A Land for Ladies

Anne Boleyn flirts with treason to keep her head and provide the Crown with an heir. How much would History change if King Henry died before his time, leaving Queen Anne in charge of the realm? The obvious answer is: a lot, from individual lives to international politics.

Cross-posted on fanfiction.net

Notes

Dedicated to KatieR, who convinced me to write it down and publish it.

A/N: this fanfic takes place in the universe of the TV series The Tudors, with nevertheless some correcting. For instance, the duke of Norfolk is not going to vanish without any explanation, Henry FitzRoy is not dead at the age of three, and King Henry has indeed two sisters, Mary and Margaret.
I also took inspiration in ReganX’s Queen Elizabeth I Challenge, as well as the excellent Wolf Hall by Hilary Mantel.

Forgive me if I manhandle chronology a bit (and even a lot), but we are here in an alternative universe, and I tried to have my creation fit History as properly as possible.

I wish you a good reading, and all comments are more than welcome.

This being said, flames will be used to roast marshmallows, and I have a nice bastard sword at home for the would-be flamers. I’m not joking. I do have a bastard sword. :)}
Prologue

On this Christmas evening of 1534, Anne Boleyn had received the most precious of gifts. She would be a mother again within seven or eight months, something she had learnt to enjoy with Elizabeth. This alone would have been enough to make her forget the daily volleys of abuse she received from the former queen Katherine of Aragon’s fervent partisans, who so generously compared her to the despicable Jezabel. Just the previous day, a preacher who officiated in the royal chapel had served her those kind words, predicting she would end eaten alive by some stray dogs.

"It would be a shame for those poor dogs," Anne had retorted him, keeping her temper in check, before the man was dragged out of the castle. "As you can see, they would not find much to eat on me."

But it did not matter any more; the king had renewed her his favors and she was now sheltered from his fury. Provisionally, she knew it too well. If in August she did not give birth to a boy, to the much desired heir, Henry would look for another woman to put in her place, and she feared the consequences, as much for herself as for her beloved little Lisbeth.

She shook her head to forget those dark thoughts, and glanced at the ball room. The dancers, wearing crowns of holly, were all sat back on the benches, and Mark Smeaton had put his violin away to allow himself a well-deserved rest with a cup of wine and a nice lady. Small wonder... Mark had the reputation to lead simultaneously enough relationships to wear a whole battalion out.

Anne stifled a yawn. It was high time she went to bed. She raised from her seat and produced a deep curtsy for her husband, the king answering with a gracious smile and a small gesture. Then she left towards her chambers.

On her way, she passed several couples, some rather unseemly, kissing, either amused or embarrassed. She understood soon that one or several pranksters had hung mistletoe on every doorway, taking the tired guests unaware, and forcing them to respect tradition, in order to avoid misfortune for the coming year.

Anne agreed to conform to this little rite, as long as she did not have to kiss Charles Brandon, or even worse, his harpy of a fiancée, Catherine Willoughby. She really seemed doomed to have only troubles with women bearing that name. She would be damned, given she ever had another daughter, if she named her thus.

The goddess Fortune watched over her, and she first met her amiable cousin Madge Shelton. Certainly not the sharpest mind in the Court, but she was kind and devoted to her kin, which amply made up for her lack of wit. True friends were so scarce in such an environment.

The next one was a Mr. Sackville, who worked in the king’s service. The young man, turning pink with embarrassment, barely dared give a peck on his queen's cheek, and mumbled a nearly inaudible « Thank you » when she wished him all the happiness he desired for 1535.

Anne had nearly reached her door when she noticed a lonely figure at the other end of the corridor. She knew him at once. Since the king had gotten rid of his « dear friend » More to send him rot in a cell, only one man wore this entirely black outfit, which seemed to have become a kind of uniform for the king’s secretary.

Anne waved her and to catch his attention, and the man in black came to her.
"Tut, tut, Master Cromwell, do not tell me I have caught you working on Christmas night," she reprimanded him with her usual lopsided grin.

"Not this time," the secretary solemnly assured. "I gave all the required courtesies to the lords and ladies, and now I will come back home before my son wonders if I slipped into the Thames."

It was not the best joke Anne had ever heard – was it even a joke? - but she produced a smile to put him at ease, before she wished him a merry Christmas, and pushed him towards the exit.

She watched him go, thoughtful. She owed a lot to this quiet, hard-working man. If he had not had the brilliant idea of introducing Henry to Thomas Cranmer, God only knew where she would be on this day. He had also smuggled her forbidden books and the new ideas of the Reformation, and despite the danger she incurred, she was grateful for it.

But under this surface, it was hard to make out what he really was. Some said he had a chunk of ice instead of a heart, but knowing how devoted he was to his son, Anne did not think it likely. Others claimed he behaved this way since the sweating disease had taken his wife and their two little girls. She would rather believe this version. It had been seven years, and he had not married again, nor did he have a mistress. Anne wondered if Henry would be so faithful in remembrance if she or little Elizabeth were to die.

She could not allow herself to doubt it, and yet, and yet...
May 1535, London

The sweet month of May was just beginning to put flowers on the trees and garden beds of Whitehall and the atmosphere there was already turning sour and thunderous. The king was once again displaying his short temper, for the greatest damage of his councillors and closest advisers.

All England, or nearly all of it, had sworn the oath of allegiance acknowledging the king as Head of the Church, and the children he had and would have from Anne Boleyn as his legitimate heirs. The « nearly » was already six feet under or in jail. And amongst those who still rot in a dungeon, two « nearly » particularly exasperated the king.

The first of them, John Fisher, newly promoted as cardinal, was already waiting for his execution in the Tower of London. Despite the Pope's threats, Henry did not intend to pardon. He did not care – or at least, that was what he claimed – for excommunication. He wanted his subjects to admit his authority, no matter that they wore a cassock, or the colour of said garment. At Court, only Charles Brandon had contested the planned execution awaiting the old prelate and he was now residing on his lands with his young wife and his numerous brood (well, it was his fourth marriage, after all...), with orders to remain there until the king changed his mind.

Brandon's departure suited Queen Anne very well. But the shift taken by her husband's policy pleased her a lot less. She knew herself to be ambitious and too quick to anger, but she had the habit to weight and balance all the consequences of a decision before making it. For now, she was carefully studying the likely repercussions of the death warrant the king was about to sign. She could not see any positive aspect in it. However, she did not know whom she could share her thoughts with. Certainly not her sister Mary, swimming again in marital bliss... with a commoner, soldier in Calais, that she had not even tried to introduce to her touchy family. Her brother George took great care of her, showered her with delicate attentions, distracted her from her dark thoughts, but he could repeat their conversation to their father and this, Anne wanted to avoid at all coasts. Thomas Boleyn was not a man to spare his enemies, nor for a good gesture neither for any other reason. He would come and lecture his younger daughter like he had done after Elizabeth's birth.

Shivering, Anne realized she would have to plead directly with the king. Fortunately, she had received something that would help her.

##

The council session was coming to an end and the ten men attending it left the room without noticing the queen leaning against the panelling of the corridor.

Anne waited for her uncle Norfolk's broad shoulders to disappear before entering the council room, but she was disappointed to find the king still conferring with his unavoidable secretary. Cromwell started to rise from his seat when the queen entered, but she signalled him to stay. She would rather have a witness for the coming meeting.

"My dear Anne, to what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?"

She arranged her face to look as innocent as possible.
"I dare disturb you, Henry, because I recently received a letter from France that may be of interest for you."

"From France?" the king exclaimed, surprised.

"I still have friends in the French Court who write me from time to time. Between private events, I often find some lines concerning politics."

From the corner of her eye, she noticed Cromwell lifting his head from his papers.

"This seems a promising start," Henry said. "Tell me everything."

"My correspondent is an Englishwoman married to a French lord," Anne explained while picking the letter in the folds of her sleeve. "She still minds our interests and sends me some intelligence when she considers it necessary."

The king's eyes lit up with laughter. So his queen had her own little intelligence service. Wasn't it piquant?

"-Your Majesty's decisions regarding the Act of Succession are debated in all Europe," Anne went on with a more formal tone. "The Pope is ready to excommunicate you if Fisher dies."

"And why should I care?" Henry said, shaking his head. "The Pope's authority does not exert on the English Crown."

"But it still does on others," the young woman pointed out, "and that is where the shoe may pinch. Let us imagine that His Holiness manages to convince the princes of Europe, the kings of France and Spain first of all, that your policy is harmful and could generate new conflicts based on religious claims, no doubt they would agree... at your expense, Majesty. It would be like a crusade to bring England back in the generous arms of the Roman Church, out of the rule of a king deemed as an heretic. Even without coming to such extremities, excommunication, if it extends to the whole realm, would deprive us of relations with any other country, either political or in trade."

"And you think that keeping Fisher's head on his shoulders will change anything?" Henry asked, losing any hint of a smile.

"It will be seen, be it right or wrong, as a gesture of good will towards the Pope, and will give him one less argument against you. There are so many ways to punish cardinal Fisher other than kill him. Put him under house arrest, exile him to Rome, you have the choice to silence him without having his blood on your hands, my lord," Anne concluded, her voice getting more high-pitched as her concerns grew.

"Good will?" the king repeated. "Good will? Why should I care to show some good will towards the bishop of Rome? Fisher is my subject, and as such, he owes me his obedience. If he refuses, he must suffer the consequences. The authority of the Crown is here at stake, madam!"

"And the honor of the Crown, what will you do about it? What will the princes of this world think and say when they see you sending to death an old man whose faith is exemplary, and another you called your friend since childhood? Kill them, and you will have their corpses, but not their obedience."

"Enough, madam."

His icy tone caused Anne to take several steps backwards.
"The topic of politics, the way I rule my kingdom, are not your business. The only thing you should be concerned with is giving me an heir."

Anne blanched at this reminder. Two months ago, she had lost her child, and the Court doctors still argued over the causes of this disaster. No matter the reason why, her womb was empty again, she had lost a chance to hold another baby in her arms, to give a brother or sister to Elizabeth...

The poor woman dropped in a quick curtsey, then backed towards the door, and took flight.

The king slammed the door behind her.

"Wretched woman! he raged. Can you imagine such impudence?" he added, turning towards his secretary.

Cautious, Cromwell put on a sceptical expression.

"And the speech she made! Is there anything sensible in there? What do you think of it?"

The other man put his quill down and took his time to think.

"Am I allowed to speak frankly?"

"I am paying you just for that, the king sharply retorted, so speak!"

His secretary took a deep breath before answering.

"There is a lot of truth in what the queen reported," he said, carefully balancing his words. "Politics being what it is, no doubt the French king and the emperor would consider any condemnation from the bishop of Rome as an opportunity they should grab with both hands. The intelligence I receive tallies the queen's. Two heads, it is not much, but if they fall, the damage caused could be beyond belief."

"So she is right? So, I must let those two fools challenge me, event from their cell?"

Seeing the murderous look in the king's eye, Cromwell reflected that, for once, he should have played the perfect courtier...

##

He had raised the collar of his doublet as high as possible, but it was barely enough to cover the purplish-blue mark spreading along his jaw. If the king did not dare beat his wife (at least not before witnesses), he had no such qualms concerning his retainers. Cromwell cursed himself once again for talking too much. Like he needed to come to his office the following day with this little expression of the royal « esteem » on his face... All the great lords were already sniggering behind his back, of the work pace he demanded himself, of his low birth... He just needed Suffolk or another to learn that he was also His Majesty's scapegoat.

"I assume he is still not convinced?"

The queen's voice startled him. He was not expecting to meet her in this nearly deserted corridor he used to come in and out of Whitehall. It seemed that the charming lady was not only spying on King François...

"Indeed not", he managed to utter.

Of course, his unusual diction caught Anne's attention. She came closer, and forced him to turn his
"Pathetic," she groaned. "Well, come with me."

He realized a bit late she had dragged him in her chambers. Luckily enough, her ladies-in-waiting were all busy somewhere else, and no one saw him enter.

"Your Majesty, I do not believed it is prop..."

"Not another word!" the queen barked, before disappearing in her wardrobe.

He heard her rummaging through her things, and ranting too.

While the queen was searching whatever item she needed, Cromwell found himself studying her. He had to admit, he did not know where to stand with her.

She was a reformist. She was also his fiercest enemy's niece. His former patron Wolsey had fallen for her and by her. She could be incredibly stubborn. Sometimes violently angry. And her last discussion with Henry Tudor proved it, she was really interested in the foreign policy of the realm.

He could forgive her Wolsey's disgrace. She had had valid reasons to be mad at him. The cardinal had broken the young woman's engagements to her dear Henry Percy, allowing her uncle Norfolk to use her as bait for the king. As a whore. Something she had vehemently refused for years. The exile and the accusations of treason had been the dukes of Norfolk and Suffolk's doing, and the king had been very quick to endorse them to satisfy his new conquest's greedy family.

The worst of it was the strange fascination this unique woman exerted on him. Since... since the day Henry had crowned her, yes. She had seemed larger than life, perfect for the crown laid on her head. Since that time, he had nearly become her shadow, and she frequently required his presence. Her conversation was most pleasant, and she was extremely well-learnt. She asked his advice on the best way to manage the considerable lands she possessed at Pembroke, in Wales, and as far as he was concerned, she did the job properly. He had gotten used to the idea that he would be nothing more than a trusted councilor. He wanted nothing physical, even though Anne was a rather attractive woman according to his tastes. But she was The Queen and a kind of Noli me Tangere floated around her. Gaining her friendship should be enough for him.

"Aha! I knew it was here!"

She came back with a small ivory box.

"It will lessen the damages," she said, handing him the box. "Well," Anne went on, "I suppose that if His Majesty got angry with you, it is because you supported my opinion?"

"You suppose right."

"And now, do you?"

He tried a smile that quickly turned into a pained grimace.

"It takes more than a punch to make me change my mind. Your Majesty," he added hastily.

"So we are now back to working together", Anne said, thinking of the small English Bible that Cromwell had offered her some years ago, that she kept hidden among her anthology of poetry with other forbidden books.
They would have to play very carefully to make Henry change his mind. The peace of the realm, inside and outside, demanded it.

Chapter End Notes

The respective historical ages of the characters have been respected. Henry was born in 1491, Katherine of Aragon and Thomas Cromwell in 1485, and so on... Since Anne's birth date is still debated, I chose 1502, and the fictional Anthony Knivert was born in 1496.
A Summer of Despair

28th of June, London

Until now, nothing had succeeded in diverting the king from his goals, not even the indignant letters he had received from Rome and Paris after sending cardinal Fisher to the scaffold. The old man had died with great courage and dignity, and Anne had caught herself, the morning of his execution, reciting a slightly altered Ave Maria, which had become « Pray for him now, for it is the time of his death. » She respected the prisoner's firmness and integrity, and a man who had defended Katherine without ever calling her rival a prostitute or asking for her murder. A worthy opponent...

She did not dare broach the subject in front of her husband any more. The slightest allusion to his « great matter » sent the king into fits of rage, and for some weeks he had seemed to bury himself in feasts and hunts, as to forget what had happened less than a league away from Whitehall, forget Fisher's head thrown into the Thames, forget the body laying on the scaffold. He had even called his old mate Brandon back from his lands to enlist him for help.

Anne could have made use of such freedom, to escape from Court, go to Hatfield and see Elizabeth, but the doctors advised her against leaving Whitehall. It was rumoured here and there that cases of plague, or even sweating disease, had appeared in town. No way the queen could risk infection.

So she was turning round and round like a caged animal, her frustration at feeling useless increasing in her mind until she wanted to scream. She also had to endure the king's whores, to add to her anger and humiliation. Henry seemed animated by a frenzy of lust and took one mistress after another at a pace that left even the most cynical completely flabbergasted. Anne feigned ignorance, seemed not to notice the housemaids with their bodice askew who left a room just before, or after, the king... Once she was in her chambers, she expressed her rage by kicking the furniture. The worst was that she still loved her husband. Somehow.

# #

This morning, as Anne was reading again a letter from Lady Bryan proudly describing Elizabeth's most recent progress, the king burst into her room. The ladies' chatter stopped at once and they all dived into a deep curtsey.

"Your Majesty," Anne whispered, her nose nearly touching the Flanders carpet.

"I will go hunting for two or three days," the king announced. "I would like you to refrain from trying to circumvent my ministers to do your every whim."

Still bent, Anne swallowed the rather dirty words that came to her mind to choose a

"Naturally."

which did not sound natural at all.

The queen and her ladies did not raise back from their curtsey until His Majesty and his retinue left the room. The ladies exchanged some uneasy looks. Anne clapped her hands to call them to order and sent them back to their tasks, before glancing through her window. She could see Henry in the bailey, Suffolk and Knivert on his heels, while thick clouds were building up in the sky.

Looks like all the roosters are leaving, she thought.
She could only hope that this hunt was not an excuse for a new affair. That the king was the worst womaniser in the realm, she had almost resigned herself to it, but with his personal demon Brandon besides him, it was more than she could tolerate.

She must have lost herself in her thoughts longer than she believed because, when she raised her head, Madge Shelton was staring at her with a queer expression. Anne signalled that all was well. Her melancholy was an excellent excuse to explain some absent-mindedness only caused by unsavoury reflections. She went back there, her gaze fixed on the rain now beating her windows. Tomorrow she would summon Butts for an examination. She was getting more and more worried by the absence of any clue for a pregnancy.

# #

While taking shelter in an inn three leagues away from London, waiting for the deluge to stop, the king and his companions were dining gaily. Emptying a cup of wine, Charles Brandon congratulated himself on the new affair he had imagined for his royal friend. Indeed, he had been allied with the Boleyns once, to get rid of a too influential Wolsey, but now the queen's family was becoming rather... troublesome, while the star of Henry's wife was growing dim, slowly but surely. He had to make the most of it. Ambassador Thomas Boleyn was nothing more, all in all, than a spicer's grandson. Brandon was perfectly aware of the modesty of his own origins, but they were a bit more refined than that. To lose his influence on Henry for some shopkeeper, without speaking of the blacksmith's son the diplomat had sent to Court... In order to balance the political weight of Anne and her kin, what better that another face, one that could display both virtue and novelty? Brandon was convinced he had found the ideal candidate, a young, pious and shy little blonde, the queen's complete counterpoint. If Jane Seymour did not please Henry, Charles would eat his hat, feathers and embroideries included.

By his side, Anthony Knivert, who knew everything of his friend's little scheme, was glaring at him, wondering if Henry would be very cross if he strangled Charles right now.

# #

The Court lived at a slower pace without the royal presence. The servants remaining in the palace made the best of those scarce holidays, the councilors had a lot less files and papers to treat and many courtiers left for some hours for a walk in town rather than standing up in the great hall, watching the monarchs dancing or meeting with some ambassadors. This being said, it also left more free time to scheme and plot. There always was a gentleman looking for some favor to scrape, a lady willing to sell her body to a higher-ranking lord to obtain jewels and places for her kin...

Anne feigned a complete disinterest for those beggars, even though some of them besieged her door with the regularity of a clock. For now, she received Mark Smeaton in her anteroom. The charming musician acted as a sneak at Court and right now, she was trying to learn more about the king’s escapades.

"So, Mark, do you know where they have gone hunting?"

"Well..." Smeaton said, fingers toying with his short curly beard, "when I played for the king and his friends during supper four days ago, they were talking about Wolf Hall."

"What is this place?" Anne asked.

"This estate belongs to a gentleman named John Seymour. Good nobility. Comrade-in-arm of the king in many battles. Two sons, both promising. He has rather strained relations with his elder because of a... scandal. Sir John seduced his daughter-in-law and had a rather long affair with her. It
is even rumored that the two sons she got are his."

"I see... Does he have a daughter?"

"Even three," Mark specified in a sorry voice. "But one of them is already married."

"How curious," the queen whispered. "It reminds me of someone else... How old?"

"Uh?"

"The two remaining Seymour girls, how old are they?"

"One is twenty-seven, and the other, twenty-four. The eldest is still single, and the youngest, freshly widowed from Sir Anthony Ughtred. You remember, the governor of Jersey, who died last year?"

"Two young and available daughters", Anne mumbled, before letting out an angry cat growl.

Mark thought it safer to flee from the royal chambers before the meeting turned sour. Anne could be extremely violent for such a thin woman, when she reached the worst of her rage.

# #

The king came back in his capital two days later, in a very cheerful mood. His hunting had gone well, and when Cromwell reminded him that Thomas More's trial was to begin the following day, Henry did not even produce one of his usual tantrums. He just notified his secretary that if the court of Justice judged More guilty, he would commute the death sentence to life detention. Cromwell shook his head. Life imprisonment was not really an improvement on beheading, he believed; you suffered in vain, and longer. The other hunters barged in on the king's heels, and among them, Sir Knivert was making the souriest face of the lot, while the duke of Suffolk pranced around like a rooster amongst its hens. Cromwell managed to catch up with Knivert.

"What did they kill to look so pleased with themselves?"

The knight gritted his teeth.

"He's doing the same, all over again. Brandon took the king to Wolf Hall, at the Seymours', and introduced him to the eldest daughter of the family, Lady Jane. She is everything that the queen is not, and vice-versa. In other words, blond, pale, shy, devout and ignorant. It makes me sick."

"Thanks for adding this little stone in my blackmail box, Sir Anthony. Do not let me detain you."

The two men nodded a salute and went on their way.

8th of July, Hampton Court

Not so surprisingly, the court in charge of Thomas More's trial had judged him guilty of treason, but due to an exceptional royal favor, in remembrance of his good and loyal services, he was allowed to keep his head on... and to spend the rest of his days in the Tower.

"What a favor", Anne muttered while taking a casual walk in Hampton Court gardens.

She had at least partially won this round but it did not give her any joy. She was still brooding over doctor Butts' conclusions. According to him, she was perfectly able to conceive and bear other children. The old doctor was not a man to hide the truth, so she would not question his diagnostic. Where was the issue? She had given herself one month to recover after her miscarriage, before trying again. She had made complicated calculations to have Henry in her bed at the best time of the month,
she followed medications increasing fertility...

Led by incomprehension, Anne went to Butts' chambers, while the man was busy curing a feverish lady and undertook a search of his papers. She quickly found the notes he had taken about her, and nothing contradicted what he had told her. She went on searching until she found her husband's file. Anne read it quickly, came back to the beginning, read it again more carefully... When she reached the conclusion, she felt bile rise in her throat. If Butts was right, she was lost.

_August, London_

This time, it was official; on the tenth of the month, the sweating disease had come back into London. The city gates had been closed, circulation on the Thames reduced to a strict minimum and the inhabitants had been ordered to clean their houses and the streets with vinegar and whitewash.

The king was shut away in Whitehall, in accordance with the protocol, but the queen did not care. Much to the councilors' horror, Anne left the palace each morning to go to Hospital Saint-Mary, on the other side of the city, to bring some comfort to the sick and dying that crowded there. She came back on the evening to collapse on her bed, and started again the next morning.

