bear it?” whispered Catherine. She rested her head against the cold stone wall nearby, watching as Elizabeth of York cradled little Princess Mary. “How do you bear any of it?”

Now, by anyone’s estimation – Yorkist or Lancastrian – Catherine was Queen Dowager of England, just as she was Queen Dowager of France: just as if nothing had happened, save for her beloved daughter, a child of two fathers. She wanted to weep, but she did not know, now, for whom she meant her tears. For each of them, for those who were dead and those still alive; for all that had happened; for all that had not.

Elizabeth looked up from the infant in her arms at the sound of the question, meeting Catherine’s eyes. She’d not spoken much to Catherine which was, perhaps, unsurprising. It must be hard to face someone who had known one’s sibling in their later life when Elizabeth, herself, had been deprived of the opportunity. Elizabeth sucked in her lips and nodded slowly, coming to sit beside Catherine. “I bear it because I must,” she said, at last. She reached out, hesitated, and touched Catherine’s hand. “It’s true what they say, lamb. Time is a great healer.”

Catherine shook her head. “No, the Greeks had it right. Time devours his children. I do not want him to have mine.”

Elizabeth exhaled slowly, brushing her fingers through Mary’s new tuft of chestnut hair. “As he has devoured mine?”

Catherine looked at her suddenly, fiercely. “I’m sorry,” she began. “I didn’t mean to-”

Elizabeth shook her head, kissed the baby’s little hand. “I know that some run from their grief – and from time to time I run from mine – but I prefer to keep it close. Eventually, the pain will fade and then it will become sweet memories tucked away. My bonny boy, Edmund,” she added. “I thought once I’d die of the pain, but now…now the thought of him brings pleasure. You see, grief turns love to pain, but the love never dies. That stays with us when the pain is gone.”

“The pain dies?”

Elizabeth stroked Mary’s fingers gently. “I should clarify…not entirely. It will always be there, I think, bittersweet but one grows fond of the thing because it is what remains of the one we have lost and becomes, by that means, incalculably precious. My parents, my siblings, my boys, my husband…I would not trade my memories of them for all the world. As long as I live, you see, they remain with me. They are still alive within me.” She paused. “Someday, we, too, will live through those who remember us and we will be reunited in paradise and in their minds with the ones who went before us. Then, it will be our turn to await those who will come after. Life seems cruel, but
there are blessings even amidst the rest.” Elizabeth’s eyes rested on the Spanish Infanta for a moment before she offered a ginger smile. She reached out to take Catherine’s hand. “Take heart, for if you pain be great, so great was your love and what, in all this world, is more precious than that?”

Catherine smiled softly, nodded. Tears leaked from her eyes, staining her face, but she did not dash them away. “What shall I do without him?”

Elizabeth released Catherine’s hand and shifted the baby she held in both arms. “Who?” she inquired, very softly. “My brother…or my son?”

Catherine gasped. Her heart leapt, pounding in her ears. Catherine gripped the arms of her chair for a moment, as though if she stabilized herself in her seat, she could still her throbbed mind. She dashed away the tears. “What do you mean?”

“I know,” replied Elizabeth. “I know who the father of this child is and, while I confess it is hard for me to think of the pain caused to both my brother and son by it, I am no less glad. I did not think, when he died, that I would ever hold his child in my arms. Instead, you have given me back the most wonderful blessing in the form of this child,” she added, kissing Mary’s forehead. “My granddaughter, a granddaughter I did not think ever to have.”

“Then…you will do nothing?”

“I will do nothing,” agreed Elizabeth. “Little Mary need never fear anything from me. In any case, she is betrothed to her cousin in London and, when they are wed, England shall have peace. It is what my Henry and I wanted. It is what Arthur wanted. Ultimately, it is what my brother wanted, too.”

A pause, Catherine stood and walked about the room for a moment. Her husbands all were dead and now, so was she, dead and buried and already replaced. It seemed so strange and so predictable: she’d replaced her own husbands again and again and another time yet: now it was her time to be covered over and forgotten. This, too, was her duty: to give way to another woman…even one born from so small an estate as the one that was coming. Yes, Anne would replace Catherine as Catherine once had replaced Elizabeth and on and on and on it went. Perhaps Elizabeth was right. Perhaps, even now, they all lived only in the memories of those who once had known them.

“Even now, Anne Boleyn rides here to meet her husband,” said Catherine, moving to the window. “She will be crowned at the Minster. Does it not seem strange to you that she should occupy our place as Queen? My lady, Queen of England as I once was and as you were before me?”

Elizabeth laughed. “You did not see her with my son in France. In all this turmoil, I confess it is perhaps an ill-advised match – a princess might better suit in preventing further war – but even amongst royal princesses, he could not find a more capable match. No, I think she shall do quite nicely. My mother, you forget, was of still less elevated lineage than is Queen Anne but she raised us all up with love and care and made us each the person we grew to be. You remember my brother: he was as dogged as she. I am the same. I pray my grandchildren will be as redoubtable as their mother, one day.” She paused. “There is something else you ought to know. Before I came here, I visited in London with Queen Anne. She informed me that, before you marriage to Arthur, he wrote to your nephew the Emperor. The Emperor has responded. He endorsed the match.”

Catherine pressed her eyes shut. “He knows?”

“He has cause to suspect, but I doubt as he can know anything for certain. Will he make a fuss?”

Catherine exhaled slowly. “I doubt it. Regardless of Mary’s true paternity, my nephew will have a
cousin sitting the throne of England when Mary becomes Queen. I do not think he will wish to endanger that outcome. He will stay silent unless he is thwarted in his desires and, as he has great hopes of our dynasty, that can only ever mean he shall rise in support of Mary, not the other way round. We may rely upon him.” She paused. “What of François?”

Elizabeth nodded. “He will be satisfied so long as Harry lends his support to the French cause and he, at least, knows nothing of Mary’s paternal difficulties. He wishes my granddaughter, Bess, to be sent to him in France, eventually, and that, too, will no doubt please him. Spain and France may clash, and that shall bring some unhappiness to us, I’ve no doubt, but none like we’ve known. Perhaps, at long last, England’s difficulties shall all be external and the crown my rest a little easier upon our children’s heads.”
The day was bright as the Queen’s congregation gathered outside York to be greeted by the King’s. The world was lined with cheering crowds, gathered to see the splendor, to hear the music, to collect the charity that would be handed out in thanksgiving for the coming of this happy day. Anne was borne up in a carriage and peaked out its windows towards the future. The long-combatted walls of York had seen some repairs and common folk seemed to line every foot path, tossing white and red roses and every other flower down upon them. Anne leaned forward.

“They must be glad,” she remarked to her companions: her sister, Mary; Henry’s sister, Mary; Anne’s brother, George, who had come from France; and Anne’s children were all snugly fit into the large shuddering carriage. “To see the end of war.”

“It seems passing strange to me,” replied Princess Mary. “I can hardly imagine celebrating a conquest.”

“Conquest?” murmured Mary Carey. “Do you imagine that’s how they see it? The Usurper did not die in battle.”

“Nor was he a usurper,” said George. “As it turned out.”

“He agreed in the end that Henry should succeed him,” Anne pointed out.

Princess Mary turned towards them each in turn, then smiled softly. “It does not matter whether the man was born prince or pauper, in truth,” she responded. “This was a war. The invaders won,” she added, turning back to her window. “That makes it a conquest. My father was a conqueror. Now, so is my brother.” The princess balanced Anne’s baby boy in her lap and raised his tiny hand to wave out the window as they rode past.

Mary Carey, who held little Elizabeth, smoothed the child’s ruddy hair lovingly. “Why is the coronation occurring now? Oughtn’t it to wait until more money can be saved for it?”

“Usually, yes,” said George. “But, given the…hard-won quality of the English throne, it was judged
best that a coronation ought to be brought on quickly and so close to Scotland who were lately allied with the previous regime so that its truth could not be doubted. Particularly with Dickon of Clarence...God knows where, it seemed prudent. It seems there is some concern that he may lay claim to the throne and, as you know, he is vanished without a trace. A speedy coronation is the best way to claim the throne while leaving little room for doubt amongst those who might otherwise raise question.”

“You don’t think anyone would raise doubt, now, surely?” inquired Mary Carey.

“There is always room for that,” replied Princess Mary. “My family’s plight is proof of that. Fortunately, both sides are exhausted and few have the will or reason to take up a fight, wherever this Dickon may surface and whatever he may claim.”

“In any case, Henry’s position is already far more secure than the Usurper’s ever was,” said Anne, stroking her son’s baby-soft hand. “He has already heirs of his own body with every expectation of more to come in future and, besides that, two beautiful sisters and an influential mother, herself a princess of the blood. Henry’s royal descent cannot be doubted, whereas the Usurper’s never was sure.”

Micklegate Bar rose before them and Anne closed her eyes as its shadow was cast over the carriage. For a moment, all light seemed cut off, but it rained down upon her again, surrounding her in a golden glow. She opened her eyes, blinking in the brilliant, streaming light, crowned in the sun’s rays.

The carriage rolled to a stop and all filed out to greet the party that awaited them. Anne watched in anticipation, practically tripping out of the carriage to meet them. Her husband awaited her, at long last.

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HENRY TUDOR, KING OF ENGLAND
York, England
August 1522

“Oh, sweetheart,” he murmured, holding her close. When he saw her run to him, he hardly cared that all the world was now in witness to her coming. He held her tenderly, kissed her cheek. “Oh, Nan,” he murmured, touching her face as he stepped back to look at her. “God, I’ve missed you. I was so frightened for you and our babe, as your time drew near. I prayed God keep you every day that passed.” Harry’s forehead touched hers gently and he rested for a moment in her touch. He didn’t realize he was crying till he looked at her again and saw she was, as well. “Say you missed me.”

“Desperately,” replied Anne.

“Say you prayed for me.”

“Every day.”

“Say you’re pleased to be with me, again.”

“More than I can ever say. Oh, Henry, you weren’t the only one who was afraid and had no way of knowing how things stood. It was agony, waiting for you to come home.” She laughed, her hands on his shoulders. “But more the fool I, for all England is our home, now, I suppose.” She paused. “I’ve someone for you to meet.”

Turning away from him, finally, Anne held out her arms and received their son into them. She turned
back and put the child into his father’s arms.

“Henry, this is your son.”

He was beautiful, this tiny lad, with his face placid in sleep and smushed up with extreme youth. “God in heaven,” he whispered.

“I can hardly believe he’s already got himself a future wife,” teased Anne, leaning close over the boy. “He works even more rapidly than his father, hard to believe.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t consult you first, Nan, it was the only way.”

“Oh, hush, I’d have done the same. I’m glad of it. This nation must heal and in what better way? We’ve made a king, together, Henry, and this is what kings do.”

Reaching out, Henry snaked his arm around her waist. “It’s not what I did.”

“Well,” she replied, tilting her head playfully. “You were but a prince at the time.”

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ANNE BOLEYN, QUEEN OF ENGLAND
York Castle, England
August 1522

Anne sipped slowly at her wine, watching Henry play with their children. An array of fine cloth and pillows had been decked out on the floor and, Anne included, the whole lot of them were spread out on the floor. Anne was exhausted from travel and more than pleased for Henry to take over with the children. When, at last, it was time for them to go to bed and their maid came for them, Anne was dozing off, herself, a bit. She woke, sometime later, in bed and dressed for it. Henry, who was fumbling with changing out of his own clothes, grinned at her.

“Awake, already?” he teased.

She chuckled. “I suspected you might be about to undress and I didn’t wish to miss anything,” she teased. “Speaking of which…which maid helped me into my nightclothes? I don’t remember a thing.”

“No maid but your most devoted servant,” he replied.

“You?”

“Me.” He grinned. “I sent the servants away, tonight. I want you all to myself.”

“I’m sorry I wasn’t more excitement to begin with,” she replied. “Most unromantic to fall asleep on you like that.”

He laughed. “I pray you don’t regret it. Any moment passed in your company is a blessing to me… even if you do snore.”

“I don’t snore!”

Henry laughed and, half-dressed, clambered across the bed to kiss her. “No,” he agreed. “You don’t. But I do love to vex you.”

“Well do I know it.” Wrapping her arms around his naked shoulders, she kissed him more fully.
“Now, you’ve performed for me a service, tonight,” she said, kissing his cheek, his chin. “Allow me to do the same for you and help you out of these wretched clothes.”
Mary Boles, Lady Carey
York Castle, England
September 1522

Her sister was resplendent, raven hair loose and tumbling down her back. All the great ladies hovered around her sister, making themselves useful to her as best they could. Despite herself, Mary grinned. Memories of France were present for her, now: all the world hovered around Queen Claude. Mary wondered what the Queen of France would make of the Boleyn girls, now. They had come a long way since they had crossed the Channel.

Even Catherine of Aragon hovered in Anne’s midst, as Anne prepared for her coronation procession through York. The Infanta held Anne’s baby boy in her arms.

“Arthur,” whispered Catherine, looking down at the child. “I am glad that shall be his name and my Mary shall wed him. I am glad.”

Anne stood still, very still, as her ladies adjusted her dress around her. Stiff as she stood, her eyes were alive with that unreadable thing that crossed them from time-to-time and Mary glanced quietly towards Catherine, who held the gaze. Mary clutched her hands before her. It was difficult to think that, someday, they may share a grandchild or many, through that planned union.

Anne glanced around her, and flicked her arm. Quickly, the ladies filed out. Mary moved towards the door to go, and Catherine as well, but Anne held them back. “We three were once in France together,” said Anne. “Long before any of this happened.” She looked to Catherine. “Were we not such good friends?”

Catherine smiled softly, sadly, and glanced down. “The dearest,” she confessed. “And you have been friends to me, since, much of the time…if not always.”

“Our men may fight each other for a crown,” said Anne. “But we have seen each other through it all. We keep each others’ secrets.”

Catherine exhaled slowly. “Then…you will keep mine?” Catherine glanced hastily towards Mary.

“Forgive me, Your Grace,” said Mary. “But I had already heard.”
“It was Richard’s wish that Mary should keep his name so as to help mend England’s wounds.”

“And your other English husband? Arthur?” inquired Mary. “What should he think?”

“He would be glad to know that we are safe and that his child shall sit the throne and the Tudor dynasty shall reign, one way or another.”

“Then,” said Mary, softly. “Honor is satisfied all around, I suppose.”

“Do you know the route your procession will take?” inquired Catherine.

“No,” confessed Anne. “But, then, I’ve not been to York before and the explanation did not do it justice. I know we shall end in the Minster, my Henry and I.”

The ceremony, itself, was slated to take many hours, she’d heard, and Mary found she dreaded them, though the procession did seem exciting. There were to be pageants and recitals along the way to keep the royal couple entertained while they were shown off to all the world this way as King and Queen.

“Are you nervous?” inquired Catherine.

“Yes,” confessed Anne. “Nervous, but excited, too. The future awaits.”
Coronation

Chapter Summary

The great bells of the cathedral tolled joyfully to announce their coming and cannons roared their triumph.

Chapter Notes

This chapter has not yet been edited!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

ANNE BOLEYN, QUEEN OF ENGLAND
York, England
September 1522

The litter rumbled along beneath her, but Anne hardly felt it. She seemed to soar above all that was around her as the crowds swarmed around them all. Above her, a canopy sheltered her from the autumnal sun. Before her, her husband and his household marched and behind her, her own brought up the train. It felt the brightest day that had ever shone, the sun’s rays warming her through the elaborate canopy as, all around the procession, the people put on displays to amuse and delight their new sovereigns as they passed on their way to the Minster to be crowned. The great bells of the cathedral tolled joyfully to announce their coming and cannons roared their triumph.

Anne smiled at a group of children who rushed up, casting red-and-white rose petals. York’s streets were narrow and solid, lined with ancient buildings and Anne caught herself with the singular thought, War is over. It was the refrain for the day, echoing unspoken all around them. It was in the singing choirs and the wordless cheers, it was in the streaming sunlight and in the grey stones that built York. War was over for the rose, both red and white, had returned. War was over because there was no left to fight.

Elizabeth of York had written to each of Henry’s cousins and each had come, in turn, to kneel at his feet. Only Dickon of Gloucester hadn’t appeared, but with no support, there was nothing he could do. Both Spain and France were content with England’s role, as each had a promising alliance with the new royal family. No, Anne was sure they were untouchable and, today, today, they were golden.

Winding through the streets of York, Anne listened to the sweet music, watched the fine spectacles. The world was glorified and death was conquered.

The spires on the towers of the Minster peaked above the rooftops; its ancient spires seemed to pierce the sky. A choir filled the world with enchanted refrain as the cathedral seemed to rise before them. Anne leaned forward to catch a glimpse of the building, despite the canopy that shielded her from the sun. Her dark tresses, in which she sat, fell forward and she gazed up, up, up. The bells sang out, each peal ringing merrily across the city, and beyond. The litter came to a halt before the great doors which soared above them all. Anne’s lips curled into a smile and she put her hand out of the litter.
Henry came to claim it, himself, handing her out of the litter. He glowed in the sunshine, arrayed in a
gold collar of rubies and a mantle of cloth-of-gold and velvet and ermine. Likewise, her coronation
robes were purple velvet, furred with ermine, and a gold coronet. They stood for a moment, hand-in-
hand, taking one another in, sucking in deep breaths, knowing that though they entered a king and
queen, they would leave as something more. They breathed in sequence and she offered a smile. His
returned, wide and grateful, and she felt her own responding as he squeezed her hand. The Barons of
the Cinq Ports came to hold great canopies over the royal couple and their hands parted, but Anne
found she could not tear her eyes away from him, nor could he from her. Together they walked over
the striped cloth rug which had been laid down before them and entered the Minster.

The cathedral soared, its tracery ceiling – all ivory and gold – rising up, up, up to God and to every
side massive pillars flanked immense arched walkways. As one, the king and queen processed down
the center towards the high altar, passing beyond the King’s screen, depicting every king from the
Conqueror to Henry VI. All around them, massive stained glass windows shed glowing light across
them, pooling upon the floor as they walked. The bells rang and choirs sang, but did not cross
beyond the sacred privacy of the screen.

There, they made their sacred oaths. The chrism was warm against the Archbishop’s thumb as he
anointed her, warm and gooey and she gasped to feel it against her skin: God’s sacred touch upon
her. Their immortal souls, indelibly marked now, were ready for what was to come.

Anne felt each step as she walked towards the chair and was seated beside her husband. She
watched as the Archbishop raised St. Edward’s crown in the sight of all, presenting it and turning to
place it upon Henry’s head. His eyes found hers and then Anne glanced back and out towards the
great window. It was her turn.

The Archbishop raised up her crown, high, high above all, and paused. The chrism still felt warm
and sticky and the songs of the people rose above all. Slowly, he lowered it and she felt the void
between woman and queen weakening every moment. The crown was heavy on her brow and Anne
closed her eyes, feeling its weight.

“Vivat!” cheered the crowd inside, as the came to do the new regime homage and swear oaths of
their own. “Vivat Rex!”

Henry took her hand again and they were led out to be presented by the people.

“Vivat!” roared the people in deafening acclaim. “Vivat Rex!”

All the world was turned to gold and Henry’s hand was in her own.

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HENRY VIII, KING OF ENGLAND
York Castle, England
September 1522

Harry and Anne laughed with their friends as yet another course was lain before them. All the streets
of York were lined with cloth and the world was bright. It hardly felt real, all this, only a blur, after
all that had been and Harry wondered, briefly, if Arthur and their father had felt this way on their
own coronations – stuffed full and content, yet floatingly surreal, kaleidoscopic, distant. Yet, perhaps
it was only the relief of having removed the impossible weight of St. Edward’s crown. This moment
felt more real, relaxed, triumphant, with his life seated beside him and his friends all around him,
feasting and reveling in their shared victory.
Still, Harry remembered the boy he’d once been: cast out of England, staggering along the shores of Brittany alongside his mother. He remembered the young man he’d become, growing up in want and poverty and hope of a fantasy. It was a strange roiling he felt, somewhere in his gut now, to think that all over: his father’s life, his brother’s life, those sweet days in France of his courtship of Anne.

Harry had imagined this day so often – though, always, on behalf of his brother – it seemed more as thought he’d strayed once more into his own mind’s eye than that he was truly experiencing all this, at last. He wanted a grounding force.

Harry stretched out his hand, catching Anne’s in his own, her long, lovely fingers adorned in rich rings, the soft warmth of her flesh in his as his fingers ran over hers slowly, softly and, at last, he grasped her hang, pulled it close. Her eyes were black, black and scorching as ever they’d been, and he put her hand to his lips. Her eyes gentled, turning to liquid fire and she leaned towards him, carefully, her hand coming to rest over his heart as her sweet lips found his, slowly at first, soft as rose petals when she raised her other hand to touch his face. Her tongue was wet and promising and he grinned into the kiss, felt her lips respond likewise. Her eyes were a brand and he was glad. He longed for all the world to see that he belonged to her.

She pulled back to look at him, smiling fondly and he clasped both hands over hers, where it rested over his heart. “Tell me, Nan,” he whispered. “Le temps viendra. Has the time come?”

“Yes,” she breathed back, her warm eyes searching his as she broke into a wide grin. “I am, at last, the Most Happy.”

Chapter End Notes

The York Minster is one of the most magnificent Gothic churches in England and you can check out more about it here: https://yorkminster.org/ and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/York_Minster It is, indeed, a site for coronations, as Edward III was crowned there.

I based this coronation jointly on the double coronation of Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon and upon the solo coronation of Anne Boleyn (who was pregnant with Elizabeth I at the time).

More Henry VIII's coronation:
https://www.westminster-abbey.org/abbey-commemorations/royals/henry-viii  
http://royalcentral.co.uk/blogs/history/king-henry-viii-is-crowned-10226

More on Anne Boleyn's coronation:
https://www.theanneboleynfiles.com/31-may-1533-anne-boleyns-coronation-procession/  
https://englishhistory.net/tudor/the-crowning-of-anne-boleyn/  
https://www.theanneboleynfiles.com/anne-boleyn-coronation/
League of Cognac

Chapter Summary

Silhouetted against the light, Carlos spotted the figure of his mother, Juana, standing stock still, her shadow scrawled across the floor between them.

Chapter Notes

Please note the date! We've had a rather significant time leap.

Also, my apologies: this piece is unedited.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CARLOS V, HOLY ROMAN EMPEROR
Royal Convent of Santa Clara, Spain
August 1530

The Emperor’s shoulders were stiff and hunched, and he paused, half lurking in the shadows, before he went in. The great doors swung open before him. He walked unseeing, through corridors, through rooms, through a courtyard bathed in the scorching sun. This was a familiar trek for him but one perhaps, less trod than his mother would have liked. Carlos came to stand before a final pair of doors. He glanced towards a steward, nodded, and waited for him to open the doors.

The day slanted through the high windows, whose ornate lintels were supported by columns worthy of the ancients. Silhouetted against the light, Carlos spotted the figure of his mother, Juana, standing stock still, her shadow scrawled across the floor between them.

“Mother,” greeted Carlos.

She moved, slightly, a flinch she hadn’t meant to display, and Carlos inhaled slowly, slowly. “My darling son,” she said, turning to face him. She did not come forward, however, remaining where she stood amidst the light. “What brings you here? I’d not expected to see you. I cannot think the last time you came in person to see me.”

Carlos paused, hovering for a moment where he was, before strolling towards her. Quickly, he dismissed the nuns attending her. Glancing around the room, he spotted a chair and brought it to her. When she had sat, he took one of his own. “Only,” he began. “I wished to check in on you.”

“Yes,” said Juana. She lapsed into silence, regarding him. She paused, glancing away out the window, again. “How fare our kingdoms?”