After a week of those round trips, the king finally lost his short patience and ordered his wife to be brought back to Whitehall and that she remained there twenty-four hours a day. But his officers were slightly reluctant to enter such a flea-ridden place. So Henry delegated this task to his handyman, as usual. Norfolk rubbed his hands when he heard that Cromwell was responsible for bringing Anne back, hoping that this cumbersome nobody would caught a fever and that the realm would be rid of him, at last.

The secretary himself was not exactly please with this mission. The disease did not frighten him, but he feared that the queen would throw a fit. For the last month, she had seemed to close herself up, spending more time than ever in prayer. Pregnant again, maybe...

At Saint-Mary, one of the nuns carrying out the day shift quickly pointed out to him where to find his queen. Cromwell thanked her warmly. Without her he would have lost so much time in this maze of corridors and small rooms. He may be a reformer, but he would have never uttered a word against those devoted girls who dutifully served God and men. His laws targeted another kind of people.

He found Anne in a room reserved for children, sleeves rolled up, an apron over her dress, entertaining the little ones by telling them some stories, while two nuns were tending to them.

"Your Majesty..."

"Master Cromwell! Are you her to bring support to my charity work?"

He smiled with embarrassment and shook his head.

"The king wants you to come back to Whitehall at once. I am truly sorry, but if you do not follow me, he will send his guard."

Anne apologized profusely to the nuns, who urged her to leave, with their thanks and gratitude. Some childish voices pipped a rather weak « Good bye, ma'am » as the queen left their room.

"Why did you risk you neck here?" Cromwell asked, walking her towards the exit.

"I don't risk a thing," Anne said sharply. "I have already been sick once, I am immune to this plague."
"You know just as I do that there is no immunity of any kind to this illness!" Cromwell growled. "Do you really want to catch it again? Are you so eager to die, my lady?"

"Religion forbids us to attempt suicide," Anne said in a hollow voice. "We do what we can with what we have."

There was so much despair in those few words... Any other woman, he would have taken her in his arms to reassure her would have at least held her hand... But she was his queen and the smallest, spontaneous gesture could send heads rolling. Silently, he took her by the elbow to lead her towards the coach waiting near the gates of Saint-Mary. She climbed inside without arguing.

"Never lose faith, he said at last. Things will get better, given some time."

She smiled sadly.

"My dear friend, if only it could be true..."

# #

He watched the coach moving away with relief. Leaving the hospital would certainly lessen the queen's dark mood. As for himself, it was time he went back home, at least to have some news of his family. He had not come to Austin Friars for six days. His nieces would certainly be cross with him.

When he reached his street, he felt his heart wringing.

As a sign of contamination, a bundle of straw had been hung to his door.

He ran the last meters and hit the thick oak door with his fists. A servant, alarmed by the racket his master was making, hastily let him in.

"Rafe! Jo! For Heaven's sake, where are you?"

"Here, uncle, his nice Johanne's voice answered. We are well," she added, emerging from the kitchen, accompanied by a powerful smell of vinegar.

But she looked tired, and Rafe had huge blueish shadows under his eyes.

"Two of our servants caught the disease, and one of them died yesterday evening", the young man pointed out, looking at his boots.

Cromwell only half listened, his eyes searching the room, the stairs.

"Where is Gregory?"

"In his ro..."

Johanne could not finish her sentence, her uncle was already climbing up the stairs.

Gregory was still awake, but barely. His eyes glassy, nearly as white as his sheets, he was violently shivering in spite of the blankets added on his bed. Noticing someone coming in, he frowned and tried to raise from his pillows.

"Father? 'shouldn't be... here," he mumbled.

"Nonsense."
"going... be sick, too... 'm not that bad. Just a headache... and 'm cold... My letters..."

If Latin and Greek had stubbornly refused to remain in Gregory's head, modern languages suited him much better, and now he took responsibility for translating all the letters coming from Germany and Italy to Austin Friars, as well as meeting with traders and clients-to-be with his disarming good nature. He learnt fast.

"Do not worry for your letters, you will take care of them when you are better." _Mercy, Lord, make it be true._

"Never better..." the young man groaned. "If... not now... will get me later..."

His eyelids started to close. His father grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him forcefully.

"NO! For Christ's sake, stay awake!" _I beg of you, don't take him as well._

"'m trying..."

For several hours, Cromwell kept watch over his son, and in spite of all his efforts to rouse him, could not manage to keep him awake very long. The extra working hours he demanded of himself finally took their toll, and he sank in a deep slumber.

# #

He could not have slept much, he thought, opening his eyes, the sun had not set yet. Then he glanced back at Gregory and felt a wave of vertigo seizing him. The young man lay unmoving on his bed, his eyes closed. For a moment, he thought his carelessness had cost him his last living child, before he heard the soft sound of his breath, slow and regular, normal. He reached for Gregory's hand. One hazel eye half opened, then Gregory fully woke up.

"Not this time," he established in a much steadier voice.

"In so little time," his father whispered, "it's a miracle."

"So little? Father, you were here since yesterday evening. A whole day passed."

"What? Oh good Lord, I'm in a right pickle!"

"Let him wait," Gregory sighed, falling back on his pillows. "Won't hurt him."

# #

The king having remained shut away in his chambers, he had not even noticed his secretary's exceptional absence. But Cromwell received a warm welcome from his colleagues, chancellor Audley first, and from his clerks. They knew the awful toll the previous outbreaks of the disease had taken in his family, and to think that – this time – the bitch had spared him delighted them.

Just like him, Richard Rich had the look of a man who had not slept much, and he confessed that his little girl had caused him quite a fright, for what had only been a sunstroke. Both men settled down at their desk with a flagon of wine, buried themselves under their papers, and prayed for the disease to disappear.

The scourge lasted for two weeks in London, and despite a lessened intensity, compared with its first appearance, caused hundreds of deaths.
Seymour business

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, we leave London to meet the Seymours, father, brothers and sisters. Another correction to the show, Lady Lizzie will appear in this story and play an important part. Now, to the chapter!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

September, London

Thanks to the closure rules taken at the beginning of the epidemic, the sweating illness had not spread much around London. In a few days, barges and small boats had resumed their trips on the Thames, and trade had started all over again. People were coming back to a normal life and worked flat-out.

At Austin Friars, Gregory had gone back to his German translations and worked hard on them, without commenting the content, sometimes bordering illegality, of some missives. Now that he had completely recovered, his father sent him to carry the answers to friends or clients, or contact new partners. His kindness and great supply of patience always made things easier for him. He also heard many rumors on his way, which he transmitted to his father's office. These days, people talked a lot about the queen, and even better, they said a lot of good. Her presence at Saint-Mary was bearing fruit. The commoners were slowly getting to like her... precisely when the king started to indulge a new whim. Life was really unfair for poor Queen Anne.

# #

Beginning of October, Wolf Hall

Nothing ever happened in Wolf Hall, so when a messenger wearing the royal livery entered the yard, the whole household rushed to the windows to discover what it was about. Despite the butler's calls to order, the servants could notice their master's satisfied smile when he read the missive. Was the Seymours' rather low fortune on a bright path again?

"Ah, my dear Jane, Sir John purred in his eldest daughter's ear, obviously you had a incredible effect on the king when he visited us this summer. He wishes you to join the queen's ladies-in-waiting. It's an immense honor, as you must know. And an unexpected opportunity. Never miss an occasion to be on the king's path. Believe me, if you act this way, you'll make us all proud and happy."

The young woman smiled shyly. She could not imagine herself as queen of England, as her brother Edward had predicted, not yet, but if one day she became the king's wife – his legitimate wife – she would be a model of domestic virtues and would give him the son he had craved for so long. She would put him back, slowly but surely, on the right path, the path of Rome. And above all, recreate a bond with his legitimate daughter, Mary.

The poor girl could not know that it was precisely what her brothers did not want to happen. As far as they were concerned, the only rightful heir of the king would be the one their sister bore. No one
could get in the way of their grand project.

###

**15th of October, Whitehall**

Anne and her ladies had their noses buried in a cards game when a little blond mouse was ushered in the drawing room by one of the queen's pages.

"Your Majesty," the lad announced, "Lady Jane Seymour."

Her back still turned to the door, Anne frowned. She knew by the spies she had dispatched in the palace that it was the king who had ordered the addition of this young lady to her household, a girl dug out from her country some months ago, on the duke of Suffolk's suggestion.

Slowly, Anne rose and turned to look at the intruder. She was not really impressed.

Lady Jane was nearly transparent. The vivid blue of the dress and matching cloak she wore that day stressed this flaw. Her skin had a whiteness that nothing enhanced, her eyes were the colour of water, her hair, a dull shade of blond. She did not even possess the lovely golden hair that all admired on Princess Mary, the late duchess of Suffolk. She dived in an elegant curtsey and Anne took some steps towards her.

"Rise", she ordered.

Staring at the floor, Jane Seymour rose, her breath wheezing. She was afraid. Interesting...

"Since you are joining my ladies-in-waiting," Anne said in a teacher's voice, "you must know that their standards are extremely high. Your behaviour will have to be exemplary. No familiarity with the gentlemen, no frivolous readings, dignity in everything."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Jane whispered, still staring at the tip of her shoes.

Anne put a finger under the girl's chin.

"There, look at me. It will not turn you into stone."

Jane raised her head and smiled at the joke. Anne was surprised. Here! She seemed nicer to look at this way. And it did not please the queen at all...

"Come here to swear on the Bible that you will remain true to your commitment, then Lady Saville will take you to the seamstress' to prepare your dress."

While the newcomer took her oath, Anne Saville traded an glance with Madge Shelton. The latter cast a ferocious look at Lady Jane, before making a quick twisting motion with her hands. The two women knew perfectly well why the Seymour girl was here, and if this little trollop thought she could replace their mistress... well, it would be Hell on Earth for her.

As for Anne, even though she ignored her ladies and friends’ intentions, she was planning just as frantically. She needed new supports. Maybe playing nice with Lady Mary would prove useful.

###

**21st of October**

Jane could not believe it. The king, kneeling before her, asking for a favour? It was nearly the world
upside down. What could she possibly do for him? She would not give him anything before being his wife...

"Allow me to be your loyal servant, the king said, his eyes fixed on her. Like Lancelot was for Queen Guinevere. You will be the queen of my heart."

She felt carried away by this declaration. The king at her service, like a knight of old times, as you could find in the courtly love novels her sisters read her sometimes.

"Do you allow it?" Henry insisted.

"Yes, Your Majesty," Jane answered in a small voice.

The king then rose and bowed low to kiss her hand.

When her brothers learnt of this little scene, they were in Heaven, but did not stop scheming for such a small thing. They were painfully aware of the king's volatile character, and had to think of some backup plan in case Jane was discarded.

"According to you, my dear brother, could Dorothy caught the king's eye?" Thomas Seymour asked.

"Oh certainly not," Edward answered, shaking his head. "No way. He likes women who can discuss without boring him and our last sister can not. No, we need to get Elizabeth back in London and introduce her to Court. I sent her a letter."

"She was recently widowed," Thomas objected. "It could create a scandal."

"I will not put her in the king's bed at once," his elder sharply retorted. "But it would be good to train her a bit so we can use her as a spare."

Thomas gave his brother a deeply skeptical look. True enough, Edward was considered the strategist among his siblings, but Elizabeth did not come far behind. She was clever and stubborn. Funny that Edward had not taken theses factors into account.

Elizabeth Seymour arrived at Wolf Hall a week later, curious to learn what her elder brother could want of her. He had written her a rather demanding letter, ordering her to come back home as soon as possible. She had been tempted to refuse, but York was deadly boring, and she lived frugally up there. Thus she had finally surrendered, and accepted the "invitation".

Still wrapped in her mourning clothes, she barged into Wolf Hall to find herself in the middle of a swarm of servants loading luggage, and found Edward so busy that he barely took some time to greet her.

"Well, dear brother of mine, since you made me run from York into this god-forsaken hole you call a manor, could you at least be kind enough to look at me when you greet me? Or did I become suddenly hideous?"

Truth be told, Elizabeth was not a beautiful woman. There was something a bit too... masculine in her features, her long nose and strong jaw. Edward thought that her thick mane of chestnut hair and lovely brown eyes compensated for these flaws. And she was educated.

"Of course not, my dear sister, but as you can see, I am getting prepared for a trip. I am coming to Court, if you must know. I must appear there at my best. Just like you, by the way."

"You will have to spend a lot of money to make me fashionable again," Elizabeth retorted dryly. "I
am a widow, I live in the country and my income is limited, as you well know. And what on Earth would I do at Court?"

"You see, the king has become quite interested in our sister Jane."

"Oh for shame," the young woman moaned. "We only lacked a royal whore in the family to complete the scandal."

"Don't be stupid. You know as well as I do the advantages our family could draw from this... inclination. It will not hurt us, and our purses either."

"And it does not bother you to prostitute our poor Jane?"

"She already imagines herself queen, but even without going so far, becoming a royal mistress will bring us some comfortable fees. And frankly, Lizzie, I know your husband was not up the task to please you, but to turn into a goody-two-shoes..."

SPLAF!

The content of her wine cup had just landed on his face.

"And you certainly expected me to play as your backup plan if Jane failed? Go to Hell, Edward, Elizabeth growled. I will not be wearing black eternally, but I and I only will decide who, when and how. I hope I'll never see you again, brother."

She spun on her heels and stormed out of the house, then crossed the yard and was promptly sat on her saddle – she could not bear traveling in a coach, which made her sick. When Edward reached the steps, he saw nothing but his sister's long black skirt flying away like the wing of a giant raven.

##

3rd of November, Hatfield

Lady Mary was more than surprised to see the governess Lady Bryan coming into her room followed by another woman holding a bundle of cloth and a tape measure. She did not need a new dress, the ones she had were still fitting perfectly.

"Here is Lucy, who will take your measurements for your Christmas dress," Lady Bryan announced with a kind smile.

"Christmas?" Mary repeated, perplexed.

"Yes, the queen suggested that you come with us all to London for the celebrations and the king accepted. So you will need new dresses. And a costume, perhaps."

Mary raised her eyebrows a little higher. Her stepmother would bother to let her out of Hatfield for the new year? It had to hide something else, but for once she had the opportunity to leave her cage and she would grab it with both hands. Lady Bryan left the room while the seamstress unfolded her measure and went to work.

"What will the costumes look like, this year?" Mary asked while extending an arm.

"Oh, as usual, my lady," the seamstress answered. "Red, mistletoe, holly... that sort of things. Her Majesty the queen designed very nice crowns of leaves to come with the dresses. The ladies will be so lovely this winter. And the queen has a new fine maiden in her service!"
Mary made a face, like every time someone praised Lady Anne in her presence. In her eyes, the only good thing the concubine had done in this world was Elizabeth. Well, Lisbeth and the schools for poor children the lady had created, let's be honest. Mary fell silent again, and let the seamstress finish her task.

##

4th of November, York

Elizabeth Seymour had gone back to her home in the North. Her prospects were still rather dim. Sure enough, one of her late husband's friends, Sir Arthur Darcy, would come and see her from time to time, but it was nothing serious.

She spent some hours to think carefully before setting a course of action. Once, when you wanted a favor, you asked cardinal Wolsey. Now, the essential man at Court was the king's Secretary, Thomas Cromwell. What did it cost Elizabeth to request his help to leave her precarious situation?

The young woman fetched a quill, some ink and paper, and started to write.

Chapter End Notes

Some may think I'm a bit harsh with Jane, but remember, we discover her through Anne and her ladies' eyes so, of course, the first impression is not really flattering. It may get better in the future. Next chapter, we meet with Anthony Knivert again, and Lady Liz makes a good bargain.
7th of November, Whitehall

Reports were piling on his desk, again and again. Reports from Wales, others from Devonshire, from Kent...

Good Lord, I did not imagine there were so many monasteries in this country... Thomas Cromwell thought, massaging his temples.

Just with the day stack, he had something to keep him busy until night. Reading pages and pages, taking notes, counting... It was a evilly fastidious work. Even with some help from his own secretary, Ralph Saddler, and Gregory, who worked flat-out on those damned papers, he would not see the end of these counts before Christmas. Or New Year. Or...

All right, all right! Stop moaning, and get back to work!

However, his resolutions vanished when someone stormed into his office. He knew the clac-clac-clac of those heels on the floor so well. Even without it, since Mary Boleyn had left Court to live with her William Stafford, with the discreet but constant help of her sister, only one woman would bother to come here to talk with him. So he could as well greet her politely.

"Your Majesty", he said, rising from his seat.

He waved a hand to the few clerks that were bustling about around him, and the small group quickly walked out, bowing to the queen. She smiled at them with more warmth than dictated by protocol, and as soon as the last one had closed the door, she took a bundle of rather crumpled sheets from her slashed sleeve.

"Mercy, Anne said, putting them in front of him, tell me you did not know!"

She looked almost desperate. Puzzled, Cromwell picked up the papers. They were drawings, nicely carried out if he was any judge, of elegant palaces, fantasy gardens... Some structures seemed familiar, but most of them were perfectly unknown.

"No," he assured. "I discover them right now. What are they?"

"What Henr... the king intends to do with the money you will draw from the closure of corrupted monasteries. It is far from what we wanted," she almost shouted. "This country does not need new castles and palaces!"

She sat in front of him, upset, her lips thinned in a line, while he was skimming the sketches. With each new drawing, he felt his stomach constrict a bit more. How would he tell the king that his projects were pure madness and there was better to do with the Treasury? Anne seemed to read his thoughts, because he heard her express aloud what he did not dare say.

"People complain that the English roads are muddy and unsafe, that the bridges are falling apart, that the woods are ill-kept, that we are lacking hospitals and hospices... And he wants to play the architect!"
Though the queen shared her husband’s taste in that department, she had fortunately less costly ideas.

"It is not what was planned for the monasteries... They must not be all destroyed, unless I am mistaken."

Cromwell shook his head.

"Indeed not. Those which support a school or an hospital will remain, with a civil administrator or an abbot more honest than his predecessor. If you could read what my inspectors report..." he sighed.

"As it happens, I have a lot of spare time. Let me borrow some of these files, I am interested."

"As you wish, my lady. Concerning the institutions to close, only the smallest abbeys, where the monks can be sent elsewhere, or those which are already in ruins, will be abolished at short term, and their lands reallocated."

"To whom?" the queen asked.

"Preferably, to people who really need them, my lady. Prices will be naturally established at a strict minimum to allow villagers to associate and buy lots. Nonetheless, it will make a nice income for the Crown. I think that for the first year, between the auctions and the taxes collected by the State, we could receive something like... four to five hundred thousand pounds."

Anne emitted a low, very unladylike whistle.

"And you really believe your fair redistribution will be accepted by... Let us say my uncle, who dreams of increasing his possessions more and more?"

He had a slightly embarrassed smile.

"I highly doubt I well ever put anything forward that could please the duke of Norfolk, my lady. If we had to sell those lands to individuals, it would be to wealthy merchants who would know how to make the most of it, rather than nobles that would thus create for themselves some little personal realms in the country, but... there is what I propose, and what the king decides."

Anne groaned with disappointment. Her dark eyes suddenly fell on some drafts the secretary had carelessly left on the table. She grabbed them faster than a cat would steal a quail in the kitchens.

"Hey!"

"And what is that? Oh là là ! Mon pauvre ami, but you will never make it pass such as it is!"

"And this is precisely why it is a draft..."

He reached for the law project the queen was holding, but she pushed him back at arm length to go on reading.

"Anne..." Cromwell groaned, getting impatient.

She stared at him, stunned, as if she had almost forgotten her own name. He suddenly realized the colossal blunder he had just committed against protocol.

"Er... I am sorry, Your Majesty, I..."

"It is nothing. It is no more... I will not remain « Majesty » for long, I think..."
The queen suddenly went from a childlike mischievousness to the deepest distress. She fell against a corner of the desk, and he caught her by the shoulders to get her back on her feet.

"Such a dark idea... What is so problematic?"

She gently patted his cheek, looking almost sympathetic, before heading for the door. Just before leaving, she paused.

"Nothing you can solve, my friend."

# #

13th of November, Whitehall

The constant noise of the hammers echoed in the whole corridor, and in the royal secretary's office, no matter how soundproof. As much as he loved Christmas, the preparation of the celebration were driving him mad. He could not stand the workers' racket, the crowded corridors where you could not set a foot without colliding by a clumsy courtier who sent your files flying... In the end, he could not bear it any more, he slammed the door open, making two pages carrying baskets filled with decorations jump at his sudden appearance.

"For Christ's sake, could you please make a little less noise? There are people working here! Damn them!" he added, shutting the door.

The whole swarm of clerks who were writing, compiling, counting around him, barely refrained from laughing. Those little snobbish pages who thought themselves so above commoners... Well, take that!

"You know, they could object that they are working too", a mocking voice pointed out from the back of the office.

Sir Anthony Knivert, his boots propped on his desk, eyed his employer with a small lopsided smile. Since September, he was going through reports from commissioners that Cromwell had sent in the whole country investigate into abbeys and monasteries, and most of all their wealth and the way they managed their lands. Anthony had himself inspected two or three of these places where were sent the superfluous heirs and the mouths that could not be fed. Now, he wrote up the not so tidy notes taken by his colleagues. That would teach him to rant about his inactivity within the king's earshot. Not that he had to complain about Cromwell, not at all. The man was a lot less... volatile than Henry, something the knight found really resting.

"I don't call that working," Cromwell grumbled, seating at his desk. "Did we receive some mail other than these reports today?"

Anthony skimmed through some papers he had sorted by importance. He had already put away a nice little bundle of letters coming from abbots contesting the commissioners' conclusions about their monastery. They would have to reread them one by one and find the references in the reports. No one had ever said the Reformation would be easy, had they? Knivert took charge of more trivial requests : pensions, offices... but sometimes, to entertain his employer, he would pick one particularly comical and they would study it together.

"So... ah, yes. There's one for you. A lady writing you... A widow."

Anthony's eyes twinkled.

"And so? She wants to marry again?" Cromwell cut in with, it seemed, a bit of worry in his voice.
"Hmm... no," Knivert reassured him. "She did not have children of her marriage, and the husband's family took this opportunity to grab all the deceased's possessions. The lady's kin are not in a hurry to help her, though she would not be a huge burden for them, and refused to host her in their manor. She's living in York, for now, with a small income, and she asks for help."

"Who is this unlucky person?"

"It's at this point the thing becomes funny. Lady Elizabeth Seymour."

"I thought she already had a place at Court," Cromwell objected.

"She is the other Seymour girl," Anthony pointed out.

"Ah... Yes, that's right. What do we know about Lady Elizabeth?"

"Well, unlike her sister, she can write proper English, for a start."

Anthony suddenly shrank on his chair under the Secretary's dark look. He had chosen a poor timing to make a joke.

"Something useful, Sir. I think that some abbeys near Dover may be in need of an inspection..."

Much to his surprise, Knivert's face lit up. The prospect of facing cold winds, rain and maybe one storm or two seemed to fill him with joy.

"So you will leave tomorrow, right? It is not an issue?"

Anthony swore he would be on his way on the very evening, if he needed to. He left his employer's office humming to himself, under the clerks' surprised stare. Norfolk could call this "to play flunkey for a knave", this work included some delightful compensations. Dear Bridget, who, he hoped, would be waiting for him in Dover...

During his first trip there, he had discovered this adorable girl while wandering in town, as she was out shopping. A cloth trader's daughter, Bridget Barrows was walking, her basket at her arm, with other young women, and Knivert had noticed her at once. She stood out of the group thanks to her tall frame, her open behaviour and her being completely free of any false modesty. The over-refined gentlemen at Court would not have thought her beautiful, no doubt, but the knight had experienced a rather bad case of love at first sight.

To Hell with Norfolk! He would let the old duke rage at length and Cromwell take care of Lizzie Seymour... if he was interested.

Curious to meet with the Seymours' black sheep, but not so eager to attract his queen's wrath, Cromwell thought it safer to consult her before requiring the lady Seymour to come in London. As soon as she heard that name, Anne tended to turn deaf.

Fortunately, the presence of her daughter, even chaperoned by her half-sister, had taken her out of her dark moods, and when the Secretary showed her the letter, she barely raised an eyebrow.

"Ah, according to their brothers and the king, it was the other sister that had all the required qualities to become one of my ladies. I hope for Lady Elizabeth that we will not be playing Two Sisters for a King again", the queen commented with the smallest hint of bitterness.

Nan Saville audibly snorted to disguise her snicker.
Anne read Lady Elizabeth's letter again. She tapped it against the arm of her seat, then a sly smile appeared on her face.

"Oh, excellent. I believe I have found the perfect replacement for Madge while she is away to plan her wedding with our good Norris. I am sure that the young Lady Seymour will perfectly suit our needs. Summon her."

###

26th of November, Austin Friars

A month before Christmas, Elizabeth Seymour found herself before the lair of Lucifer. At least, it was how her very Catholic neighbours called the king's Secretary. This nonsense left her unmoved. Anyway, she needed this place, so Lucifer or not... She knocked on the door.

A young man about her age opened, bowing before her, then went back to his writing case by the window to resume his task.

She was now facing the « devil ».

Well, he was simply charming, this devil, and very courteous. However, once she was comfortably seated, he did not waste any time and spoke plainly.

"Lady Elizabeth, I assume you know why I asked you to come here."

"No, I admit I don't understand why your should require an interview with a potential lady-in-waiting for the queen. Or... Would it have something to do with my sister and her... criminal record?"

The king's Secretary gave her a knowing smile, and the young man working behind him raised his nose from his files to cast her an appraising look.

"You understand quickly, my lady. I wish, and so does the queen, to be sure that your family ties will not generate the smallest..."

Lady Seymour raised a hand.

"You can consider I have no more family ties. I fell out with my brothers, I am afraid."

Cromwell raised an eyebrow.

"Why is it so?"

"They have already sold me once for their greatest benefit, and even though I had nothing to reproach my late husband, except for his age and leaving me childless, this time I wish to manage my life and the little I own without supervision. I may marry again, certainly even, but being of age and a widow, I will choose by myself."

"I see you took some time to study the law," the Secretary approved. "You can go to Whitehall, Lady Elizabeth. I am sure the queen will welcome you with open arms."

The two men rose to walk her back to the door and when she left the office, Lady Seymour was under the impression she had made a very good bargain.
Yeah, yeah... "The Other Seymour Girl", I could not resist, sorry. And "Two Sisters for a King" (Deux Soeurs pour un Roi) was the French title for this movie.
To you I command my soul

Chapter Notes

Hello dear readers.
Here we become a little more serious, and start to deserve the rating.

3th of December

Elizabeth Seymour started her service in the queen's chamber and was pleasingly surprised by the warm welcome she received there. After making sure she was nothing like her sister, the ladies were simply charming and the queen, very friendly. Jane, however, did not seem pleased by her younger sibling's arrival, and did her best to avoid her in the confined space where they lived and worked.

In the middle of the afternoon, Anne left her ladies for the palace great hall, to supervise the installation of the new sets designed for the festivities. Elizabeth immediately went exploring under Nan Saville's benevolent wing, without thinking of her sister any more

#
#

It was nearly six in the evening, and Thomas Cromwell decided to grant himself a moment of leisure between two edicts. His steps led him to the great hall, for he was curious to see what constructions would be created. Unsurprisingly, he noticed the queen standing at the foot of the scaffolding, a plan in hand, the master of the builders explaining her the details of each decoration.

She possessed many things to make men happy, he thought, watching her getting busy among the workers, giving a directive here, an encouragement there, and distributing smiles without being asked twice. Yes, she could make a man happy. But not the king; her independent, fiery, character would never gain favor in Henry's eyes; he wanted his women to be lovely, graceful... and obedient. And many men could have made Anne a happy wife, but not the king either. The mood swings, the changing opinions, the anger, the perpetual tension imposed by her royal husband had somehow... made her fade. For those who had not been in close contact with her during the last eight years, it went unnoticed, but he had known her since her beginnings at the king's side, and he had watched her weaken, slowly but surely. Such a shame to watch a bright and vivacious mind breaking against the limits of its role... But what could he do about it? Nothing, or so it seemed.

Once the last details were settled with the painters, Anne gave them leave, and the men left with many bows et "God bless you, my lady", and don't forget the nice shiny coins the queen had given them to reward the promptness of their work.

She was now alone. After one last look to the paintings, the lonely queen spun on her heels and crossed the great feasting hall staring at her shoes, almost like a little girl. She walked past the secretary without even registering his presence.

"My lady?"

#
#

Anne was so violently surprised she thought her heart would go flying through her ribs. She threw a
punch on instinct to hit the man who had called her, and her fingers collided rather harshly with an ornate metal chain.

"Oh... sorry," she muttered, the little colour she had slowly leaving her face.

"There is no damage, he assured her. I startled you..."

Anne gave a wide shrug, showing more distinctly the hollow under her collarbone. Oh good Lord, she was so skinny!

"I do not need much to be startled, so if you appear from nowhere without warning..."

She let out a small, fake, giggle to hide her embarrassment. Cromwell felt his irritation rising. What had been wrong with her for months, now, being afraid of her own shadow, to consume herself with worry?

"You told me once that I could not solve your problem. But I do not even know what the matter is, he pleaded. At least tell me what it is, and then I will see if it is truly out of my expertise."

Technically, no, Anne told herself, but she would never ask him to do that.

"All right, she growled. You really want to know? Perfect, you will. Where can we discuss this... in peace?"

Cromwell thought about it, then opted for a small room in entresol behind his office. It could be accessed that way or through a small, deserted corridor; it would be perfect for a quiet discussion. He led the queen there, opened the door for her, and closed behind them. Anne even locked the door to make sure they would not be disturbed. Then she sat on one of the two chairs that furnished the room, with a dusty table, and invited Cromwell to do the same.

"I am facing an unpleasant alternative," Anne said slowly, looking for the right words. "I can be the most faithful and devoted queen ever seen in England, or be the mother of a Prince of Wales, but it seems I cannot be both."

"How?" the king's secretary nearly choked. "What do you mean?"

"Since March, I have been working on getting pregnant again, the queen explained, tightening her fists, but to no avail."

Cromwell felt a bit embarrassed at tackling such personal matters, but he could only complain to himself, after all. If he did not want to know, he should not have insisted.

"Finally I... studied the files Dr Butts writes on each of his patients," Anne admitted, looking away. "I am able to give birth again. I could have all the children I wish, according to him... if I took another husband. The good doctor made his calculations. Katherine had eight miscarriages or stillbirths. I had two..."

"Two?" Cromwell repeated. "I thought..."

"On Christmas after Elizabeth's birth, I was pregnant again, but I barely had the time to discover it before I lost the child," Anne wryly cut on, still refusing to look at him. "Furthermore, only two of Henry's mistresses gave him bastards he could truly consider as his. One is FitzRoy, and the other a girl, Audrey. This girl's mother, Joan Dingley, had a miscarriage too before having her daughter. Then, only four of the king's children lived past their first year, and – additional detail – among these four, three are girls. Butts believes the issue comes from the king, that he... he can sire a child, but not
easily and that... quality is wanting. He has the opinion that the king suffers from an illness that not only prevents his wounds from healing properly, but thickens his blood and contributes to his... difficulties to procreate. I can bear other princes and princesses, but the chances are small that they live. Or even they can breathe. Do you understand the problem now, and the fact you can not do a thing about it?"

Cromwell did not know what worried him most: the prospect of having the Tudor dynasty sink without a trace in a short time, or having the queen repudiated for being barren. It was of course out of the question that Henry would ever admit the smallest amount of responsibility in this disgrace. He tried to analyse the problem logically. He needed Anne to pass his reforms; she had a gift to flush issues out and sweeten the pill. She supported his efforts for the Reformation. She had to keep her crown. So she needed to get pregnant, no matter how... well, who did it.

"My lady?" he tried.

"Yes?" she said in a weary voice.

"Unfortunately, I am afraid you gave the answer to this issue in the alternative you suggested: be faithful to the king, or bear a child. This being said... Who could... help you in this predicament?"

"Another stumbling block," Anne sighed. "The king takes umbrage at all the men that visit me for one reason or another, whether it is my musician, Smeaton, Henry Norris when he came to meet with Madge, Francis Weston because he's looking for an easy target among my ladies, or even my own brother."

She snorted disdainfully.

"His jealousy knows no limits. I would not be more a prisoner in a harem... Actually, I think that only Cranmer and you manage to escape his inquisition."

Cromwell refrained from snorting, seeing the face the poor archbishop would make if he was required to impregnate the queen. Cranmer worshiped his lady, but in a purely platonic fashion. For the prelate, she was a kind of goddess, the unreachable star. They could hope for nothing from this side. He surprised himself staring at the queen, wondering if...

Anne's black eyes met his.

"Tell me, Thomas... How long have you been looking at me this way?"

He lowered his head, ashamed. What was happening to him, all of a sudden? Never before he would have dared envisage such a thing. The circumstances were... particular indeed, but she still remained his anointed queen.

"A rather long time, my lady," he finally said, his gaze still lowered to the floor.

"And you would not... ? But then," she added with a sad smile, "if we were caught, it would pain me to see you executed. A queen of England, you can easily replace her, particularly when you know the king's changing mind, but an administrator of your quality, you can not find one every day."

She turned and paced up and down in the room, nervously biting her thumbnail. He watched thinking. She was still in love with her husband, everyone said it. Small chance she would ever accept...

Anne suddenly turned on her heels.
"Do it."

He stared at her, dumbfounded.

"But we must agree, Thomas: you are not my lover, and I am not your mistress."

She did not say "I do not love you", but he heard it all the same. He nodded slowly. It would be a... business transaction, nothing more. He was in familiar territory.

"Don't you have any qualm to put a bastard on the throne of England?"

"Henry would not have any to put his boy on it."

"True enough."

He took off his chain of office and his thick coat, which he spread out on the table. Anne rose her eyebrows.

"It will spare you some dust, and will be more comfortable," he explained.

"I hear personal experience speaking", the queen said with a forced cheerfulness, then she sat on the edge of the table.

Cromwell put his hands on her shoulders and gently pushed her backwards. Anne leaned on her elbows and looked at him, perplexed.

"You should lie down, your back won't like it otherwise."

"How many times did you have your wife on your desk?"

"A lot", he admitted.

Then he fell silent. Anne hitched up her skirts without a word either, and remained silent even when he could not refrain from caresser her long legs. She took care of herself, he thought. The skin was so soft... He shook his head and unlaced his breeches, his hands slightly trembling. According to the law, it was a true sacrilege he was going to commit. A case of high treason that would lead them to a vile death if they were caught.

If his mind was balancing the possible consequences of his act, his body did not burden itself with such moral issues. Anne was a lovely woman, and it did arouse him.

She barely let out a sigh when he entered her. They were both too tense to enjoy it much, it was too rushed, so much they feared being caught in the act, but at some moments it seemed to him that liked the treatment. The queen's slender fingers clenched on his wrists and her legs tightened in fits and starts around his waist, her breath came out fast an irregular, but her face betrayed almost nothing, except that she was biting her lips to keep silent. Not a sound. They could not make a sound. His nails scratched the wood of the table when a spasm more violent than the others suddenly tensed his muscles. Anne emitted a low whimper at that, and immediately turned red, as if she had committed something terribly shameful.

When they were done, Anne slowly rose, then slipped down on the floor while smoothing her skirts, helped by Cromwell who checked the back of her dress for any suspect trace of dust or splinters. Anne shook his coat to dust it off and gave it back. He bowed in thanks and walked her back to the door. The queen hesitated, tried to speak, changed her mind...
"I think, she whispered at last, that once... once will not be enough."

Cromwell had to make a serious effort to persuade himself it was not an invitation.
10th of December, Whitehall – early evening

As agreed, the queen and the secretary had continued their little «interviews ». Anne hoped they would soon bear fruit, as it was difficult for her to shake her ladies off and disappear without attracting unwanted attention. Henry was not so fond of her any more, but he was still fiercely jealous. Anne would rather not think of what would happen if her and her lov... compagn... accomplice were discovered together. The simple fact of mentioning this thing was enough to make her sick.

She was just coming back from one of these interviews into her chambers, that evening, when her cousin Sir Francis Bryan made a reappearance at Court and requested an audience.

After two less than fruitful years in Italy pleading the king's cause to the Pope, Sir Francis had just come back home, not really cross to leave the papal city, even if the Roman ladies had proven... much more hospitable than the Pope and his cardinals. With his gift for poetry, he had been able to pick not only many mistresses, but also friends out those women. Oh well, the gentleman thought when he entered the queen's chambers anteroom, English ladies were not that bad either. The queen's chambers were full of them, and the arrival, a day before, of princess Elizabeth and her half-sister Mary had added to the charm of the place. It was only coloured skirts, rustling petticoats, pink cheeks and pleasant smiles. Anne knew how to pick her companions. For his part, with his feathered hat, his high boots and his eye-patch, he had some effect on women that watched him walking by, whether they were high born or low. They were watching him carefully and whispered in each other's ear, wondering, amongst other things, where he had received his pirate accessory.

When Sir Francis entered, he found his cousin in the middle of a cards game with two lovely brunettes who seemed to be losing some money, while a little pale blonde was wearing herself out trying to catch Lady Mary's attention. But the former princess of Wales was more concerned about her young half-sister and having a chat with Madge Shelton. Sorry! Norris, now she was married to the king's best friend.

- Your Majesty, Bryan said, bowing before the queen. How is my little pixie of a cousin?

- Well, the pixie grew up, my dear cousin, as you can see, Anne laughed, stretching a hand which he kissed very seriously. I am glad to see you back amongst us, at last. How are you?

- Rather well, if one takes into account the two years of humiliations and useless waiting I spent in Rome, he answered rather bitterly. I'll convert to anti papism, one of these days, he added a bit lower.

- You would do it for far less than this, his cousin growled.

- Oh, oh... I feel you are in a bad mood. Did I say something offending ?

- Absolutely not. It is... oh, the Court gossip will surely tell you. Henry has taken a mistress again. He has not bedded her yet, but to have her more conveniently at hand, he added her to my ladies-in-waiting. It's the little blond one beside Mary. Jane Seymour.

Sir Francis made a face.
- Another distant cousin... Such a small world. Well, Henry did accustom us to choose better. I am sorry to judge my family thus, but she is not even a lovely girl. And she holds herself in such a way... Shy. You would think she is afraid that someone could walk on her feet.

- But she is submissive and makes an excellent puppet. I would like the king to turn away from her. A bit of scandal would not spoil it. Do you see what I mean?

- Completely, my dear cousin. I know a lot of gentlemen who would find extremely funny to encroach on good king Henry's illegitimate territory.

#

14th of December - afternoon

The queen's chambers had been literally invaded by a little army of seamstresses and milliners. The atmosphere was relaxed, chairs and tables piled high with dresses, ribbons and pincushions, while two serving maids offered plates of small waffles and wine cups among incessant chatter and laughs.

The poor girls were hard-pressed not to trip on a train being attached to its dress or in the hem of a skirt in revision. The Christmas dresses ordered by the queen had arrived at last and the ladies were carrying out the last adjustments. Even Elizabeth Seymour had been included in the adventure, in spite of her late arrival in the queen's household, and she radiated happiness in her garnet red velvet. At last, she was free of black clothes! She was allowed again to wear colours that suited her. All the other women had put on the same colour, in different shades and fabrics. It would make a nice effect, Lizzie thought, when the queen and her ladies arrived in a tight group in the reception hall. Courtiers would only see a kind of sparkling river of flames. The holly and tiny pineapples crowns coming with the dresses would splendidly complete the effect.

Even Lady Mary, usually withdrawn, seemed happy to be – a little bit – the centre of everyone's attention, while her half-sister was solemnly passing the pins and needles to the seamstresses working on Mary's dress. She did not notice that her step-mother was watching her and liked what she saw.

All in all, to treat her nicely, give her a better statute, had proven more efficient than to have her beaten by the ladies Bryan and Sheldon, as Anne had thought for a while. Furthermore, the girl almost looked nice in her new dress. Maybe they could succeed in finding her an admirer, which would hopefully distract her from any political topic for a while.

Of course the queen was granted the most luxurious clothes, and there was in her dress as much gold thread as velvet, which made it extremely heavy. The smallest of her moves had to be carefully calculated to avoid knocking something down, or simply having her legs giving way under the weight of the garment.

No lively dance for Christmas party, Anne thought with a small regret, even if she intended to lead another kind of dance before joining the Court.

Darn! Now she was getting accustomed to her encounters with the king's secretary... It was becoming dangerous... or not. Anne knew that in fact, she was not the center of Court life any more. She had noticed the number of people coming for a visit slowly decreasing. It offered her an increase in freedom. Less audiences meant more free time to escape and be usefully busy, whether it was by reading, conceiving a child, putting her nose into the council's dispatches or looking for a way to oust this ninny of Jane Seymour.

##
17th of December

- Wonderful, the king whispered, turning the necklace between his fingers.

Kneeling before him, the goldsmith allowed himself a little sigh of relief. The monarch was known for his demanding nature and the fit of wrath that followed if his whim was not made into perfection. Apparently, the jewel crafted for his newest mistress suited him. The artisan had worked for long hours, a magnifying glass tied over his eye, to create the piece of jewellery, a beautiful chain of gold filigree holding a medium-sized sapphire, of a luminous blue. Delicate, blue and golden, the very definition of the young lady who charmed the king.

The goldsmith told himself that the royal favourites were indeed very costly for their lover. He had already realised orders placed for Lady Boleyn before she married the king, and according to his annals, the sapphire alone was as expensive as two or three of the sets of jewels he had delivered at the very beginning of Henry’s affair with Lady Anne. Yet the king had not purchased some worthless trinkets for the young woman. He remembered a certain brooch of amber and gold...

Did it mean the new one was worth more in the king’s eyes that the current one? Well, time would tell it very quickly.

Henry put the necklace back in its case of wood lined with white velvet and handed a heavy purse to the artisan. The man was effusive in his thanks, bowed three times as required by the protocol, and left humming to himself through the palace corridors. One or two lovely girls more on His Majesty’s path and he would be able to retire, his fortune assured.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter, people unwrap their Christmas presents. Whatever it may be...
**Merry Christmas to you all!**

Chapter Notes

I know it's a bit early for a Christmas chapter, but I hope you will like the delayed present. I had a lot of fun with the food they served for the feast...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

**24th of December – early evening**

The whole palace was drinking, dancing and having fun... and he was still working. Sometimes Thomas Cromwell wondered if he had not been cursed. *The king laughs, and the secretary put all his efforts in his files.* He would have rather eaten something, see which courtier offered the most expensive present to the king, and which one offered nothing, exchange some words with Anne... Despite their resolution to keep their relationship at a strictly "professional" level, some more personal gestures had slipped into their meetings. A caress, a kiss just at the corner of the lips, Anne's fingers knotting his short black curls... Curious, that one, he thought while reading again a letter from the North. Elizabeth also did that often. He prayed God and Heaven that their betrayal was not being done in vain, and that the queen conceived quickly. As for what would happen next... She must have a son to reinforce her staggering position, even if at a strictly personal level he would rather have a daughter. Unfortunately, Anne was not his wife, and he had to put the family man's wishes after the minister's. England needed a prince. They would think later about having a girl. Later... As if the queen was going to keep him behind her skirts after he had given her his help. He was dreaming. Never would she compromise herself with him longer than necessary.

He put back on the desk the letter from York he was studying. He could not work any more. He wanted to go home, spend some time with his son and his tribe of nephews and nieces, share a good supper with them, stop thinking for some hours. Cromwell arranged his papers and left his office, heading for home. Not wishing to cross path with a bore coming to submit another petition, he went through the little back room behind his office (Most importantly, he should not think of what took place on this table...), then in the nearly disused corridor leading there. As he was locking the door, he heard quick footsteps behind him.

Cromwell turned to find himself facing the queen. Surprised, he noticed she was wearing one of the dresses she had used as queen Katherine's lady-in-waiting. No complicated hairstyle, a relatively modest jewel... She would go almost unnoticed.

He bowed before her.

"Majesty... what can I do for you?"

She seemed to balance between anger and desire when she greeted him back. She tilted her head and flashed a dangerous smile.

"What would you think about an early Christmas present?" she whispered.

"Well, why not? What is..."

She did not let him finish his sentence.
Anne gripped his collar in her small nervous hands and pulled him to her. Her lips met his while her fingers were stroking his neck then playing with his thick black curls. He grabbed her by the shoulders and pushed her against the brick wall, then his hands seemed to act on their own initiative when they hitched Anne's skirts up on her waist. The queen's fingers went down to the lacing of his breeches and undid it quickly. He took her by the hips to raise her, and Anne's arms locked around his shoulders while her long legs circled his waist, pulling him close.

It was quick, but more intense than usual. Anne seemed to have lost her fear, and gave as good as she got, almost violently. Cromwell felt her fingers gripping the collar of his cloak, her hips jolting against his while he laid a trail of kisses along her neck. She kissed him full on the lips when he raised his head, then lowered her forehead against his shoulder, moaning softly. He held back a too brutal thrust, so she would not hit the wall behind her.

Good Lord, just once, one whole night in a proper bed, if it's not asking too much. And... Oh God...