Carlos shifted, cleared his throat. “Lady mother, you know there is nothing I would not do for the greater glory of our House, of our countries, indeed, of the Empire. It has always been my greatest aspiration so to live my life that we may live forever in the glory of all Christendom.”
Juana’s eyes were steady on him, she did not seem to move at all in her chair, but there was no judgment, not even curiosity in her eyes. Her years of imprisonment had worn hard upon her, he briefly admitted to himself, and looked away. “Mother, I fear these battles I fight now take my measure.”

Juana glanced away and back.

Carlos’ teeth set and he rubbed his chin. “I’ve made some headway in Italy, but I’ve lost Navarre. Lost it, entirely. Now,” he added, gravel in his tone. “It is all-but a puppet dominion to the fool, François. For a time, all the distractions of the wars in England were, to me, an advantage, but those years of war seemed only to have tempered the English into fighting steel and I have, now, forged for François the sword with which he strikes at me. And, now,” he added. “This bizarre arrangement with my niece, Queen Mary, as she ought to be, who is…what…a captive to her future husband’s will? Fortunately, your sister, Catalina, remains at her side so, no doubt, she will make a positive influence for Spain upon her husband, when the time comes, but it does not seem near.”

“Catalina,” said Juana. “Poor little Cat. Will she never come home?”

Carlos sighed. “I don’t know what to do. I must take Navarre back. It’s position is crucial to keeping the French on the defensive. They must not invade our borders. They must not. How shall I stop them, mother? What would your parents have done?”

Juana’s eyes flicked towards his and she laughed, husky. All around her, motes of dust danced in the sunlight that streamed across her shoulders. “Do not seek to follow their example. In my mother you may find one path, but in my father, you shall find no good,” she said at last, growling. “When he locked me away here, I was not mad, but now, having known such a one, it is enough to drive one unto madness. If, indeed, I am mad, it is he who has done it and no other.”

Carlos exhaled slowly, regarding her carefully. “Do you hate me, mother?”

She wetted her lips and said, “Not today. Today, my darling son, I pity you. I pray you shall not follow, either, in the path of your mother: monarch for nearly two years, prisoner for all the years thereafter.”

Carlos’ smile twisted itself upon itself. “You’ll stay here, Mother,” he replied, tautly. “Under surveillance. It is for your own good.”

Her smile was genuine, bubbling into a laugh. “Let us not fool ourselves, my darling son. My imprisonment is for your good.” Slowly, she stood. “It is for this reason that I now endure my confinement, for you are my child and I would not be to you the parent that mine were to me. If you must share in my fate, my darling son, ensure that you, too, find some sweet thing worth the sorrow.”

He shook his head. “And am I to you?”

Juana gazed at him. “If I had been born a man, I might have broken these chains. Be kind to your daughters, Carlos, and I shall tell you, then, if it has all been worthwhile.”

“And Aunt Catalina’s daughter?” he murmured. “What of her? She, too, is a queen in captivity. Shall I make a war for her and put her upon the throne?”

“What will become of her if you do?”

“She will wed and ensure that England remains amongst the lands belonging to our House.”

“Mmm,” remarked Juana, nodding. “And her husband will be her governor. I see. Why do you
hesitate?"

Carlos rubbed at his short-cropped beard. “Two reasons. First, it is an additional theatre of war. Second,” he paused.

“You do not wish to oppress Catalina’s daughter?”

He sighed. “Second,” he went on, as if he had not heard. “There is the problem…the very great problem…of the English Channel. In order to invade England, we’d need have a great Armada to carry our host across the sea from here to there. François accomplished it with far fewer ships, it is true, because the distance is narrower between France and England and because they were English people who were invading who already had friends on the island. Mary Plantagenet will already be Queen, if only co-ruler with her husband rather than ruler solely in her own right. Even her supporters are therefore unlikely to wish to throw in with those they will see as foreign invaders.”

“So you fear this is an ill-advised stratagem. Why pursue it at all?”

“To draw the English out of the League they’ve forged with France and Navarre and the rest! The English will be forced home and, the League’s forces having significantly dwindled as a result, they’ll not have the reserves to directly assault Spain which, I fear, is the League’s very next move.”

Chapter End Notes

Just a little reminder, since it's been awhile since I've mentioned it, but this is Carlos V, Holy Roman Emperor, and Juana of Castile. Juana is Catherine of Aragon's older sister and, therefore, Carlos is Catherine's nephew. You can read more about each of them here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joanna_of_Castile and here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_V,_Holy_Roman_Emperor
Bessie snuggled beneath the shade of a wide oak. In her lap was settled a book, its pages elaborately illustrated and its print just as beautiful, each curling letter traced with a meticulous hand. Bessie’s own finger traced each word, skittering across the page as it raced to its conclusion. Her alcove had been shaded when she’d begun in the morning, but afternoon had chased the shadows all away and she sat nestled beneath the burning sun. Bessie took no note. She was too absorbed in her book. Around her, her brothers shouted and rushed, thrashing at one another with wooden swords, but Bessie did not hear them, did not see them, did not see anything but the wonderful images that rose in her mind, conjured by the words at her eager eyes. Unconsciously, she leaned forward, straining over the pages as though being nearer to it might allow her sooner to grasp its contents.

“Your Grace!”

Bessie glanced up, hearing the nurse’s voice very close to her. She peered gravely towards her and glanced back down to the page. “Just a page more,” she said in a tone that did not brook debate, as she turned the page.

Kat Ashley’s lips pursed in badly disguised amusement and she reached out to lay a hand upon the branch. “I’m afraid not, Your Grace,” she said. “It’s time to go in. You’ll burn in this scorching sun.”

“My father,” she replied, pointedly. “Laid low the sun in its splendor a long time ago. And mine is a holy endeavor. I wish to learn what became of Jeanne d’Arc.”

“You already know what became of the Maid of Orléans and your mother, Her Grace the Queen, would not forgive me if I carelessly allowed you to partake in any measure of her fiery martyrdom. You may read inside, Your Grace. I won’t see you burn out here. Look, even your brothers are already inside.”

Bessie pouted but gave way before the mingled logic and inevitability of the situation and, handing the book down to Kat, clambered from the safety of her nook. “I do this,” she noted, proudly. “For
your sake and not my own.”

Kat bit down another smile. “Thank you, Your Grace.”

“They say she’s a saint, in France, I hear,” commented Bessie as they strolled. “Do you imagine they’re right?”

“Only God can know that, child, until all’s proven.”

“She was put to death,” said Bessie, her eyes distant as she gazed over the vistas of the lawn. “By the English.”

“She was convicted of heresy, Your Grace, and burned for it.”

Bessie peered up at her nurse for a moment, looked away again. “By the English.”

“Yes,” said Kat. “Convicted by stout, good Englishmen, your own cousin, Cardinal Beaufort, amongst them.”

Bessie glanced sharply at Kat, smiled and laughed, half-serious, half-teasing. “I hear much of my many cousins and predecessors. Stout they may have been, but what makes you think they were good?”

“Oh, you,” murmured Kat. “I pray you’ve an understanding husband in your future.”

Bessie huffed. “Must I really marry the Dauphin?”

“It’s not so bad, Your Grace. You’ve known him all your life!”

“Oh, but that’s precisely what makes it so dreadful! I already know I don’t like him.”

Kat sighed. “I think you’d like him a great deal more,” she replied, chidingly. “If you hadn’t been told you must.”

Affronted, Bessie thrust her chin out. “I’d certainly like you better,” she declared, quickening her pace to storm inside ahead of her nurse. Glancing to her left, she arched a brow, listening to the ruckus of her brothers and their friends and sighed. She wanted to be out of the doorway when Kat arrived, but she was in no humor to deal with any sibling squabbles she had no doubt were being, this instant, given rise due to the banishment indoors.

Stepping quickly, Bessie darted up a corridor of nearby stairs and turned towards a window. Bessie twisted her lips slightly upon spotting another figure – ideally, she wished to be alone with her thoughts, but she didn’t mind seeing her Plantagenet cousin.

Mary sat by the window in the very spot Bessie had hoped to occupy. In one hand, she clutched a doll, but her gaze had drifted out the window. She turned, quickly, however, when she heard Bessie’s step. “Oh,” she said, offered a wan smile. “I didn’t feel like going outside.”

Bessie gnawed at her bottom lip on receipt of this unsolicited information. “I know,” she said. “How? I didn’t tell you?”

“You weren’t outside,” replied Bessie with a shrug. “And you’re not ill.”

Mary’s lips twitched. She paused, before patting the cushion beside her and Bessie assumed the proffered seat. Mary rested her head on Bessie’s shoulder and Bessie laid her head gently against
Mary’s. “The time’s coming soon, isn’t it?” murmured Mary. “The time when everything will change. I don’t want you to go to France.”

Bessie blinked away stinging tears. “I don’t want to go, either.”

“I heard your great-grandmother was married when she was even younger than you are, now.”

Bessie shifted, suddenly, and Mary raised her head. Bessie was grateful – she had to move. She stood, balling her hands into fists. “There’s time, still! My future spouse is not sixteen, himself! Anyway, everyone agrees what happened to my poor great-grandmother was shameful. They’ll not do that to me.”

“Well, it’s too late, now, for that, anyway,” pointed out Mary. “You’re almost fourteen!”

Bessie nodded, slowly, feeling her maturity rising around her like a wreath of flowers, blossoming and protecting her as Eros’ brambled had protected his beloved Psyche from the fury of Aphrodite in myth. Despite herself, Bessie smirked as she considered this comparison. “Anyway, it won’t all be so very awful. Someday, you’ll be Queen of England and I’ll be Queen of France and, if Papa hasn’t already defeated Spain by then, we’ll do it for him!” She paused, bit her lip. “Oh, I’m sorry,” she murmured. “I forgot-“

“I’m half-Spanish?” Mary sighed. “I’m English, first, aren’t I? But I like to think it won’t be a matter of one side vanquishing the other – I like to think all three countries can become friends. Wouldn’t it be nice to have peace? We could all be together, again, all the time, and it wouldn’t matter who was in what country when we weren’t – we wouldn’t have to worry, all the time.”

“That does sound nice,” admitted Bessie.

“And how lovely to know that we’d be the cause of it! Amongst we cousins, we could unite practically all of Christendom.”

Bessie laughed. “Perhaps not quite all.”

“We could make a difference,” insisted Mary.

Slowly, Bessie sank back into the seat beside her. “I like the sound of that.”

“So do I.”

Chapter End Notes

As always, thank you so much for sticking through all of this madness with me!! It’s been quite a ride so far and we’re streaking towards the end, now!! That being said, though, I hope this chapter will tide you over until next month. My schedule is absurdly busy for the month of May, so unfortunately I won’t be able to update again until June. You can expect the next chapter by June 8th, if not before! I hope you all have a tremendous May and can’t wait until I can update you guys again on WftH!!
Better Selves

Chapter Summary

yes closed, he watched the patterns of light filtering between the trees and dappling the inside of his eyelids.

Chapter Notes

Thank you for your patience during my absence!!

Please not that this chapter has not yet been edited. I hope you enjoy!! <3

HENRY VIII, KING OF ENGLAND
Olite, Navarre
June 1535

Harry’s head fell back as he tilted his face towards the sun. Eyes closed, he watched the patterns of light filtering between the trees and dappling the inside of his eyelids. The heat was welcome, now, where it had not been before, sweltering as he rode on towards the palace his sister called home. A triumphant band rode before him, playing a victory tune but, for all the pomp and circumstance, it was not the triumph – though that was present, too – which he felt. It was the wear of years.

Harry had not thought always to be on the road, always to be fighting far from home. He felt he’d seen home little enough that he may as well call himself Navarrese as anything else. It struck him as sadly ironic to have spent his youth and his childhood besides fighting to come home – only to, in the earning of it, have promised himself always away once he had home within his reach. Still, merely the knowledge that he could go back buoyed him. Once, even that much had been forbidden him.

The road proliferated dust, a thousand horses kicking up dirt as they moved. Another battle was over; another battle won. Harry took up the tune the band was playing, singing it softly as he road. He was fond of the music and tired, tired, aching in his bones. The palace rose up in his view and Harry cracked a smile for the happy news of victory he brought.

Soon welcomed into the palace, he came into the presence chamber. François met him, clapping him on the shoulder as they walked. “Another victory, brother,” he said.

“And you, as well,” he replied, tilting his head. “How fare Mary and my little nieces and nephew?”

“Your sister and niblings are all well,” replied François with a wide grin. “You’ll be glad to meet little Marie – she is already the very image of her radiant mother.”

After the tragic death of Queen Claude in 1524, François’ marriage two years later to Mary Tudor had proven a balm to him and a sweet consummation of the Anglo-French alliance so long sought after. Four children had been the result, but Harry did not imagine any further would arrive, given the bride’s age. Still, François remained quite dedicated to the effort of procreation, even knowing there
was little chance of a result – he was, by his own admission, besotted with his wife and had just
returned from a visit home.

“I expect,” observed François. “You’ll be eager to return to your family, yourself, soon enough.”

“Quite right,” replied Harry. “With Navarre secure and an invasion into what was once called Spain
well underway, I think I must visit England again very soon.”

“Or perhaps England shall visit you,” said a new voice from around a curtain. Harry’s breath caught
and he turned instantly.

“Nan!” he rushed towards his wife, who laughed, and pulling her close, spun her around. “God,
Nan, how come you to be here?”

She grinned, her face brightening, half blush, half grin. She touched his face and, behind them, Harry
heard François laugh and walk away, leaving the couple alone. “Why, I came to see you, you great
fool!” she exclaimed and kissed him. Her lips were sweet as strawberries and she smiled against his
lips, laughing with the kiss. “Oh, darling,” she murmured. “How I’ve missed you.”

“As I have missed you, sweetheart. Will you walk with me?” he inquired. “I dream of you every
night. Will you hold my hand and let me kiss you again?”

Anne chuckled, her hand on his cheek. “You know that I shall.”

Turning his face in her hand, he kissed her palm and leaned towards her again to find her sweet
mouth with his. Her hand slipped into his own and he grinned, putting his lips to her nose, her brow,
and leaning his own forehead against hers at last.

“We miss you at home, you know,” said Anne.

“And I miss you no less, here. How are the children?”

“A royal nuisance, the lot of them,” she chirped lovingly, tilting her head. “Like their father.”

“I know none more capable of making said nuisance amenable,” he responded, lips quirking
upwards.

“Mmmm,” hummed Anne, arching a brow. She leaned against his shoulder. “You know, when I left,
Bess was reading of Joan of Arc.”

Harry chuckled. “A touch unpatriotic.”

“I don’t know, I think it bodes well for her future, as she’s to wed France, one day, that she might
have regard for its heroines.”

Harry shrugged. “In any case, I fear it shall do our little Bessie-bee some good to have a warrior’s
spirit. God knows our House has been much in need of courage from the very start.”

Anne paused, turned. “Oh, Henry, won’t you come home? For good, this time. Surely whatever was
owing to France has been repaid tenfold, by now! And now that our sister, Mary, is wed to François,
surely there’s no need that Bess need wed the Dauphin. Come home and we can be a family again,
as we were meant to be, not merely sporadically, for a few months here and there sewn together, but
always and for as long as life shall last.”

Harry exhaled slowly. “I do not attempt to deny that your wishes are precisely my own,” he replied.
“But our debts to France are greater than they may seem, I’m afraid. Arthur changed the terms of our contract when he wed Catherine and I, myself, further reneged on our French treaty once, already,” he said, touching her chin. “When I married you, I cannot for a moment regret that fact, but I do know that, now, it cannot be we who alter the deal. It must be France.”

“By those terms why would François ever release us? You give him control of not one nation but two and the strength to overthrow his greatest rival in the form of Spain.”

Henry sighed. The room was large, strangely large, suddenly, and almost cold. He turned towards a bench and seated himself, patting the spot beside him, which Anne assumed. His breath was long, as it had been long held in, and his voice was very soft when he spoke. “It is not François who drives me, my love. Do you know, all those years ago, when we first met, I was bitter, bitter because we knelt before a French king, begging for his scraps, when I felt we ought to own all of France, ourselves, because of the ancient French king’s agreement to turn over all of France to Henry V. I complained of this to my brother, who unlike me was waiting with great patience.” Harry laughed. “Arthur rebuked me and reminded me that I was not Henry V and never would be. And you, you told me something, later, do you remember? You told me that I must choose who I would be.” He paused, shifting in his seat. “Before I met you, in that chamber with my brother, I felt defined by all that had gone before me…Now, so much later, I realize that, if I had to look to family for what to be, it should have been the young man patiently waiting beside me for his crown and not the long dead figures I would never meet. And you showed me I need look to none. I mean to be my own kind of king.”

Anne tilted her head. “I think that is perfectly admirable but if you mean to blame me for your absence, I’ll not accept the burden of guilt. Your choice is yours.”

He laughed. “Oh, it is. But that is it, I am driven to be a better man, to be my best self. I can forge him, here, and I can forge a better world for us and for Christendom. I do not believe Carlos is all that he could be.”

“But François is? Do you not recall his deplorable conduct towards both my sister and his late queen? How he so vilely insulted the both of them in one action?”

Harry smirked and kissed her brow. “I do believe he has done a great deal of growing, since that time.”

“Yes, I do believe you’re right.”

“But, no, I don’t believe François is the best man he could be, either. But the two of them can keep one another off balance, if I continue my work here, and that will be for the good of all – particularly England. I must be like my brother, now, and think of England. That is what kings do – not thinking of their own rights and privileges but of the good of their nation and people. England remains in a precarious position. Do not forget that little Princess Mary remains, and always shall be, half Spanish. And-” he glanced about, searching for listening ears. There were none. “Arthur’s only child. If it were known, control of England could be wrested from us to Spain. Whatever the cost, England must belong to no one but herself. I must stay here and fight. I must.”
Chapter Summary

Anne eyed the circle of men, carefully, who had rushed in to bring the news to the king. She felt Henry’s eyes heavily fall upon her own and turned to meet them, swallowing hard.

Chapter Notes

This work is, as yet, unedited. Also please note the dates in each of the sections - we have a flashback at the end of the chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

ANNE BOLEYN, QUEEN OF ENGLAND
Palace of the Kings of Navarre, Navarre
July 1535

“The Emperor has ceded Navarre?!” demanded Henry in shock.

Anne eyed the circle of men, carefully, who had rushed in to bring the news to the king. She felt Henry’s eyes heavily fall upon her own and turned to meet them, swallowing hard.

“Unthinkable!” declared Queen Margaret, standing from her place at table.

The formal dinner they’d been enjoying had been suddenly burst in upon by muddy messengers with news that seemed celebratory.

“His armies are gone! Cleared off, entirely,” the envoy continued.

“It is not like him,” commented François. “To surrender. Perhaps he thought a mere unannounced retreat might better suit in giving the self-same report to the victors. I propose a toast,” he declared. “To the unmanning of the Holy Roman Emperor, himself!”

Henry laughed, seizing up his goblet. “I’ll drink to that!”

“Do you not think it strange?” asked Anne. “That Carlos should simply withdraw without so much as a word when we have begun an invasion into what he sees as his own territories? Would he not at least send someone to begin negotiations?”

“He is not entirely withdraw, Your Grace,” pointed out the messenger. “He leaves behind men to hold the line, but the bulk of his army has gone.”

“Where?” demanded Margaret. “Where have they gone?”

***
The Emperor’s tread was deliberate. The sound of his footfall was jarring in the eerie quiet that soaked Rome like the deafening silence after rainfall. Smoke floated through the air in wafts, breezes that carried with them the odor of ash and blood and sweat and excrement. Through the streets, bodies are strewn; women wept and children shrieked; treasures from churches were scattered across the ground, mauled and defiled or simply left behind in the pursuit of some other valuable. Rome had been well and truly sacked.

Still, the Emperor’s tread was deliberate. A retinue of guards surrounded him on every side, but he walked as he always did, not unaccustomed to being swarmed with followers, and he walked, ever onward. St. Peter’s Basilica rose before him, its work temporarily abandoned in the wake of the catastrophe that had struck. Already, it was white and soaring and Carlos admired the progress with a dissecting eye, lips twisting upwards – perhaps he would seize a few of these architects for his own projects. He flicked a coin towards a woman bemoaning a child in her lap but did not stop to see if the child lived or not. His business was with the Pope.

The party passed the Basilica and moved towards the Apostolic Palace, shuttling along at a quick pace, not hurried, not leisurely. The Emperor had nothing to fear but neither did he have time to waste.

The party was brought through the grandest apartments and moved on and on to the very apartments of the Pope, himself.

Paul III had a long face, which he had covered over with a still longer beard, an aquiline nose, and large, brown eyes hunkered beneath bushy brows. He was not by appearance a handsome man but a noble one and, garbed in his papal robes, he was magnificent.

Kneeling, the Emperor formed a small smile. “Your Holiness.”

“Oh, get up,” said the Pope. “Why do you come here, after all this suffering, with soldiers? Can you not see we are bowed before you?”

Carlos stood, folding his hands before him. “Your Holiness misunderstands. In light of this violence, I bring an honor guard to protect your most precious person.”

“Hmm,” muttered the Pope, eyeing the Spaniards. “Is that what you are calling them? Very well, then. I may be forgiven if I mistook my protectors,” he continued with a note of sarcasm. “For gaolers.”

“Well, then, my son, what would you have of the Bishop of Rome?”

Carlos’ lips curled upwards.

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CARLOS V, HOLY ROMAN EMPEROR
Rome, Italy
July 1535

MARGARET TUDOR, QUEEN OF NAVARRE
Palace of the Kings of Navarre, Navarre
July 1535
“You don’t mean to leave me,” hissed Meg, seizing Richard de la Pole’s arm. “Not after all this time.”

The night was quiet at last, crickets chirping in a blissful chorus and the moon shone out, painting all in silver light. She stood, for once alone, alone with Richard de la Pole.

“What choice do I have? It is clear the Emperor has nefarious intentions in Rome. We cannot cede the Holy See – think of the consequences! He is already the Holy Roman Emperor, now he looks to be the Pope, himself, with Paul III a mere mouthpiece to the whims of Spain. He will lock up the Pope and wield his power just as his grandfather did with his mother. It is a strong gambit and what can we do? It must be stopped.”

“I do not think that, whatever force has moved on Rome, it can be the force that once besieged us, here. How could they have moved across the continent so swiftly? He has another gambit in mind: I am sure of it! He has sent those men elsewhere and taken some other part of his armies to Rome. Stay, Richie, stay with me. Stay till we know what he plans, at the least, but stay.” She clenched his arm, pulling him closer and he bent like a reed in the wind, moving towards her. “Stay.”

“It is not my will but the will of the King. You know that I would not leave you for the world, but-” Richie stretched out his free hand as if to touch her face, but dropped it to his side once again. “Convince your brother the King,” he resumed. “Convince him and I shall remain here with you.”

***

RICHARD OF WARWICK, DUKE OF GLOUCESTER
Royal Palace of El Pardo, Spain
June 1530

Dickon paced, first this way then that. It felt good to move, to exercise his muscles, to distract himself from wearisome thought with the motion of his feet. Yes, each step was a journey to nowhere, but a journey still. Yet, he knew what he must go. The idea of begging curdled in his heart, smearing all with mustard-yellow horror. He balked, felt that dread sticking at the back of his throat. Even so, Dickon knew it was necessary; knew he was compelled to play this role. He’d been denied what was rightfully his: now it was his right to get it back.

The doors opened, their squeal ringing gratingly in his ears as it proceeded. He cringed but approached. Each step felt sluggish, now, a dread crawl towards demeaning necessity. Part of him longed to go back, but he set his jaw and walked forward. Before him, Carlos V was seated at a desk, speaking to his scribe. At the wide doors, guards stood, closing them behind Dickon. He was being announced, but Dickon hardly heard any of the words until one. Duke! They dare introduce him as Duke of Gloucester? No, no, Dickon was the rightful King of England! Rage boiled in his ears but he bit down, bit down on his cheek till he tasted blood.