He did not know what move exactly Anne had done with her hips, but he felt a wave of intense pleasure. He tightened his grip on her, and she repeated her move. He savagely bit his lips to prevent a cry, and his thrusts became more urgent, almost desperate. Anne hit his shoulder with her clenched fist, her face buried in the fur of his collar to stifle her moans, then suddenly sagged against him like a rag-doll. He followed her immediately, spilling in her, shaking, with barely enough strength in his arms to keep her standing.

They remained huddled together for a long time, both out of breath. One of the queen's hand was still gripping his collar, the other was gently patting the nape of his neck. Cromwell extracted himself from her embrace with regret. Anne let out a disappointed groan, then straightened up and brushed her dress with the flat of her hand. After that she smoothed the fur of his coat, that she had ruffled grabbing it in her fists.

"Happy Christmas, Thomas," she whispered before leaving a quick kiss on his lips, and then she vanished in the corridor.

Jesus, do not let me fall in love with this woman, or I lose myself, and I lose her with me.

It was too late, he knew it already.

#

Heading for her chambers to change her dress, Anne mechanically ran her hands on her face. She was pretty sure that Master Cromwell had truly liked his Christmas gift. He had not wasted any time to make good use of it.

Snif, snif...

Her left hand, which had pulled on the secretary's collar, slightly smelled like the lavender used to keep the linen fresh. The right one, which had somehow got lost on his skin, rather smelled like cinnamon. Anne sniffed again. Yes, just so. She loved cinnamon. Oh Lord, she was going to have sweet, beautiful scented dreams, this night. Thank you for this lovely present, Thomas. What a gentleman you are. She giggled when she remembered how delicious this spice was on baked apples.

#

Christmas, reception hall

After many unfortunate meetings with unwelcome solicitors, Cromwell made his way amongst the
courtiers crowding in the great hall and reached without too much jostling the platform where the royal couple was seated. He had already missed the offering of gifts to the monarchs, but he still wanted to have a look at the feast. If he couldn't avoid being late at home, at least he would bring back some interesting anecdotes to his family, particularly his nieces, who were very fond of them.

The secretary quietly squeezed in beside the queen's ladies-in-waiting, all dressed in red: dark, scarlet or crimson, wearing crowns of holly and false pineapples, and sparkling with jewels. All the sets were made up of red stones: rubies, garnets, spinels, red agates... set in gold. Some, he noticed, had been lent by the queen to her favourite ladies Nan Saville, of course, was wearing one, a long gold necklace set with small rubies cabochons. The other jewel he could identify was resting on Elizabeth Seymour's throat. Finally free from her heavy black dresses, her neck circled with a line of faceted rubies, the young woman was simply charming. For sure, she would not remain a widow for a very long time. With any luck, she would find a man of her age who would like her culture and lively mood. When Lizzie noticed his presence, she turned slightly to give him the hint of a curtsey and gratefully smile at him. It was thanks to him she had obtained this place, and she intended to repay one day the debt she had incurred.

Henry was, as usual, very busy talking to his plate and his glass, that a cup-bearer regularly filled with a thick red vintage. A present from King Francis, perhaps. The French monarch enjoyed sending wines from Burgundy or Bordeaux to his English neighbour, who appreciated them without any moderation, as well as solid food. This evening meal comprised a thick soup of barley and venison, roasted beef with little white onions, a rather large boar brought in pieced together with its tusks on a plate as wide as a little fountain, grilled fish in a nest of herbs, goose legs with crisp skin, coming with a verjuice sauce and roasted little birds, trushes and ortolans, and all sorts of desserts, candied fruits and spiced cakes... and His Majesty seemed resolved to give a try to all of it, only interrupting his supper from time to time to bark rather bawdy jokes to the gentlemen clustered around him.

Anne, by contrast, nibbled, drank little and seemed as cold as marble in her dress of red and gold brocade, as if nothing had happened between the two of them some hours ago. By the way, officially, nothing had happened. She was the embodied picture of a distant but benevolent royalty. However, a little mocking smile was beginning to stretch her lips and Cromwell understood why when he discovered the man who was paying his respects to his monarchs.

Henry Percy.

Now earl of Nothumberland thanks to his father's death, the queen's former fiancé had spent a awful lot of money for this trip to London, dressed in the latest fashion, covered in vermilion silk and gemstones, even more sparkling than on his wedding day or when he had taken his oath before the king as Warden of the North. A not so charitable soul would have compared him to a peacock ready to spread its tail while he bowed in front of the royal couple. The red and white feathers of his hat swept the floor when he renewed his salutations, before straightening and delivering a speech of congratulations and his best wishes to Their Majesties.

Master Secretary barely refrained from laughing out loud. In his desire to keep Anne at her place as queen, he had offered himself, without thinking about it, a beautiful vengeance against Percy, sent to arrest cardinal Wolsey so many years ago. It was said that Percy was still madly in love with Anne Boleyn, and he, Cromwell, had become this woman's lover. Oh God, that was just too funny. He did not wait for the end of Percy's bombastic compliment, and considered better to leave before starting a scandal. The house at Austin Friars was waiting for him, with its warmth, its loving atmosphere and the trust he put in its inhabitants.

##
"Father!" Gregory happily called out from the threshold. "The girls were wondering if you had gotten lost on your way here."

Lost? Yes, something like that. "I was a bit delayed by the show. Percy came to pay homage to the king, and it was worth seeing."

Gregory cracked a mocking smile.

"I can imagine the picture. It was a good idea, heading back home," the young man added, "I had gone up there to fetch you at your office, but with the scramble in Whitehall, I thought it would be wiser to come back here."

"Saw nothing of interest on your way?" his father asked.

"The Spanish ambassador chatting with one of our gentlemen. One of the Seymour brothers, I think. I will have to check which one."

"Ah? Nothing comforting there; thanks for the warning. Anything else?"

"I also met with the youngest of the Seymour sisters, Elizabeth," Gregory finally confessed, suddenly finding a great interest in the wall at his right. "She is very... nice," he concluded flatly, his cheeks turning a bright red.

"No, really?"

"Father, please... Do not make fun of me, and share our diner, I am sure you did not even think of having one of the king's servants pinched of all the goof things he was carrying."

"Hey, robbing the king, do you know how much it costs?"

While trading some cutting remarks, the two men headed for the table where nieces, nephews and associates looked ready to bite into their plates so much they were hungry.

"Tuck in! Tuck in!" Richard, Ralph and the salesclerk Thomas Avery chanted.

"Here, here, we're coming!"

"Pschh! Quiet, men," Helen, Ralph's wife, ordered them. "Do not set a bad example for the little ones."

"We want a story," one of her daughters immediately pointed, raising her spoon. "Please," she added hastily.

"Later," Helen resolved. "Right now, we're eating."

The child pouted.

"One can talk while eating," Helen's other daughter grumbled while spying for the cook's arrival with the first dish. "You just do not have to talk with your mouth full."

"She is a fast learner," Richard pointed, laughing. "What are we going to do with the little miss?"

"Teaching her sums," Cromwell said at once. "And then one or two foreign languages for trading, and then only we will scour the best shops in London to make her a nice fashionable ladies."

"And find her a husband?" Avery joked.
"Oh no," the little one protested at once. "I don't want one!"

"And why not? You need a husband to have children."

"I don't want children either. It's too tiring," the little girl stated at once.

"No kidding..." her mother sighed.

The whole household burst into fits of laughter, then quickly recovered as the cook arrived at last holding a large soup tureen in his hands covered by a dish towel.

"Here it is!" the round-bellied chap announced. "A good broth with pike quenelles!"

Gregory whistled.

"We are so spoilt. We must have been very good boys... and girls, this year."

It seemed to him, but no doubt it was caused by the candles light, that his father had somewhat turned red when hearing this.

Chapter End Notes

Ext chapter, we'll be talking about more serious things, so I put here some "lighter" scenes, such as the supper at Austin Friars with Ralph's step-daughters (I borrowed the little ones and Helen from Wolf Hall). I have to confess, I also borrowed the "thick soup of barley and venison" from G. Martin's Game of Thrones. The man has such a way with cooking and good food, he really could be French. :p
Manipulations

8th of January 1536, Whitehall, the queen's chambers

End of Christmas cease-fire, Anne thought just after waking. The holidays have already come to an end...

She stretched lengthily like a huge cat under her sheets, unwilling to leave the warmth of her bed. She had slept like a log, and yet she still felt immensely tired. The girls had gone back to Hatfield the previous day, the royal chambers seemed empty without their retinue and the queen simply did not want to get up to face a cold and lonely day. Worthless. Even the thought of tasting the sweet foods sent from France and Italy by the English ambassadors did not raise her interest.

Anne suddenly sat up straight, one hand pinned on her mouth, her stomach heaving with waves of nausea. She forced herself to swallow back what was creeping up her throat and take slow breaths to regain some calm. The simple notion of food made her queasy. When the heaving had stopped at last, she remained thinking for a while sitting against her pillows. She knew this feeling well. It was the fourth time in three years she was pregnant. She held back a happy shout, fearing that one of her ladies heard her and came running at her queen's side.

Then an ice-cold hand closed on her. She had to sleep with Henry so that he could claim the child as his.

For once, Fortune was kind to her.

On the 7th of January, Katherine of Aragon has surrendered to sickness. The news reached Court three days later, with the former queen's last letter to her husband.

##

10th of January, Whitehall

The valets keeping watch at the king's door cast a worried look to their queen when she showed herself at the entrance of her husband's chambers. She assured them that everything was under control, and knocked twice.

"Come in," a hoarse voice moaned. "But be quick about it."

It started worse than she expected.

When she entered, Anne immediately smelt a rather strong alcohol odour. Two defunct bottles of wine were lying about on a console, and Henry, sprawled on an armchair, still had a cup in hand.

"Henry"

"Why?" the king hiccuped. "Why does it put me in such a state? She defied me! She tried to ridicule me! She only gave me a daughter who is just as stubborn as she was!"

Anne warily took some steps forward. Henry could be viciously mean when drunk.

"She even sent me a letter, can you imagine this?"

There was not the smallest clue for a letter on the table.
"I burnt it... this bunch of snivelling. But why does she still affect me this way?"

"She has been your companion for more than twenty years," Anne argued in a soft voice, while slowly coming closer. "She shared your joys and your sorrows. She was able to lead an army, remember; it is no small thing."

"Yes, it's true. Poor King James...", Henry chuckled.

Anne fished a still full bottle in a basket near the chimney and filled her husband's cup. He drank it in one gulp.

"Again..."

"And though God called them back to Him, she was also the mother of your children. Whatever may happen afterwards, we always keep some fondness for the man or the woman who gave us a son or a daughter."

She poured him some more wine, that he drank in one swallow. He was staggering on his chair. One more cup... He fell forward, and Anne caught him right before he hit the table. Leaving him there, she went to lock the door, then undertook to drag her completely drunk husband to his bed, which was not small matter. Henry was very heavy, and his wife was maybe a third of his build.

Mary mother of God, make sure this does not dislodge the child from my belly...

Anne managed to lay Henry's head and chest on the sheets, then lifted his legs, one after the other. She took off his boots, his shirt, his breeches... and stuck him under the covers. It would look rather authentic. Anyway, drunk as he was, he would not be able to remember much.

# #

11th of January

Henry woke up with a dreadful headache. It seemed to him that the veins on his temples had turned into drums that would not stop beating, beating... He groaned and tried to extract himself from his sheets. While doing so, his hand hit something.

It was warm, soft... His fingers crept up and find a lock of hair.

"Mmm... Henry?"

Oh no... Don't tell me...

And yet... What he had wanted to avoid at all costs had happened. Beside him under the covers was his wife. The queen. Her large dark eyes were staring at him, and she smiled at him with kindness.

"Do you feel better?"

What? Ah yes, she had come to see him on the previous evening, after he had received Katherine's last letter. They had talked a bit, drunk a lot... Good Lord... He had sworn he would never lay with Anne Boleyn again, and he had done it! With his usual luck, the bitch would get pregnant. She usually needed one night in his bed to be with child. If this nightmare turned into reality, he would be nowhere close to getting rid of her and marrying his dear, sweet Jane.

"Henry?"

"Oh... yes, I do feel better. Thank you."
Anne offered him a radiant smile before she rose and picked up her dress, left on a chair. He heard her grumble something about bodice lacing and rose to help her adjust the garment. It did not cost anything to act the gentleman. Anne, once she was strapped in her clothes, curtsied before him, and slipped into the anteroom.

Not far from there, Master Cromwell was trying to erase the last remains of sleep from his mind. The king had stayed up late the previous night, and the noise had prevented him from getting his rest for a long while.

Absolutely no respect at all for the people surrounding him. I'd like to see him work as hard as Audley or myself with the little rest we have...

If the day was truly bright, he might see A... the queen. He knew he had taken a dangerous road when offering her his « help ». The smallest word, and he was good as dead. As for her...

He was leaving his chambers when the king's door opened in a buzzing of « Your Majesty » uttered by valets bent in two. A rustle of petticoats and the queen emerged from her husband's rooms, her shoes in her hand and her dress creased. He felt slightly faint, like someone was squeezing his heart. Oh well, he was not jealous, was he?

Once she reached his position, Anne nodded and slowed her pace down, so he had the time to greet her.

"Your Majesty."

"Master Secretary," she said in a loud voice.

And then, much lower:

"I did not sleep with the king. I just had to spend the night in his bed. I think I am pregnant..."

And with that, she went on her way, leaving him register an information for which he was not exactly ready.

##

The royal chapel was deserted at such an early hour, exception made of a small silhouette wrapped in a heavy fur coat, kneeling in a corner.

The queen of England lit a candle that she firmly drove in on its support, crossed herself and began an unusual prayer.

"God grant you rest for your soul, Katherine. As for me, I thank you for giving me a last chance to save my head and my daughter."

On an impulse, Anne lit a second candle, put it down more gently before the statue of the Virgin Mary, and spoke to another ghost.

"Mistress Wykes," she said, feeling her cheeks burn, "please do not get cross with me... not with him, I beg you. I am not going to steal him from you. I do not intend to replace you, which is not possible anyway, but during these recent days, I have felt like I could damn my soul to keep him safe. It is not not a small service he offered me. I humbly pray you, me Anne Boleyn, to forgive me if you think I caused you any wrong."

She crossed herself again, rose and left the chapel without looking back to the twin lights shining
behind her. The candle she had lit for Katherine teetered, then vanished. Liz's remained clear and straight.

##

13th of January

Henry had sent a group of doctors to Kimbolton to carry out the late princess' autopsy and cut short, if possible, the rumours that would most certainly appear, without much hope. Butts confirmed the diagnosis he had made during his last visit to Katherine. Opening the body he had found a tumour on her heart which was partially sticking to the lung.

"Completely incurable and inoperable," he concluded.

Henry thanked him for his good services. The doctor's report would only convince those who were already on his side. As soon as the news reached Spain, he could very well picture the emperor getting indignant and this little devil Chapuys fidgeting every way and writing to his master that the Boleyn whore had poisoned his queen. Even without going so far as Spain, accusations would spread quickly in London. A guy paid his round in a tavern telling tall stories, no one would need more. Despite the increasing irritation he felt against her, Henry would not be silly enough to accuse his wife of murder. She had waited for seven years to be queen of England, he reasoned, she was perfectly able to wait for her rival to die from natural causes. But for now, a more delicate task had to be carried out, announcing to the Lady Mary that she was motherless.

Henry wished Thomas Boleyn was here. He would have gladly sent his Lord Privy Seal break the news to Lady Mary, but the man was still delayed abroad by his diplomatic activities. The French were absolutely fond of him, and did not wish for another parley partner. Thus the king had to make do with his brother-in-law George, hoping he would know how to treat the stubborn bastard girl accordingly. On this topic, he was wrong. Viscount Rochford had no intention to hurt the young woman.

Arriving at Hatfield, George Boleyn was worried stiff. He might be gifted with words, he completely ignored how to tell her daughter princess Katherine's death to her daughter without making her suffer (too) much.

He did not have to worry about finding a proper wording. Court gossip had already reached Lady Mary, and George found her in tears before the small crucifix she kept in her room.

"Is it true?" she asked in a choked voice.

George nodded. Mary rose from her prie-dieu and sat on the edge of her bed. He picked a stool, not too close.

"How did it happen?"

"As doctor Butts had suspected, she had a tumour growing on her heart."

"At least," the young woman stammered, "could she receive the last rites? Did not she suffer too much?"

"Be assured she remained conscious to be given extreme unction," George said in a soothing voice. "For the rest... the doctors had given her a decoction of poppy if the pain was too much, but knowing her character, I doubt she made use of it."

"Yes... No doubt... When will her burial take place?"
George thought about it for a moment.

"Within a week, certainly. She will be buried with all the honours due to a princess of Spain and daughter of kings. Concerning the site of her grave, Peterborough abbey was considered. The place is close to Kimbolton. It receives many visitors and shelters some relics of Thomas Beckett, as you must certainly know. Westminster is not..."

"I know," Mary cut in. "The king would not want their bodies to rest in the same place. This abbey, how is it?"

"Slightly isolated from the town, surrounded by trees and meadows. It is a peaceful retreat."

"Very well... Why did you take up the task to warn me?" the fallen princess asked in a rather biting voice.

"Would you rather have had my father?"

"No. Certainly not. Tell me when it will be time to accompany my mother," Mary simply said, before going back to her devotions.

George left her alone at her prayers, and went to Elizabeth's chambers. The little girl was already sleeping. A little time off in London, the viscount thought, would bring some welcome holidays for Lady Bryan, who was not so young an more, and had to keep an eye on her grandson while his father Sir Francis was away. Since his wife's death, he did his best to be home often, but with little success.

"My lord."

"Lady Bryan, we will need to find mourning clothes for the king's daughters. It is out of the question to show them at Court with anything but black for Katherine's funerals. Else, it would make a scandal."

The governess nodded. The fastest way would be to dye some clothes the children already owned. Elizabeth had dark blue velvet winter dress that would be perfect, she thought. As for Mary, her wardrobe did not lack black, unfortunately.

# #

21st of January, London

Eight days later, Katherine's funerals took place at Whitehall with all the decorum required for an infanta of Spain and princess of Wales, but nothing more. The Court in mourning clothes, minus the king as demanded by protocol, had come and was now assembled in the royal chapel, but Anne, who was standing in the first row with her daughter, could notice that the commoners outside had not come in great numbers. Suffolk had signaled that some anti-Spanish brawlers had to be sent by the city watch in one of the city prisons, before they could generate a scandal during the ceremony. For now, the duke was sitting on the bench behind her with his wife, the Howard tribe and Henry FitzRoy, back from Dublin with his lady wife. The young man did not seem in very good shape, Anne thought. He had lost a lot of weight since their last meeting and was very pale. He made her think of his poor aunt Mary, more and more emaciated until death came.

When the priest had at last said the last blessings on the former queen's coffin, the cortege slowly left the chapel, and the courtiers gave up their grave faces to comment the event with their usual disrespect.
“In your opinion,” Sir Francis Bryan thus asked the stiff earl of Shrewsbury, "what did she confess to the priest? That she had done it with prince Arthur, or not?"

The earl shrugged.

"Does it have the slightest importance now? We have a queen and a princess all English. That is all that matters."

Not far from them, Mary was coming back to her coach with her old friend Margaret Pole.

"Ambassador Chapuys shared some curious rumours with me," the young woman said, at once cut by the countess.

"Do not believe a single word of it. If your Lady Anne was a stupid woman, she would have surely tried to poison your mother, and you too. But luckily for you, she is a smart woman. She just waited patiently for things to happen. From now on, you will notice that she will be much nicer to you."

While the young woman went back to Hatfield, the Court was taking a change of air and celebrated Katherine's departure in a much happier fashion. The mourning clothes disappeared and in spite of the cold, the palace gardens were crowded with swarm of musicians and servants that brought drinks and good humour to the gathering. Henry had joined his Court and was playing happily with his friends and retainer's children, Elizabeth perched on his arm. If this frenzied joy seemed shocking to some they refrained from commenting on it. Anne was watching this outburst of exuberance, rather perplexed. Two weeks ago, Henry was sobbing in her skirts, lamenting his former wife's passing. Now he was dancing, and had ordered to loot all the gowns and jewels that remained in Kimbolton, not minding the late princess' will. Go figure... At least, the snow and the frozen ground would prevent him from shaming himself by taking part in the tourney he had wished to on the day in a flourish, finally cancelled for safety.

###

4th of February

"I found some potential candidates for Lady Seymour," Sir Francis said, rubbing his hands together. "I will not take care of it personally, because I refuse to try and catch two birds at the same time, since it is really serious for me."

"Are you going to marry again, cousin?" Anne asked with a happy smile.

"I think I will," the « pirate » admitted. "I don't like being alone, and Edmund... as the king sends me from one side of Europe to the other, my son spends most of his time alone, and this is not good. To get back to the topic, I found a boy, a bit younger than Jane, by five or six years, but already very forward, who is named Thomas Culpepper. Else, your cousin Henry Howard may be interested. Not in marrying the wench, of course, but making her less... virtuous, let's say. And Francis Weston seems in for a bit of screwing, if only to send the girl away and prevent her from troubling you."

"Do you worst, cousin, just do. And see which of these gentlemen gives the best results. Though I would not like Henry to be in trouble."

"All right! Thus it will be master Culpepper or this good Weston!" Francis Bryan shouted, grinning.

###

12th of February
Doctor Butts carefully listened to his patient. For some days the queen had complained of feeling sick, dizziness and an unusual tiredness, not to mention her missing her courses for the second month in a row. The doctor estimated the probability of a pregnancy rather high, but would rather reserve his diagnosis. If rumours spoke true, the queen could not be more than four or five weeks pregnant, and Butts wanted to wait a little longer before making the news public. Nonetheless, he acted as reassuring as possible, and walked the lady back to her chambers with a smile and kind words.

Now he could only pray for the queen to keep her child. Good enough that the king had managed to get his wife pregnant again...
Announces and their effects

2nd of March

The queen's drawing room was rustling with quiet activity. Here one was embroidering a cloth, there one was reading... All the little bees were peacefully working around her beloved queen. Only Lady Jane remained in a corner without doing anything, nervously biting her lips.

At last, unable to wait more, she came to curtsey deeply before the queen.

"Your Majesty..."

"Lady Jane, what would you want?"

"Could I have a discussion in private with Your Majesty?"

All around them, the others ladies, Lizzie, Jane Rochford, Maddy Dormer, fluttered nervously. Knowing Jane Seymour's position in the king’s « esteem », none of them considered this request as really innocent.

"Well... If you don't object to your sister's presence..."

"Absolutely not, my lady."

Anne gestured the two Seymours to follow her in her bedroom, and pulled the heavy velvet drapes shut behind them.

"Right. You can speak, now."

"I am deeply embarrassed, Your Majesty," Jane said, twisting her hands. "The king... you have noticed... his advances..."

"Yes, yes," Anne impatiently cut in. "I should be blind not to see them. He wants to make you his new mistress? And so?"