The way seemed terribly, terribly far now that his opportunity had at last come. But this was his weapon – Spain was his weapon – which he would wield against his great foes. He swallowed hard and proceeded, a draining pit opening in his stomach when Carlos did not so much look at him. He winced and ignored it. He’d been trained to speak to kings. He was a king, himself. He knew of to flatter and admire.

Dickon sank into a deep bow. “Your Highness,” he greeted.

Carlos’ eyes flicked up, his pen stilling in its journey across the paper, fixing Dickon with an iron flash. Then he returned to his work, finishing up his signature with a flourish. He folded his hands on the paper and looked up.
“Your Grace,” said Carlos. His look was long and Dickon felt the dire uncertainty – did Carlos mean to say more, or was he waiting for Dickon to speak?

Dickon felt off-kilter and ill at ease and he stuffed his belly full of fury before he continued. “Your, your page,” began Dickon with a queasy smile as he stabbed an irate finger towards the person in question. “Is in error. I come here not as a mere duke, but as the King of England, here to treat with Your Highness, the Holy Roman Emperor.”

“How do you propose?” inquired Carlos, hanging a batch of papers to his secretary and beginning to draw up another on the desk. He did not look at Dickon. “To represent a nation which has spat you out?”

“Spat me-” Dickon felt sick to his stomach and clenched a hand there. “I have not been ‘spat out,’ Your Highness. I have left of my own accord to seek out justice abroad.”

“Hmm, so you were not ousted but, rather, fled?”

Dickon’s cheeks flamed red. “I have fought long and hard to see you, Your Highness. Is this the treatment I receive?”

“It is said that you have killed one king, while bound; and rumored that you murdered another by trickery.”

“King! King! No,” he laughed. “No, no kings. I have never laid a hand in violence upon a single true king, Your Highness.”

Arching a brow, Carlos set down his pen to look at him and, despite himself, Dickon grinned in victory. “Explain.”

“Oh, Your Highness, the affair is simple enough. Arthur Tudor was as much a pretender as was Perkin Warbeck – the latter merely fooled us longer but the truth became quite evident.”

Carlos tilted his head. “I had heard that Elizabeth of York, herself, recognized him as her brother.”

“To end the war! And, no doubt, out of wishful thinking. My aunt was close to the end of her life; she wished to see her brother one last time. It was all lies, accursed lies wretched in the sight of God. But I, I am the undisputed child of Edward of Warwick, son of Prince George the Duke of Clarence, and of Edward’s lady wife, Princess Cecily of York, daughter of King Edward. I know, Your Highness, that it would suit you well to be rid of the Anglo-French alliance which harries you through those lands which are, by rights, your own. If I were restored to my full rights and glories as King of England, I would renounce the claims of the proud François of France and fight for your own interests across all Christendom.”

“Hmm,” mumbled Carlos. “And what of my cousin, little Mary of England, soon to be Queen of England, herself?”

Dickon sucked in a deep breath and speedily approached Carlos’ desk, snatching up his Bible. He placed his one hand upon it. “I swear to you, Your Grace, in the sight of God and all his blessed saints and angels: if you restore me to my proper rights and privileges as King of England, I shall wed Mary, Infanta of Spain, and make her Queen of England by my side.”

Carlos nodded slowly. “Very well,” he replied, softly. “But there is one more thing. Were I to undertake the task you suggest, I would make one other claim upon you.”

“And what is that, Your Highness?”
“You must swear to me that you would also renew your ancestral claims upon those lands now French that once belonged to your forebears: Anjou and Normandy and Aquitaine and Gascony; Pointiers and Maine and Nantes and Brittany. All these things you must claim and must swear to make just and holy war upon France to reclaim, once you are restored, if you wish for my aid. Will you agree to these things, as well?”


Chapter End Notes

Carlos’ men did, in fact, sack Rome during the Italian Wars, but at a different time and under different circumstances, in history:
Across the Water

Chapter Summary

In the night, the fires of Dover seemed to gleam bright as amber and the ghost of a smile settled upon his lips.

Chapter Notes

Note: this has not yet been edited.

SIR JOHN DUDLEY, EARL OF WARWICK
The English Channel
August 1535

The ship swayed imperiously under John’s feet. Gripping the bulwark, he glanced back towards shore, towards home, towards England. In the night, the fires of Dover seemed to gleam bright as amber and the ghost of a smile settled upon his lips.

In great haste, John had gathered the King’s fleet. There was no cause for immediate concern, but letters from the Continent had made John feel wary. Besides, his feet itched on dry ground. He was Lord Admiral of England – he may as well make something of it as the sea battles for the Continent had proven few and far between. The fleet lay anchored around the head of land behind them. John had ordered all lamps doused and quiet maintained but, he had little doubt, if there were an enemy awaiting him on the other side of the lapping water, they made likely done much the same.

John drummed his fingers against his leg. This waiting was abominable and he half-wished some enemy would material that he might do something. As it was, he felt half jittery with the anticipated fight, half foolish for expecting one where there was little evidence one might come. Yet, the King’s letters had warned that the Spaniards were on the move, and their fleet was perhaps the most famed and feared in all of Christendom. Yes, he felt foolish, too, to doubt – as foolish as he felt to believe.

A crash behind him.

John cursed beneath his breath and swirled to see that his page had tripped with a tray of John’s dinner and boy and contents had poured all over the ship’s deck. The boy’s eyes widened in the dark. “A thousand apologies, my lord!”

“Shhhhhhh,” hissed John, wheeling back towards the Continent. He held his breath, listening on the waters.

Then he heard it: the mighty roar as cannon cracked open the night. Fire burst from the mouth of the guns and John heard a long, loud whistle. Boom! Wood splintered behind him.

“Well fire!” screamed John, pointing towards the enemy. “Lights! Lights! And return fire!”
Across the water, the Spanish were doing the same, their position now revealed. A dozen lantern lights seemed to wink on all at once and another volley descended, the long wail of the ball as it soared overhead seemed to blot out the heavens, exploding in a cacophy of screams and fire. John crashed to the deck, smashing into the boards. His ears rang. All around him, fire. All around him, screams he could not hear. He staggered to his feet. Another ship, another, another. Sound came back as though he were emerging from below the earth: slowly, then all at once. Shrieks and blood and fire and black, black water. “Stop them!” screamed John. “They must not gain England! Stop them, stop them whatever it takes.”

Another shot rang out. It crashed behind him, cutting down the mast. John lurched for cover. Everything was on fire.

“Sir,” cried one of his lieutenants, hot tears leaking down his cheeks. “They’ve breached us, sir, we are lost. They’ve breached us.”

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EDMUND DE LA POLE, EARL OF LINCOLN
Dover Castle, England
August 1535

Evening rolled in like a blackened hand, the sun’s rays sinking in a kaleidoscope of color. Ed watched it splash across the sky: vermillion and peach and orange and coral all searing across the blue that deepened in color like a bruise. A cold breeze flapped at his cloak and doublet and Ed yanked both closer. He welcomed the night, knowing it would lead into another day.

Since the new regime had taken place, Ed had been placed in control of the region: a great responsibility for a nation at war. Yet, he was not in any delusions as to the intent. This, he knew, was a respectable exile. He could hardly be surprised. Ed had chosen the wrong side of the conflict but, his brother having been on the right one and the Cousins’ War having come to a peaceful conclusion, his punishment could not be too severe. He’d been given the inferior title of his house while his little brother was created duke and been sent packing to Dover to watch over all England but Ed did not mind. He’d done a great deal more waiting than this and time, he’d found, had always been a friend.

Ed stalked the bulwarks of the great castle, speaking in turn to the men who manned the walls. Loyalty started here and he spoke to them kindly, cheerfully, as the cool wind gave rise to a cool evening. He enjoyed it, too, speaking with his men, coming to know each one and his pleasures and his troubles and whiling away the hours of night in comraderie. No, there had been many a worse exile and, as the hours rolled by, Ed found, as he did every night, that it was not so very bad passing the evening thus.

Ed strode to a nearby grate, warming his hands over the blaze within. Heat soaked through his gloves and he smiled pleasantly with the sensation. Hearing tramping feet, he turned quickly. A pale-faced young soldier gave a squeaky smile of awkwardness and bowed. “What is it?” inquired Ed.

“Your Lordship,” said the boy. “Lights…across the water, a few hours ago, you remember? Now… there are sounds…below.”

Ed shrugged. “Ships are forever coming and going across the Channel. A few lights make little matter. Why do you bring this to me?”

“The commander, sir, said I ought, sir.”
“All right, then. What kind of sounds?”

“The, uh, the, uh,” the boy squeezed his hat in his hands so hard his knuckles flashed white.
“Digging.”

“Digging?!” demanded Ed, confused. “What in God’s green earth do you mean?”

“Your Lordship, the commander, he, the commander said that I, uh, I should tell Your Lordship… we may be under attack.”

“What?” demanded Ed. He flew across the parapet, down to the courtyard, and deep into the castle. Down he went, below to the tunnels dug centuries ago when the French king had come to take England. He found many of his men gathered around his commander. The chalky walls echoed. Rrrrrk! Shint! Rrrrrk! Shing! Rrrrrk!

“What in the devil’s name,” swore Ed, under his breath.

The commander turned, spotted him, and moved towards him, speaking in a hushed tone. “My lord, if I am not mistaken, that is the sound of undermining.”

“Undermining?” demanded Ed.

“Aye, Your Lordship: some enemy tunnels beneath us in the hope of digging up and taking the castle from within.”

Ed sucked in a breath. “This cannot be allowed to proceed. You, boy, round up the men.”

“Aye, sir,” said the boy and rushed out to be about his business.

“I pray you forgive me, commander, but my experience of battle does not include this. How does one prevent undermining?”

“One must dig down to the invaders, Your Lordship,” replied the commander. “And fight them in the gloom and dark to prevent them coming any further into the sun.”

“Then,” said Ed, reaching for a torch. “That is just what we shall do.”

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Deep, deep in the bowels of the earth, it was cold but sweat dripped down Ed’s nose. He felt his way along with one hand resting against the sweaty chalk walls around him. The sounds of tunneling had ceased but the sounds of men were near enough, the tunnels and chalk of the cliffs playing strange ticks on his ears: he thought he heard the enemy breathing upon his neck, but they were before him and they were waiting. He could see spark or two of a lantern and Ed nodded.

He raised his sword. Steel flashed in the sparkling lantern light and then there was screaming, screaming all around him. His blade flashed, slicing an opponent. There was a shot, like a gun in the dark. It echoed in cacophony. He swung again. To his side someone was attacking. His chainmail took a blow. Ed grunted. He swung with his shield. Whack! Ed’s lips curled into a sneer. Cries in Spanish; cries in English; wordless cries. Ed swung his sword again. It bit into soft flesh. He ripped it out again and leveled his gun. A swirling mass of Spaniards before him. They moved like creeping shadows of dread.

“Guns!” shouted Ed. “Fire!”
The blast was deafening. Its spark lit up the tunnel for a half a breath. It teemed with men, fighting savagely in the dark. The spark faded. The world was black again. Ed roared, stabbing again, again, again. They were surrounded. He could not see. He prayed to God his latest attacker was an enemy and not a confused friend. He stabbed again. Arms and arms and arms reached for him, scratching and chafing. He stumbled, almost fell. He must not fall, he knew. Any who fell underfoot would be trampled, there. Ed’s fingers cleaved to the pocks of the slimy chalk walls. He was pinned, thrashing. He hacked at everything within range. Shrieks filled the night.

“For England!” screamed Ed. “Kill the invaders! We must stop them here! We must stop them, here!”

He was swarmed. His sword caught in armor and fell away from his hand as his opponent slumped to the ground. Ed seized up a dagger. He stabbed senselessly, frantically. “We must stop them here!” he screamed and stabbed again. Blood spurted in his face, his open mouth. He spat and hacked again. The press of bodies moved like a tide. He stumbled back. A blow so hard his chainmail broke. Ed howled. “Stop them! Stop them!”

He was swept down the corridor. Another devastating blow. He fell hard against the chalky wall. His knife was lost. “England,” he muttered. “England.”

The whites of wild eyes glowed in the fathomless dark. Ed raised his shield as steel flashed. Something bit into the wood hard. It would not pull away. Ed swiped at his aggressor with his armored hand; kicked with armored foot. “England,” he panted, swinging up with his shield hard. It struck a blow; a body reeled back. But the tide did not stop. He stumbled back again; he fell. Someone stepped on him. Ed struggled to gain his feet. Another step, another. He fell back. Another foot, another, another. He tried to hold up his shield. The splintered wood caved. Another foot, another blade, another wound.

“For England,” whimpered Ed as the black dark closed in around him. “England.”

Chapter End Notes

The beginning is inspired by the Spanish Armada, an event that clearly went quite differently, historically. You can read more about that, here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanish_Armada

Undermining was a siege technique used at Dover Castle in 1216 by the French. You can read more about that, here: http://blog.english-heritage.org.uk/the-great-siege-of-dover-castle-1216/?_ga=2.150345846.1538730485.1560860050-736171901.1560860050

You can read more about the history of Dover Castle here: https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/dover-castle/history-and-stories/history/

You can learn more about medieval undermining here: https://www.castles-of-england.com/undermining.htm
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tunnel_warfare
https://mediaevalcastles.wordpress.com/2014/05/27/undermining-a-brief-introduction/
“Go on,” said the Queen. “And be in fear of nothing. No harm shall come to you here.”

“Say that again,” growled Henry.

The messenger swallowed hard as though there were a mound of gravel in his mouth, settling, settling, settling slowly around his belly. His cheeks were pale as sheets as he gazed fearfully upon the King of England.

Anne came forward slowly, placing a hand on Henry’s elbow. Henry flinched, turned towards her but stopped when his eyes met her own. Arching her brows, Anne rubbed his elbow tenderly and turned to look at the messenger, again. “Go on,” said the Queen. “And be in fear of nothing. No harm shall come to you here.”

“Your Grace,” replied the envoy, making an obeisance towards her. He turned back towards the King. “Spain has attacked England upon her own shores in the name of the traitorous Richard of Warwick. Both the fleet and Dover Castle have fallen before the onslaught and my lord the Earl of Suffolk is said to have perished, there. When I departed, the Lord Protector, my lord the Earl of Devon, was rushing English forces to halt the Spanish before they reached London.”

Henry turned away and Anne thanked and dismissed the messenger. “It’s possible,” said the King as the doors shut behind the envoy. “The battle has already been fought and decided. We would not know from here.”

“Nothing is decided,” snapped Anne. “Not until we’ve had our say.”

Henry’s eyes roiled as he turned towards her, but his face was a picture of uncertainty. Anne knew that feeling, herself. It tumbled through her chest as well, pummeling first this rib, now that, a cruel reminder that they were only mortal and God had given them a crown but no more wisdom that any other man to command it: anger and confusion and fear all rolled up into one. Anne wrapped her arms around him, her head against his chest. His heart pounded and his arms pulled around her, his head bowed to kiss her head.

“We will defeat them, Henry. We will defeat them all.” Anne squeezed her eyes shut, listening to the
thump of his heart, feeling his warm arms around her. “This is my fault,” she whispered. “All mine.”

“What?”

Tilting her head back, Anne looked up at him. “I left England! I left our babes all alone and undefended and our nation empty of its Regent.”

“In no way is this your doing, Nan,” replied Henry. “This would have happened no matter where in the world you were. This is to be our punishment for defying an Emperor.” Henry broke away from her embrace and went to the window. “I should have foreseen this; I should have been prepared for this moment and long, long before now. From the instant that Arthur died, ending whatever alliance we may have forged with Spain – no, further back, still – from the time that Richard VI wed Catherine of Aragon, I ought to have seen this moment was coming. Spain has been our enemy for so long…” he shook his head. “Am I so blind?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” replied the Queen. “There was no reason to believe this would happen. Always, the conflict has been between France and Spain. To attack England was nonsensical!”

“Until now,” he murmured. “Until we invaded Spanish territory and he, that devil, had Richard of Warwick’s claim to serve as justification in the palm of his hand. Oh, Nan, what shall I do?” he turned quickly towards her. “Must I invade England, alone? I do not know how to do it.”

Closing the distance between them, Anne took her husband’s face in her hands. “Listen to me, Henry. You are the only person alive who can do it; you are the only person alive who has done it. In all the world, there is no one better.”

“It was all Arthur, Nan; all Arthur. It was he who convinced François, at the last, to side with us; it was he who organized the troops; it was he who devised the plan of attack… I fell at the first test of valor, do you remember, and he was obliged to come and rescue me. This time I am alone. What if I fail?”

“His tactics will not work, this time,” said Anne. “They are too recent, too well known, and, if memory serves, it was only when fighting with his tactics that you fell. When you made war of your own, you were certain and able and true. And you are not alone,” she added, seizing his hand. “You have something Arthur did not. You have me; you have our children; you have the loyalty of all England. This is not like the last time, Henry. The Spanish are foreign invaders and, whatever conflicts England may have internally, it has always been the case that England will tolerate from its own what it will never forgive from foreign powers. The Cousins’ War was civil discord; this is invasion.”

“Nan,” whispered Henry. His hands were hot against her skin, his lips feverish, but it was not hope that burned in his eyes. “Oh, Nan, I am not my brother.”

“Henry,” she murmured, taking fistfuls of his doublet in her hands. “Henry, listen to me. Your brother was capable with all he did, capable and honorable to the last: good, a good man. That was his gift. But, while Arthur was good, it is you, Henry, you who has within you the spark of greatness. Let it out; blind your enemies with it, and you will be unstoppable.”

“Greatness?”

“Yes! Greatness! I see it in you, Henry; I’ve always seen it. But there are things to learn from your forebears along the way. Your brother, and you father before him and your grandfather before him, did all that they could to achieve their ends. That what you must do, too, Henry. If you give it your all, England will be saved, I know it.”
“You once said to me, Anne, that you hoped, when the time came, the great choice of my life would not be England or all, but a choice of what man I wished to be.” He smiled softly, sadly, sweeping his thumb across her cheek. “It seems the choice is one in the same. I must be my best self if I wish to save England.”

“Oh, Henry,” whispered Anne, shaking her head as she leaned it against his chest again. “I thought our struggles were done with.”

“Do you know, my Uncle Richard…the very last thing he said to me was that we are obliged to struggle every day of our lives.”

Anne raised her face to look into his again.

“He said that one must always fight for there is no final, climactic catharsis and there is nothing that will blot out the shadows of the past. It will stalk us all our days. If this is to be our fate, Nan, I praise God for it, for He has put joy in my path: He has given you to me.”

His lips were gentle, gentle but urgent as they brushed hers, softly at first, then harder as she wrapped her arms around his neck to pull him close. When he pulled away, it was to rest his brow against hers and she breathed deeply, longingly, as though she could make this moment into an eternity.

“Henry, when do we leave?” she asked.

His eyes opened and he stood straight to look at her. “We?” he shook his head. “No, sweetheart, you must remain here where you will be safe.”


“You will,” he responded. “I cannot take my wife into battle with me. It’s not safe.”

“Safe? None of this is about safety. You need me and our children do, as well. No, you shall not keep me away from England or yourself. I will go as other queens have done before me. Do you forget that I am not merely a Queen of England but a queen from England? Do you forget, too, that I was present at the Battle of London not so very long ago, myself? I have seen conflict. Other English queens have gone to battle: Empress Matilda, Eleanor of Aquitaine, Eleanor of Castile…all of these have seen war and the blood of each of them flows through my veins, as well. I shall do no less.”

He chuckled, pulling her into arms. “God loves me well, indeed, to give me such a woman to wife. _Le temps est venu_. The time has come.”

Chapter End Notes

'Le temps est venu' means 'the time has come' and is a call back to Anne's early motto: 'Le temps viendra' or 'the time will come.' (Or, at least, I believe it does - my French is not very good. Does anyone who speaks better French than I do, have any thoughts on this? I'd love to hear them!)

Additionally, Anne references three English queens who went to battle. They were by no means the only queens who saw battle, but they are three queens who are ancestors of Anne who did so. Additionally, to be clear, these queens did not fight in the battles, they were simply present for them and, in the case of Matilda, presided over the various
battles. Anne, herself, is not talking of fighting the battle herself, but of being present at the battles.

All three of those women are utterly fascinating and well worth a read!

Lancastrian To The Last

Chapter Summary

Lord, in Thy infinite mercy, she prayed. Spare my boys, my sweet boys and my darling, dearest Elizabeth defend!

Chapter Notes

note: this chapter has not yet been edited!

ANNE BOLEYN, QUEEN OF ENGLAND
Bath, England
September 1535

A cool breeze stirred Anne’s cloak, but she did not move. She felt the wind roll over her back, her shoulders, rooted to the spot. As she peered upward, she had the distinct impression that Bath Abbey stared down at her, its angelic figures clambering up the ladders between heaven and hell while the demonic figures slithered downward headfirst, sightless eyes boring into those below. Dread seized at her limbs, caught at her robes as the wind swept all around her. Shutting her eyes, Anne focused on what was being said to her, on the words being spoken, but the only image that seared into her brain was that of her children huddled together, frightened and abandoned by their parents.

I should not have left, thought Anne. I should never have left. The words tumbled like a chorus through her brain, scalding and hot as a brand. Wrapping her arms around herself, Anne stood as though braced against the cold, but she did not even feel it as the wind plucked at her gown or whipped through her cloak. I should not have left. Like Henry’s mother and Henry’s grandmother before her, Anne had two little boys at the mercy of the world’s caprice. I should never have left. Opening her eyes, she bent them towards the Abbey. Lord, in Thy infinite mercy, she prayed. Spare my boys, my sweet boys and my darling, dearest Elizabeth defend!

William de la Pole was nodding as Anne opened her eyes. “Your Grace, I may assure you that your children are quite safe,” he said in answer to Henry’s question, as though in answer to Anne’s prayer. “My Lord Protector, Henry Courtenay, rushed straight to them when he heard the news. They are barricaded in the Tower.”

Henry paled and glanced away, nodding. “That is well,” he said, despite his expression and turned to Anne with a gentler look. “Recall, sweetheart, I, myself, as a boy was once there barricaded with my sisters. I know well its protective qualities: they will be safe.”

“And the Spanish?” demanded Anne. “Where are they?”


“Windsor? Were they not on their way more directly to London from Dover? Why do they detour?”
“Your Grace, I would venture they mean to cut off any aid that might come from that source to London before they turn their attention there.”

“Well, it is positive for us. If Windsor can hold out, we are given the chance to get to London before they do.”

Henry nodded. “We need to get the children out and then hold London. We must stop the invaders from going any further than that. Arthur proved, once London is won, it is far too easy to scour the rivers up, up, up into the nation.”

“We will stop them, Your Grace,” swore William. “We will.”

“For once,” said Henry, a note of irony clinging to the edge in his grin. “All the Celts are united in this. Ireland and Wales all turned out happily to greet us and even Scotland sent envoys of peace and fellowship. Our French and Navarrese friends attend us, still, as well. Yes, we have but one foe and we shall hurl all our might against them. What could stand in our way?”

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ANNE BOLEYN, QUEEN OF ENGLAND

London, England

September 1535

The day was warm enough, despite the autumn chill as summer faded and died away, but Anne hardly noticed either: the death of one season, the birth of another. She stood at a precipice of her own, heedless to those of others.

Inhaling sharply, Anne glanced towards the walls of the City of London, dead ahead of her as she rode. She felt almost lightheaded, as she moved beneath the great walls of the city, as if she’d strayed into a dream. London’s walls towered in piled grey stone, lording over the entire region and Anne felt she’d never been more glad to see them or to watch the great Bars boom shut as they passed within its gates.

“The King!” people shouted everywhere around them. “The King! The King!”