"But I don't want to!" the young woman wailed, on the verge of tears. "His moods are ever so changing. For now he likes me, but what will happen once he has tired of me? I do not wish to be pointed at everywhere I go like a... a... dishonest girl."

Anne turned toward Lizzie, who winked. She had explained her sister, at length, what dear Edward had hatched up to put one of them or the other in the king's bed.

"I thought that every noble young lady's dream was to wear the crown one day," Anne pointed out, provocative.

"Not when it is only their family's dream, my lady," Jane answered frankly, without thinking that her comment could as well apply to the queen.

"Do you have a friend at Court?" the queen inquired.

"Master Weston is very nice to me," Jane admitted, "but I would not go as far as to say I am in love with him. Majesty, I humbly beg you to grant me your help and your protection. I was very flattered of the attention the king gives me, and I accept to be his friend, a real friend, someone whom you talk with, who you tell your worries to feel better, but nothing more."
"Of course, of course," Anne conceded, smiling. "Go and dry your tears, child, I will find a pretext to send you away from London to somewhere safe."

Once Jane had left the room, the queen traded an amused look with Lizzie Seymour.

"What did you tell her?"

"That becoming queen, from our father and brothers' point of view, was just the icing on the cake, and they would content themselves with the office of « maîtresse en titre », that would earn them enough money, titles and jewels to satisfy them. The poor girl remained speechless with shock. Furthermore, Jane is a very pious young woman, thus suggesting her to commit the act of flesh out of wedlock... She just loved the idea..."

"If I were you, my dear," Her Majesty advised, "I would quickly find myself a nice boy before the king turns his looks on you."

"Do not worry, my lady. I already have an idea in this topic," the young woman answered before falling in a curtsey.

##

18th of March

It was done. The church bells were ringing everywhere in the city to spread the wonderful news. The queen was pregnant! And this time, it would be a prince, of course. A beautiful little boy to wear the crown of England.

In the great reception room of Whitehall, Henry was strutting about, exchanging jests with the ambassadors. He had momentarily forgotten his wish to get rid of the queen. Once more, he did not doubt he would have a son. He did not doubt the general enthusiasm.

Eustache Chapuys was looking at the king with a small pout. He had hoped that after her last "accident", the concubine would not conceive any more. Too bad... No one could win every time. With any luck, she would give birth to another girl, the king would tire of her and he could be suggested a new candidate, fresher. Less heretic. The best would be that she died in childbirth, that would solve the problem without giving anyone a headache.

Sitting on a platform, Anne was smiling at all the flatterers complimented her for her happy state, even tough her mind was a hundred leagues away from Whitehall. She should have been praying for a son with all her strength, and yet she was hoping for a daughter. It would not be so easy to spot her father's features on hers, this way. Anne had dark hair, no one would ask questions if the child inherited them, and the blackness of her eyes would hide any other colour. Anne patted her belly. My God, please make so that she looks like Elizabeth, the rest, I am taking care of it.

Standing some steps behind the queen, Master Secretary was watching the crows, seemingly impassive. He id his best to convince himself that he had just done what was necessary to keep Anne in place, because he needed her to achieve his Reformation. Of course, he felt nothing seeing Henry spreading his tail and being full of himself, taking credit for the conception of a child that was not his. No more than he would felt anything watching another raising this child. Of course.

Right. Sure. That's a good thing I do not have to confess any more...

He should better concentrate on the Act of Dissolution of the small monastic houses, that the king had signed, at last, and the Parliament, ratified.
Anne quickly pretended that the noise and the crowd were tiring her, and she came back to the relative quiet of her rooms. She needed to think. Now, no way to go back. Within two weeks, the whole realm would be aware of her pregnancy. That would leave her about six months to make friends of the commoners and protect herself against her husband. She knew he did not love her any more. Even if she gave birth to a son, nothing would ever be like before, like the seven years he had ardently courted her. She had wished to give him a son, more than anything else. Now she was carrying the child of a man for whom she felt a deep friendship, who she trusted... but she did not love Tom Cromwell. Not this way. Not yet. And Henry? Well, let us admit she had grown tired of him...

# #

9th of April

The king scarcely came into his minister's lair, and Cromwell was grateful for it. The royal presence paralyzed all his team's activity. It would indeed have been improper to go on sorting notes or another thing while His Majesty was there. The worst was that today Henry was disturbing his secretary and his clerks for a business that had nothing to do with politics.

"I was thinking of a little trade," the king said while looking through the window. "You could take the Seymours' rooms, and give them yours, which is so opportunely located close to mine."

And allow you to meet with your little wench in peace? And lose the opportunity to watch over the come and go in your chambers? And what more?

But that was not something you could tell the king of England without risking – at least – a huge cuff on the back of your head.

"If I may..."

"YES?"

"People will believe that you want to visit Lady Jane away from prying eyes... and the Court being what it is, there will be talk about the lady's virtue..."

The king seemed disappointed at Jane Seymour's mention. Apparently, despite her brothers' pressure, the little miss did not answer the king's advances as positively as he had hoped. And Cromwell knew Anne was busy introducing other men to her. He had even advised some...

"Well," Henry mumbled, more for himself that the company, "she has a sister who seems more... lively."

Cromwell had the distinct impression that a quill had just snapped behind him.

"Good. I thank you for your excellent advice. Good day to you."

The king rose, receiving bows from all the staff. He had reached the door when he turned, a facetious smile on his lips.

"Concerning young ladies, maybe it would be time to find one for your boy..."

Once the door was closed, Cromwell risked a glance to Gregory, who was compiling incomes behind him. His lips thinned, biting his cheek, the « boy » looked ready to explode.

"Not the ink pots," his father advised.
"It's all right, I respect our tools," the young man hissed, throwing away what remained of his late quill.

He noisily blew out before falling back on his chair.

"Yet for Christ's sake, could he not choose another?"

His father leant against the panelling, feeling his headache coming back with a vengeance. Thump, thump, thump. The back of his skull softly hit against the wood. No need to worry about the incoming bump, after the multiple slaps given by one Henry Tudor, there was one permanently now.

So, let's sum this up. I... had an affair? No, I... have fucked the king's wife for about a month to get her pregnant, I'm helping the same woman to pair the king's new sweetheart with another man, and now he finds himself a third lady, he must choose my son's good friend. Oh Lord, you really make me pay climbing up this high...

# #

18th of April

Locked up in his chambers, Henry Tudor did not let up. The previous day he had expressed his interest for the younger Lady Seymour and she had treated him in a... perfectly disgraceful manner! Yes, that was the word, disgraceful. She had dared claim that the situation of « friend » had caused too much sorrow to her elder sister Jane to make her wish she could take it, and that she wanted to remarry, which would take a bit long if all the gentlemen in Court knew her for the king's mistress. On top of this, the little trollop had downright said that the king was too old for her and, in a nutshell, absolutely not to her tastes. Such an insolence!

The king brutally gripped the bell-pull, and a page arrived running. Henry quickly wrote a message to the queen, ordering her to expel Lady Elizabeth Seymour from her service, and demanding that the girl left the Court until new orders. The boy left running with the billet, relieved to leave the monarch.
Imprudent Celebrations

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

1st of May, London

Each year the Court celebrated the return of warm days in a profusion of pageants, tourneys, shimmering vestures and feasts. This time, courtiers decided to double their efforts to rejoice both in the return of the spring and the queen's future child. Anne received several little jewels in the shape of a cradle of gold filigree holding a baroque pearl which irregular roundness reminiscent of a plump baby wrapped in its swaddling clothes. She picked one to pin it on her dress and lined the others up on the mantelpiece in her bedroom.

Her pregnancy started to show, and she had already required her dresses to be consequently enlarged. For this first day of rejoicing, she had chosen a peach-coloured dress, and all her ladies sported flowery shades. Elizabeth, back from Hatfield for the feasts, had been garbed in pale green, as well as her half-sister. Anne was indeed going on with her sap digging on Lady Mary. She had made sure that the young woman was allowed to pray whenever she wished on her mother's grave, and from time to time, asked Henry to have her at Court with Elizabeth. Thus, no one could accuse the queen of ill-treating her step-daughter any more, or to keep her away. Unknowingly, Mary was going to work for the queen's propaganda.

The day would begin with performances in the gardens, a play during the afternoon, and then a ball in the evening. Anne would remain quietly sitting during all those festivities, since a misstep could cause her to lose her child. She did not worry much about this possibility. Henry not being the baby's father, the risks for such an accident were limited.

Two hours later, sitting on a platform with her husband and ladies-in-waiting, Anne was starting to wish for the comfort of her rooms. It was too hot for the season and the weight of her clothes was making her back ache. At her side, Elizabeth showed no discomfort and had the time of her life watching the acrobats and tightrope walkers who were performing before the royal family. The little girl handed out some gratifications at the end of each show with some nice words, and the audience visibly valued her good grace. If they did not love (much) the queen, the princess was their little darling.

After a too abundant meal during which Anne had to grit her teeth not to be sick, the Court gathered again in the palace gardens, where a company of actors played a comedy the queen did not truly watch, taking the opportunity to nap a little bit. Nan Saville spared her any embarrassment by waking her some minutes before the end of the show.

- Maman is light-headed, Elizabeth noticed with a knowing smile. Does the baby move?

- A little, Anne admitted.

The baby had just started to kick, but she knew it would only get worse as time went by.

- Go and play with your sister, she told her daughter. I will get some rest.

Actually, it took Madge some time to wake her from the deep slumber she had sunk in after she went back to her chambers. Her hair combed, with a fresh make-up, Anne went back to her place besides the king to admire the ball. Henry seemed impatient, fidgeting on his chair. After the first two dances,
he rose, and the crowd went silent.

- My lords and ladies, he said in a booming voice, as you know, tomorrow will take place a tourney many of you will enter.

Anne knew thanks to her ladies that Norris, the youngest Seymour, Knivert and Weston had enrolled, as well as the untamable Richard Cromwell. The show would be amusing, no doubt.

- I decided to join you...

Anne did not listen to the rest. Amongst the nearest gentlemen, she heard disappointed groans. Against the king, no victory was ever possible. She also noticed that Cromwell seemed to be victim of a vicious headache, considering the less than discreet way he was holding his head. Poor Thomas... To watch the king taking risks was always an ordeal for him, not that he loved Henry that much, but if his employer died, he would follow him in the grave rather quickly... except if Anne had something to say about it.

##

2nd of May

At least half the Court was squeezing onto the terraces around the lists to watch the tourney. The queen, her daughter and the duchess of Norfolk were sitting at the first rank of the royal stand, the duchess of Suffolk, the countess of Salisbury and Lady Mary not far behind. The weather was still hot and Anne was desperately fanning herself to get some fresh air. Some benches lower, her brother was happily taking bets.

Not far from there, the Cromwells father and son were waiting for Richard's arrival, keeping their fingers crossed so that he would not ride against the king. Francis Bryan took place besides them, and lowered the edge of his hat to avoid being seen talking with the minister.

- Any issue? he asked.

- Not yet, but if I were you, I would avoid my evangelist friends for a while, Bryan whispered. Bishop Gardiner wants your head. Or your whole body turned into ashes, the choice is yours. And he will urge the king to get rid of you. He spoke to the Seymours brothers to this effect.

- As long as Henry does not find anyone to take care of his papers better than I do, I can sleep easy. Our good king cannot stand, as he says, sorting parchments and counting copper.

- Gardiner wants an office for his protégé, there... Risley?

- Wriothesley, Gregory mechanically amended while observing the servants flattening the sand of the lists.

- Yeah, that's what I said, Bryan went on. And Richard Rich, too. Those two owe you a great deal, but they will not hesitate to stomp on you if it can get them higher.

- Thanks for the warning. Where is our good bishop today, by the way?

- You do not imagine him taking part in such a frivolous event, do you?

- When Richard AND the king are jousting? Damn, if you can't even rely on your family, where is this world going?
Bryan sniggered in his beard.

- What can I do for you in exchange? the secretary asked.

- Nothing for now. The king speaks of making me a Gentleman of the Chamber before the end of the year, it is good enough. But do not worry, I will know how to remind you of your promises when the time comes. I must leave you, I have still bets to take.

Both men watched him go, then went back to their contemplation of the lists.

- Just as good that Gardiner is not here, Gregory muttered, else he would pray that Richard breaks his neck.

- No doubt, his father admitted. I believe you are in a rather dark mood, these days.

- I have some reasons to be, the young man grumbled.

- Did a lady rebuke you?

- A lady did not rebuke me, but the king sent her to the other side of the realm. This excepted, everything is fine, father, thank you very much.

The minister sighed. Some days before, following a royal whim, Lady Elizabeth Seymour had been forced to pack her things and travel back to York. Her sister had been granted a leave to – officially – help her settle, but it was said that the young woman would not come back any time soon, too happy to escape from Henry, who was for now without a mistress. This did not improve his mood. How long before he went back to his habit of slapping his unfortunate secretary on the head?

A blaze of trumpets announced the first duel, Thomas Seymour and Anthony Knivert. Cromwell had chosen to bet on the knight's experience, and placed some coins on Anthony. Seymour trotted at his place without any flourish, but as Knivert was riding to his position on the other side, Elizabeth called him from the stands.

- Uncle Anthony!

People smiled indulgently when the little girl, already instructed in the tourney practices, hung one of her ribbons around her favourite « uncle »'s spear. Her lucky charm tied up, the knight rode in position and wedged his spear on the piece of armour used to support it.

- Allez! the tourney referee shouted.

Both riders spurred their mount and the horses bolted forward. Someone hit the wooden guardrail yelling encouragements while the adversaries came closer and closer. Knivert slightly lowered his spear...

In a great crash of broken wood, it came crashing against Seymour's shield, the strength of the impact almost sending him flying from his saddle. His own spear was intact, so victory was granted to Knivert, to the courtiers' joy. Cromwell held out his hand and some coins were dropped in it, rather grudgingly. Then the next joust was announced, opposing his nephew Richard to Francis Weston. If some hoped to see the secretary's family receive a thrashing in Master Richard's person, the majority of the courtiers were rather indifferent to this joust opposing two relatively minor personalities. Nonetheless, when Weston landed on the sand, numerous applauds greeted his performance. And more coins passed into Gregory's hands.

- Nice, he approved. Pity that the earl of Surrey is not here, he would invent a little satire on Seymour
and Weston' fall, literally and figuratively. Where is he, by the way?

- In the country with his wife. She is pregnant, he thinks that fresh air will do her good. They also took the opportunity to visit his sister Mary and Lord Richmond.

- Oh, FitzRoy. I heard people say that he was not faring well, Gregory commented. Really, he added in a very low voice, the king's sons have troubles staying alive, whoever their mother is.

- Indeed, his father admitted without sticking his neck out.

Butts had already noticed it, now Gregory... Who would be the next on to ask questions?

He did not have time to deepen his reflection on the topic, the herald announced the next jousters. He lost any interest in the game, and waited for the king to enter the lists. It would naturally be the last tilt, and the draw had set him against Henry Norris.

After some falls and many broken spears, the last joust was called. Bryan was back to his place near the two Cromwells and observed the riders, his only eye radiating impatience.

- Hum, hum... Henry should sit better on his saddle, he is not straight, he noticed.

- Which one? the minister asked.

- The king, Gregory answered at once. He is not stable, and his horse is snorting all the time.

If His Majesty had noticed the issue, he did nothing to solve it. The king spurred his horse forward at the herald's cry, Norris did the same...

A loud cry came from the crowd when Norris' spear hit the king's shield, unbalancing him, and sending him flying against the guardrail, which broke under his weight.

Norris and the herald were the first to react, running toward the king to get him up. Lying on the ground, Henry was not moving any more. George Boleyn and his father ran down the terraces to help the two men carrying the injured king away from the crowd that was beginning to gather around him, despite Suffolk's orders.

- You should better go back to the palace, and double-quick, both of you, Bryan whispered, and prepare everything just in case... I will come back when there are some news.

Cromwell turned on his heels, dragging Gregory with him. From the corner of his eye, he noticed that the king's daughters had already left the royal stand, but he did not see Anne anywhere.

The queen was pacing up and down in front of her husband's pavilion, surrounded, but at some distance, by a whole pack of courtiers. Inside were Suffolk, Norris and Knivert, that she had left in prayer, before Doctor Butts sent her out. Now, she could only pray for Henry to survive. If he died, she entertained no delusion on her own chances of survival. One of Mary's supporters could kill her any time, pregnant or not. Henry would be allowed to die when her position would be more secure.

Cromwell's office looked like an ant hill that would have just received a good kick. Clerks were running everywhere, filling papers, sealing letters, taking notes... Francis Bryan barely made his way through the minister's staff.

- So?

- It has been two hours, and he still does not wake... It looks bad. What are you doing?
We are preparing proclamations for princess Elizabeth's accession to the throne, if...

Right. Can you give me a minute?

Bryan dragged Cromwell away from his clerks.

Pray in English, in Latin or in Hebrew if you feel like it, but pray for the king to survive. Norfolk et Gardiner are already recreating the kingdom.

They are not wasting any time...

Thanks God, they cannot manage to agree. The duke wants his niece as queen regent, and himself as Lord Protector, this bastard bishop wants to put Mary on the throne and be done with your reforms. Oh, and they are also discussing the Irish question, that is still not concluded by the Parliament. They will be at it for days.

Cromwell barely refrained from screaming in anger, and sending the stacks of papers piling on his desk flying through the room. He just missed these two vultures in the picture!

Father!

Gregory bumped into some clerks, sending some parchment rolls on the floor.

I have just... the king has awoken... Butts does not bet his head in it, but he seems out of danger.

Bryan and Cromwell exchanged a glance, and both let out a big sigh of relief. This time, they had had a narrow escape.

Anne went back to Hampton Court with a heavy escort, but the hardest part was behind them... for now. Henry would be carried to his rooms and examined from head to toe by the Court doctors. All would be fine.

Except for the king. The following day, he received rather displeasing news. His fall had reopened an old wound in his leg, and the sore looked bad. He would have to take care of himself and forget forever any idea of a tourney. Doctor Butts heard a lot of nasty threats after that...

Later, when she looked back to that day, Anne would wonder how the shock she had received had not caused her to lose the child she was carrying... and would have to admit that there had not been any. Henry's fall had caused her some worry, indeed, but no despair. Her husband had already ceased to be the centre of her life.

Chapter End Notes

Allez! = Go! It's the common signal used by the ref during a tourney to start a duel.

The piece of jewellery offered to Anne really exists. It's not a Renaissance jewel, however; it was created two centuries later for the last Medici princess.
Hello readers. I'm posting this chapter a bit early, since the week-end will be rather busy. Hope you'll enjoy it.

17th of June, Hampton Court

Following her doctor's advice, for several weeks Anne had been doing a little half-hour walk in Hampton Court gardens, Nan Saville on her heels and her little dog Pourquoi at her side. She liked having only her faithful maid with her, without the swarm of ladies-in-waiting usually surrounding her. Nan had the privilege of being the first arrived in service, and to know all of her mistress' little secrets. Well, almost all of them. She had a very fine taste for fashion, and Anne often followed her expert advice. She also had conversation and wit. What a pity that Nan had yet to find a proper man, she deserved her personal happiness rather than always watching her queen's.

"How does Your Majesty feel?" Nan asked after a while, easily forgetting the protocol that forbade talking to the monarchs if they did not speak to you first.

"Much better since last month", Anne admitted, breathing deeply.

The air was smelling like freshly cut grass, the wetness from the last rain, newly-opened flowers... She was almost feeling at peace, the only worry reaching her now being the increasing agitation of her child, who was turning and kicking relentlessly during the whole day and part of the night.

A future reveller, George had joked, feeling this sarabande under his fingers.

You should better produce a son, this time, Thomas Boleyn had only groaned.

Henry... After his boisterous reaction during the official announcement, Henry had become rather indifferent. One could have even said that his wife's pregnancy was ill-timed, and prevented him from getting rid of her as fast as he wished. He had not even had the curiosity to put his hand on Anne's belly to feel the child's moves. It was for the better, she told herself. She had no desire to see Henry growing fond of the newborn once it was on this world.

As for Cromwell... he was making himself more than discreet those days, not wanting a too obvious familiarity with the queen to generate suspicion. But Anne had discovered she needed him. She was bored to death if she could not argue at least once a day with her favourite secretary. He never sent her back to her embroidering, even asked her advice on some points. She also wanted to see how the baby would react to him. The child was jumping in her belly each time its mother was in presence of her brother, he daughter or – surprise – Lady Mary

Chance smiled upon her. As she was chatting with Nan about some Court gossip, Anne spotted familiar black dresses moving through the garden toward the palace. Cromwell would have to cross their path. Perfect. When he reached their position, Nan curtsied while he bowed before his queen.

"Nan, would you please leave us for a moment? I need to speak with Lord Cromwell."

"Of course, Majesty."
Nan quickly slipped away, dragging the queen's pet with her. If her mistress wanted to talk about politics... Anne waited, tapping her foot, until she disappeared to grip the man's hand firmly and drive him to sit on a bench with her, hidden behind a high box hedge.

"So," he said smiling, "which part of the budget are we going to discuss, today?"

Without answering, Anne guided his hand to her belly and pressed it against the folds of her dress. The baby immediately reacted to this new source of heath and kicked vigorously. She almost burst into laughter seeing his dumbfounded expression. Then she saw his features soften, take an almost dreamy look while he eagerly caressed the roundness of her waist, again and again, followed by the child's moves.

"Good," she said. He seems to like you."

He straightened and they exchanged a smile. Then, to her great regret, Anne went back to serious business and tackled less pleasant topic.

"But there is something else I wished to discuss with you. Since his accident, I have found the king... how can I say? Maybe... different. Of course, he was prone to anger fits before that, but it seems to me that things have worsened. His mood changes so quickly... I have stopped counting the furniture and vases he has broken."

"I know. The doctors think it is caused by his wound. It causes him constant pain and it embitters his character. I admit that it will not make our life any easier, since..."

"Since?"

"It is possible... well... We are most certainly going to encounter issues in the North. The closure of small monasteries is not as easily accepted up there, and I suspect some ill tricks."

"Does the king know?"

"Not yet. I am waiting to know more before reporting him what may only be some false rumours or minor incidents."

"Thanks a lot for keeping me informed, Thomas. I will free you now, before Saville asks herself too many questions."

He bowed.

"Your Majesty."

Anne watched him go sadly. She wished so much this little moment of peace could have lasted a bit longer. He had seemed so... fascinated by the child's moves. If only Henry had proven as considerate during her previous pregnancy, maybe she would not have had need of the dangerous expedient she had chosen.

##

18th of July, Whitehall

This had to be the most awful day in the whole life of Thomas Howard, duke of Norfolk, Charles Brandon told himself, watching the man from the corner of his eye. He looked like a mummy under his ducal crown and his red velvet coat. Another of those wretched commoners raised to the honours of nobility! And not just anyone, on top of that.
On that day, Thomas Cromwell was made Lord Privy Seal, in Thomas Boleyn's stead, as the man was truly essential as an ambassador, and for good measure, baron of Wimbledon. Though the man was one of the queen's allies, if his elevation meant Norfolk's failure, all the better! Unfortunately, Brandon was not ideally positioned to completely savour the old duke's shame, and he would end with the mother of all headaches if he kept on looking sideways as he did.

Sitting at the king's left, frozen under her heavy ceremonious cloak, Anne was biting her lips not to laugh, observing her uncle's sad face. And yet, she was happy beyond measure to see her old friend and councillor justly rewarded at last for the gigantic work he accomplished for the king for such a long time. He had slithered in Lord Wiltshire's absences like he had done some years before with Stephen Gardiner, stealing his office from him in the process. One only had to hope that Thomas Boleyn would not regard this as an offence. Doubtful; he loved being employed as a diplomat much more than paperwork, and would certainly be grateful to be discharged of it at the «benefit» of his former protégé.

When the newly-made baron rose to his feet after swearing his oath to the king, he could almost feel Norfolk's stare on his back, as uncomfortable and dangerous as the tip of a well-sharpened dagger.

# #

2nd of August

Doctor Butts carefully washed his hands after the examination and gave his patient reassuring smile.

"Good. Your Majesty does not need to worry about the child. It is well positioned, acts normally and seems of a normal size, as much as I can estimate."

"Does this mean I will have to withdraw soon?"

The queen's voice was incredibly weary. Her pregnancy had not gone well for several days, and small wonder. Butts shook his head, upset. A pregnant woman should never be, in any case, submitted to the pressure the queen had to endure. She had looked awfully pale, and far too skinny as she had started her last three months of pregnancy. Her legs and ankles had swollen, despite the walks he had prescribed her and she suffered from dark moods too often. Confinement would not do her any good. She needed light, exercise, entertainment, happiness around her.

"No, my lady. I think it is for the best that you remain in the world until the birth. Ask your friends or your family to come... You would greatly benefit from it. Your lady mother could join you, maybe?"

Anne had a nearly malevolent smile. To submit Henry to his mother-in-law? Brilliant! She thanked the good doctor warmly for such an excellent suggestion, before calling Nan Saville in so that she sent an invitation to Lady Boleyn.

# #

11th of August

When George Boleyn entered his sister's chambers in Hampton Court, he thought for a moment he had opened the wrong door, or that Anne had gone into labour sooner than predicted. The ladies and servants were running everywhere, carrying linen, books, cushions, and over all this affolement, he heard a familiar voice giving orders.

"There, there, work a little harder, by Jove! You receive wages to serve Her Majesty, and I have never seen such a disorder in all my life! You, there, put this stool against the wall, it is in the way! You, in the pink dress, be kind enough to put these books on their shelves, they are more than ready
George walked out in the corridor in all haste, stifling a giggle.

The hurricane known as Elizabeth Howard-Boleyn had just fallen onto the palace. God protect its inhabitants.

Inside the royal chambers, the queen’s mother was applying her very personal method to obtain order, zeal and discipline. She had already made several ladies-in-waiting cry by scolding them, and the remainder of the henhouse was now deadly afraid of her, except Madge, who was used to this storm, and Anne Saville, who at nearly thirty would not become flustered for such a small event.

Anne watched her mother fret around with a smile. The small woman had been ill in July, or so she said, but if her recovery went on this way, the palace would never recover. If she had been certain of recover so easily, Anne would have accepted to be ill every day. Despite her more or less fifty years of life, Lady Boleyn was bursting with energy as soon as she found a right cause to work on, and right now, it was to make her daughter happy and entertain her until birth.
Revised succession

30th of July

The blow was terrible, and yet... If its consequences had not been so dreadful, the news would have remained relatively unnoticed amongst the buzzing activity of the London hive. On the 23rd of July, Henry Fitzroy, Lord Richmond, had died at Saint-James palace, of a wasting illness like his aunt Mary and his uncle Arthur, after slowly fading during almost a year.

Usually, the life and death of royal bastards only mildly bothered the Court and people, lest said bastards had distinguished themselves on the battlefield or with some plot. The case was slightly different there. The young man was the only bastard acknowledged by the king and, according to the most recent news, his only son still alive. There was some talk about two or three other boys born some years after Fitzroy from at least two different mothers, but the king’s paternity was more than doubtful in all cases. Fitzroy had died without an heir, his marriage to Mary Howard never consumed because of a character incompatibility No Tudor male child remained. Now, Henry Tudor could only rely on his daughters and the child the queen was bearing. Or, in last resort, his nephews and nieces born from the union of his sister Mary and the duke of Suffolk, but they were coming far behind in the succession line. The Scottish princes and princesses born of Princess Margaret had been driven back behind the Suffolks, so much the idea of a monarch born beyond the frontier displeased Henry, as well as his subjects. England was almost permanently at war against Scotland, and a king born of the Stuart line, even with Tudor blood in his veins, held close to no chance of having Englishmen grow fond of him.

The king had remained locked up in his rooms for two days when he had learnt his son's death, and none of his councillors had dared open his door. Knivert had tried to reason him from the anteroom, but had been sent away by an inconsolable Henry. Anne received some news through Master Sommers, the king’s fool, only man allowed to approach the royal person. The fool acted reassuringly, and then overdid himself to cheer his employer up. His sharp remarks quickly snapped Henry out of his torpor.

"Oh, poor Henry. Poor king all alone in his room. While you are crying, do you know how your country is ruled?"

"Go away, Will."

"Well, jugs were gathered in the council room, they were decorated with blue or red ribbons, and each jug was filled with water at a level different from the others. This way, when you tape on the jugs, they all give different sounds. And you cannot tune them. The cacophony!"

"All right. I get it."

The king called his servants, his barber and required clean clothes then came back into the world.

Learning this, Cromwell and Audley sighed in relief. To make the council work against Norfolk's wishes and whims was a rather perilous exercise during the king’s absence, Henry being the only one high enough to quiet the old duke.

At the same time, gossip was spreading, at Court as well as in the city inns. If the gentry kept a polite face and noisily mourned with the king: "Such a fine young man, and who looked so much like him!" The commoners did not take kids gloves and crudely commented the royal bastard's death.
"There I say," a pedlar hammered on a market in London, "me say, and that it's an omen from Heaven, sure! The Lord wants a lass to wear the crown after Henry. Yes! He wants a good English girl to be our queen!"

"And if the queen gives us a boy this autumn, what does it make of your omen?" a market gardener retorted.

"The king only has healthy girls", the man replied without turning flustered, before collecting his goods and quickly scampering to escape the city watch.

Truth be told, many people in London, and elsewhere in Europe, shared those thoughts.

First of all, the Imperial Ambassador Chapuys, dutiful partisan of Lady Mary, saw Fitzroy's death as a sign from Heaven in favour of his cause. His lady would become queen, it was now obvious. God was cleaning the way before her and opened the way towards glory and the throne. He wrote in this regard to his master, forgetting to mention that Queen Anne and Elizabeth won a bit more popularity each day. People liked the little redhead and her mother never missed an opportunity to exhibit her when she came in London; the queen's charities also earned her some gratitude.

More annoying for the Tudors than the Savoyard and his protégée, the king's cousin, Reginald Pole, now living in the Vatican, told himself that this death made him closer to the throne. Good catholic as he was, he would certainly receive the support (and funds) of both the pope and the emperor to depose the Tudor and wear the crown in his stead. Princess Mary might rise as a source of disagreement with the Spaniard, but he could marry her to soothe the emperor. Their children would come from two royal lines, and be the incontestable heirs of the crown. He was wearing a cassock for now, but had not been ordained priest yet. This shaky situation would help him. He was still allowed to leave the Church to come back to civil life. Bless be the pope who had invented the office of secular cardinal!

The queen too saw a splendid opportunity to grab in order to validate the candidature of Elizabeth or the child to be born, if it was a boy. No need to besiege Henry as she had been stupid enough to do for her daughter's betrothal with the Duke of Angoulême. She would remain as silent as a grave on this topic and would limit her part to being a good mother and a fine piece of art for Court. For now, she had to let Henry come to this decision all alone.

But the king did not resign himself so easily. He was still entertaining the thought of taking another wife again, if Anne gave him one more daughter. However, he made the mistake of opening his heart to Archbishop Cranmer. The priest immediately tried to demonstrate the sacrilegious aspect of such an act; his marriage was valid, and he should not despair so quickly. The queen had given obvious proof she was still able to conceive. Within a few months, the king's issues would certainly be solved. Henry kept the project for himself and decided to never talk about it again with the archbishop. Too pro-Boleyn to be useful, this one.

# #

15th of August

"For Heaven's sake, Dick, close the windows!"

"But sir, it's stifling in there!" the servant protested.

"And these songs are a nightmare for my ears."

Still grumbling, Cromwell tried to go back to his work on the last law the king had required. Outside
a procession praying the Virgin Mary passed by, and the minister wondered if his neighbours did not sing louder on purpose when they walked past his house. These were not the ideal conditions to draw the new fiscal map of England, in order to simplify its cut-out a little and rationalize the collection of taxes. If one added the worrying rumours that Cranmer had reported him, Cromwell had something to keep him busy all night.

The king was thinking of divorce again, even though the queen was pregnant.

_Not by him_, a little voice whispered in his mind.

So what? _It is not the blood that counts, it is the symbol. All England followed Edward III even though some claimed he was Mortimer's son, and not the second Edward's._

Despite this reasoning, as the queen's delivery came closer, he prayed more and more often so that the child did not look too much like him. The king was proving more and more unstable, even with an audience, and the consequences of a raging fit could be dreadful. Anne had once told him how Henry had thrashed a poor groom sent by Katherine just after her exile from Court, only because the unfortunate man had transmitted a kind message from his princess. This type of incident could easily happen again, and Cromwell hoped it would not be at his expense. Henry frightened him. To feel him walk behind him while he was working, to imagine his huge stature just behind his back, made him feel extremely ill at ease. He always feared a slap or a punch. The strength of habit, no doubt. His own father had never missed an opportunity to beat him.

Until the day he would break, answer back, and then... farewell, Thomas. To raise his hand against the monarch was an act of treason, and the penalty, so horrifying, that it was worth learning to grin and bear it, and avoid any violent gesture.
Hello readers! Here is a fresh chapter for the week-end, where a new player enters the game.

Thanks for the kudos and comments, they really help since I'm not... in a very nice place right now.

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Night of the 15th to 16th of September, Whitehall

A loud cry woke the queen's servants, who were sleeping in a little room adjacent to hers. The three women rushed to their mistress' side. Anne was holding her belly, whimpering, and her sheets were soaked.

"Doctor", she croaked between gasps of pain.

Two of the servants went running through the corridors, one to Doctor Butts, the other to the king's chambers. The doctor came in trotting, his bag under his arm, and started to give orders. Other servants, waken by her colleagues, entered the room and began to prepare clean cloth and heat some water...

##

16th of September, eight in the morning

Butts grimaced. The queen had been in labour for seven hours, and things had not improved much. The child did not come towards the light, and if he or she remained too long in his mother's belly, he would risk suffocation, and Anne, complete exhaustion. The doctor knew that it could end in a truly awful way, given the queen's current weakness. He sent one of his pages in his chambers to get a certain small bottle he only used as a last resort.

When Butts showed her a flask of thin brown powder, Anne stared at it with distrust. What was that mixture?

"It is rather dangerous, my lady, but I have nothing else to quicken the birth."

"Dangerous?" Anne groaned. "How?"

"It is a mixture comprising ergot. If the dose is not properly gauged, you may fall gravely ill. But a simple infusion of thyme or dill will not be enough to help you, so..."

Anne made a face. She had swallowed without complaining the herbal teas of nettles the doctor had given her during her pregnancy since, according to him, they were good for the baby's health, the fennel seeds to lessen her sickness, but she could not stand all these disgusting infusions any more.

"Give it", she ordered, before screaming when a more violent contraction hit her.

Thomas or Henry, no matter; the first one that gets between my hands will pay for this. No way I'll let one or the other enter my bed until I am too old to bear children! Ouch!
16th of September, nine thirty

Nan and Madge exchanged a dismayed look. Which one would tell the king his wife had given birth to another daughter? Madge decided to put herself out; she had been Henry's mistress, maybe he would not be too inclined to mistreat her. She gathered her skirts and her courage, and left the queen's bedchamber to walk towards the council room. No one in the anteroom, except the other ladies-in-waiting, Lady Jane Rochford amongst them, and the queen's mother. The king had not even allowed George Boleyn to keep his sister company. It was cruel...

The guards watching the council entrance smiled indulgently when they saw her tiptoeing towards them. They made friendly bows, and one of them left his post to walk her inside.

"Lady Norris, Your Majesty", the guard announced after a quick salute.

Henry was surrounded by his whole council and Madge wanted nothing more than to disappear under the carpet. No, better, under the floor, it was safer. She curtsied deeply before the assembly.

"Well?" Henry demanded. "Do I have a son at last?"

Madge took a breath. *Lord, protect me.*

"No, Your Majesty, the queen..."

Poor Madge did not even have the time to finish her sentence. Henry had risen from his seat and darted in the corridor, violently shoving the young woman aside on his way and sending her on the floor.

"Sorry," Madge muttered, having a hard time getting up.

"There," George Boleyn said, reaching for her hand. "I think one of us should better follow His Majesty before he makes a scandal in my sister's rooms," he added, worried.

"He can shout as much as he wants, the lady-in-waiting ranted, it is not as if the queen can hear him..."

The councillors all stared at her in alarm, and Madge realized what she had just said.

"No, no," she quickly amended, "the queen still lives."

Relieved sighs escaped some of them.

"But she is unconscious for now."

"At least," chancellor Audley asked, "is the child healthy?"

"Oh indeed," Madge answered with a genuine smile. "She is in very good health and the doctor has only pleasant things to say about her!"

"Here are some excellent news. Lord Rochford, I believe you are right we should better go with the king, just in case..."

Thus the chancellor left, followed by George, Richard Rich and Lady Norris, leaving Cromwell, bishop Gardiner and the duke of Suffolk looking daggers at each other.
When they arrived at the queen's door, they could not believe their ears. Henry, crimson with anger, was facing his old friend Anthony Knivert, equally furious, and the two men were exchanging rather... frightening words.

"You have a healthy child, your wife almost died trying to give you a son again, and this is all you manage to say? « What am I to do with a daughter?»" Anthony shouted, indignant.

"It matters not the queen is ill or dying, she failed to do her duty again. She owed me a son!"

"The Lord graced you with the chance of being a father once more and you spit in His face! Dear God, you deserve to have daughters and only daughters, no matter how many wives you take!"

For a moment, Henry seemed on the verge of hitting Knivert, then he pulled himself together and raised his hand. The two guards that followed him everywhere came closer.

"Please take Sir Anthony to the gates of London, if you please. He must leave Court and not come back without an order from the king, under penalty of perpetual banishment from the realm. Be glad I am a moderate man, Anthony. What you have just said... is treason."

###

17th of September

The queen had regained consciousness at last, and the little swarm of ladies and servants surrounding her had come back to life with her. People breathed again, they dared laugh and speak within the royal earshot. They found absolutely charming the name Alice Her Majesty had chosen for her daughter.

Chancellor Audley, the chancellor of the Court of Justice Richard Rich, "Call-me" Risley, Lord Cromwell... in a nutshell, all the men who owed the queen part of their current fortune, or felt the slightest loyalty towards her, came to offer their congratulations, though their worry was easily read on their faces. Anne did not make any comment. Nan Saville had already reported the king's fit of rage, the fact that poor Madge had landed on the carpet before the whole council, and Anthony's exile. She thanked everyone with a smile, before falling back against her pillows. True, Alice's birth had been really more exhausting than Elizabeth's... Was it God's call to order for the way the child had been conceived? If it was, Anne did not care and did not regret the afternoons in the little room, nor a certain Christmas and a certain wall. She did not want to apologize any more for everything. She wanted to sing to her daughter, to take care of her... just for a day. Was it asking too much?

Under the baffled eyes of her ladies-in-waiting and her mother's more tender gaze, Queen Anne took advantage of the absence of the doctor, the king, her father and all the others to – at last – allow her newborn daughter to feed in peace.

"It seems," Audley told George and Cromwell once they had left the queen's room, "that Lord Boleyn and the duke of Norfolk are all but satisfied."

"Of course", the youngest Boleyn sibling answered, rather tartly, "being the future king of England's uncle and grandfather would have been so much better than uncle and grandfather to a future princess of France or another country! Well", he resumed with a more smiling face," it is our gain. It means we will be allowed to take care of these two little angels without having those dreadful censors behind our backs!"

Audley smiled too. Elizabeth would become queen of England, with God's help, and Alice, princess in Europe. They would have to train those children for their future roles. This would lead to very
long lessons, if the chancellor had to judge by their father. He was going to say as much to the Lord Privy Seal when he noticed the unusual dreamy expression on his colleague's face. Of course... To him, the prospect of having two little girls running to him again was heaven.

Cromwell went back to visit Anne later that evening, and as soon as he entered her room, she felt his awkwardness. He hid his uneasiness behind an elegant bow.

"Your Majesty..."

"Come closer, Thomas."

He took some steps and stood at the queen's bedside. She was holding Alice in her arms and the baby was fidgeting, her tiny fingers opening like a little starfish. Thin black downy hair already covered her head.

"I am so sorry", he muttered.

Anne stared at him wide-eyed.

"What for, my friend?"

"I fear that I did not help you much, giving you another daughter," he sighed. "This does not secure your position at all."

He nearly winced when Anne reached to touch his cheek. She was staring at him with a rather unsettling intensity.

"You do not need to be sorry," she assured him. "There, sit and... take your daughter", she added, a bit lower.

With infinite caution, Cromwell took the child in his arms, praying that she would not cry. But she remained silent, her darkening eyes staring at him. He loosened the cloth that surrounded her face to study her better, and Alice's small hand closed firmly around his finger.

I have a daughter.

Suddenly, it was real. It was not a simple political move any more, a favour done. He felt the weight and warmth of the baby in his arms, saw her move, could touch her. He tried to swallow back the knot growing in his throat. Whatever the king would ask him against Anne now, he would be unable to do it. She was the mother of his child; he was bound to her as surely as if she had his ring on her finger.

##

20th of September, Hatfield

Anthony reined up and his mare entered jogging into the yard of Hatfield. A lad came out of the stables and took care of the animal while the knight had a servant announce him. He had not much time, and though Henry had not formally forbidden him to go there, his volatile mood could still go ablaze if he learnt about Anthony's visit.

Lady Bryan welcomed him with a warm smile and soon an overexcited "Uncle Anthony!" warned him of Elizabeth's arrival. He bowed before the little girl, the feather of his beret sweeping the floor, then he put a gentle kiss on the little hand she extended.
"So? Is the baby born?"

"Indeed, Your Highness, and I am very glad to tell you that you have a little sister."

Elizabeth burst into happy exclamations, and was about to climb up the stairs to Lady Mary's room to share the good news, when she stopped dead on her tracks and, balancing herself on a step, asked her sister's name.

"Alice", Anthony answered, and the child resumed her race double quick.

He watched her run, smiling.

"It must not be easy, I imagine?" he told the governess.

"Indeed not," Lady Bryan admitted, "but she is so kind, and clever... it is easy to forgive her. How is the queen?"

"Not as well as after Elizabeth's birth," Anthony confessed, "yet Butts thinks that some weeks of rest will put her back on her feet. The child is healthy. I don't dare report the king's reaction," he sighed.

"Tell me, I have heard so many things," the lady said, resigned.

"To be short, he told in front of the whole Court that he did not care a fig that his wife was ill or even in danger, given that she had not been able to give him a son."

"Oh!"

"This should dampen the marrying fervour of many young ladies... if the mistreatment of both the Seymours sisters had not already disgusted them. As for myself, I made the huge mistake of criticizing His Majesty for his behaviour..."

"And you are not in the Tower yet?" Lady Bryan cried, alarmed.

"So here I am, on my way to my lands, with an express order not to move from there until the king changes his mind. This time, it will not be before a long time."

Lady Bryan, who had always liked this wise young man, kissed him on both cheeks and wished him good luck, adding she would pray so that the king would not leave him pining too long far from London. Anthony thanked her, but he intended to use his exile to conclude two or three little businesses. In Dover, for instance.

# #

25th of September

Alice Tudor's baptism came with a far much simpler ceremony than her elder sister's. There was better things to do, according to Henry, with the Treasury. But the queen did not take offence. On the contrary, this smaller gathering, almost familial, pleased her more than the church organs and the lines of courtiers staged by her husband two years ago. The ambassador's wife acted as a proxy for the queen of France. As for the godfather, Anne had had a good laugh choosing the duke of Suffolk. Creating him sacred obligations towards her daughter was an excellent way to keep his hands tied. She had also planned donations at the end of the ceremony. Fifty poor girls would receive an allocation of two pounds to marry, and as many poor widows would be given the same amount of money to pay their debts and feed their children.
The ambassador's wife was carefully carrying the little princess, smiling proudly, while Elizabeth was, as usual, clutching her half-sister Mary's hand, watching all those beautiful clothes with interest, under the indulgent eyes of her governess and her aunt Mary Stafford. The three women had apparently reconciled, thanks to the girl. This detail of course did not escape Chapuys's keen eye and made him grimace. If the princess formed a too important affection for the little bastard, it could become an issue.

While the archbishop drew a cross on the baby's forehead, and said baby did not like the joke the tiniest bit, the imperial ambassador squeezed through the crowd towards the young woman. At first she did not notice him and he had to tap her on the shoulder so she looked at him.

"Master Chapuys, cannot this wait the end of the ceremony?" Mary asked, frowning.

"It is of the highest importance," the envoy insisted. "I must tell you about your cousin's projects."

"Hmm... Really?"

"Come now, my lady, have I ever lied to you?"

"Yes", Mary retorted, slightly annoyed. "When you told me that the lady loathed her child and that my sister was a little monster. Now show at least some respect for this sacred place."

"Defiled by the presence of all those heret..."

Chapuys promptly shut up when Lady Bryan turned her head towards him, her lips pinched. When he wanted to resume the conversation, it was too late; the governess had beaten him and dragged Lady Mary behind her. Together, the ladies went to give the alms the queen had prepared. The sweet amount of two hundred pounds was distributed amongst benedictions.