Frightened people emerged from their homes, hailing him as the company road across the cobbled streets, bearing their English banners and urging onward their great chargers. “The King! The King! The King!” they sang out to hope as embodied by a single entity. Anne felt queer watching them, dreaming back to a time when she’d seen another king ride here in triumph: Richard IV, having defeated Henry: a savior of London. Anne glanced towards the Tower of London, the spot from which she’d viewed his approach, ensconced high up in its windows, and wondered if her own children gazed down upon her, now.

Exhaustion rolled over her, breathing around her shoulders as she gazed, thanking the Lord in Heaven that they had beat the Spanish here.

Soon, they were brought to the Tower and ensconced there, a blur of activity Anne hardly seemed to witness. It seemed that one moment she was gazing up at the Tower and the very next she was there, sinking to her knees to greet her children.

“Mama!” they greeted, hurrying to them. “Papa!”

Anne wrapped her arms around them tightly. “Oh, my sweet babes,” she murmured, kissing her boy, her girl, her next boy, as Henry enveloped them all in his arms. “Oh, my children. Forgive us, forgive us for leaving.”
“Dear Mama,” murmured Bessie, favoring her with a smile. “There is nothing to forgive. You’ve come back, haven’t you?”

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CATHERINE OF ARAGON, QUEEN DOWAGER OF ENGLAND
Tower of London, England
September 1535

“Welcome home,” greeted Catherine, rising from her curtsy.

She had been summoned by the king and queen to meet privately with them. Entering Queen Anne’s chambers, once Catherine’s own, was strange but she bit back the thought, focusing on the tension she knew was coming. The room was empty, save the three of them, and Catherine sucked in a deep breath.

“No doubt,” began Henry, coming forward. “You know what has brought us all here.”

“The Emperor invades.”

“He does,” replied Henry.

Silence pervaded, oozing into every crevice of the room and Catherine glanced down. “I see you doubt me,” she observed. “I cannot blame you. It is no easy thing to turn aside, entirely, from Spain. Was I not sent here to represent her? Yet, when I came here, when I wed, when I gave life to Arthur’s child, I was born myself anew,” she said, sinking to her knees. “And English. My loyalties lie not with our enemies, but here, at home, with you and with my daughter.”

Henry and Anne exchanged glances. “Rise,” commanded the king, coming forward. “You invoke Arthur’s name? If you do so in vain, I swear to you, I shall find no mercy in my heart.”

“You need have no fear of that,” replied Catherine. “My loyalty to him lives on in our child. I could no more betray her than myself and, I might remind, to betray England would be to betray Mary in the same breath: she who is its daughter and, someday, to be its Queen, as well.”

“Yes,” murmured Anne. “Mary is England’s daughter…as you are a daughter of Spain.”

“Was,” she replied. “Happy are you, Your Grace, who lives and dies as the daughter and consort, both, of England. Few queens have ever enjoyed that happy fate but, someday, my daughter shall. I pray, Anne, that you shall not doubt me, not when we have, the both of us, faced the same choice and made the self-same decision in the House of Tudor when faced with the House of Plantagenet. Our fates, yours and mine, are interminably linked. I pray you remember the friendship I have ever shown you.”


Catherine sucked in a deep breath. “It was my jealousy which acted, on that occasion. I must beg your pardon for any offense I may have offered. Those were trying times.”

“They were,” replied Anne. “As are these. In any case, I recall, as well, that you begged for my pardon when I offered to swear upon the Most Holy Eucharist that Arthur was no husband to me and begged me forget.”
Despite herself, Catherine laughed, glancing towards Henry. “And now I know why you failed to make answer to my inquiry until I named Arthur specifically as your Lancastrian lover.”

Anne chuckled. “I cannot tell you how very grateful I was for that specificity.”

“You told me to go see Henry in his cell, in this very palace and inquiry of him whether you were wife to his brother, as I recall.”

“I recall I did not know, then, whether to hope that you would avail yourself of that option or not. If you had not been so precise in your accusation with Henry as you were with me, it would have put us both in a very difficult position whereas, if you were so precise, it would have cleared away any suspicion you may have harbored.” Anne paused and, coming forward, she took Catherine’s hand in her own. “We are sisters through our husbands, my friend. Please do not think we look with suspicion to find fault. It is merely that we know how deeply duty runs with you and we hope to find that sense of duty sways you towards us and not towards our deadly foe. You know how fully I comprehend the strange position in which you find yourself.”

Squeezing her hand, Catherine kissed Anne’s cheek. “Then know, sister,” she replied, clasping her hand fervently. “My duty, my only duty which God has left to me, is to my daughter and, therefore, with you. I am the wife of King Arthur and the mother of the future Queen Mary and, therefore, your fate being interlinked with hers, I am made Lancastrian to the last.”
Chapter Summary

A thousand, thousand time she’d seen it done, watched the strange ceremony of fitting a king for war.

Chapter Notes

this chapter has not yet been edited! thank you, as always, for your ongoing patience <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

ANNE BOLEYN, QUEEN OF ENGLAND
Tower of London, England
September 1535

“I’ll be your page, today,” whispered Anne, touching Henry’s face. His eyes, that deep blue of oceans, were stormy, tossed upon an ocean of uncertainty, and Anne made a silent prayer for peace. Outside, however, even the weather had no peace, as dry wind lashed the Tower walls. Peace, she prayed. *Peace for my husband, peace for my people, peace for us all.*

Quickly, Anne dismissed everyone from the room, Henry’s arms and armor having been brought, and she set about her task, helping him on with it. A thousand, thousand time she’d seen it done, watched the strange ceremony of fitting a king for war. God, she knew well how it was done. Daylight streamed in all around them, spilling like pools of liquid sun around their feet. Anne moved gently, caressingly, kissing his warm skin as she moved it over with a steely shell. Her Henry glowed golden in the light, as he had always done, his head bending towards hers, his fingers lingering over hers, whispering her name and sweet words of love in the gilding of the light. He touched her face, drawing her near to him, as she tugged at yet another strap, seeking her eyes with his own, seeing nothing but her.

“Nan,” he whispered soft and raw. “Nan, my own sweetheart.” His eyes roiled below the surface, but his hands were gentle as they cupped her face and a smile took hold of his lips. “Nan, Nan,” he murmured, nuzzling at her brow. “My dearest mistress,” kissing her brow.

She fastened the strap tight, his lips against her cheek, her ear, and slowly she turned to look into his eyes again. He smoothed back her hair with his fingers, smiled again, that glorious shock like sunlight, and shook his head. “How is it, through all this, you are mine?”

“I’ve been yours through worse than this,” she replied, half-chiding, reaching up to touch his hand on her face. “I’d be yours through even worse, still.”

“Do I deserve you?”

Anne grinned, shook her head. “Not one jot.”
Chuckling, he arched a brow. His face turned more sober, however, and he exhaled gently. “Anne, whatever happens, I want you, you and our children, to be safe.”

“I will be.”

“You’ll stay here in the Tower, behind all these walls.”

“Yes.”

“And if the men should tell you to flee, you’ll go.”

“Across the waters with John Dudley,” she assured him. “To make a place for you with the children. I’ll see them safe, I swear to you. But you mustn’t worry about us, today, Henry. We won’t be fighting a battle: we’ll be perfectly safe. Remember,” she added. “I’ve been here amidst battle before. I know what to do.”

He nodded.

“Henry, there’s something else.”

“What?”

Anne licked her lips. “I want you to remember something else, won’t you?”

He nodded. “What is it?”

“My motto.”

“The most happy.”

She nodded. “Remember…remember, Henry, it does not only mean that I am the most joyful or content – which I am – it means, too, that I am the most lucky. I am lucky because of you, and you, therefore, are made lucky by me, also.”

He smiled. “I will remember,” he promised. “You have always been my good fortune.”

“We will win, Henry,” she hissed, grasping the back of his neck with both hands earnestly, urgently. “We will win.”

“We will win.”

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HENRY COURTENAY, DUKE OF DEVON
Tower of London, England
September 1535

Hal had the queer sensation that he’d been here, before, as he stood upon the walls of London, watching the Spanish come. He’d held them off as long as he could, but as soon as he’d realized he could hold them no further, he’d gathered his men to safety, here, to help stop them, once and for all, here with the king. Now, sure and relentless as the sea, they swept into London.

Hal crushed his sword hilt, peering over the bulwarks towards the oncoming storm. Yes, yes, he’d been here before, he considered, but he’d been on the opposite side of the wall, that time, riding behind his uncle the then-king, Richard IV, and the enemy out there, Dickon, had ridden by his side. Hal released his sword hilt, his hand moving away like a soul tripping over a precipice, boundless
and free and falling, falling, falling. He felt he was hurtling, as well, as he watched the two-headed
Imperial Eagle march ever closer.

“Dickon,” he muttered beneath his breath. “God, Dickon, what have we become?”

The dry wind rustled his hair beneath the helm and he exhaled a long, hollow breath. Squeezing his
eyes shut, he half-wished that he were attacking, again, rather than defending. He’d found, often
enough now, that it was worse to sit and wait and watch, helpless, than even to ride towards doom.
At least, in that instance, there was the business of marching to do, some frail distraction, some
necessity to attend. Here, there was nothing to do but think.

Around him, the men shivered and rustled with dissatisfaction. He could not blame them as the same
nervous energy chewed at his brain. Biting his lip, Hal sucked in a deep breath, sighing out a silent
prayer to the God above for he-knew-not-what. A sarcastic chortle choked him and Hal prayed, this
time, that Dickon had come in person. If he had, they could capture him – or worse – and end this
forever. There was a time when the thought of doing Dickon any real harm would have horrified
him, but the image of their uncle, dead in a pool of his own blood, his eyes bulging with shocked
horror, had killed his qualms. He had no proof that the murder had been at Dickon’s hand, but he
needed none. He’d watched him kill Arthur Tudor, he’d known Dickon all his life, Dickon had
disappeared just in time. There were no doubts in Hal’s mind.

God save me, he prayed. From the perpetual fire for the things which enter my mind. Was there any
deed more foul than kinslaying? Yet, it was that very offence of which Dickon was guilty and Hal
prayed, too, for justice.

He laughed, glancing over his shoulder as he heard movement. King Henry greeted him with a nod.
“Have you ever heard the tale of the House of Atreus?” inquired Hal, without thinking. “A line of
kings, cursed forever by the pagan gods for the dreadful deeds their ancestors had once committed –
doomed all to kill each the other over and over and over again. Where does it end?”

Henry shook his head. “That is not our fate.” He nodded. “We will win.”

Hal’s smile barely brushed his lips; it did not reach his eyes. He turned, slowly, to gaze out over the
coming doom, marching, marching, marching, its two-headed eagle fluttering before it. His tone,
when he spoke, was colorless, meaningless, frail in its hope, but steady, still, for all of that. “We will
win.”

Chapter End Notes

If you're wondering about Anne's definition of 'happy,' here it is! Happy was still being
used in that sense, at this period and, yes, her motto was a pun <3
https://www.etymonline.com/word/happy

If you want to learn more about the fascinating mythological House of Atreus, here's a
summary: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atreus
BOOM!

The sky was scorched, seared in infinite color by the rising sun. Pale blues and pinks scarred the maelstrom of gold across the sky, swirling amidst sun-shot clouds. The sun, in its splendor, rose over the weary world to light the progress the Spanish-Plantagenet forces had made.

Chalky smoke belched from the breached holes in the walls surrounding the city, blown to hell by Spanish cannon. The ancient stones crumbled and fell, dripping like water from their weary watch. Harry’s ears screamed with the sound of the explosion. He was on his back, like a turtle, blown backwards by the blast. Confusion overwhelmed him and the enemy poured through the breached wall.

Harry stumbled. He grasped for a handhold. He grasped at something – found it was an arm that had been blown off of someone and stumbled back again. He stared upward at the sky, saw the dull-faced moon dip behind sun-smote clouds. Ash danced above him. There was a distant roar, like the sea, building, building. Harry winced. Suddenly, a world of sound rushed over him. He stumbled to his feet.

“Stop them!” ordered Harry. “Stop them!” He glanced around him, found his horse was dead. “A horse!” he shouted. “A horse!”

Spotting his standard bearer on the ground near him, he shook him. “Raise the red-and-white rose high,” he said. “I want them to see it all across London.” Offering a hand, he helped him up.

Shrieking, Harry turned to face it. A Spaniard raced towards them, axe raised. Harry reached for his sword, felt nothing there. He grasped his pistol. One shot rang out. His only shot. The Spaniard fell.

He spotted his sword: his brother’s sword, his father’s sword, before that. The king’s sword. It lay only a few feet away. Yes, only a few feet away, it lay surrounded by fighting. A world away; a lifetime further. “A horse!” shouted the king. “A horse!”
Harry reloaded. It was his last proper round, with his horse’s supplies lost to him, and he used a stick for a ramrod. He could make use of other odds and ends for more bullets. Harry nodded. It would have to do. He had a crown to defend – with a sword he must retrieve.

First, he needed a horse. Harry scanned his surroundings. Shrieks and dust clouded everywhere. The earth was dry. The wind kicked up loose dirt, hurling it everywhere like a veil over the world.

A horse, thought Harry. He hefted the gun in his hand. He needed one near. He needed one that would not escape him. He needed help mounting it in all his armor – or he needed to strip off some of the metal shell that protected him. He rushed to the side of a few others who had been knocked down by the blast. Some were dead, some too injured, but a few were able-bodied enough to help. Harry would keep his armor.

All around him, his men fought the Spanish. Harry was surrounded by rubble – rubble keeping him relatively safe and slowing all others. He crouched, watching two knights – one in yellow and one in green, squinting towards their colors. He needed to know which of them was his own soldier – and which a conquistador. Their blades lashed, slashed, gashed. Harry swallowed hard. A double-headed eagle peaked out as the yellow knight moved. Raising his arm, Harry fired. The yellow knight slumped forward. The horse reared. The green knight slashed – too late to stop the blow – at his enemy who was no longer there.

“Seize the reins!” ordered Harry to the green knight, as he darted forward, vaulting across the rubble. His men were hot of his heels.

“The King!” they shouted. “The King!”

Harry settled into the saddle, knighting two of his helpers with his make-shift ramrod as he did. He claimed a metal button from a third and knighted him, as well, for his trouble. Harry loaded the button into his gun. “I’m going to take back my sword and we are going to stop this for good and all,” he snarled. “With me!”

“The King!” chanted his followers. “The King!”

Turning his horse’s head, Harry faced his opponents. “With me!” Harry kicked the horse hard. They shot forward. Harry raised his gun. A conquistador brandished his sword. Harry fired. His enemy fell from his horse. His warhorse was his only weapon, now. The creature reared, iron-shoot feet stamping out opposition.

His sword twinkled on the dusty road. “There!”

The button-knight scrambled up on foot. The green knight, horsed and now bearing the king’s standard, slashed with his sword. Harry stretched out his hand. The button-knight reached upward, half-lost amidst the swirling cloud of dust. Harry grasped his father’s sword.

“ENGLAND!” he roared, holding the blade aloft.

“ENGLAND!” the English screamed back.

Harry swept and slashed with his sword. The world narrowed. All that was before him was the next enemy, the next, the next. A sea of them rising like an ill tide. The air was choked. Dark motes danced around them, blistered in the grey light. Harry hacked with his sword. Another enemy, another, another. His men gathered around him, shoulder-to-shoulder-to-shoulder. The motes turned to red, ringed with smoldering flame. He smelled smoke, felt heat. London screamed.

Turning, he looked back. Flames licked one side of the walls of a nearby building, fanned by the
breeze. The fire laced up, up, and into the thatching. It licked greedily and caught and wound towards the next house, the next, the next.

“My God,” whispered Harry. His gut twisted like dough and the fire rose, rose, rose. London roared. In the midst of the soldiers, the civilians ran, screaming, their homes engulfed.

London was burning.

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ELIZABETH TUDOR, PRINCESS ROYAL OF ENGLAND
Tower of London, England
September 1535

“Don’t look out the windows,” their mother had warned them. The screams and explosions had engulfed the day as they huddled at the heart of Tower, waiting, waiting, waiting. Bessie was seated on the floor. She didn’t know why and no one reprimanded her, but she sat there, her skirts billowed and puddled all around her. Bessie liked the solidity of the floor beneath her, the rigidity amidst the distant cries. Stretching out a finger, Bessie traced a fathomless design upon the floor, watching it swirl away into nothingness – a long, arbitrary line twirling and twisting away with no purpose and no end, no beginning. Still, it sputtered, running along the surface beneath the pad of her finger, following her wherever she moved like the silent wake of a ship. Her finger spurred away and she cast a look towards the others. Her mother and Queen Catherine sat in dignified silence together, reading and sewing, respectively, as though today were no different from any other day – they had seen this before, Bessie considered. Bessie’s brothers and Mary, however, were an entirely different, snuggled together: a cacophony of arms all wrapped one around the other until Bessie could hardly tell whose limb was whose, and chattering away inanely, their voices as blended as their arms.

Bessie glanced away, again, back towards her invisible swirls upon the floor. She thought of other queens who had made use of these lodgings: queens and princes and princesses: her own grandmother and father amongst them. Bessie tilted her head, watching her finger twisting on the floor and wondered what they had thought, felt, done, in this self-same scenario. Countless, countless confined to the Tower, by will or no, and Bessie merely the latest in a regal parade of joy and despair and uncertainty. Her finger stopped, suddenly.

“I smell smoke,” announced Bessie.

Anne glanced up from her book. “Perhaps the servants have lit a fire against the chill or to cook.”

“In the middle of a battle?” countered Mary.

“People do strange things in situations like these,” assured Catherine in her most soothing tones.

“Is that why Bessie’s sitting on the floor?” asked Arthur.

Bessie rolled her eyes. Leaning on her hand, she stumbled to her feet. Gathering her skirts carefully, Bessie wound around her siblings and cousin towards the wall.

“Bessie,” warned her mother. “Not too close to the window.”

Bessie inhaled sharply. The scent was sharper, now, more acrid. The screams were strange, muted, as though there were something between them all. “I’m sorry, Mama,” she said, and reached for the tapestries with which the servants had covered the windows. Bessie gave a hard yank. The makeshift rod screeched and the tapestry fell, an image of King Arthur’s quest for the White Hart – piling upon itself in a pool of green and yellow and blue and scarlet upon the floor. Outside, devastation.
Day had turned to crimson, glowing tangerine. Flames licked the thousand buildings littered all around them as armies clashed below. Soldiers and civilians on both sides ducked and ran for cover. The fire spread and spread and spread, its vermilion fingers flickering across the great, dry forests that had built every building around them. England was in flames.

“My God,” whispered Bessie, her hand clasping her mouth. She heard everyone gain their feet behind her. “Have mercy on us.”

Chapter End Notes

As you may have guessed, the fire is inspired by the Great Fire of London, though the actual event having occurred in 1666, clearly it was quite some time away.

Ashes To Ashes

Chapter Summary

The inferno blazed with the dry wind, whirling like a maelstrom all around him.

Chapter Notes

So, I just wanted to share a quick note of appreciation to all of you AMAZING ppl who have lasted this far. ONE HUNDRED CHAPTERS!!! I've been writing this story for two years and twenty days as of today and, sure enough, here we are a hundred chapters in. You guys are super and your love and support has gotten me through so, so much both w this story and in life, in general. Thank you SO MUCH for being the absolutely incredible ppl you are and for sticking w this story through thick and thin <3333333

See the end of the chapter for more notes

HENRY VIII, KING OF ENGLAND
London, England
September 1535

Flames soared high, rushing up buildings. Thick black smoke choked the air. Harry stumbled, coughed. His eyes stung; breath gasped within snarled lungs. He squinted through the smoke and the heat. He staggered on. All around, chaos was unleashed. A world of smoke and flame and shrieks surrounded him. Hell, he thought. I've seen Hell. The inferno blazed with the dry wind, whirling like a maelstrom all around him. Harry choked on ash and hastened forward. The fire spelt new jeopardy. His family was in danger.

“We must stop them!” he called to his men. “We must stop them!” He hardly knew whether he meant the Spanish or the flames.

The narrow streets were halls of flame, the buildings buckling as the fire ate away at their supports. Harry had lost his second horse and several good men to such a collapse. He prayed God spare the rest. Everywhere, there was fighting: fighting enemy after enemy, fighting for survival in the ash-choked streets, fighting for breath amidst the molten-black smoke. Harry could hardly see before him. He darted onward, onward, onward. He fought to the next step, the next, the next. Cruel heat seemed to score him.

Harry lurched forward, scrambling from the corridor of flame. Before him, at last, at long last, lay his goal: the Tower of London. Crenelated walls soared imperiously above the flames. The White Tower leered, magisterially, as all below it was consumed. Harry gasped. He scrambled forward. His family waited behind those gates. They were not safe. He had to get to them.

Here, away from the curtain of fire, the fighting was fierce. The double-headed eagle paraded, eyes wide and wild. Harry raised his sword. He hacked. A shield screamed towards him. Harry cut a path through the enemy. Roaring, he pressed forward, forward, forward. Inch by inch, he moved. The world felt still, slick, slow. He punched further into the madness. Metal shrieked on metal. The smell
of blood and flame and panic was everywhere. And Harry’s family was in danger.

The world was narrowed to one single point. He knew where they stood, could see them clearly, gathered together in their jeopardy. And he, fool that he was, had made them swear to remain where they were. They stood, even now, upon a powder keg – stores and stores and stores of the stuff was kept safe beneath their very feet. The Tower of London was set to explode if exposed to open flame.

Harry scrambled forward. He blocked a blow with his sword; another with his shield. The fire neared bHe pressed on, on, on. The world sloped upward, up towards the Tower, up towards its 11-foot thick outer walls. Almost there, Harry told himself. Almost, almost. The wind drove the fire ever closer.

“The King!” shouted a man at the walls. Riders cut through the crowd towards him. Harry cut through the crowd to them.

“The Queen!” Harry roared over the confusion. “The Princes and Princesses! We must get them out!”

Harry swung into a saddle. He kicked his mount, shooting towards the great walls. “Out of the way!” commanded Harry. “Move!”

Enemies fell beneath his hooves. Harry did not think of them, again. He kicked again, harder. “Faster!” demanded the King. “We have to get to them faster!”

Heat poured over London like a fog.

“Let me through!” shouted Harry as he came to the gates.

“Your Grace, if we open the gates—”

“The enemy may get through,” snarled Harry. “I am well aware. Let them, for all I care, but by God, get every Englishman away from this place, post haste. By God and my will,” he swore. “Either stop that blasted fire or open these gates!”

The gates groaned, opening slowly, softly. Harry darted around them the instant he found a sliver wide enough, hurtling inside. He raced towards the door, vaulting off his stallion. Knights stood aside to let him pass. Harry tore the door open, rushing inside. Harry’s armor clanked as he wound up, up, up the winding Tower steps, half-slipping on their recesses. Knights rushed to challenge him.

Harry flipped his visor up. “Where is the Queen?”

“Henry?”

He turned at the sound of her voice.

Anne shook her head, coming up to him. “What on earth—?”

“Papa?” asked Bessie, rushing forward. Her siblings and Mary hurtled up on her heels. Only Catherine remained where she was, rooted to the spot as she stared.

“We must all leave here, immediately. There can be no delay.”

“Wha—” began Anne.

Harry stabbed a finger outward. “We are surrounded by fire, Nan.”
“And by battle!” she exclaimed.

“No, Nan, if you stay here you will die. The Tower is filled with gunpowder. If the flames reach it, the Tower will ignite and be blown apart. You cannot stay here.”

“My God,” whispered Anne. “How do we get out? We’re surrounded by fighting.”

“I’ll see to that,” swore Harry. Impulsively, he grasped one of her hands, pressing it to his lips. “Do not fear. Remember that I, too, as a child escaped the Tower. All shall be well.”

“Begin your descent. Catherine!” he exclaimed. “Come. We must go.”

She gazed out the window, watching the fire consume.

Harry turned, watched the last of the children step into the stair, moving downward. He walked towards Catherine. “Do not be afraid,” he said, stretching out his hand. “No harm shall befall you. Of all the people here, you are safest. Neither Englishman nor Spaniard would do you any ill.”

Catherine chuckled. “You are very much mistaken, I am afraid.” She turned slowly to glance at him. “But it doesn’t matter, does it, who harms me? This is where I met Arthur; and soon after, I wed him. Just below those gates, I first laid eyes upon him, first heard his voice. How has it all come to this?”

He wished for words, soft words to answer to that, to sweeten the hurt, but none came. There were no words that could bring back his brother, even when his ghost hovered about his one-time bride. Harry shifted his hand, let it lie in the air between them, palm up, ready to take hers. “Arthur is dead,” he said. “But we live on. Come. Now.”

Catherine’s eyes were hard. She laid her hand in his. Together, they rushed along the wooden floor, rushed towards the stone steps, their feet falling in rhythm as they hastened. Only a moment, only a breath. His feet rang out sharp as they smashed against the stone and they ran, ran for their lives.

Out upon the parapet, reunited with his family, they scrambled for the steps. Beneath them, London glowed in crimson-gold. Flames lashed the sky, screamed echoing from below. Harry glanced out over terrace as they ran. Two ravens gazed out across the carnage and took wing, fluttering into the sky like carrion crows. England burned.

Chapter End Notes

Note on the two ravens flying away at the end! As you may know, a legend exists that, if all the ravens leave the Tower of London, both the Tower and England, herself, will fall. The first recording of this legend (of which I’m aware,) occurred during the Stuart era, but, as it was said by Charles II who decreed that the ravens must therefore be protected - it seems likely the superstition had probably existed for some time beforehand and, perhaps, even existed during the Tudor era - who knows? ;D

Chapter Summary

She wanted almost to laugh, but the bitter sound broke in her chest, shattered like glass in the pit of her gut.

Chapter Notes

Please forgive me, this has not yet been edited!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

CATHERINE OF ARAGON, QUEEN DOWAGER OF ENGLAND
Palace of Westminster, England
October 1535

“Where are they?” demanded Dickon, hissing till his teeth bared like a rabid lion.

Catherine shook her head. “Why should you ask me?” she inquired, one hand on Mary’s shoulder. “We were separated during the battle, as you see.”

“They won’t let me see the Tudor traitor, myself, so I am unable to ask him. As if they had the right!” he raged. “I am the King of England! Why do they can imagine they may interfere?”

She wanted almost to laugh, but the bitter sound broke in her chest, shattered like glass in the pit of her gut. “Perhaps,” spat Catherine, eyes flashing. “It is due to your history of murdering kings.”

Dickon froze, his lips yanking back in a snarl. Suddenly, he raised a hand, striking her across the face. “How dare you! I am the only King in England!”

Catherine rocked backward, reaching up to touch her cheek as pain fluttered over her face like a sun-soaked blister.

Everyone in the room turned suddenly, gasping at the violence done Catherine and Dickon seemed to become suddenly aware of them, again, glancing back towards the stunned array with burning cheeks.

Hand falling away from her face, Catherine looked back to Dickon. “King?” she whispered. “Are you? Or are you, rather, a gelding, another useful puppet to my nephew? Another pretty bauble studding his imperial crown? No, Dickon, you are no more king than you were when you first bowed over my hand to kiss my ring. In fact, I daresay, were you the only contender in all the world for the role, you still would not be a king. There is nothing in you at all that might bear up under the weight of a crown. Though I do not wish it upon the people of England, I see now I could enjoy watching you attempt to rule, simply for the pleasure of watching you crack.”

“Why do you trouble me? I did nothing to any king, dispatching only traitors as it fell to me lot so to
Catherine’s gut tumbled. A thousand eyes seemed to look her way, boring into her flesh, a curious world looked to explore the contents of her mind, her heart. Which husband, which king? Raising her chin, she arched an imperious brow. “Yes, regicide is an ugly word. I well see why it catches in your throat. Come,” she said to Mary and to her ladies. “Let us go. I believe my nephew the Emperor wishes to see me.”

“I know you know, Infanta!” shouted Dickon, after her. “Tell me where I can find the Boleyn traitors!”

Catherine breathed a sigh of relief as the doors closed behind her. Glancing towards her daughter, she smiled softly.

“Mama, your cheek—”

“Oh, hush, it is no bad thing, sometimes, for the suffering beneath your armor to be visible. Let Carlos see that I was struck, let those who saw talk. I shall not permit that you be wed to that monster, whatever both Dickon and Carlos may wish.” She paused, gazing into Mary’s bright green gaze. “Are you ready?”

“Yes, Mama.”

“Then, let us to the Emperor.”

“Aunt,” greeted Carlos, coming around the other side of the desk that had been set up for him, here. “Cousin.”

In unison, Catherine and Mary swept a curtsy.

“Your Imperial Highness,” said Mary.

“My own darling nephew,” said Catherine, earning a surprised glance from her daughter for her lack of formality.

Lips quirking into a grin, Carlos stepped forward. “Come, sit with me by the fire. There is, I think, a chill in the air here.”

“England seems so very far from the sun, compared to Spain, doesn’t it?” responded Catherine, as they each sank into the seats indicated. It was pleasant to converse, once again, in her own tongue, the words tripping out familiar, yet distant, like a half-remembered dream of a sweeter time.

Carlos’ smile didn’t quite reach his full lips and he folded his hands in his lap purposefully, resolutely, hooded grey eyes trained on his aunt. “Yes,” he said, voice quiet, very quiet. “Now, there is much to be arranged. For example, the marriage between you, dearest princess, and your noble cousin, Richard of Gloucester, to seal the two…claimants together.”

“There is another claim,” replied Mary.

“We have defeated and exiled Henry Tudor’s entire line.”

“As his father before him?” inquired Mary.

Carlos’ look was long, thoughtful, and punctuated with a smile. “Indeed,” he replied. He glanced with some interest towards Catherine as he addressed Mary. “You may find that the tenacity of the
“Tudors favors you.”

Mary frowned in confusion.

“In any case,” continued Carlos. “Soon, your Tudor cousins will have nowhere left to hide. The Duke of Gloucester will lay claim to his ancestral rights in France and, together, an Anglo-Spanish force will return them to you. Then we shall have France in the palm of our hand and the Tudors along with it. Spain’s glorious conquest shall continue and our House will grow and gather strength. But, in order to cement this union with England, our Anglo-Spanish princess must wed the next king.”

“I am already betrothed,” pointed out Mary. “To my cousin Arthur.”

“Have no fears, little one,” replied the Emperor, a smile tugging at his lips. “I have no doubts His Holiness the Pope can be brought round to understand that your pre-contract may be…dispensed with.”

Catherine’s eyes flicked towards the Emperor’s own and his smile broadened. Her chest felt tight as Catherine grasped the arms of her chair. “Your Highness,” began the Queen. “That will not do.”

Carlos cocked a brow.

“My daughter shall not wed this jumped-up scoundrel. He is guilty of both regicide and what, in his case, amounts to patricide as the late King Richard IV practically raised him. It would be unthinkable to wed Princess Mary to the man who brutally murdered her own father.”

Carlos inhaled sharply and flicked a glance first towards Mary than towards Catherine. “So you believe he did, in fact, commit these crimes?”

“I do,” replied Catherine. “And it is fact that he slaughtered Arthur Tudor, while bound, before a crowd populated by both sides of the conflict. There is no limit to the baseness of his soul.”

“Indeed?”

“Your Highness,” continued Catherine. “He will make no fit ally to the Empire. As soon as it suits him to cast down Spain, he will do so, and if you mean to help him take so much of France for himself, he may well have the power to do some harm to Your Highness.”

“Hmmm,” Carlos rubbed at his beard.

“Do you hear me?”

“I hear you.”

“Do you not agree?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know him.”

“Do you believe I’d advise you against him if I thought him a promising ally to Spain?”

“In fact, dear aunt, I do not know what you would do. Your behavior seems most curious to me. First throwing in with the Plantagenets, next with the Tudors, then the Plantagenets again, and finally casting your lot to the Tudor faction. I understand that, in so turbulent a place as this island, one must do a great deal of swimming into order to keep one’s head above water…but more than that, I cannot say.” He glanced towards Mary, smiled sweetly, and said: “Dear cousin, pray give leave to allow me
a private conference with your lady mother.”

Mary cast a glance towards her mother, before inclined her head to the Emperor. “As Your Highness wishes,” she said as she withdrew. Carlos dismissed all his other attendees, waiting till he was entirely alone with Catherine to speak further.

“Aunt, perhaps you are not aware, but I happen to have been the recipient of a certain letter from the late King Arthur,” he said, producing the document and handing it to her. “I know he wrote you much when you were betrothed as children. Do you recognize the hand?”

Catherine’s hand shook as he put the parchment into her hand. It bore, broken, Arthur’s royal seal, the hand within as familiar to her as her own. A wave of nausea rushed across her, filtering amidst her lungs. “He writes…to ask permission for our wedding.”

Carlos nodded. “Were you unaware?”

“No,” whispered Catherine.

“Hmmm,” Carlos rubbed. “It seems to me, the date of that letter relates much more favorably to the date of Princess Mary’s birth than does the date of your return to your Plantagenet husband.”

Catherine felt turned to stone, a blast of the red-hot eyes of the Medusa was upon her, her tender flesh seizing up in a gossamer sheen of marble till she could hardly move. Carlos’ eyes were heavy upon her, their gaze sharp and long as Catherine continued to stare, half-mesmerized, at the letter in her lap.

“Who else knows, dear aunt?”

Catherine’s look was quick and fierce. Her eyes met his, holding them, and she felt suddenly free, free and strong as if a blast from her pale eyes could cast down any man. “What do you mean to do?”

“Who knows, aunt?”

“Henry Tudor,” she said. “Anne Boleyn.”

“Who else?”

Catherine shook her head. “There were rumors…whispers of our…affection…but no one else knows anything.”

Carlos nodded slowly. “Please leave me, aunt. There is much here to consider and I am weary of company.”

“What do you mean to do?”

Carlos reached for the document, snatching it from her, and smiled in his distant way. “What I must.”

Chapter End Notes

I know you're probably wondering 'what the hell happened in the battle?????' I promise, I am getting to that!! Much is soon to be explained... :D That being said, if you've got
any question, toss 'em to me!! I know I'm hurling you around a bit w this hahaha
Kinslayer

Chapter Summary

Greasy black ash charred the scattered mound of stones which still remained.

Chapter Notes

Once again, I am so, so sorry about yesterday. Truly, I have no idea how that happened. In my mind, I think somehow it was Sunday - I didn't realize until the instant I posted what day it was and, by then, it was too late. In any case, I wrote this up as quickly as I could. I hope you enjoy it, though, it is unedited (my goal here was speed hahaha) so, without further ado, on to the chapter!

HENRY VIII, KING OF ENGLAND
Tower of London, England
October 1535

Harry strained his neck, craning his entire body into a peculiar angle. If he squeezed into just the right position, he could see the blistered hulk that had once been an ancient wall. The Tower was still formidable enough as a prison, surrounded by guards and a bolted door and four walls around him, but the damage had been done: a fortress it was no longer. Even most of its prisons were rendered ineffective by damage, but sadly, not this one. Harry leaned further, peered towards the north of the Tower, where its spine had been cracked and splattered. Greasy black ash charred the scattered mound of stones which still remained. Outside, conquistadors removed rubble, carrying it off to God knew where.

It was strange to be here, a prisoner…again. Harry was filled with an odd sense of enthusiastic dread – enthusiasm for the sweet moments (perhaps Anne would come and wed him, again) – and dread for the dire (perhaps Arthur would free him and die all over again). Yet, he wondered if he were still that young man, deep in the pit of his stomach somewhere, or if the weight of a crown had splintered a skull already full of cares, and replaced it, undetected, with another mind altogether.

Harry felt strange, almost giddy, ready to collapse into giggles at the first spark of humor to fan his weary mind.

It did not evade him, this, for all that. It did not evade him that his situation was desperate.

Hearing a clank at his door, Harry retracted his head abruptly, clocking it against the wall in the process. Stifling a groan, he turned to see who had come to interrogate him now…only to spot little Mary and her mother, Catherine. The girl, spotting him, broke into a beatific grin and rushed towards him, arms held out for an embrace.

“Mary!” he exclaimed, wrapping his arms around her, half-lifting her in his hug. “What on earth are you doing here? You shouldn’t be here.”
“What were they going to do,” bit back Mary. “Deny me? If the Tudors aren’t the kings of England then,” she shrugged. “I am. Who are they to say no to me?”

Harry nodded slowly, casting a quick glance to Catherine’s face. She was weary, weary of everything. He thought, perhaps, she’d aged in the mere month since last he’d seen her and a twinge of pity stirred his heart. No wonder Catherine was worn, Harry considered, when Mary made such proclamations. “I hope you haven’t said that to anyone else.”

“Rulers have heralds for a reason,” she replied. “The ruler who must announce himself is no ruler at all.” Mary paused, walking over to the cot to seat herself. “Now, my cousins; the Queen – are they safe?”

“I hope so,” said Harry, laughing, a touch nervously. “But neither Anne nor the children have any means of contacting me now. I pray they’re safe in France, or else all that we sacrificed to get them there…may have been for naught.”

“Not entirely,” said Catherine. “We know just who are enemies are, now.”

“Had you lost sight of that?” inquired Harry. He shook his head, lip curling with disgust. “I never did.”

“You let Dickon go.”

“I did not – he was already gone! What was I to do? He was in the wind. If I’d caught him, you can be sure he’d have met with justice, as my warrant for his arrest promised, but I didn’t catch him. Apparently,” added Harry, derisively. “He was under the protection of the Holy Roman Emperor.”

“Why did the Emperor help Dickon?” asked Mary. “France is their real enemy, not us. If they were going to use the resources for an invasion – should not the target have been France?”

“He is the Holy Roman Emperor,” said Catherine. “It is one thing to scuffle with another nation in other territories over disputed fiefs… another, entirely, to invade a strong Catholic nation, particularly as the Holy Roman Emperor. He needed an excuse: Dickon’s claim gave him that.”

“It gave him something else, as well, something far more precious,” mused Harry, cocking a brow.

The two women fixed him with an inquisitive stare.

“The Plantagenet claim to France. If he can unseat me and take the English throne for one of his followers, the Emperor will now have a valid excuse to invade France, as well. We will have wiped out the threat that was our alliance with France, yes, but he will have wiped out the threat that was France as well.”

“Yes,” said Catherine, softly. “But in so doing he will have made of Dickon perhaps the most powerful man in Europe: he will have set up for himself a rival who is not constrained by the bounds of morality or decency or trust, who is far less amenable than the Emperor may now imagine. Dickon will turn on him – it is what he does – and, when he does, the two of them will tear this world apart in their scramble for dominance.”

Mary wrapped her arms around herself. “I am to marry him.”

“No,” growled Catherine, seizing her daughter’s shoulders. “I shall not allow that to happen. You will be safe, you will be safe, I promise.”

“He killed my father, didn’t he?”
Harry inhaled sharply and glanced out the window. He did not watch Catherine or Mary, but either way, even in Mary’s unique case of having two fathers, she was quite right: Dickon had murdered them both.

“Yes,” Catherine said, softly, slowly. “He did.”

“I knew he had slain your brother,” Mary said to Harry. “I had no confirmation about my father.”

“In truth, there was none,” said Harry. “But the two of them were seen going into that room and, ultimately, only Dickon came out, although he was not observed in his exit because Dickon disappeared immediately afterward. There is no proof, but the identity seems clear enough to me. I suppose, once one begins killing kings, it can be difficult to know where to stop.”

“We’re not safe around him, are we?” asked Mary.

Turning to look at her, Harry’s expression softened. He realized, all at once, that she was frightened, still frightened, had been frightened since first rumors of invasion had begun, no doubt. And he, Henry VIII, had been meant to protect her. He felt hollowed out and small and her eyes blazed, in the strange bent light of the charred and cracked Tower, a green all too well known to Arthur’s only living brother. Extending a hand, he took hers. “Listen to me, Mary, you must be strong and brave.” He nodded. “You must be strong and brave and you must never come back here to see me, again.”

He watched her fight back tears and Mary squeezed his hand. “I know I am not your daughter,” she said. “But you’re the only father I’ve ever known. I love you.”

His gut seemed to fall away and, instinctively, Harry gathered her into an embrace. “Shhh,” he soothed. “My brave girl, I cannot protect you now, from here, but do not doubt for a moment,” he added, pulling away enough that he could look into her face and, seeing tears, he gently wiped them away. “Your mother will always look out for you. And, remember this, too, you cannot always trust him, but you are valuable to the Emperor. He will see no harm come to you. Now, you must go. Let no one see you. I love you.”
Thou Shalt Not Covet

Chapter Summary

He could rewrite his missive; he could not erase the blot.

Chapter Notes

Unedited!!

CARLOS V, HOLY ROMAN EMPEROR
Palace of Westminster, England
November 1535

His quill scratched along, suddenly snagging on the parchment. He watched the black ink ooze out, heavy and laden, welling into each divot of the manuscript, watched its slow progress, marching back towards the word he had just ridden, muddling the last loop in the word *Rex*. Carlos sighed softly. The letter was fully penned, he'd been about to sign, but he regarded the imperfection sourly. He shook his head, irritated. He cast it into the flames. He could rewrite his missive; he could not erase the blot. Carlos did not wait to watch the mistake bloat in the heat or swallowed by the flames, instead beginning anew, his handwriting neat, a stringent scratch upon an unblemished sheet.

“Enter,” he replied to the knock upon his door, not bothering to look up.

“What’s this?” demanded a voice.

Carlos flicked his glance towards the intruder, and back down to his paper, again, as he wrote. “Gloucester,” he greeted.

“Look at me!”

“I see you,” said Carlos, dipping his quill into the inkwell and beginning a fresh sentence.

Dickon fumed, practically quaking. “I am the *king*,” he growled. “I’ll not be treated this way.”

Carlos spared him a single, withering glance. His pen did not cease in its stride across the page. “What is you want?”

“You cannot speak to me that way!”

“I can,” he said, liberally casting sand across the page. “And I shall.” Looking back to the young man, he cocked his brow. “Now, why have you come?”

Dickon was fuming, red in the face, the tips of his ears almost purple with fury as he clenched his fists beside him. Rigid with anger, he dropped into the seat opposite the Emperor. “I hear a *rumor*,” he said. “A scandalous *lie*, no doubt,” he added. “That you mean to make me king by right of my wife – not, as justice would have it, the other way around!”
“Princess Mary is the indisputable Princess Royal of England.”

“It is disputable!” cried Dickon. “I dispute it! Many have, you know! The Tudors, themselves, did—”

“And changed their minds.”

“I told you, I told you in Spain, I told you that that man who claimed to be to be my uncle was a false pretender, instead! I learned the truth, too late, that he was just what the late King Henry had said: Perkin Warbeck.”

“When Elizabeth of York met with him, she declared him her own flesh-and-blood brother.”

“She would have said anything!”

“Your mother said the same,” pointed out Carlos, calmly. “As did all her sisters.”

“You believed me in Spain. You published papers! What, what has changed?”

Carlos’ smile was thin, a grey thing that whispered of a shadow and hardly breathed at all upon his features. Slowly, he put the red wax to the candle upon his desk, turning it and turning up. He watched each bloody drip fall upon the folded page, dop, dop, dop, watched them run together and rolled his signet ring from his finger before he plunged into the wax. “What matter does it make in whose right the crown is worn so long as it rests upon your brow?”

“It matters,” he complained. “It would matter to you– if you were only king by right of your wife… it would matter to you.”

“That is as may be,” he said. “But that is the price of applying to a foreign power to win your crown.”

Dickon’s eyes widened, his mouth opened, shut again to mold into a snarl. He stabbed one finger at the Emperor, dropped it, again. “There was no other way,” he hissed, at last.

“There is always another way.” The Emperor slid his ring back upon his finger. “And this is the new way. If you still wish to wear the crown of England, you will wed Her Grace, Mary, Queen of England. If you ever wish to be sundered from her, you will be sundered, also, from the throne. This is how it stands. Do you consent?”

“This is Catherine’s doing, isn’t it? That great fuckin—”

“Careful,” growled Carlos. “How you speak of Her Grace, the Queen Mother. She is, also, my aunt and an Infanta of Spain.”

Dickon’s glare flared, before shooting off to the fire in the mantel not far away. Carlos studied the young man with interest. In truth, it was little easier for Carlos to trust his family than it had proven for Dickon’s extended family. Such, he considered, was the fate of rulers. Yet, for all that, his aunt seemed more to be relied upon than a member of an entirely different family, a different nation. And then there was the matter of Mary’s own blood to consider…but that, at least, he had well in hand.

“I can’t agree to this,” objected Dickon, at last.

“I understand,” replied Carlos, reaching out for another sheet of parchment. “You needn’t concern yourself, if so. Mary will find other suitors: I’m sure there is another who will.”

“I told you! Warbeck was a false king. There are other kings who agree. You want your cousin
secure on the throne, don’t you?”

“Is the high seat of kingship, then, dependent upon the consent of other kings?”

“Hasn’t all this chaos proven, since 1495, that it is?”

In the fire, a log cracked and split, tossing tongues of flame upward, licking orange and crimson and white, white hot towards the ceiling.

“Who knows this better,” demanded Dickon, leaning forward. “Than an elected Emperor?”

Carlos’ smile was wan, half-corroded, and his pen hovered above the parchment, dripping black ink upon the page like obsidian tears.

“I can give you France,” pressed Dickon. “I will cast down François, that preening prig, and sprawl him out before you on all fours like a beast. I know how it feels to lay low one’s foes.”

“I take it, by this instance, you assume I do not know the feeling?”

Dickon swallowed hard, a loud sound that intruded upon Carlos’ thoughts. “What do you promise me that cannot also be achieved in the name of my cousin? Like you, she has a claim – perhaps a better one – upon the lands of your ancestors now held by France: Anjou, Normandy, Aquitaine, Gascony, Poitiers, Maine, Nantes, Brittany…I do not require your claim to them no more than I require your claim to England.”

Dickon was trembling, his eyes large in his face, he began, half-choked, half-shouting. “But I-”

“But you? You did nothing!” shouted Carlos, standing abruptly. “I did it all. If Henry Tudor claimed right of conquest through battle and a tentative bloodline, than certainly Mary may do the same. Now, go. Get out of my sight.”

“You used me,” whispered Dickon. “You used me.” The crackling of the fire drowned out Dickon’s retreating footsteps. Carlos crushed the unfinished letter in his fist.
Empress of the Carnation

Chapter Summary

“What is she like?” asked Mary, as they walked. “The Empress?”

Chapter Notes

Unedited!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Catherine of Aragon, Queen Dowager of England
Palace of Westminster, England
December 1535

The corridor bustled with people, a flurry of fine skirts and breeches jostling around one another as the day’s business was carried out. Catherine hardly noticed any of it as she and her daughter made their way.

“What is she like?” asked Mary, as they walked. “The Empress?”

“I do not know her well,” admitted Catherine, weaving through the hall as courtiers stopped to let them pass. “But, from what I see of her, she is very like my mother: determined and prudent and intelligent. She is a great beauty, certainly,” she added. “Your cousin, the Emperor, seems to be very much in love with her. When they are together, they hardly seem to notice another soul in the world is present.”

“Of course I am pleased to meet her,” said Mary, carefully, softly. “But why does she come, at all?”

“The Emperor has summoned her.”

Mary’s brows rose. “But why?”

“I suppose he must have missed her.”

“It seems very strange to me,” commented Mary. “Particularly as she is supreme Regent of Spain, in the Emperor’s absence.”