As easy to spot amongst the courtiers as an ink stain on a parchment, Cromwell was watching them with renewed interest. The Londoners' hurrah warmed his hearth. There were still some to call Anne a whore, but more and more people recognized her qualities. Well, well, well...
When, in June, he had told the queen that the North would be an issue, Cromwell would have never thought it would come to this. On the 1st of October an uprising had started in Lincolnshire against the actions of his commissioners (small surprise) and for the abolition of taxes in times of peace (small wonder again). Some forty thousand demonstrators had walked towards the county main city and occupied the cathedral. Henry had not wasted any time. In the following days, he had sent a messenger to the demonstrators ordering them to disperse, under penalty of facing the duke of Suffolk’s troops, who were coming up from London to the province. The threat was understood all right, and most of the rioters had left, some leaders still persisting, only to be executed.

But on the 13th of October, Yorkshire had taken over, led by men far more determined. A local minor nobleman, Robert Constable, and a lawyer, Robert Aske, had been able to channel the people’s discontent concerning the taxes, the high cost of life and... the dissolution of monasteries into a full rebellion. Rumours had travelled about the suppression of parish churches and the end of free baptisms, which was totally false, but how could one explain it to nearly illiterate people who knew nothing of the world except what their notables would tell them? Properly indoctrinated, they had taken York, had reinstated monks and nuns in their former accommodations (it mattered not that the new tenants were often modest families who would have never had a roof over their heads without it), and had then showed themselves at Pontefract Castle, held by Lord Darcy... who, supposedly lacking troops, had immediately capitulated.

Henry, for once, had not reacted violently. Well... Not against the demonstrators. The minute the king had learnt of the uprising, Cromwell had certainly received the worst correction of all his adult life. The morning after, his head had still pained him, and he had thought he would lose some teeth.

His Majesty had chosen negotiation, and sent Norfolk and Shrewsbury to treat with the rebels in Doncaster, then invited some of their leaders to list their grievances directly before him.

And thus the minister was now standing at the king's right side in the great hall of Hampton Court, watching two of those men who wanted, according to the rumour, to see him at the end of a rope.

It was most certainly true. One of them, whom his agents had pointed to him as Robert Constable, would not stop throwing hateful looks at him.

Never had Robert Constable thought to come to Court one day, and even less as a representative for the contestants in the North. He was doing his best to hide his amazement at the beauty of Hampton Court, its gardens, its painted and carved wooden ceilings and the crowd massing around the throne.

Once he had risen from his deep bow, Constable took advantage of his colleague Elleker listing their complaints to the king in the ornate style fitting the Court to take a good look at the gentlemen surrounding the king, and at the monarch himself.

Henry Tudor was a huge man, corpulent, with a rubicund face, a strong voice, magnificently garbed in velvet and furs. All his courtiers matched him, ladies and gentlemen sparkling of a thousand colours and costly jewels. All but one. The man standing at the king’s side was easy to spot with his black coat and the sobriety of his look. Constable already knew who Thomas Cromwell was and what he looked like. To see him standing here increased the hatred he felt towards this man. He was saying nothing, and listening to Elleker intently, unlike the courtiers chatting with their closest neighbours. Constable noted the minister's calculating look and when their eyes met, Cromwell
allowed himself a slight nod that could have been friendly in any other circumstance. Patience, Constable told himself, within a very short time, the king would be rid of this arrogant upstart.

While Constable was meeting His Majesty, the young Charlie Raw felt a bit forgotten, sitting on a bench, lords and servants walking past him without even noticing him. The two negotiators' horses had been led to the stables and now, he had nothing to do, when he used to be their lad and stable boy. He was bored to death and tired, so he did not notice the pretty lady-in-waiting watching him from a corner. He was not aware of her presence before he nearly had his nose on the blue velvet of her dress. Seeing this apparition in front of him, he jumped on his feet.

"Ah, er... my lady... I'm sorry..."

Ursula Missledon offered him her most charming smile. Recently promoted as one of the queen's ladies-in-waiting as well as the king's mistress, she was delighted to find at last someone to impress in this blasé Court even if it was a little provincial still reeking of sheep.

"It is nothing. Please follow me. The queen wants to speak with you."

The young man started at her in amazement. He had surely heard wrong. The queen wanted to see him?

"Er, fine, my lady. I'm following you."

The lady walked through a maze of corridors, turning left and right in quick steps, and Charlie wondered how she could walk so fast while wearing such heavy clothes. At last she stopped in front of a door guarded by two armed men.

"You can let him enter. The queen invited him."

One of the guards opened the door for them, ushered them in, and swiftly closed it behind them.

The queen's chambers made a violent contrast with the brick walls of the corridors. Carved panellings on the walls, thick carpets on the floor, tapestries, costly bibelots... To think he had believed he had seen the best in the archbishop's palace in York...

A small dog suddenly appeared, barking, and came to sniff his legs.

"Pourquoi!" an annoyed voice called out, "leave this young man alone."

The animal trotted back to his mistress, who was sitting near a window, a book in one hand, the other resting on a crib. Charlie watched her. She was thin, dark-haired, dressed in what must have been the latest fashion and wore expensive jewels, far more luxurious than the other ladies'. Charlie was getting to the only logical conclusion just when Lady Ursula drove a finger between his shoulder blades.

"Bow before the queen!" she hissed.

The young man clumsily obeyed, and nearly fled when the queen held out a hand. He quickly put a peck on her fingers, before taking a step back and straightening.

"What are you called?"

"Charlie Raw, my lady."

"Sit down, Charlie. What are you waiting for?"
"I was told it was not polite to sit in front of the king... or the queen. My lady."

"I am inviting you to do so," the queen insisted, showing a stool near her seat.

Charlie sat, his hat in hand, and Anne waved her ladies-in-waiting out. Only remained the small dog Pourquoi and the baby sleeping in her crib.

"I would like you to tell me how things are going up North," the queen said, closing her book.
"What brings you here, Mr Raw?"

At first he hesitated, not knowing what Constable and Aske wanted him to repeat, but as the queen remained silent, listening to him, without getting angry, he gained some trust and tried to tell the whole tale since the first envoys' arrival. The plunders of some, the rudeness of the others, the feeling of being robbed of your very own soul, the hard life because of the poor harvest, the fact that some lordlings did not like the way things were going and wanted the power to go back to nobility exclusively.

At that, she laughed.

"Mr Raw, do you believe that power truly belongs to nobility? Politically, it is the king who rules. But the true wealth of England, it is traders who make it, not nobility. Behind every earl, baron, marquess you see at Court, there is a small team of commoners who cash up for them, manage their lands and prevent them from making too many debts. They are the ones holding the true power now."

She certainly knew what she was talking about. She was educated. And she met with nobility daily.

"It surprises me to see people of low birth, no offence, feel indignant when one of them succeeds in rising above his condition."

"It doesn't bother me," Charlie said at once. "But... I'd like Mr Cromwell to leave our churches alone. It's not this way he'll change our minds."

"Yes, I know this. I have been trying to make him understand for a very long time, but he is so stubborn."

Relieved, Charlie allowed himself to laugh. To think Constable called this woman a witch! She was certainly very smart, but not evil.

"That's the whole story, my lady."

"Then I will not detain you any longer."

She rang a little silver bell, then rose, followed by her guest. Charlie craned his neck to see the baby and Anne bid him to come closer. He bent down and saw a tiny head covered in black hair, two small hands gripping the sheet...

"She's lovely."

"Thank you, Charlie. Ah, Ursula! Can you walk our friend back to where you found him?"

The lovely lady in blue left with Charlie while the queen turned to a woman who had remained hidden behind a curtain.

"What do you think, Mother?"
"I believe you won this boy over," Elizabeth Boleyn answered, leaving her hiding place. "But what he told you is not comforting at all, specially for your friend Cromwell."

Once more, Anne wondered what her mother really knew of her relationship with the minister.

"Report to him everything this young man told you. He did not do enough to restrain his inspectors, apparently."

Anne sighed. During the previous weeks, almost ten inspectors had been arrested and put on trial for robbery and use of false documents. They had stolen liturgical objects in several monasteries and had sold them to others religious institutions eager to grasp new relics, or to rich individuals. They had not been really prudent, flaunting their brand new fortune right under their employer's nose. Cromwell had proven pitiless for those men whose actions endangered their colleagues, and had them all hanged.

After several interviews with the two messengers, the king had allowed the duke of Norfolk and the earl of Shrewsbury to promise a general amnesty and that a session of the Parliament would be held in York within the year, if only they agreed to cease fire. To drive the point home, Henry invited the leaders of the contestation, Aske and Darcy, to come to London for Christmas.

Anne wondered if he planned to have them all arrested on that day, or if he would play more subtly. Of course he would never keep his promises. But who would he bring down first? The rebels threatening his throne, or the minister whose head they demanded? Anne was desperately praying for Thomas to be spared, that no one ever got the opportunity to hurt him, neither those demonstrators nor the king. If he was to disappear, she would lose her best defence. He was always playing the devil's advocate for her, protected her interests as she defended him against Norfolk, Gardiner and so many others. She felt more a queen after ten minutes with him than a whole day holding Court at Henry's side. She would have given her crown for one day in his arms without hiding. She had become so reliant on this man...

Why denying it? She was in love.

##

25th of December, London

Never had Christmas seemed so gloomy to Queen Anne. She had requested Elizabeth to come to Court and made the best of the little time she could spend with her girl before she went back to Hatfield with Alice. Once more, Henry took her baby to send her away, and left his queen alone in a Court which was becoming colder and bleaker each day that passed. .

Two days ago, Robert Aske, leader of the rebellion, had arrived in London, magnificently welcomed by the king. Anne had watched him with a measure of pity. He had been trapped by His Majesty's smiles, like so many before him, without suspecting the fate waiting for him. If Anne had been a good Samaritan, she would have advised him to flee as fast as possible, but that would have been treason too. So she played her part to perfection, distant, polite and silent. Aske was too courteous to call her a whore, but he thought no less of her. For this fervent Catholic, Mary was the king's only heiress, Elizabeth and Alice were bastards and their mother a scarlet woman, without mentioning his unwavering opinion concerning Thomas Cromwell's presence in the government. Anne could not allow this king of individuals to walk free. She tolerated his presence during Christmas mass, doing her best to ignore him and focusing instead on the beautiful canticles sung by the choir the archbishop had recently created. Excellent distraction.

At the end of the mass, Cromwell left the palace chapel muttering curses. To be forced to hear
THREE hours of Latin just to avoid having this damned Gardiner falling on him like the whole Spanish Inquisition... unbearable. He did not even have Ralph Saddler to help him, since the king had sent him in Scotland to lead negotiations. Cromwell wanted to go home, to see his daughter... He thought about it. He had some time to go and wish a merry Christmas to his queen before leaving the palace. He headed towards his office to pick up the books he had bought for Gregory, and found new reports piled on his desk.

*Well. Just two minutes to see what it is.*

"I would really like to open my gifts now", Elizabeth muttered, fighting to keep her eyes open.

"You are sleeping on your feet", her mother told her, taking the girl in her arms. "It is time you went to bed..."

"I hope Mary will like what I found for her", the little girl adding before yawning widely.

At the beginning of the month, the young princess had sent her maids to scour the shops in London with precise instructions. They had come back from their trip with a carved wooden chest for Lady Mary, hairpins for her tutor Kat Champernowne, handkerchiefs of embroidered cambric for Lady Bryan, new feathers for cousin Francis' hat, a painting of a hunting scene for the king, and so on... In the end, she had order to buy a notebook bound in a cover of dark leather for her « uncle Thomas ». Nervous, she had asked her mother to bring it to the recipient, which suited the queen perfectly.

As she suspected, he was still in his office, sorting some papers, seemingly distracted. Anne silently came in and slammed her package down on the wooden table. Cromwell nearly jumped from his chair and stared at her with wide eyes.

"M... Majesty?"

"How many times will I have to tell you that you will likely kill yourself, working so much?" she ranted. "It is Christmas, go back home, spend time with your son and nephews, but for Heaven's sake, forget those files. They will still be here within two days."

He bowed, smiling, and left his chair. She handed him the package.

"The box is from me", Anne indicated, feeling slightly awkward.

He resisted the temptation to shake the object to guess its content and put it in his pocket. The other package bore, in a still hesitant writing, the mention : « Uncle Thomas ». He frowned, not understanding.

"It was Elizabeth's idea", Anne explained. "Knowing that three of her uncles and four of her aunts died before she was born, she decided to replace them. Always with people who had nothing to do, by blood, with the Boleyns or the Tudors. She has already chosen Anthony Knivert for prince Arthur, Nan Saville for the late duchess of Suffolk, Liz Seymour for one of my sisters and apparently, you to replace one of my younger brothers."

He stroked the thin cloth wrapping the gift, moved by the girl's gesture, and also surprised by such an initiative from a very young child. Anne tightened his fingers around the package and took her leave, Thomas remaining behind, rather surprised.

The minister needed some minutes to completely regain his senses. Then, his curiosity piqued, he opened the small box Anne had given him. Inside was one of those little brooches used to close the collar of a doublet or a cloak. The dark blue stone was rather discreet, the originality of the piece coming from the silver setting in the shape of ivy leaves that surrounded it.
I take root or I die.

This was crystal clear.

Maybe the coming year would begin under better omens.
"Good Lord, they were stupid enough to do it..."

Cromwell was reading his agents' last report on the North with an increasing incredulity. One of Constable and Aske's seconds-in-command had disobeyed their orders and organised demonstrations in Cumberland and Westmoreland, complaining that the king was taking far too much time to give some effect to his promises. According to the report, Constable had done everything he could to prevent this, all in vain. This Sir Francis Bigod had just provided the king the arguments he lacked to have the rebel leaders hung, and on a silver platter, no less. It would not be pretty to watch, Cromwell thought. He had heard Henry's vows to destroy the rebels as well as their wives and children, to put an end to their revolt. And the fear the monarch had felt had led him to promise the same fate to his minister if everything did not go according to plan.

Sticking the paper in his pocket, Cromwell headed towards the king's chambers, dragging his feet. It did not bother him to have Constable and Aske hung, but all the others... all those miserable peasants who had followed them, believing they could change their lives...

As he had imagined, Henry burst in anger before ordering Norfolk to march back in the North to arrest Robert Aske, Robert Constable, Lord Darcy and Sir Francis Bigod. All those people would be brought back in London for their trial.

"As you wish, Your Majesty."

The old duke seemed a little too eager to unleash his soldiers on the peasants for Cromwell's taste. As the minister was leaving the council room, Suffolk caught him by the arm and dragged him away from the others councillors.

"I must talk with you. Could you come to the chapel within one hour?"

Without waiting for an answer, the duke whirled on his heels and walked away.

Curious to discover what Suffolk had invented this time, Cromwell went to the meeting. He cast a quick eye around him.

"Is it really a place to discuss politics?"

"It is the only one where we won't be disturbed", Brandon assured.

It became almost frightening. The duke of Suffolk would not be stupid enough to lure him there and try to murder him, would he? It was unlikely. The duke had killed men in the middle of a battle, but probably never in a more personal way, in a backstreet or a corridor. He had never faced such a... distasteful situation.

"What do you want from me? I am aware of the amount of friendship and trust you feel for me, so I know you need something. What is it?"

"Well... you see, the king is growing really tired of his wife", Brandon began.

"No, really?" Cromwell groaned. If you disturb me to tell me something so obvious, your life will turn very, very difficult, you dolt.
"And he has resolved to send her away. One way or the other."

"Ah... His Majesty wishes for a divorce or another annulment?" the minister inquired as politely as he could.

"Or even something more radical", Brandon pointed out with a satisfied smirk. "It would be easy to launch some rumours about the queen, don't you think? the duke went on. Her behaviour with gentlemen is rather... peculiar, isn't it?"

"Perhaps. But questions would automatically be asked, and the answers would lead to me." And in more than one way.

"If your 'good reputation' worries you so much", Suffolk hissed, "I will find other ways. This woman is not fit for the throne. We need a more... worthy queen."

More pliable, you mean.

"And her brats have nothing to do in the line of succession."

That said, Suffolk left the chapel in a rustle of fur. Cromwell watched him go, his stomach knotted in fear. He fell on his knees on the cold stones.

I beg of you, Lord, help me. I do not know what to do to protect them.

# #

3rd of February

The news for the North were more than satisfying. Aske and Bigod had been arrested, and Lord Darcy as well. The soldiers were still looking for Constable, but he would be found soon and arrested too. The three prisoners would be brought to the Tower of London to be questioned by the duke of Norfolk, while Suffolk and Shrewsbury went on tracking Constable and his men.

Cromwell held no delusions concerning those rebels' fates. They would all be executed, even though they had tried to stop the last demonstrations. Henry forgot the meaning of pity when he felt threatened. And those demonstrators, with their scythes and forks, had threatened him. Worse, they had frightened him.

# #

27th of February

Shrewsbury's short note was brought on the king's desk during the morning. Constable had been captured with some of his last followers and the earl, according to his orders, was ready to bring them back to London for their trial.

Henry was beaming.

"Excellent! Now I will be able to spend some time on other issues."

Knowing the king's mind, Queen Anne started to worry when she heard of this. If Henry wanted her death... No, no, he would just want a divorce, nothing more. If he wanted this, she would grant it to him without making a fuss. To be free again was more important for her than anything else. She would not need to hide to visit the man she had come to love.

# #
10th of March, Tower of London

The Tower was really crowded. It was hosting four eminent prisoners, as well as the duke of Norfolk's guards and His Grace himself. If some had wished to see him locked up in a cell with his victims, no one would have dared push him inside. Instead of that, with Mr Rich, Edward Seymour and Master John the torturer, the duke interrogated his guests relentlessly. Had they received money from abroad? Had they been contacted by Reginald Pole? Did they wish to overthrow the king? Despite the energy displayed by Master John, the answers were still no. It did not suit Norfolk or the king at all. Without any proof, it would be difficult to justify their hanging or beheading or... whatever method of execution would be chosen.

To Norfolk's great displeasure, the king sent his minister to inspect the progress of his inquiries. The duke would have not desired anything more than to throw the insolent crow in the deepest put he could find, and send the torturer to practise on him but unfortunately, Cromwell had managed to make himself indispensable and it was not the right time yet to get rid of him. Patience, patience... his turn would come, and the damn commoner would replace Constable and associates in a cell.

"Do as you will", he just said to the intruder.

The minister did not even honour that with an answer. He was ready to visit the indomitable captives when Master Kingston, governor of the Tower, asked for him.

"What can I do for you?" the minister asked.

"Well... I wished to speak to you about one of the prisoners. I don't believe he has anything to do in this place. He's only a lad, who will be of little use for us. Just think he was taking care of those lordlings' horses, my lord. That is what he said when he arrived, and he repeated it when Master John... chatted with him."

"I understand the issue, Master Kingston. May I see this boy?"

The governor called a turnkey, and the three men climbed up the stairs.

Kingston was right; it was only a lad, no more than seventeen or eighteen, his neck and jaw stained by a large, ruby-red birthmark. He remembered the boy the queen had mentioned, a naive young fellow who had opened his heart to her and told her his grievances. That must be him. His presence in the Tower served no purpose. The lad himself, however...

"Have him cured", Cromwell told Kingston, "and send him to someone you can trust until he is back on his feet. It is useless to keep him here."

"Yes, my lord", Kingston answered with an obvious relief.

Of all the prison keepers Cromwell had met in his troubled life, William Kingston was undoubtedly the most human and charitable. It did little good, this being said, to the prisoners' fate.

Then he went straight to Constable's cell.

The results of the « chats » with Master John were at the very least unsettling. The chains had carved the flesh of his ankles and wrists. If he was not executed soon, his festering wounds would kill him.

"Do you come to admire your work?" the prisoner barked.

"You did not need me to get in trouble, Constable. And it is only the beginning. This poor idiot Bigod finally confessed that Reginald Pole was behind your revolt."
"But it's a lie!" Constable exploded.

"I know. But it is irrelevant, as far as the king is concerned. For two weeks, Sir Francis Bryan and Tom Seymour have been scouring all Italy in search of this annoying cousin. I know he will face many unpleasant moments, even if they do not kill him."

"And I know that one day you will be in my shoes. We will have your head, sooner or later", Constable growled.

"And you will not be here to see it any more, what a pity... At least, you will be satisfied to learn that your lad, Charlie, left the Tower, and even on his feet, though the duke of Norfolk's hospitality did not really suit him."

"What are you going to do with him?"

"Send him back home. Why? Did you think I would hang this boy simply because he took care of your horse? This, you see, is absolutely not illegal."

Then, unwilling to waste more of his time, Cromwell turned on his heel and left the cell. He was forced to endure the king's ire and the dukes' insults, but not from this damn demonstrator. He would soon have other fish to fry. The king wished to have the Pole family at sword length to guarantee cardinal Pole's behaviour.

##

17th of March

On that day, the king finally took a decision concerning the queen that had him worried for weeks.

As a Gentleman of the Chamber, Henry Norris had the duty to announce it, suspecting the king of having chosen him on purpose, just to embarrass him. He went to his friend and cousin-in-law's chambers cursing the Tudor and his spoilt behaviour.

"So, what is the verdict?" Anne asked. "Are you taking me to the Tower, cousin?"

"No, God be praised", Norris answered. "But it is not much better. The king orders you to leave for your estate of Pembroke, and to remain there. You cannot come back to Court; however, it is possible for you to visit relatives and friends in the country, such as your sister. Hatfield is also forbidden."

"Won't I be allowed to see my daughters?"

Anne paled.

"At least, will I be allowed to write?" she asked.

"The king did not give any detail on this topic, thus I assume it is allowed indeed. Majesty", Norris added, "I am truly sorry."

"What are the reasons of my exile?"

"Incompatible moods, amongst other things", the embarrassed gentleman said. "Frequent disobedience."

"And then?"
"Erm... I... The king himself said nothing, but a rumour has been circulating in the palace. He let people say that... that Elizabeth is not his."

Sir Henry carefully took a step back when his cousin-in-law grabbed a rather heavy vase. But she immediately calmed down and put the object back on the table.

"Elizabeth? She has red hair like all Tudors, and he says she cannot be his? And with whom would I have conceived her?"

He averted his eyes.

"Smeaton."

"Must I laugh, or cry?" Anne roared, slamming her fist down on the table.

She did not understand Henry's reasoning. Of the two children, Elizabeth was the least suspicious one, whereas Alice's bastardy was visible if one would care to take a good look at her. She had inherited her father's dark hair, and fortunately her bonnets could hide the small curls that grew on her head. Or it was a trap, an insane tall story to blind her, to make her confess her supposed fault? Mark Smeaton... No, really, this was ridiculous!

"You are allowed to choose the ladies who will go with you to Pembroke. No more than ten."

"So generous... I thank you, cousin. Tell the king I will do as he wishes."

Once Sir Henry had left, Anne checked the list of her household ladies. No way she could bring her cousin Madge, it would be too cruel to separate her from her husband when she had just begun her first pregnancy. She would not bring Jane Parker-Boleyn either; it would be too cruel for Anne to bear her sister-in-law's presence. Her aunt Lady Wood was a bit too old to bury herself in such a remote place. Lizzie Holland being Uncle Norfolk's mistress, it would make an excellent opportunity to get rid of a Howard spy in her household. Same cause, same effect for Mary Howard, FitzRoy's widow. Anne also crossed Mary Wyatt from the list because of her poor health – furthermore, being Thomas Wyatt's wife, she would not like a forced exile with the queen.