The entire court was decked out in all earthly finery and Catherine inhaled slowly, sharply, a strange sort of harried fever upon her. She did not, could not say, but the fact of Isabella’s arrival concerned Catherine, as well, particularly paired as it was with the series of random arrests that had taken place over the past few months. Still, she smiled softly, refusing to display a moment of uncertainty. It would do no good. “It is good of the Emperor,” said Catherine, instead.

“To have stayed so long with us, here, during our turmoil, and it is only natural that after so much time, a man should miss his wife.”
Mary’s eyes were green lichen, fixing on her mother for a prolonged moment before flicking away. “The Empress is almost arrived.”

Isabella appeared in crimson samite, her copper hair tied up upon her head in intricate braids, twisted and pinned upon her hair. She was fine-featured with milky skin and hazel-green eyes almost a match for Mary’s own.

As the foremost lady of English court, Mary ventured up to her, curtsying. “Your Imperial Highness,” she greeted.

“Rise, dear cousin,” said Isabella, graciously. “Walk with me.”

Approaching Catherine, who curtsied, Isabella smiled and extended the same invitation.

“Yours is a long journey, all the way from Spain,” said Catherine. “I remember it well. Your Highness must be exhausted.”

“Exhaustion is nothing, my sweet aunt,” responded Isabella with a wan smile. “I shall soon see my husband. I expected to find him awaiting me.”

“And so you find him,” said a voice. Looking over, Catherine spotted the Emperor, emerging from the gaggle of men who had come to gawk at the Empress, holding out both his hands to her. Her aunt and cousin forgotten, Isabella came forward eagerly, taking both his hands as they moved on to speaking Spanish.

“What do they say?” hissed Mary to her mother. “They speak too quickly for me to follow.”

“Only gentle greetings, not meant for our ears,” she said, as the pair filed away, the congregating parting for them like the Red Sea before Moses and the Israelites.

“They seem fond of each other.”

“Yes,” replied Catherine, softly. “They do.”

“No doubt,” said a voice, stepping forward from the male crowd. “We shall be so when we wed.”

It was Dickon. He looked dreadful, his skin blotchy and his carriage, half-slumped as though in pain. He leaned heavily upon a cane, and gleamed with sweat though it was December.

“Your Grace,” said Catherine, very carefully. “Are you well?”

“It’s nothing,” growled Dickon, snarling. He pushed passed the last person whose shoulder was in the way, coming face-to-face with Mary. “You know, I am the King, by right. I could command you to marry me, here and now.” He seized her arm.

A murmur grew in the corridor, the astonished onlookers shifting and whispering to one another.

“If you must state your rank,” snapped Mary. “You have not achieved it.” She yanked away from his touch.

Catherine moved swiftly, placing herself between Dickon and her daughter. “You will not touch Her Grace, Princess Mary.”

“I shall touch whomever I please, whenever I please!” hissed Dickon, trying to push past the Queen. Reaching out her arm, Catherine slapped Dickon across the face. Her hand burned with the force, a
sweet pain, and Dickon staggered back, his cap falling away to reveal he’d lost chunks of semi-colorless hair. The slap echoed across the hall, the collective gasp seeming to revive it as the sound died away. Dickon staggered to his feet, pushing away those who would help him.

“What happened to you?” whispered Catherine. “It’s been only a few months since last we spoke. How are you so changed?”

“Will you leave me alone, woman?” demanded Dickon, seizing back his cap and stuffing it back onto his head. “If you dare touch me ever again, I will have your head, do you hear me? Your head! I am your king! I am the King! Why will no one hear me?”

He slumped away, leaning against his cane, his legs hardly seeming to respond as he lurched from the hall.

“What happened?” asked Catherine. Not a soul answered her.

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CARLOS V, HOLY ROMAN EMPEROR
Palace of Westminster, England
December 1535

“So these recent arrests,” began Isabella, daintily eating from the plate before her. The servants had all been dismissed and it was Carlos, himself, who served her. “You mean to change everything here in England. How may you legally act?”

“I am the protector of our Holy Faith,” said Carlos, softly, pouring more wine into her cup. “I must act.”

“The Faith is in no peril here.”

Glancing away, Carlos licked his lips. “We shall see,” he murmured. “We shall see.”

Chapter End Notes

Isabella of Portugal, Holy Roman Empress, is known as the Empress of the Carnation because, it is said, Carlos introduced them to the Alhambra in honor of her.

Anyway, you can read more about Isabella here:
The Death of Kings

Chapter Summary

Yet, the glittering diamond sliced his hand open and his fingers opened in shock, red blood transforming the diamond to a ruby as the crown clattered away, dropping out the open window.

Chapter Notes

tw: violence
tw: death
tw: seizure
tw: torture mention

note: you can read a brief description of the events at the end, if you don't wish to read the triggering portion, itself, (which is the final bit from Catherine's perspective). also please note that this chapter has not been edited.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

RICHARD OF WARWICK, KING OF ENGLAND
Palace of Westminster, England
December, 1535

He dreamed of the crown. It radiated light, jewels sparking in the candlelight. Always the same dream: he stood near it, stepped forward to grasp it, eager hands out-flung to capture the precious gold coronet. It rested in a windowsill, pale silver moonlight pooling about it like a corona of heaven. He moved towards it, yet his feet were weighted like anchors, painful and sluggish, and his breath heaved, tongue foul-tasting in his mouth as he staggered forward. Rather than drawing closer, he seemed to edge further and further and further away, his every step dismal and sluggish. Always, he fought forward, ready to snatch the magnificent crown where it rested, fighting forward, forward, forward. It was all he wanted; it was all he deserved. Had he not given everything to have it? At last, his fingers closed around it, reaching for one single bejeweled spire. Yet, the glittering diamond sliced his hand open and his fingers opened in shock, red blood transforming the diamond to a ruby at the crown clattered away, dropping out the open window. Then Dickon – falling, falling. He awoke as the earth rose up to meet him, crushing his bones upon the dirt of England.

Dickon half-stepped, half-collapsed from his bed, staggering for the table before him. His head spun painfully, a thousand florid colors dancing before his vision. All the world seemed bruised, color leached from it in place of damp shadow. His limbs lurched, numb and unresponsive, and he winced, fighting to focus despite the shade over his eyes. Where had his fabled beauty fled? His physical prowess which, once, had laid low would-be kings? He groaned softly, stumbling, leaning against the table. Ill-tempered, he’d screamed at each successive servant till they all left him and he moaned again, stretching out one hand to clasp the heavy drapes. He tugged, felt nothing, his fingers, palms buzzing. Dickon clenched his face. Sweat wept down his brow, his cheeks, resting at the soft
upsweep of his lips, coating the hair of his eyebrows.

He watched, shadowy, as his fingers fist around a bolt of the rich fabric. Snarling, and half-shrieking, he ripped. Down fluttered the window dressings, curtains he’d once viewed as a tangerine now darkened to bloodthirsty vermillion. Dickon fell forward against the table, exhausted by his exertions. The familiar fist of pain cramped in his gut, twisting through his intestines like a vice. Tears ringed his swollen eyes and he whimpered, one hand still caught in the rich fabric, another reaching up to touch his head. He felt thin follicles of hair pulling from his head and screamed, screamed, screamed.

‘What happened to you?’ Catherine’s voice rang in his head. ‘How are you so changed?’

“No,” he murmured, shaking his head. “No, no, no…”

He mumbled on and on, half-conscious, half-fainting as vomit spilled from his lips, again, again, again. A spasm was starting, welling deep in his feet and rising up, again, as he capitulated into the vomit-soaked curtains. “No, no, no…”

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CARLOS V, HOLY ROMAN EMPEROR
Palace of Westminster, England
December 1535

The Empress arched a slender brow. Her skin was white as a sheet, her eyes blue as the heavens above, but there was no sweetness to her countenance, now, her look searing as it bored into his flesh, sizzling across his exposed skin and scalding his eyes.

Carlos felt an uncomfortable sensation fluttering in his gut. “You do not approve,” he stated, meeting her gaze.

Isabella smiled thinly, picked at her plate, dully. “It is not my place to approve or disapprove. I am not English, but, as a Catholic, I do not condone it. In any case, there can be little doubt the English people will have an opinion.”

“Yes,” replied Carlos. “But, Archbishop or no, Thomas Wolsey was common born. English laws against torture only apply to those of noble blood. In any case, we may be certain what he confessed is true: everyone knows that a human being cannot lie under torture. The man was a heretic.”

Isabella nodded. “And, since a heretic crowned Henry Tudor, his coronation is not valid.” She nodded, sipped daintily at her wine. “So you have uncrowned a king. This is a dangerous business, my love. If the common people of Christendom become too accustomed to uncrowning kings, upon our own heads it may one day land.”

“No king,” said Carlos with a wave of his hand. “A heretic. Indeed, his own wife, the so-called Queen Anne was known to sympathize with various heresies imported from France. My love, you know well and good that Marguerite de Valois, François’ own sister, is herself resting upon the cusp of heresy…if, indeed, she has not already crossed that border.”

“So, now what?”

“His Holiness the Pope will excommunicate Henry and declare him a heretic.”

Isabella swallowed hard, her white flesh going a shade whiter, still. “Oh, my love, be careful.”
“I am the true heir of my grandparents, Isabella. If Inquisition is what is required in England, that is what they shall have.”

She swallowed hard. “You mean to kill him,” she whispered. “You mean to strip him of his crown, his faith, and his life…This is a dangerous game, Carlos. And what, then? What happens when Henry is dead? Why kill him when you may delegitimize the Tudor claim and be done with it, spare this messiness? It is bad enough to rip crowns from kings, Carlos – far worse to spill their blood. Where does this end for us? What if our own methods should come back to harm us or our own children?”

“God is with us,” quoted Carlos. “Who can be against us?” He smiled softly. “There is something you do not yet know, my love, as I feared to write it in any letters, lest they be intercepted and the news spread in a way I do not wish. As you already know, this Duke of Gloucester is no fit king, but Mary may still be queen without him.”

“How? She may be of the senior branch of the family, but he is a male. Empress Matilda proved that one may easily trump the other here in England.”

Carlos smiled softly. “But you have it quite turned around, my love. It is Mary who belongs to the senior branch – and her uncle Henry is therefore her chief rival, not Dickon.”

“What?”

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CATHERINE OF ARAGON, QUEEN DOWAGER OF ENGLAND

Palace of Westminster, England

December 1535

“Be quick,” snarled the Queen. “I will spend no more time in your presence than I absolutely must.”

Dickon was slumped, leaning heavily on the table between them. “No, please, you must help me.”

“Help you? Why would I help you? You murdered my husband!”

“No, no,” he pressed a hand to his sweat-slick brow. “Please. There is no one else who can help me.” He closed his fist, struck it against the table. “They’re killing me, Catherine.”

“Who?”

“I’m being poisoned! Can’t you see?” he demanded, tears weeping down his face, eyes red-rimmed and bulging in his face. He leaned across the table, foul garlicky breath hitting her full in the face. “You remember me how I was, don’t you? Just months ago! What else could it be?”

“Illness,” she said. “A curse from God for what you have done.”

“I’ve done nothing wrong!” he wailed, scratching at the tabletop, shaking his head. “I’ve done nothing your husband or your precious Tudors didn’t do. They simply lacked the gumption to look their victims in the eye or learn their names, but they have killed, each and every single one of them. So many deaths! So much chaos! Just for a crown they held each for such a short time, really…so short.” He shook his head. “Yet still longer than I. I am not a king, at all, I am a prisoner – one they execute slowly. Please, please,” he seized at her hands, his own damp with perspiration. “Make it stop, make it stop, make it stop! Please.”

Yanking her hand away, Catherine shook her head. “How dare you say that to me! How dare you
compare your acts with those of-"

“They were pretenders, all of them! I am the only one whose birth was true and legitimate from a true and legitimate source. I am the only king England has...or has ever had. I know, now, that you were wrongfully wed to your late husband. It was all a lie! He was never Richard IV, but Perkin Warbeck all along. Therefore, your marriage was invalid and your daughter is a bastard, but I’ll marry her, still, I’ll make a Queen of her. I don’t care, I don’t, I-” he choked on his breath. “I just want what I deserve.”

“What you deserve?” demanded Catherine, her lip curling. “You are a murderer who used betrayal and ignobility to kill honorable men. If you truly are being poisoned, then, I say, it is your just deserts.”

“No, please, no, have pity, have pity! It is your own nephew who does this to me, I am sure of it! He used me, he used me!”

“As you used your Uncle Richard. Goodbye, Dickon. I shall not see your face, again.” She stood, abruptly, pulling away from him.

“No!” shrieked Dickon, his voice a raw half-sob, half-roar. He slammed his fist down on the table. It rattled, cup of wine overturning. Catherine watched it flow out. She watched it and pictured the horrid vision of Arthur’s grisly murder. “No, I am the king, you do not leave me like this!” He leaned forward, seeking with both hands, and seized her wrists, pulling her back towards him. “I will not die like this! You will help me! You will help me! You will help me or I will do worse to your daughter than I did to any of those you’ve accused me of. You Spaniards don’t have the monopoly on torment you may think you do. I will make her beg for death,” he sobbed. “Beg! You will help me! You will help me, help me.”

Catherine yanked against his grip, but his fingers gouged into her flesh, his fingernails slicing into her flesh. “Let go of me!”

“Help me!” he screamed, tears coursing down his face. “Make it stop, make it stop, it hurts, it hurts!” he wept. “Make it stop!” His face seized up, arms contracting, dragging her close, ramming her body against the table beside him. His eyes were distant and milky and he pulled her closer, limbs jerking back and forward, his body stiffening and shaking by turns.

Fear rattled up Catherine’s arms and into her chest. Dickon’s face was red, his eyes protruding as his neck rolled convulsively. His mouth gasped and his bladder let go. A tear of blood trailed from his mouth. She grappled uselessly, trying desperately to pull away as Dickon fell across the table, pulling her along with him. “Help!” screamed the Queen. “Someone please help!”

No one came. It went on and on, and no one came.

At last, it was over. His eyes and mouth were wide open, but Dickon was still, terribly still, and Catherine pushed away, away, away until her back hit the wall. “Oh, God,” she gasped. “Oh God!”

Chapter End Notes

If you skipped the last portion, you can find a brief description below, as well as some notes on the chapter.
Catherine of Aragon goes to a meeting with Dickon, where he reveals his belief that he's being poisoned and demands that Catherine help him escape his fate or he will wreak horrors upon Mary. Catherine, however, points out that this may be justice for the murders he has committed and refuses to help him. Distressed by this news, it triggers a final attack, which results in Dickon's death in front of Catherine as he grabs her, pulling her close. At the end of the attack, the poison has taken its toll and Dickon dies.

Ok, so notes!!!! First of all, I did some research on the topic of medieval/renaissance poisoning and tried to present it realistically, but also as respectfully - in terms of its results - as I could. A very common poison, that was available in England as well as Europe, was arsenic, which was often used because it was readily available and also many of its symptoms looked a great deal like many other diseases, such as cholera. Dickon displays in this chapter and the last many of the symptoms of acute arsenic poisoning. You can read more about that here: https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/241860.php

Finally, a note about Carlos' comments on torture! This is based on the belief - that was already under some dispute but still had many adherents - that lying under torture was impossible because a lie was an evil act of the human will against the will of God and, under torture, the human will gave out. Obviously, this is a bit of a circular argument as well as, as we know today, totally wrong as one is more likely to falsely confess simply to make the torture stop, but Carlos would have been taught that lying under torture was not possible...esp as it suits him to believe it.
Something of his mother was scrawled across his cheeks, in the space just beneath his eyes, but it seemed strangely dark in the flickering candlelight, and only darker still with the thin grin that stole across his features.

CATHARINE OF ARAGON, QUEEN DOWAGER OF ENGLAND

Palace of Westminster

December 1535

“Dickon implicated you.” Catherine’s brows arched, but she sipped daintily at her wine, the red bitter-sour thick and sweet as it soothed along her throat. Her limpid eyes were fixed upon her nephew as she set her goblet down again, watching, reading, discerning. Time had taken its toll, a whirl of large and small problems alike, all whispering at the edges of her mind, demanding her attention. But this, this moment, she knew good and well, it meant something, it trickled storm-tossed towards a future she felt she saw written upon the wall in a language she could not read.

Carlos’ look was long, long as hers, his gaze matching hers, eyes fixed upon her own. Something of his mother was scrawled across his cheeks, in the space just beneath his eyes, but it seemed strangely dark in the flickering candlelight, and only darker still with the thin grin that stole across his features.

He reached out, knuckles wrapping around the neck of the bottle, pouring, pouring, the liquid gurgling into his glass, a whispering spirit. “And what, dear aunt, do you believe?”

She paused, her throat constricting as she swallowed, but her smile appeared more genuine than Carlos’ had, for all that. “The physicians ruled that Dickon’s death was natural - sickness.”

“But you disagree?”

Dickon’s face, the awful snarl of torment upon his features as he convulsed. Her neck twinged and she moved, suddenly, looking away. The fire leapt and danced in the grate and she watched it, transfixed, fearing the strange hiss as it singed its way along the dry wood. She heard rustling, steps approaching her. From the corner of her eye, Catherine noted Carlos moving from his position behind his desk to take up a seat beside her by the hearth. She closed her eyes, her limbs felt strangely stiff, but she turned slowly to look at him. “It seemed violent.”

Carlos’ look was steady. “Death is always violent.” He shifted to pour more wine into her chalice, then leaned back again. “I know you had no love of him-”
“I didn’t ask you to kill him!” she exclaimed, leaning forward into her hand with her brow. Her wine sloshed, spilled over the edge, crimson liquid spilling across her white flesh.

“No,” said Carlos, evenly. “You did not.” He inhaled deeply. “But you did want him dead.”

Her look was sharp, a keen reproval, a deeper wound. “Do you accuse me?”

He tilted his head. “Do you accuse me, aunt? Let us recall how very much you had to profit from his death: revenge, wealth, power…and absolutely nothing to gain from his survival.”

Catherine stood abruptly. “How dare you!”

Unmoved, Carlos sipped calmly at his cup. “You were also the only person present at his death. You must admit, dear aunt, this makes you a rather suspicious figure in all this if, indeed, there were any foul play.”

“How can you say this to me?”

“Easily. Come, now, Your Grace, sit. Let us speak.”

Catherine trembled, her hand flattening against her belly as she stared. “So you did it. You killed him. You killed him and you sent everyone away so no one would hear the cries! You murdered Dickon. But why?”

“You’re hysterical,” said the Emperor, flicking his gaze to the fire, again. “Need I remind you how much you remind me, just now, of my mad mother? Sit.”

She felt stiff, again, and reached up her own arms for warmth, for comfort. “Why? You had everything to gain from Dickon? You did not do this for me, I know that much. Why did you do it?” Slowly, she sank back into her seat, her eyes frantically studying his face.

“Now that he’s gone, I find I do not miss him overmuch,” began Carlos, softly, running a fingertip across the top of his glass. “I have lost nothing. Everything I stood to gain from Dickon, I gain still from the Princess Mary and, moreso, now that I have come to the…inescapable conclusion that it is the House of Tudor whose claim to the throne of England is legitimate. It is perhaps well he is not alive to hear such a declaration. I cannot imagine it would have pleased him much and he was not…so stable as one might like in a prince.”

Catherine turned mechanically to look at him, her limpid eyes frigid, some part of herself burying itself away, like a bear come winter, and part of her waking to stare long and hard at her nephew. Once, Catherine had marched armies across this land, now she marshaled herself, instead. I must not fear, she thought. I must not fear. “If that is so, should you not release Henry Tudor from his cell, at once?”

“The man is a usurper, as vile and repulsive as Richard III, when he usurped his own nephew and locked him in the Tower to die. Besides,” he added, glancing into the fire. “This is a sensitive matter, Tía Catalina, but it is, in fact, the very reason I summoned you here, tonight. I must be open. Disturbing rumors of heresy in England reached my ears quickly upon arrival. No sooner did I investigate them, than found…a disturbing truth behind them.”

“What?”

“It seems that this Usurper, once known as Henry VIII, is a Heretic King. You must understand, dear aunt, as Holy Roman Emperor, I cannot stand by while England is overrun by the false preaching of a usurping heretic!”
“Carlos, please—”

“He must go to his death.”

“You risk killing a king? What happens if the people of Christendom become too comfortable with royal execution?”

“The Empress had the same…concerns,” replied Carlos. “But my…research into his heresy has unearthed something far more grave. The very Archbishop who crowned him king was, himself, a cursed heretic and has gone to Our Lord to eternal damnation, as a result. Orchestrated by a heretic, his coronation was not truly blessed under God and therefore holds no ground. He is no true king.”

“So,” replied Catherine, folding her hands in her lap. “You have unmade a king. What will you do when the people take it into their minds unkincing you?”

“You question me?”

“You can’t kill Henry!”

“You should thank me. With Henry a heretical usurper, the stage is all-but set for Mary to claim her father’s throne. Is that not what you wanted?”

“Of course I wanted that! But I will not see her there through lies and treachery and blood!”

“You are far too late for that,” sneered Carlos. “What do you think a throne is? And, should you choose to make a fuss, I may be forced to investigate your involvement in dear Dickon’s demise. You may be seeing Henry Tudor much sooner than you may like. And then who would protect our dear Princess, when I return to my Empire?”

“Are you threatening me?”

Carlos pressed his lips together, his eyes searching hers. “I am warning you, aunt. Do not forget that.”
His letters were fluid, their contents nothing but the slick ink that flowed across the page – slimy and utterly without content.

ANNE BOLEYN, QUEEN OF ENGLAND
Chateau d'Amboise, France
January 1536

“So the bastard’s dead,” commented Anne, flipping the letter over. Anne did not lament Dickon – she had little doubt few would – and in fact considered it the first good news from England, since her departure. She was grateful, truly, for the news that shuttled across the Channel to her, but the answers she received were much too few and far between. Still, she hadn’t sat idle. A string of letters scurried back and forth across Christendom and, even, across the Channel, not only to those few English nobles willing to risk correspondence with a cast-off queen, but even to Carlos, himself. So far, however, Catherine and Mary had yet to respond to her. In the first case, she did not know whether this were prudence or simply Carlos preventing them from reaching her, but in Mary’s case she was certain she had not received them.

Whatever the truth of those details, Anne was certain Carlos did not mean to treat with her, but she had expected nothing less. His letters were fluid, their contents nothing but the slick ink that flowed across the page – slimy and utterly without content.

“I am glad that cursed traitor is dead,” growled Margaret, the visiting Queen of Navarre. “Arthur’s soul may now rest in peace, knowing his end is avenged.”

“Strange, isn’t it, that Dickon should die now?” inquired Mary Tudor, exchanging a glance with her sister. “What was the cause?”

“Cholera,” said Anne. “Or some other dread illness. It seems Queen Catherine was present.”

“Strange and stranger, still,” commented Mary.

“Perhaps she killed him, herself.” responded Margaret. “She was his wife, after all.” Margaret’s lip twitched, her eyes seeming to narrow and widen in quick succession. “Good for her,” she whispered, fist tightening. Anne observed the elder sister’s look, her quick turn of the head, and she wondered if that ache were gone for her, all these years later, or if she still felt the loss of her brother like a sword’s sharp steel.

Shaking her head slowly, Anne handed the document to Margaret. “Whatever happened, he is dead and he died terribly. All that he ever did is at an end.”

Margaret’s eyes were green like Arthur’s and their flash like snarling seafoam against Anne’s cheek. Slowly, her fingers tightened upon the document and she accepted it, pulling it into her lap to read, her lips pressing together.

Mary glanced towards Anne. “I’ve been considering England’s next action and what it should be,”
she said, her chin raised.

“And what is that?”

“The obvious move would be to appeal to Rome, which you ought to do—”

“It will serve no purpose!” exclaimed Margaret, irritably. “Carlos, himself, is Pope now in all but name.”

“Yes,” said Mary. “I know. But, since all of Christendom is well aware of this situation and watching keenly, Carlos will know he must be careful in how he proceeds. He must at least appear to consider any allegations from England…which means merely that the Pope must appear to deliver over them. He will, naturally, rule against England, but it will buy time, precious time for thwart the Emperor.”

“With Dickon gone,” said Margaret. “His Anglo-Spanish niece, little Mary, will be his only option for retaining control over England. Now, since we haven’t heard from Catherine, the situation is…complex. It is hard to say whether she agrees with the Emperor and his methods or not and, therefore, how she might influence her daughter.”

“Are you saying,” began Anne. “That we must not trust little Mary?”

“Yes,” said the Queen of Navarre. “I am saying that, but I’m saying something far more important, as well: I’m saying we don’t know her allegiance. She may well be for us. In either case, as regards her we must tread lightly.”

“In any case,” began Anne, softly. “I’ll wager he’ll make a move to throne Mary.”

“How will he manage that?” demanded Margaret. “When Henry is even now housed within the Tower, himself? Everything was settled between Richard IV and Henry that Henry be his lawful successor.”

“Dickon,” suggested Mary.

“Dickon merely gave Carlos an excuse to invade,” replied Anne, shaking her head. “Once the invasion was complete, someone as volatile as he was of no use to the Emperor – in fact, no doubt Carlos viewed him as a liability…particularly if – as is likely – he would prefer to see little Mary wed to his own son, Philip. Carlos means to use the ancient Plantagenet claims to French territories to invade France – that much he made clear. He will not risk loosing his hold on England, for anything. He will see little Mary throned and wed to Philip as quickly as possible and, with his own son securely King of England, he will turn his attentions upon François.”

“How will be bypass the established Tudor claim for the discarded Plantagenet one?” wondered Margaret.

“He could draw up a rival will, claiming it to be the true will of Richard IV – since the other was produced under such harried circumstances. It would not be too difficult, I should think, to forge a new one believably and thereby to contest the previous ruling for a Tudor regime.”

Or, thought Anne, dread dropping upon her gut like lead. He knows of Mary’s true paternity. “Either way,” murmured Anne. “One thing is for sure. He will have to eliminate Henry. One cannot very well throne a new queen while the old king still breathes.” Slowly, his two sisters turned to stare at her and Anne bowed her head.

“It’s been done before, where there is some contest,” supplied Margaret, hastily. “Henry VI still lived
for long after Edward IV ruled.”

“And look at all the chaos it caused!” exclaimed Margaret. “Anne is right. Carlos will not be so sloppy in his dealings…nor so merciful.”

“We have to stop the Emperor,” said Anne. “We must find a way to save Henry!”

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ELIZABETH TUDOR, PRINCESS ROYAL OF ENGLAND
Chateau d’Amboise, France
January 1536

“What do you make of France, Your Grace?” inquired François, moving towards the princess. “Do you think you could make a home here?”

Elizabeth’s eyes were dark like her mother’s, deep pools of ember that flashed and snarled in the light, but her eyes were not on him, now, instead they trained against the high walls of the palace as, slowly, she turned to him to curtsy. “Your Majesty.”

Elizabeth regarded him, carefully. While she had, for some time, been betrothed to his eldest son, she knew that her value now was waning and, should they fail to recapture England, he may well choose to select a different bride for his son, casting the Tudors off to the beleaguered hopes of landless heirs to nothingness. Quietly, she formed a small smile and came forward, catching François’ arm in her own. “It is quite the most lovely place I have ever seen,” she replied, pleasantly, eyes alight with rapture. “My father has always spoken of France as the very treasure of Christendom.”

François smiled softly. “And I wonder, little princess, do you take after your father…or your mother?”

Elizabeth chuckled. “I am asked that often,” she replied, nodding slowly. “But I think it is a mistake to see it that way, Your Majesty. I am, you see, both of my parents rolled up into one.”

“With, perhaps, a hint of your uncle tossed in,” he added, narrowing his eyes. “I believe I detect the breath of tactician hiding behind those eyes.”

“And you do not believe that quality belongs to either of my parents?”

The King laughed. “You are so very young,” he said, slowly. “How is it I almost wish to call you wise?”

Elizabeth tilted her head. “I have seen much, Your Majesty, and I shall every bit of my experience to make my countries strong and fierce as you have made them, Your Majesty, when I am Queen of France.”

François smiled softly, nodding to himself. His lips quirked into a smile. “I have no doubt, little princess, none whatsoever, that you will do precisely that, wherever you may go.”
A War of Cousins

Chapter Summary

She’d always liked the idea of her cousin the Emperor, of Spain, of the Holy Roman Empire, all stretching out and out and out, her motherlands even if she should never see them.

MARY PLANTAGENET, PRINCESS OF ENGLAND
Palace of Westminster, England
February 1536

Carlos’ eyes were large and hard, but they smiled at her as she entered the room and he bowed, bent to kiss her hand. “Cousin,” greeted the Emperor, his eyes impassive but his tone warm. “How lovely you look this evening.”

“Thank you,” said Mary, smiling back at him. She’d always liked the idea of her cousin the Emperor, of Spain, of the Holy Roman Empire, all stretching out and out and out, her motherlands even if she should never see them.

She had always felt a quiet kind of certainty, growing up. Her cousin, King Henry, had been forced out of England and left friendless, before Mary was ever born, but she knew, should the same ill fate ever befall her, she would have somewhere to run, because she was not merely a Princess of England; she was an Infanta of Spain and, in some sense, an Archduchess of the Holy Roman Empire. Her feet and her hands were gilded and her hopes lofty as her heritage. I am safe, she had thought as a child, both because the possibility of any real danger seemed so foreign and remote, and because, even if the worst happened, surely it could not befall of three of her claims simultaneously. Yet, that feeling had evaporated, fizzled up in the great fires that had burned London to the ground. Where was she, now?

Yet, there was hope, still. The Emperor saw her for a cousin that, however ill things had gone so far, Mary felt certain in that connection, in that possibility. She had faith that all might improve, that her gilt fingertips might paint her world a brighter hue, like Iris at the dawn. She smiled, then, a tight-lipped, hopeful smile, fearful, yes, but hopeful still and looked to her cousin, heart easing at his gentle words. “I confess,” she began softly, furtively feeling out the blank landscape of their interaction. “I was surprised to receive your summons, particularly given the hour of night, though, of course, not at all displeased.”

“Yes,” began the Emperor. “That was rather thoughtless of me. It is merely that I…sent for you as soon as a dispatch reached me from home.”

Mary’s brows quirked, drawing low over her green eyes. “A dispatch, Your Imperial Highness?”

“Please,” he began, softly, as they jointly sank into seats by the fire. “We are cousins. I pray Your Grace not address me with so much formality.” A smile drew across his lips and he formed something of a shrug. “Might that please my little cousin?”

“Yes,” she replied, half sitting forward. “It would. Cousin.”
“There,” he said. “That is better. And I, may I-?”

“Oh, yes,” replied Mary, gripped again with the blush of hope. She reached out to take his hand impulsively. “Please, as we are in private, you must call me Mary.”

“Then I shall,” said the Emperor, clasping his own hand over hers.

“What’s this dispatch of which you speak?”

Carlos’ lids fell, his irises flicking towards the flames. Slowly, slowly, his hands withdrew from her own, coming to grip the arms of his chair. He slid forward slightly, looking intently into her eyes, before his right hand reached up, running across his lips, his beard. He cleared his throat, looking distractedly away.

Mary’s heart bulged and gripped, leaping into her throat. “Oh, please,” she cried out, suddenly. “What is it?”

Carlos’ eyes were large in his face, pools that flickered with reflected fire from the hearth and heat from within. Slowly, he stood, walked to his desk, gathering a sheaf of papers and returning. He stood still before her, one hand resting upon the back of his own chair, the other gripping the parchment. Carlos licked his lips and sank back into the chair again. “I…have stumbled across something…I do not know whether you are aware…and I do not know how to tell you, if you are not?”

“Please,” cried Mary, leaning forward. “Oh, please, tell me at once. You frighten me!”

Carlos nodded and put the papers into her hands. He sank into his seat. “It seems…your mother took more than two husbands.”

Mary frowned. “No, no, it was just the two – the late King of France and my father.”

“Yes,” Carlos’ eyes were dark spheres but now they seemed almost to gleam of their own accord, a brilliance that sprang clear despite the nightly shadows. “Yes, your father.” He pointed towards the papers in her lap. “Have a look.”

“Is this…is this my Cousin Arthur’s handwriting?” asked Mary, rummaging through the papers and the clear, precise words upon them. At the end of the letter, she saw it, the clear, slanted signature of Arthurus Rex and his royal seal beneath it.

“Read it.”

She frowned. “This…this speaks of his wife, the queen. But…he never married.”

“Those are some letters that were never sent,” began Carlos, stroking his lip. “I stumbled upon them by chance, recently, and it…stirred a memory in me. A memory of a letter he did send, just a little less than a year before your birth.”

Mary frowned, glancing towards Carlos distractedly, before returning to the contents of his letters. “I was confused so I sent home that the letter in question might be sent back to me, here.”

Mary shook her head. “What letter?”

“The one just beneath the one you’re reading. Arthur wrote to me, requesting my blessing upon a proposed union.”
Mary’s brows quirked in surprise. “But why would he write to you?”

Carlos’ look was long, his mouth opened, revealing a tongue poised upon speech, eyes glowing amber with the heat of the flames. “Because, my dearest Mary, he craved permission to wed my aunt, your mother, Catherine of Aragon.”

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CATHARINE OF ARAGON, QUEEN DOWAGER OF ENGLAND
Palace of Westminster, England
January 1536

Catherine awoke, suddenly. The fire blazed in the grate, a cheerful smattering of flame and ash, but in her dreams all had turned to queasy emerald, the skies burning jade and the sun a snuffed verdure. She felt sickly, suddenly, a queasy clog at the back of her throat, stuffed as if with a rag or untamed wool: greasy and coarse and retching. She sat suddenly forward, one hand splaying out to steady herself against the rigid solidity of her bed. The carvings beneath her hand were strangely refreshing and a kind of sable removed entirely of an viridescence that might once have sprinkled its branches.

Slipping out of bed, she moved towards the door, half-drifting and dreamlike. Beneath her bear feet, the stone-and-rushes upon the floor were frigid and she was glad of it, even as the icy texture spiked up through her toes and the soles of her feet into her legs.

“Madame?” queried a voice.

Catherine turned to see one of her ladies sitting up, squinting her eyes in the gloom of the dark. “Go to sleep,” whispered Catherine. “It is only a dream.”

Casting a robe about her shoulders, Catherine slipped out the door. The hall outside her chamber was still dark, though she heard the rapid scurry of servants’ feet as they hastened about their morning chores. Still, this corridor was empty and Catherine sighed softly, laying her head back against the cool stone behind her. She felt old, now, old beyond her years, old as the stones beneath her feet. Her limbs seemed to creak and crack with each motion, yet the movement was a kindness, bequeathed by a restless heart. Moving away from the wall, she moved onward, following her own footfalls like a path trod in snow.

A stirring sound, a rustling beyond the next corner, sniffling. Catherine stopped, listening, then she proceeded forward, moving towards the bend. “Who’s there?” called out the queen.

At the edge of her vision, a figure all in white stood abruptly from a bench. Catherine stopped, listening, then she proceeded forward, moving towards the bend. “Who’s there?” called out the queen.

“Mary?”

Her daughter’s face was ruddy and smudged with tears, her eyes bloodshot. “Is it true, mother? Is Arthur Tudor my father?”
The Bastard Princess

Chapter Summary

She felt strapped to the spot, pitching half-forward where she sat, suspended by the rigidity of her arms upon the bench beneath her.

Chapter Notes

note: chapter not yet edited

MARY PLANTAGENET, PRINCESS OF ENGLAND
Palace of Westminster, England
January 1536

She felt raw and sick to her stomach, a kind of dread that sat like lead in her belly, a hard, twisting knot that gurgled and pressed hard against her, filling her stomach and her throat and her brain. Her eyes, shoulders, and back were sore with weeping – yes, weeping, she felt half-ashamed and half-numb to it: all horror and disgrace. She felt strapped to the spot, pitching half-forward where she sat, suspended by the rigidity of her arms upon the bench beneath her. She stared at her mother, obsessing over each word that sloughed from her lips, yet unfocused, unsure, removed. She groped towards the present moment, yet she could hardly focus. Was she a trueborn princess…or a bastard born of sin? The question beat like a drum in her ears and she watched her mother’s lips forming a stream of words, too long held in.

“I loved him, I loved him, I loved him,” she was saying, clutching at the neck of her nightgown. Tears formed rivers from the ocean of her eyes and leaking downward. Mary watched them in distracted fascination, trailing around her nose into her mouth or falling from her chin, streaking down, down, suspended for half a moment in the air, only to collapse onto her chest and run downward, till the front of her nightgown was damp with her weeping.

Mary’s tears were all cried. They had been many as they had been mighty and still sparkled upon her face, her own chest, and rimmed red round her eyes, yet she could not summon forth a single one. She was spent, but her exhaustion did little to quiet her emotions, extinguishing only the most fervid torrents of her mind while inflaming the heat of her heart. She was too exahusten, even, to wipe away her tears. It was a useless tsk, anyway – even all gone, there was no end to their flowing even now that they were all shed. “So you lied,” she murmured, her aching fears giving way to a keen honesty, an insensitivity she’d hardly dared fancy before now. There was no room, now, for uncertainty. “You lied to everyone, even me. Why? How could you do it?”

Catherine’s stare was bleak and, no doubt, a reflection of her own. Mary’s watched her countenance curiously, devouring each raw line of reaction upon her mother’s fair face, the expressions of the face as they stared off into nothing, fastened, and found her own face. “I see him in you,” she began, softly, her fingers were searching, straining as she reached out towards her only daughter, but Mary pulled away, shaking her head. Catherine’s lips drew together. Age had etched lines into their
creases, into the soft spaces around her eyes, and Mary watched them strain, seeming to scrawl like black ink in a language illegible across her face.

Mary leaned half forward, as her mother’s arm fell away from her face, watching her brows crumple as if in defeat. She had never once seen her mother look conquered, but now she did: bowed and rattled. Her head hung, body all stilled save the soft rise and fall of breath and Mary felt caught in a moment, trapped, hemmed in. She was cornered and trembling. Impulsively, she reached out, clenching her mother’s arm. “Speak!” she demanded, felt one of her old tears spring from her face to her breast. “Tell me!”

“I did for him!” cried Catherine, moving suddenly to face her daughter, seizing her by both shoulders. “I did it for you! I did it so that Arthur would not die in vain! I did it so that, no matter how the tide turned, a Tudor would reign and all that he did, all that he achieved, all that he was would not be lost. Is that not the great tragedy of history? All the beauty and love lost, turned utterly to ash and forgotten upon the altar of greatness? We think of gold and glory because that is what survives, convincing that this is what matters, when all that we call gold is merely lead turned to something that shines. I wanted him to live, I wanted him to live and live and live forever. For who will remember Arthur, the King that never was? No, I let him slip through my fingers. All we ever shared were a few breathless months and then, as swiftly as he’d come, he was gone. I tortured myself with the thoughts of everything I could have done, could have said while he was alive but it was for naught. He was gone and he’d never know. I could not even write to him. But you, Mary, you were my last love letter, the last precious piece of him. I could not suffer anything ever to happen to you. I knew the Tudors would do you no harm – I had to ensure that the Plantagenets would not either and, if I could ensure Arthur’s vision even posthumously in so doing…I had to try, Mary. Mary, I had to try.”

“You said the Tudors would not hurt me. So they knew too?”

“Yes. Your Uncle Henry and Aunt Anne, as they are properly to you, were the witnesses at my wedding to Arthur.”

“No.” Mary bit her lip. “No, no, you were supposed to say its all a mistake, its all wrong, it’s all another awful lie constructed of politics. You were supposed to lie, again, if needs must. How could you do it? How could you do this to me, and now?” Mary’s head shook but she hardly knew it, save the feeling of her curls, which had broken loose, bobbing around her face, tickling her cheeks and catching in their dampness, plastering to her face. “It’s ironic,” she decided, impatiently brushing at the loose strands. “I always felt left out, as a child…all my playmates bore that name but I, alone, was the outcast, a single Plantagenet cuckoo in the nest. But I found peace with it, I grew even to relish it, as time passed, that immediate link to the glorious past, the seal that would breach the gap between the roses…And you wait, you wait until then, until the world’s casual cruelties mean something, begin to take shape and hold value, and then you dash them all beneath you foot? Why? Why?” Mary stood swiftly, her robe swishing magisterially about her feet. “I thought, all this time, that it was Carlos who was the liar. Now I see the truth: you all are.”

“Mary-”

“No! Stop! I never asked for this. I don’t want this! You gave me a father when I had none and, now that I stand upon the threshold of losing my only living uncle, you strip him away from me. How could you do it? You lied and lied and lied and only told the truth when confronted. You may claim all of this was for the greater glory of House Tudor but your actions have done nothing so much as implicitly confirm your own belief that House Tudor means less than House Plantagenet and, in the same breath, you have named me one of these lesser beings! You have as good as told me that I mean less to you than the potential held by my name. No, I don’t wish to see you, again, I don’t wish
to speak to you, again. I leave you to the ghostly embrace of whichever of your various husbands you choose now to pretend you cherished. God knows the truth and it shall out, but I don’t care to hear anymore of it. Stay away from me.”

“Mary!” cried Catherine, but Mary did not heed her, rushing away, her feet smacking the floor as she darted. “Mary! Please! Come back! Come back, Mary, come back!”

Mary sucked in a deep breath, half-hiccupping, half-choking, swallowing it like water, but she did not stop. She did not stop, no matter how piteous her mother’s pleas.
Only History

Chapter Summary

They held, beholding in each other the burnished depths like embers glowing and alive within an ashy hearth – beautiful and glowing and writhing with life.

Chapter Notes

note: this chapter has not yet been edited! as always, thank you for your continued patience <3333

See the end of the chapter for more notes

ELIZABETH TUDOR, PRINCESS ROYAL OF ENGLAND
Chateau d’Amboise, France
January 1536

Elizabeth leaned forward, her embroidery temporarily neglected in her lap. “What is it?” she breathed, dark eyes searching.

Her mother’s matching orbs flicked upward to find her daughter’s. They held, beholding in each other the burnished depths like embers glowing and alive within an ashy hearth – beautiful and glowing and writhing with life. “It is a letter from the Emperor.”

From the corner of her eye, Elizabeth saw her brothers’ heads pop up from their occupations, attention suddenly rapt. For herself, Elizabeth softly put her embroidery to the side. “What does he say?”

“It best be worth the telling,” snarled Arthur.

“His communication is…roundabout as communications of a diplomatic nature tend to be,” began Anne. “But the point of the letter is simple enough. He wishes to meet.”

“To meet?” hissed Hal. “Surely not.”

“He cannot imagine we could be so easily compelled to leave our refuge,” stated Elizabeth, cocking a sharp red brow.

Her mother shook her head. “He means to come to us here.”

“Then surely his aim is, truly, to meet with François.”

“Perhaps.” There was something strangely evasive in Anne’s tone as she rose and went to her desk. She shifted softly, smiling a smile that did not reach her eyes. “I’m sure the notion cannot have escaped his notice. When better to meet his great enemy than from a position of strength? Carlos stands, after all, on the brink of claiming half of France for himself.”
Exchanging a quizzical glance with Arthur, Elizabeth rose slowly, moving towards her mother’s desk.

“What do you mean? How would he manage it?” asked Arthur.

“Through Mary?” suggested Anne.

“He wouldn’t dare!” chimed in Arthur. “She is not a bargaining chip! And, besides, her own father willed away her rights when he recognized father’s. And she’s betrothed to me, besides.”

Anne nodded, calmly reaching for a sheath of fresh parchment. She dipped the nib of her pen in black, black ink, and paused, as if suspended in the moment.

“You think he wants something else from you,” remarked Elizabeth. “What?”

The Queen inhaled sharply, her brows twisting in thought and, slowly, she turned to look at her daughter. “I have something,” she said softly. “A bargaining chip, to borrow Arthur’s phrase, but if I use it…” Anne licked her lips. “If I use it to buy what I want, have I in the long run sold it all? And, if I fail to give it, have I betrayed my sacred duty?”

“Mama,” murmured Hal. “What’re you talking about?”

Anne laughed softly, crossing a hand before her weary eyes. Her shoulders shifted, giggles ringing from a raw throat. Slowly, the hand fell away and the queen turned brilliant eyes upon her children. “It is not François Carlos needs just now. It is myself and your father.”

“What?”

“Because,” whispered Anne, softly. “We were the only witnesses.”

“Witnesses? Witnesses to what?”

Anne plunged her pen once more into the molten ink, her hands folding into her lap. “Remember this, my darling children,” began the queen. “Knowing something is a dangerous business. The keeping of secrets can kill but, likewise, it may also be salvation if played properly. The trouble is… when it comes to this particular secret, I do not know which is which.”

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FRANÇOIS I, KING OF FRANCE
Chateau d’Amboise, France
January 1536

“That tricky dog,” observed the king, thoughtfully, stroking at the arm of his chair. It was wrought in gold, a lion’s mane full and heavy and seeming to move as with life beneath the king’s bejeweled fingertips. “Maneuvering to meet now and under these circumstances! He connives to kill the king I have recognized!” François stopped, abruptly, realizing what he had said and to whom.

The room had been cleared of all but Queen Anne and her brother, George, the English ambassador. Together, they peered at him, twin pairs of dark eyes regarding him gravely, shining like black stars in the firmament. François cleared his throat. “Forgive me, Madame, for the plainness with which I spoke. I did not, of course, mean to imply that the Emperor would murder—”

“My husband? Forgive me, Majesty, but if I am not mistake, he most certainly would. Our alliance with Your Majesty is, to the Emperor, a grave liability with the current… regime. No doubt he would
prefer to see another installed upon the English throne – one friendlier to his own cause.”

François stood abruptly, walking away from his seat. “I confess, the affinity of blood between him and the Princess Mary is of great concern. You suppose he means to arouse the Plantagenet claim? You needn’t concern yourself, if so. I’ve already proliferated much to the discredit of this Perkin Warbeck character. Few kings, indeed, would see one they view as a usurper mount a throne as it endangers their own to allow such a thing. No, I’ve already turned the heads of Christendom. Only a Tudor monarch will now be accepted. In any case, I’ll gladly meet with the Emperor. Write to him and tell him to come.”

“What?”

“Yes, I’ve rather a fancy to meet him, face-to-face. Yes, I can well see this concerns you. I’ve no intention, Your Grace, of selling you or your most esteemed family to him, if that is your fear. Fetch that Bible and I’ll swear it to you, now. In fact, let there be a solemn Mass before all my court to put your mind to ease. No, aside from my very great reverence for you and your House which prevents me from enacting any mischief against you, it would similarly do France no good to make such a motion. To speak plainly, it suits us far better to house a rival candidate for the English throne here. I fear Carlos’ mind is much too set against us to alter such a course, now.”

“I agree,” replied George, quickly. “Having Richard of Gloucester declare his intention to reclaim the territories of Brittany, Anjou, and the rest so long contested does suggest that is the Emperor’s intention, entirely, in taking any interest in our island.”

“Just so,” murmured the king, running one finger over a sparkling ruby at his knuckle. “But I imagine you have much to discuss with him and, I confess, I’ve a very great desire to look the man in the eye just once that, like Hannibal and Scipio of old, I may speak to my great enemy before all is said and done. Yes, write to him, have him come. Come, now, Your Grace, why do you look so pale? I suppose you had hoped, Queen Anne, that I might take another tack?”

“As you wish to look upon your enemy,” began Anne, softly. “For myself, the matter is entirely other. I’ve no wish ever to see his face – only that of my beloved king. I dread such a meeting for the ill it may do him, and I welcome it for the good it may bestow. I do not know which to expect.”

“Only history, Madame,” replied the king. “Can tell us that.”

Chapter End Notes

if you were left wondering what Anne and Henry had witnessed - it is Arthur and Catherine's wedding to which she was referring. They were the only witnesses and, therefore, the living proof that the union had, indeed, legally and spiritually taken place.
“Do not resist,” said an unfamiliar voice, ringing with command.

HENRY VIII, KING OF ENGLAND
Tower of London, England
January 1536

Fitting his fingers into a vein of mortar that had whittled away across the ages, he wound his fingers round a lump of rock, his toes finding a snug outcropping that hoisted him up against the wall. From this vantage, if he peered towards his slitted window, he could spot the river Thames, surging with recent rain as it charged across the land, a gash of glittering sapphires that wound round the country like a lady’s favor upon her trusty knight’s lance. Boats zipped across the engorged river, shuttled upon its currents on their way. Narrowing his eyes, Harry peered, trying to make out the colorful pennants that snapped smartly upon their flanks, marking the important personnel ferried upon their business while he rotted here, all but forgotten.

As the months had passed, his captivity had become somewhat kinder. Though under heavy guard, he was permitted to stroll the Tower green, so long as he stayed safely away from the great blacked scar where a chunk of the Tower walls had been blown entirely away. He was also allowed access to either of the two chapels of the Tower for a few minutes each day, though he was never to know which he might visit in advance. To be sure, all ventures from his cell were kept random in order, Henry suspected, to prevent him from plotting an escape. Henry did not mind so much as he might have: this admitted variety into a lifestyle otherwise bloated with boredom.

From his perch against the wall, he heard commotion outside his door, hopping down expertly, his worn shoes providing little padding as the soles of his feet smacked the stone floor. Turning, Harry grinned widely towards the intrusion as his cell door swung open.

Guards streamed in, two seizing Harry and pushing him against the far wall.

“What’s this!?” roared Harry, pushing the first man off him as another rose to take his place, like the heads of a hydra.

“Do not resist,” said an unfamiliar voice, ringing with command. He recognized the accent, a sharper Spanish lilt than that now sported by Catherine of Aragon, but unmistakably of that extraction.

“Imperial Highness,” growled Harry, narrowing his eyes.

The Emperor issued inside the cell, flicking his eyes about the interior in unmistakably uninterested observation. “I’ve been most curious to meet you,” he said, glancing towards his guards, then towards Harry. “I thought it high time we arrange a meeting.”

“Why?” demanded Harry. “You’ve had of me all I have to give. What more could you possibly want?”

Carlos’ laugh rang against the stark rock walls, reverberating across the cell. “You are forthright.”
“Forgive me if I’ve lost the touch of diplomacy,” sneered Harry. “I’ve had little practice of it, of late, moldering up here in the cold like a common criminal.”

“Mmm,” Carlos’ lips quirked upward. “There is nothing common about you. If you were, I suppose, there’d be little cause to lock you up.”

“Hm,” hummed Harry moodily, eying the guard nearest him. “So. Why have you come? Idle curiosity, I am to believe?” he shook his head. “If it were that cause, we’d have met long hence. It’s not as if you’ve had no opportunity. You’ve abided upon my hospitality here in England far too long for me to believe that.”

“My curiosity is never idle,” observed Carlos. “I’ve written to your wife in France, you know, as well as His Majesty King François. I expect very soon to leave England, but you need not fear. I’ll be back, soon.”

Harry felt hampered in, suddenly, in a way that was not physical, as if his limbs had floated away, his skin peeled away and spread to the four corners of the earth, but his mind closed in a tiny tin can, deprived of light, of air, of feeling. “What do you want with Queen Anne? Leave her out of this! I’m the one you want: I’m the one with the power.”

“You don’t look it,” sniffed the Emperor, glancing between the guards who held him. “In any case, I need not tarry overlong with your wife, sir, if you satisfy my curiosity.”

“What is it?” growled Harry, irritably, flagging pride enflamed to anger. “What can you possibly need to know?”

Carlos turned, gesturing to a man who stood behind him. The man came forward, seating himself at the humble desk in Harry’s cell, a pen in hand. “The scribe will record our conversation for posterity and, at the end, you will sign your name to it.”

“What? Why?”

“I have recently been apprised of certain…events of the past.”

“Events of the past? What is this, the Riddle of the Sphinx? What walks upon four legs in the morning, two at noon, and three in the evening, all that?”

“Man,” quipped Carlos, brow quirking as a smile flexed his full lips. “But, no, the matter, it seems, is far simpler, though I confess it has given me some trouble to pull on the thread in unraveling the mystery, fully.” Reaching to a sheath of papers from the scribe, Carlos held up one. “I assume you recognize the hand.”

Harry felt queerly disarmed, the blood draining from his head as he stared at the letter clutched in the Emperor’s ringed fingers. A precise, careful author had penned the words upon the page, one as familiar and easily recognizable to Harry as his own. “Arthur,” whispered Harry and, in a loud voice he demanded, “Where did you get that?”

“The late King Arthur sent it to me. It is a diplomatic letter, requesting my blessing upon his nuptials with my aunt, Queen Catherine.”

Harry’s throat was dry, dry as rock, dry like rock pulverized to sand. He felt cold, suddenly, shiveringly cold and the room felt open and arid, empty of anywhere to go, to flee, to hide even for a moment to think. He shook his head, but it was more a gesture of defeat than denial. “Fuck it, Arthur,” he muttered.
“Did you not know he wrote me?”

Harry shook his head. “Yes? No? It was so long ago. I don’t properly recall.” He thought of Arthur, then, his bones gloriously interred alongside their mother and father at Westminster Abbey, and wondered if they could forgive him. We prevented another war, he thought. The English people have proven stubborn. They did not accept a woman king before, they would not now, not after all this struggle. That had always been the silver lining, yet it rung hollow in his own mind, echoing with cold emptiness against the recesses of his skull, a failed theory. War there had been, notwithstanding, and it was the cause of Harry’s very imprisonment.

“It doesn’t matter, I suppose,” said Carlos. “You may as well know I spoke to Queen Catherine and she confirmed the truth of her marriage to the late King Arthur…and testified to the fruit of that blessed union.”

“Blessed?” whispered Harry, startled. “You must know…” he shut his eyes. “It was bigamy. Though neither knew it, Catherine’s previous husband was still alive. The marriage was thus false and any product of it a bastard. You need not fear, however,” he added, glancing skeptically towards the scribe. “Till this moment we have protected the reputations of all involved. Arthur and Catherine were shielded from bigamy and Mary from bastardy. The name of your House has not been besmirched.”

Carlos nodded stiffly. Harry watched his jaw tighten, his cheeks seemingly to sink, though no other shadow of motion was evident in his face. Carlos took a step closer. “So, you acknowledge, as is your sacred duty, that you were witness to this union, that it took place before a priest in a house of God, complete with sacred vows?”

Harry glanced towards the scribe, some vague fluttering in his chest chasing away breath till all the rhythm he felt was the juggling of his heart.

“Do you deny your brother this final grace?”

“Do not pretend to have any regard for him,” spat Harry. “I know better than that. All that you do, you do for yourself, alone.”

Carlos’s brows arched, surprise wrangling an expression from him. “For myself? What have I ever done for myself that one before me has not done? What have I ever done that, truly, was of benefit to me and not to my country, to my God? I am a vessel of God’s will – that is what it means to be king, to be emperor, to be conqueror.”

Harry laughed. “You forget,” he said. “I, myself, am two of those things. I know their language as well as any. All they demand is to be felt, but you do not have a heart. How do you do it?”

Carlos’ lips narrowed to a white thread and then he smiled, wide and harsh, a flash of ivory teeth. “As I do all things,” he replied, narrowing his eyes. “Remarkably well. Now, upon your soul and in all Christian duty, were you, or were you not, witness to the marriage of King Arthur of England and Queen Catherine of Aragon?”

“You mean to make Mary queen,” he murmured. “You should know, England has not been kind in the past to the daughters of kings who mean to rule.”

“Were you the witness?”

“What do you mean to do with me, with my wife and children, if you succeed in your aim? I’ve little doubt the Pope will find himself well disposed to appease you, given his current position. He’s as
much prisoner as I am, is he not?"

“He is protected,” snapped Carlos.

“You have no shame. Remember, the deepest pit of hell is reserved for those who seek to wield for ill the power of God on earth.”

“All that I do, I do for love of Him.”

Harry shook his head. “Maybe you even believe that,” he replied. “But that does not make it true.”

“Speak,” snarled Carlos. “Are you your brother’s witness? No doubt your wife would be glad to hear from my lips that you spoke easily and truthfully.”

“You will not harm her.”

“What want do I have of her? She is as nothing to me.”

“And my children?”

Carlos fell quiet, inhaling slowly. “Write to them all,” advised Carlos. “Tell them to cooperate. I am not without mercy.”

“That is not my experience.”

“Hear me, Henry of England, your stubbornness will be your death.”

“Or my salvation,” quipped Harry. “Perhaps I shall simply turn my stubbornness against death and live forever.”

“Blasphemy,” snarled the Emperor. “Yes, you will tell me all that you know and then your wife shall say her piece on the subject as well. You will do this and you will sign a writ acknowledging your usurpation of Queen Mary’s rightful throne. You are right, you see: I will make a queen of Mary and none shall question her rise when she sits her throne beside my son, King Philip, and rules both England and Plantagenet France, as was the dream of your ancestors before you. You can either accept this and help me and ensure the continuity of the Tudor bloodline, or you can watch me crush it beneath my heel. What will it be, Tudor?”

Harry snapped his gaze towards the scribe, watching as his pen scratched hastily across the parchment, a deep welling gash of black ink dashed across the unforgiving page. I came home to make Arthur a king and all his descendants forever after kings after him, he thought. I never thought to look between his heirs and my own, wondering which to betray. But it was more complex than that and what he was choosing was survival, not betrayal. Mary and his children would all navigate the danger before them – they had no other choice. “All right,” whispered Harry, the iron of his father’s bones screaming within him. “I will do it.”
I Forge Ahead

Chapter Summary

Great biers burned everywhere, sending flaming embers shooting skyward like wayward stars, and lords and ladies dressed in grandiose regalia passed her on every side.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

ANNE BOLEYN, QUEEN OF ENGLAND
Aquitaine, France
March 1536

The Queen watched with curious eyes. She threaded through the familiar crowd, each step carefully calculated to take her closer to the Emperor, yet leave a curtain of bodies between them.

François had insisted on accepting the Emperor’s invitation of meeting, and accordingly had coordinated the most lavish spectacle she had ever seen – perhaps the most lavish anyone had ever seen. A carpet of cloth-of-gold connected the two monarch’s tents, those tents themselves immense and crafted of crimson velvet against the cold, kept there in her exquisite cage like a peacock to be seen and admired, but never touched. Anne had a tent of her own, lined with tapestries, gifted to her from Queen Mary’s own collection, but she’d abandoned it for now in favor of the a great masquerade hosted in and around the largest of the tents.

Great biers burned everywhere, sending flaming embers shooting skyward like wayward stars, and lords and ladies dressed in grandiose regalia passed her on every side. She saw the likenesses of giraffes, of centaurs, of angels, Greek gods, and even one who she could only guess was meant to be the moon. Weaving in and out of these figures, however, Anne kept her black eyes fixed upon the figure. It seemed a strange dream, the echo of a memory, to be here and now. She remembered well enough, ere now, another masquerade, another time, another king out of place. She’d been misplaced, herself, but now it was the one who had cast her out she faced, not the only who could bring her back.

Anne had put on her pearls carefully, staring herself down in the burnished mirror. Simplicity, yes, but majesty also: these were the trappings of regal elegance. Pearls, no diamonds, and black, elegant black, a French hood, and only the trimmings of a falcon costume. She’d stared, on and on, her own eyes flashing with fire she tried to sooth. Simplicity, she had reminded her reflection. Simplicity in this, also.

Now, she watched him, long, slender brows narrowing over her dark eyes. A moment would present itself, a moment, a moment, one precious moment. The Emperor spoke to dignitaries, his face stoic, his motions swift and precise. He was, she thought, perhaps the opposite of her husband in many ways, even a dark reflection of the brother Henry had lost in others. Anne drifted after him, watching how he carried himself, watching the expression of his grey eyes, the stern set his jaw took as he observed all the gaudy splendor everywhere about him. He wore simplicity, as well, she noted, dressed mostly as a soldier – a glorious one with armor stained all black save the inlaid gold at each seam and the profusion of red feathers that sparked from his helm. Everything about him was
sharpness, from the angle of his jaw to the aquiline nose, to every controlled motion he made: there was not a wisp of softness to be seen.

Sucking in a deep breath, Anne moved closer. *Hang a 'moment,'* she thought, irritably. *I forge ahead.*

Drifting towards him, Anne raised her mask to her face, her black eyes peering out from behind a mask of falcon feathers to stare at the Emperor. She smiled knowingly towards him, but did not speak, did not speak at all.

Carlos gazed at her, eyes steely as he read whatever was to be found upon her face. She made not effort to conceal it, merely standing stock still, her eyes leveled at his face, reading what was to be found there, herself. Heavy sockets crouched over large eyes, their brows sharps and narrow, slithering along the arches of his skull. His nose was prominent, lending severity in equal measure to dignity, while his large and full lips were pink within the wiry auburn beard.

“You are not a beauty,” he said at last. “Not traditionally.”

“You are not handsome.” She smiled, allowing her expression to show some hint of laughter as her eyes danced. “Not traditionally.”

Carlos tilted his head, the hint of a smile twitching beneath his mustache. “I am told different.”

“Naturally,” said Anne. “You are the Holy Roman Emperor. Who seeks to displease you?”

“Do you?”

Anne shook her head, smiled thoughtfully. “No.”

He paused. “You want something.”

Anne inclined her head. “Everyone wants something, Your Imperial Highness. Even you.”

“What do you know of my wants?”

“Enough.” Anne’s eyes narrowed and, slowly, she pulled the mask away from her face, brazenly studying his own visage. “Do you know who I am?”

Carlos arched a brow, leaned momentarily towards her, then back again. “I have my suspicions.”

“Keep them,” said Anne, quickly. “I care nothing for them.”

“Enough.” Anne’s eyes narrowed and, slowly, she pulled the mask away from her face, brazenly studying his own visage. “Do you know who I am?”

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“Keep them,” said Anne, quickly. “I care nothing for them.”

“Do you want, then?”

“One thing only, Your Imperial Highness,” said the Queen, raising a solitary finger. “I want my husband.”

“Hmm,” breathed Carlos gruffly, irritably. “I do not trade in flesh.”

Anne smiled softly, fighting off a laugh, though its origins eluded her. She was amused, yes, amused by the strangeness of the situation, amused by the cruel twists of fate that had brought her here, amused even by his terse rejoinder…and hysterical, too, hysterical of the same causes. Lives hung in the balance, the fate of more nations than one, and the future of everyone she loved and here he was joking, joking, joking about prostitution. She did laugh, then, a soft snicker, but harsh at the end, like the sound of crushing metal, and fixed her eyes upon him. “I told you, Your Imperial Highness, I seek to offer no insult, but must ask of you the same in return.”
“Do you imagine yourself insulted?” Carlos’ look was long, a raw lingering look of scorned irritation or irritated scorn, half bland and half wrath. “If I insult you, you will know it. Do not seek to toy with me, Madame. I know what you are.”

“And what is that?” demanded the Queen, leaning forward, ire leaping into her voice, her eyes, the soft flesh of her bared throat.

“That, to you Madame, can be no question. All the world knows it,” he said. “Only one in this world seems to respect it. Well for you that you found that man, well for you, even, that for a time he claimed a throne, not so well for you that he fell from on high to sink into the mud from which you first emerged.”

Anne’s teeth set, black eyes searching his. “What do you know of mud?” asked she. “You were born beneath a gilded arch. But we are not so very different, Your Highness. Remember, I, too, was trained by the late Margaret, Duchess of Savoy, and thus like you also raised to my place in part by her very hand. Whatever you imagine you see in me, know I see you, too, and I am obstinant in my goals. I will have my husband back and you will do well to remember it.”

Carlos smiled, slow and sinister and he flicked out one hand, placing a finger below her chin. Their eyes locked and he leaned forward, smiling, smiling, smiling. “I forget nothing.”

Chapter End Notes

hi, everyone!! im going to go ahead and delete all the comments here that don't pertain directly to the chapter so we can all put this behind us. thank you so much for understanding!
“Mistress Boleyn,” called out Carlos, his brows sweeping downward over his eyes, crouched like a tiger. “Be most welcome.”

CARLOS V, HOLY ROMAN EMPEROR
Aquitaine, France
March 1536

Afternoon rolled in with thunder, whistling against the heavy drapes of the exuberant tents and thrashing their priceless contents. Carlos hardly seemed to notice, save for the firm pressure of his left hand against the page, fighting the forces of the wind. It was at this time of day that Carlos received guests and wrote his correspondence and no ill weather was going to thwart an Emperor in his goals. A broken nib, however…Carlos hissed as the tip of his stylus snapped beneath his pressure.

“Fetch another,” he ordered, setting the broken one down carefully in the allotted slot as the page hastened to the other side of the tent. Carlos exhaled slowly, listening to the wind whipping around them, shaking the makeshift walls and turned impatiently towards the page. “What’s the delay?”

Yet, as he turned, he saw the page’s back to him, as he spoke to a hooded women.

“Mistress Boleyn,” called out Carlos, his brows sweeping downward over his eyes, crouched like a tiger. “Be most welcome.”

The woman turned towards him, nodded, and walked inside, lowering the cloak of her cape. “I thought perhaps,” she began, sweeping the requisite curtsy. “You might be surprised to see me.”

“Why is that?”

“Our last meeting, you may recall, was not so…friendly as it might have been.”

Carlos regarded the woman for a moment, her hood, skirts, and general appearance admirably well-groomed for having braved the rakish fingers of the wind. Her eyes were not so controlled, however, dark coals that glowed in promise of flame and the Emperor wondered, briefly, if the wife was not so very different from her husband. “Hence my expectation of your visit. You have not forgotten my…hospitality to your husband and, thus, will not be remiss in paying your attentions. No doubt,” he added, accepting the new pen with outstretched hand as his page returned with it. “You have come to grovel.”

Anne’s shoulders and the corner of her lips stiffened and Carlos felt a small pleasure in his gut to have moved the woman to an anger she was powerless to express. Yes, he thought. Maneuvering her will not be difficult. “Well,” he said. “Say what you’ve come to say.”

Something blossomed upon Anne’s features, some slatish iron dropped from her eyes and Anne stepped further into the tent, heedless to the queer shuffling of its soft walls. “Very well, Your Imperial Highness, I shall.” Her eyes flicked to the desk behind the Emperor and at once she went to it, passing him, and seizing up the broken pen. Turning back to him, she held it aloft before her,
allowing the Emperor’s eyes to fall upon it. “It’s missing its tip.”

Carlos grimaced. “Yes.”

Anne paused, her eyes boring into his, lips curving upward, round brows hitting an arch. “Strange, how an instrument with but one missing part – the very smallest portion of it, in fact – is rendered entirely useless.” Anne’s eyes were dark orbs, fixed on him, her expression almost one of laughter, as if it were all a very great joke, as if all his work, his struggles, his plans were to her trifles – the fires, the deaths, the war itself – all mere trifles.

Carlos felt a wave of scorn, rushing like a dark curtain into the room. His lip half-curled but he stopped, arching but a single brow, and looked swiftly away. “Like your family, I suppose, deprived of your husband?” he prompted.

Anne’s look was long, her eyes sweeping across him, to the floor, as in one fluid motion she turned, resting the pen once more where Carlos had laid it. She stood very still, facing away from him, her hands upon the desk. She turned slowly back, forming the smallest breath of a smile once again. “Yes,” she replied, arching a slender brow. “I suppose it is.” Slowly, she approached again, tilting her head as she peered up at him.

The Emperor’s eyes narrowed. “But that is not what you meant to say.”

“No,” replied Anne, smiling again, that baffling smile of hers. “I did not. Rather, I think of a country, deprived of her king and, thereby, deprived of order, certainty. You have achieved this swiftly,” she noted. “In England. What happens within the Empire while you are away?”

Carlos’ smile was small, he arched a brow. “You mean to frighten me, then?”

“Who rules, Imperial Highness, while both you and Her Imperial Highness, Empress Isabella, are here?”

“My ministers: capable men.”

Anne nodded, slowly. “And…who rules Castile?”

Carlos’ heart gave an uncomfortable squeeze and he took a step closer. “What are you saying?”

“You have seen for yourself,” she began. “What becomes of those nations who are left without both king and queen at once: you have exploited this weakness, yourself. What if others choose to exploit this weakness in you?”

“Do you threaten me?”

Anne laughed, a soft, round sound, like a cheerful bell, and she cocked a brow. “With what army? What, Imperial Highness, could I hope to do to you?” She smiled. “It occurs to me,” she added, softly. “I suppose your mother might be glad of an opportunity to have her own say, again.”

“She is mad,” hissed Carlos.

“That may be,” replied Anne. “But even a madwoman can love the sun and wish for its warmth upon her face. It may behoove you, Highness, to recall that the House of Tudor is not the only crown to sport rival claimants.”

“You said before that all you want is your husband,” began Carlos. “But, if you think you can pluck one part of him out of all, you are mistaken. Once a man has worn a crown, only death can pry it
from his fingers – whether by his will or that of others.”

He watched fear work its way across the oval face of Anne Boleyn, her lips drawing back and tightening over white teeth; her brows running together, a hiss surging from her throat, and color running from her face as if all life had been suddenly muted within it. “Do you threaten my Henry’s life?”

“If you cause aught but good towards me or my crown, you may be sure I shall find no room for mercy within my heart.”

Anne leaned close, her brows arching as her lips snapped into scorn. “Then,” she growled. “You know well how it feels.” Moving back away, a sly expression overcame her features and she studied his face carefully. “Free my husband.”

“What should I?”

“You came here because you want something. It is for this reason that you wrote to me, as well as to François. You know my price.”

“You husband?”

Anne’s smile was stern, almost sad, but her eyes were fire. “My husband.”

“I told you before,” said Carlos, softly. “Your husband is not only a man. Even if he, himself, should swear off the throne, there will be others who, seeking an opportunity, may rise up in his name. It is not so very simple as that.”

“Then,” began Anne, leaning back, cocking an arresting brow. “Let us sweeten the bargain. You want something from me: what is it?”

Carlos’ smile was a bitter thing, hard and sharp like rocks upon a cliff face. “Being here again after all this time must bring a host of memories surging back. Tell me of your husband’s brother – what do you remember of King Arthur?”

Anne’s look was sly, her lips drawing into a wan smile, concealing to some degree the vein of worry that sparked behind her eyes. “Yes,” she purred. “I thought perhaps that is what you wanted.”

“Thought,” replied Carlos. “Or feared?”

“Bring me my husband; I will tell you everything.”

“You have the documentation, don’t you? The certificate signed by the priest, the late king, his wife, and the two witnesses… I have scoured London in search of it but it was nowhere to be found. You have it.” Carlos approached her, leaning close. “Understand this: I will not give your husband to you. He is beyond your reach now, safe in the Tower, where he will stay.”

“That’s not good enough!”

“That,” said Carlos. “Is the very best outcome he can hope to achieve.”

“I won’t help you.”

Carlos stepped away from her, passing her on his way to the desk. “Then,” he said. “Our business is concluded.”

“What about the Princess Mary? Her legitimacy suit! You can’t walk away from this!” shouted
Anne.

“Allow me to be clear, Madame: I already have.”

“And what of your rival claimant?” she demanded. “What of war and war and war?”

“War is the destiny of all kings. And you have no army. Good day, Madame.” And with that, he turned away.

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