Having taken all those names from her list, Anne summoned all the others and explained the new situation, generating aghast or indignant reactions.

"Now, my ladies, I wish to know who amongst you wish to follow me in Wales. I will not hold grudges against those who will want to remain here, whether it is for their health, or matters of the heart."

She noticed Nan Saville's guilty expression. So, her lady-in-waiting had a good friend at Court. Are not we secretive... But we will help you with it.

Margaret Dymoke and Honor Grenville were the first to accept, followed by Margaret Wyatt, the poet's sister. Margery Horsman, Bridget Wingfield and Mary Zouche also voted for leaving with the queen. Anne decided that six ladies would be enough, especially in the relatively confined space of Pembroke. They would bring their own servants, which would flesh out a bit the staff. Once the list was established, the ladies went back to their own quarters to prepare their luggage. Anne took the opportunity to have a little chat with Lady Saville.

"Tell me, my dear, who ties you to Court?"

Nan blushed from neck to hairline.
"I... for some months... well, before he left, I often saw Sir Francis", the young woman confessed. "We would talk a lot, go for a walk..."

"Francis? As in Francis Bryan? My cousin?"

"Indeed, my lady. Now we must rely only on letters but only one way. I never know where he is. If I leave..."

Francis had said he was looking for a new wife for company and to take care of his son...

"I understand. Why not?" Anne said with a smile. "I wish you good luck."

Nan waited for her mistress' departure to burst into tears.

##

31st of March, Pembroke Castle

Hands on her hips, Anne surveyed her domain. Thanks to her work, Pembroke was a bit more welcoming than Kimbolton, but it could still be improved. The money Anne had spent for her lands had been mostly used to repair bridges, create schools and maintain the roads. The castle itself was not supposed to receive its owner on such a short notice. It lacked firewood and the kitchens were poorly stocked. Fortunately, the place was clean and did not lack servants: about fifty men and women, not counting the lads working in the kitchens. It would do for the time being, Anne decided. The first thing to do would be to light some fires; Wales was awfully cold!
April, London

Once he had sent his wife away, Henry Tudor started to look for a new queen. He did not think any more of the Seymours sisters, though he kept her brothers working at Court. They were two clever and resourceful young men; it would have been a shame to dispense with their services. Thomas being busy running after Cardinal Pole with Sir Francis Bryan (and courtiers found it passing queer to send the First Gentleman of the Chamber rushing around like a commoner across all Europe), Henry decided to send the elder brother, Edward, as an ambassador. His mission would be to select some princesses to have them portrayed by his dear Holbein, who was tagging along, and return to present the paintings to the king so that His Majesty could choose his next consort.

France seemed particularly promising. François had still one unmarried daughter. Alas, his niece from Navarre was unfortunately too young for marriage, and it was said she had a very foul temper. One less option... His neighbour the duke of Lorraine also possessed some highborn ladies. Germany did not lack in princesses, duchesses and countesses, but sadly many of them were Reformers, and Henry hesitated to crown a Lutheran as Queen of England. He would have liked a Germanic alliance against Spain, which shamelessly supported his troublesome cousin Reginald Pole, the man who had tried to contact the rebels in the North to use their uprising for his own benefit. But a Lutheran queen... Henry would be certainly excommunicated, not even counting the sermons he would have to endure from his 'dear cousin' Gardiner. The man had been parading enough since the Marquess of Pembroke's departure. He was acting with an incredible insolence towards her relatives and friends still remaining in Court and openly promised the stake to her partisans.

Unfortunately, the king of France did not warm up to Henry's marital projects.

"My good cousin Henry is still married to Lady Anne, and said marriage is right and valid", he stated firmly through the English ambassador in Paris, "and consequently, no negotiation could be led concerning my daughter Marguerite's betrothal."

What François, as a true gentleman, could not tell, was that he categorically refused to marry his last daughter, who he adored, to a man old enough to be her father, and well-known for mistreating his wives.

Henry stormed out of the council room when he received this answer, calling François all sorts of names.

In her Welsh domain, Anne laughed a lot as she read the minutes of this meeting of the council, hidden amongst other letters. Cromwell sent regular mail to Wales, with short, discreet notes always full of kindness. One would have never believed such a word could be linked to the Lord Privy Seal. But for his queen, he was always a very tactful and delicate man.

##

3rd of May

The courtiers were leaving the chapel at the end of a mass to the Virgin Mary when the incident occurred. Henry was walking ahead alone, more covered in gemstones than ever. One could have
imagined that, like his former wife Katherine, he had sewn himself a carapace of jewels to turn blows away. He took some steps out of the chapel, distractedly saluting the small crowd of poor Londoners massing in the bailey, hoping for some coins, under the vigilant watch of the guards.

"HENRY!" a voice suddenly bellowed from the crowd. "WHERE IS YOUR WIFE?"

The king stopped and looked around, tactical mistake that proved he had heard. The anonymous man took this opportunity to drive the point home.

"WHERE IS THE MOTHER OF YOUR CHILDREN?" the same voice went on. "Are you going to send all your women in exile the same way?"

The whole Court seemed frozen on the threshold of the chapel. Officially, no one dared speak of exile for the queen. Embarrassed looks were exchanged, while the king resumed his walk, his face crimson with indignation.

"GIVE US OUR QUEEN BACK!"

A group of soldiers ran towards the source of the shouts, and the man fled. Needless to say, after this scandal, Henry was in a most foul mood, and his unfortunate councillors felt it at their expense. He sent Wriothesley knocking against a desk with such strength that the following day, the poor man had an impressive collection of bruises on his back.

"Now", Cromwell commented sourly, "you understand what I must endure every day."

'Risley' nodded sadly. Fortunately for him, his wife and her balms lessened the damages in a matter of days. She had all of her uncle Gardiner's Catholicism, but none of his malevolent nature, God be praised. Cromwell would have paid dearly to have this kind of comforting presence at home. If he did, he would go back there more often.

However, this episode had cheered him up. He had not even needed to pay that man for his little show. Some spontaneous demonstrations held some virtues, actually. And this scene was not an isolated event.

According to what his agents told him, the small folk of London grumbled against the queen's absence, almost as much as when Katherine of Aragon had been exiled from Court. Once again the king parted a mother from her children. Said mother's reputation did not matter, it was just too cruel to be accepted, even more as this time, one of the children was a small girl and the other a babe still at the breast. People groaned against the way the king dealt with the rebels and some more daring than usual even claimed that things would go more smoothly if the queen was in London. It gave Cromwell some comfort, though nothing could replace his queen's presence. He missed Anne.

Worse, he needed her, to have her constantly at his side, to see her barge in his office without warning, put her nose in his files or try to take him from his work to entertain him for some minutes. Her absence pained him.

##

5th of May

Sitting under an apple tree in the orchard of Hatfield, Mary was trying to read the tale of a journey to India, but could not remain focused on it. The previous year at the same time, she was at Court with her half-sister, wearing her most beautiful dress, dancing with gentlemen... She would have never imagined that one day, life without her stepmother would look so boring. The king did not want to hear about any of his daughters any more. Mary, Elizabeth and Alice were relegated far from
London, while their father was busy looking for a new wife. Even Chapuys had been forbidden to visit.

# #

8th of June

The king, sitting behind his desk, was in conference with Edward Seymour, back from his adventures on the continent.

"Seymour, does your man in Pembroke have something new about the Marquess?"

"Not much, Your Majesty," Edward Seymour sighed.

He would rather have been in a foreign Court, using his considerable talents, rather than playing sneak, a work barely fit even for his idiot brother.

"According to his report, the que... the Marquess' situation is satisfying. She is well loved by her people, and does not consider any action to come back in London. She writes a lot, however. To Princess Elizabeth..."

"Lady Elizabeth," the king corrected sharply. "You know very well that my marriage to Lady Boleyn was not valid."

"I wonder how many times he will use this excuse... And this stupid habit of calling the queen 'marquess' when they are not divorced yet... "Hum... yes, Your Majesty. And to her sister, her mother, her brother and Lady Saville. Nothing really important. She seems perfectly happy with her fate."

Judging from the king's grimace, it was not the proper thing to say.

"To lighten her exile, she invited one of her young cousins, the young man hastily pointed. Another niece from Norfolk's brood, his brother Edmund's daughter, I think... A little person of thirteen or fourteen, very lively. She will certainly enjoy the que... Marquess' company."

Edward Seymour was slightly too optimistic. Kathryn Howard, Kitty for her friends, did not have fun in Pembroke. At all. The place being so remote, she had thought she would enjoy the same freedom as with the dowager duchess of Norfolk, but she had been very wrong. Anne was keeping an eye on her, and worse, forced her to spend hours reading, writing, learning Latin and other things which bored the young lady dreadfully.

"You can barely read and write, not to mention count, when you are thirteen and belong to one of the highest ranking families of the realm!" her royal cousin had raged. "It is not by remaining ignorant that I pleased the king. You will improve all this!"

# #

12th of June, Tower of London

Excepting the gaoler, the prisoner did not receive many visits. By the king's orders, they were extremely restricted. Thus he was surprised to see his door open when it was not time yet for dinner.

He frowned when he discovered his visitor. Of all the men walking under the sun, Thomas Cromwell was certainly one of the last he wished to see.
"Who were you expecting?" the minister asked. "Luther? Or Edward Seymour? Honestly I don't recommend his company. I hope you did not hear what he did to Robert Constable."

"I heard," Thomas More answered without looking at him. "It would have been difficult to do otherwise. He has already come to see me."

"And?"

More felt a certain unease in his visitor.

"Oh, nothing. He just took some time to tell me in great detail how the uprising in the North had been crushed. Did the king really claim he would have children hanged?"

Cromwell nodded.

"And within some days it is Lord Darcy's head that will decorate the crenelations of the Tower."

"Why did you come and see me, Lord Cromwell? Congratulations for your promotion, by the way."

"You are too kind."

But Cromwell did not say another word, and settled by the tiny window.

"Does the queen's situation trouble you?" More asked.

"How do you know this?" Cromwell grumbled.

"The guards are very talkative," More said with a thin smile. "Thus I know that Henry has committed a second offence, and that he sent his wife to her lands in Pembroke. It must be truly annoying to lose your best ally at Court, don't you agree?"

"I intend to have her back."

"I tried to do the same for queen Katherine, God rest her soul, and you can see where it led me. I told you so. Tomorrow you will replace me in everything."

"You know, More", Cromwell growled, "if it is a good thing to learn from your own mistakes, it is also useful to learn from others' errors. I will certainly not make yours again. Good bye."

He was rather annoyed when he left the Tower, but getting back home, he was pleasantly surprised to find a letter with an anonymous seal, but which address was written by a familiar hand. He opened it hastily.

My dearest friend,

You cannot know how much your letters please me. George's mail comes only when he thinks to send it from France, where the king leaves him in exile under the cover of diplomatic missions, as you surely know, and Mary is too busy with my future nephew to have a regular correspondence. Only my mother still bothers to keep me informed of the Court and City gossip.

I received some news of my daughters. Elizabeth does me great honour, and you will be glad to know that Alice fares very well and seems ready to follow her sister's path.

I admit very willingly that I miss our political arguments, and you as well.

Your loving mistress,
"Your loving mistress" might seem exagerated, but Anne did sign one of her letters to Cromwell this way in real life. Good thing words did not have exactly the same meaning as nowadays :)

Chapter End Notes
30th of June, London

My Lady,

Lord Darcy was executed this morning at the Tower. He made no speech before leaving this world.

By order of the king, I must now go with our two valiant dukes and the earl of Shrewsbury to York, for the only purpose of watching Masters Bigod and Aske hanged. His Majesty thinks that it will do me a lot of good to see the results of my policy, but I have to notice that he does not practice what he preaches. He will remain comfortably in Hampton Court. I am sorry I will not be able to report to you all that happens in Court, and hope, for once, to be back in our stinking London before autumn.

Your depressed servant,

Th. Cromwell

"Are you writing to the queen again, Father?"

"Hmm, hmm..."

"Do you perchance miss her?"

"Get this kind of idea out of your mind immediately. People were hanged for less than this."

Gregory arched an eyebrow.

"Then why?"

"Honestly, life would be easier if we had more women of her quality, at Court or anywhere else. It would not be difficult to achieve. I am firmly convinced that with the same education, women would be as competent as men."

"So you think that one day they could be much better than just midwives or seamstresses?"

"Certainly. One must not despair. Back to our topic... You have never seen this letter."

"Once more", the young man commented, fatalistically, before he left the room.

##
1st of July

The long line of soldiers had left London in the morning, and was now walking through the country. In the middle of the line, a wagon carried a cage holding the prisoners, Francis Bigod and Robert Aske, surrounded by a whole company of riders. The dukes of Suffolk and Norfolk were leading the troops, as befitting their rank. Cromwell gladly left them this dangerous position and travelled some rows behind them.

George Talbot, earl of Shrewsbury, rode beside him, his son Francis not far from them, and watched him with concern.

"I do not understand why the king sends you up in the North. It is too dangerous", he said. "People want your head up there."

"As usual", Cromwell grumbled.

The earl rose his eyebrows in surprise.

"What do you mean?"

"Do you remember, ten years ago, when Wolsey wanted to create his two colleges in York and Ipswich? He had decided to grab the incomes of thirty or so small monasteries, isolated, ruined, badly managed... or the three at the same time, to close them, and to send the monk to larger communities."

"Let me guess, he sent you to manage the operation?"

"Indeed."

The earl let out a roaring laugh and slapped him on the shoulder.

"Well, this way you will be in familiar territory!"

Cromwell could not refrain from smiling. Talbot and his son were amongst the very few high-ranking lords he could count as friendly. But despite their benevolence, he missed his trusted associate Ralph Sadler. The man was still in Scotland, working to establish friendly diplomatic relations between the young king (newly wed to Francis de Valois' daughter, the beautiful but fragile princess Madeleine) and Henry Tudor. Ralph was firmly supported by the queen mother Margaret, Henry's elder sister, but things were never simple between the two nations.

At least Cromwell had now a good topic to think about, which would keep his mind busy for a while.

#

11th of July, York

Norfolk had made his soldiers walk on forced march, and the journey from London to York had been made in barely ten days. Freshly arrived, Aske and Bigod had been locked up in a cell. Cromwell decided to pay one last visit to his obstinate enemy. Some points still deserved an explanation, and there were some things the man needed to hear before he met his maker. The Lord Privy Seal was feeling ill and feverish but he absolutely wanted to do this last approach.

"Master Aske?"
"What are you doing here? Why tormenting me again?" the former lawyer whimpered.

Cromwell refrained from sighing too deeply and came to stand under the small barred window which gave some sparse light to the cell.

"I am only here to talk. Sit down."

Aske thought safer to obey.

What made you believe that the king would keep his promises when you had put his rule in danger?" Cromwell asked when the other man was seated.

"Honour", Aske answered at once.

"Ah yes... of course. I forgot that you are an honest and honourable man... I met so few of them in my life."

Cromwell cast a look to the cell.

"When I see what honour brought you, I understand why."

"You are corrupted to the core", Aske said curtly. "You are evil".

"Master Aske, let me explain you something that should help you understand the world better. Like many people, you believe it is divided between good and evil men. You are, of course, completely wrong. There are only bastards on this earth, who happen to fight on opposite sides. Some claim to be on the side of Good. Most of the time, those are only good for one thing, and it is to dethrone those they consider as evil. Then, people complain that the country is not properly managed. I may be a maleficient man to your eyes, but I know how to manage England. You don't. Amongst all the noble men you deem worthy to rule, none would either, except maybe Norfolk and Talbot. All those men think they deserve their titles and rank only because they demand them, Master Aske. They will receive a rather brutal wake-up."

The lawyer did not answer, huddled up in a corner of his cell. Cromwell left the tiny window to turn towards Aske.

"All long the road, you accused me to be responsible for the dead men hanging from the trees. I hope you watched them long and well, Aske, and that you will carry the memory of their faces with you tomorrow morning, because you killed them as much as I did."

"It is not true!" Aske shouted desperately, horrified.

"Of course it is. You talked to them, and they followed you. They trusted you. Your naivety doomed them. I never lied to them about their chances of success, Master Aske. See you tomorrow."

##

12th of July

At the end of the morning, there was a huge crowd before the walls of Clifford Tower. A double line of heavily armed soldiers prevented the flow from entering the building, but no one seemed ready to launch an attack.

According to the king's instructions, all the high ranking officers were present, with a perfect point of view on the place. Cromwell tried very hard to ignore all the people staring at him. Being a clever
man, he had not come without a weapon on him, but he doubted it would be enough.

Shrewsbury and his son surrounded him closely and isolated him from the Norfolk-Suffolk-Surrey party who cast him dark looks, as if he were responsible for the execution that was about to take place. He had promised the rebels nothing except to send them to the scaffold; he had never promised an amnesty before breaking his oath. The three generals could glare at him all they wished; they were as guilty as he was, and more.

Shrewsbury was grumbling something between clenched teeth.

"Of course, my idiot son-in-law had to die before I arrive", he muttered, alluding to Henry Percy's premature death. "Pity, I would have showed him how a job is properly done."

"Here he comes", the younger Talbot announced with a grimace.

On the round path of the tower, where gallows had been erected, a silhouette wearing a long white shirt, wrapped in chains, had just appeared.

"If God is merciful", Surrey commented in a negligent voice, "his fall will be enough for him to break his neck in the end."

The others did not dignify that with an answer. If a man in the crowd had held a gun, Surrey would have been dead meat, but unfortunately, this sweet daydream did not turn into a reality. Norfolk's heir remained upright on his saddle, while the executioner tied the rope around Robert Aske's neck. The man was too high for his voice to be heard. The priest who came with him gave him a last blessing. Cromwell cast a quick glance to Norfolk. The old duke was slightly straining his neck, his nose raised, like a bird of prey waiting for its piece of meat. Cromwell had already seen this expression on Lord Boleyn's face when Bishop Fisher's unfortunate cook had been boiled alive. He had himself fled before the horror of this execution. He lowered his gaze and obstinately stared at the pommel of his saddle. He was cold despite the stifling heat of York, and he felt like as if a hammer was beating against his temples. Well-known symptoms. His old friend from Italy, the malaria, was maybe paying him a visit? Cromwell gripped his reins in order not to sway before the crowd when Aske was pushed from the tower. Horrified cries forced him to raise his head and he saw that the fall had not been enough to break the man's neck. Shrewsbury let out a disgusted groan and made his mount turn to get away, followed by his son and the minister, then Suffolk, leaving the two Howards alone to watch the show.

"Really, the king grows strange fruits on the trees of his realm," the younger Talbot commented sadly while riding his horse through the almost empty streets of the city.

Cromwell was not listening any more. He had to find a quiet place where to spend the three or four following days, to give the fever some time to leave him. His horse shied when the group crossed path with a woman, and he barely remained on his saddle.

"Lord Cromwell?"

The woman had a thick mane of chestnut hair, dark eyes... Where had he seen her?

"Lizzie Seymour?" he gasped when his memory came back.

"My little self indeed," the young woman answered, smiling.

The other tree gentlemen greeted her amiably, remembering her brief stay in Court. While they were exchanging the usual banalities, she noticed the minister's abnormal state. Talbot caught him by the collar of his coat just before he slid from his horse on the cobblestones.
"Mercy!" Suffolk exclaimed. "Did someone target him during the execution? Henry will hang us if we don't bring his man back!"

"No, I think our friend just needs a good doctor," Francis Talbot commented.

"No doctor," Cromwell groaned while Elizabeth led the four men towards her house. "They're worse than the plague. Not needed for what I have..."

Lizzie's house was not far from there. The small group entered quickly, and the young woman sent one of her servants for her usual doctor. The man arrived for once without his long black robes, as he had been asked to remain discreet. He understood why when he found the duke of Suffolk and two other royal officers in the hall.

"Upstairs", Talbot said, showing the stairs with his thumb.

The doctor went up and knocked on the door. No answer. He pushed the door and entered the room without being noticed. The patient was lying on the bed, his back to his visitor, and he did not react at all.

"Sir?"

"Zzzzzz..."

The doctor came back downstairs fifteen minutes later.

"Your friend is not ill," he said, "even if he has a small fever. He is sleeping. He is completely exhausted, so let him sleep in peace as much as he needs it."

"After a week, will we be allowed to wake him?" Shrewsbury inquired with a smile as the door closed behind the doctor. "Well", he added for Elizabeth, "it is certainly the most clever diagnostic I have ever heard from one of those black robes."

# #

In the end, Cromwell woke up two days later, immediately becoming a target for the two Talbots' jokes, a useful trick to disguise their relief.

"So, are we done playing the sleepyhead? Are we joining the livings again?" the youngest said.

"Gnnn... No need to scream... Was I so sick?"

"Sick? Not at all. You have been sleeping for nearly three days!" the earl exclaimed. "Nothing more."

"Ah? I was sure, though... it is just as well. What did I miss?"

"Nothing. Not even the smallest riot. Once the show was finished..."

The earl looked away, clearly ill-at-ease.

"What?"

"Well, it is not completely finished. Yesterday evening, the man was still alive."

"Spare me the details, or I will be sick for real..."
"Indeed. I will send you Lady Elizabeth, she will have more interesting things to tell you."

The young woman came into the room minutes later with a tray loaded with a carafe and a small plate.

"It would be improper to leave my guests to starve."

"My lady, you wear black, and I did not see your sister here. Is she dead?"

"Not at all", Lizzie assured. "It is her father-in-law who left us."

"I did not know she was married."

"We did not really announce it", the young woman said. "When we arrived here, my old friend Arthur Darcy did everything to help us. We are still good friends, by the way, but he fell in love with my sister. Very... intensely. When we learnt of our father's death, Jane found herself free, and she married Arthur within the following month. Now, they are living on the family's lands. Jane is going to have a child this winter."

"I see. And they left you behind?"

"Arthur is not a fervent partisan of the queen... Needless to say, we had some rows on that topic. How is she? And her daughters? Does not she need something in Pembroke?"

The youngest Seymour's devotion for her queen was touching; unlike so many courtiers, she was familiar with the concept of gratitude.

"I swear that everything is fine... given the circumstances. And no, I cannot bring you back to London right now. But you may write."

Lizzie made a face.

"Writing letters", she sighed, "and letters again! Always letters..."

##

They left York on the 18th of July. In his saddlebags, Cromwell was carrying letters from Elizabeth for the queen, and more importantly, for Gregory.

The dukes, earl and minister came back in London at the end of the month and were greeted by drawn and worried faces. The king's health had taken a turn for the worse, and they feared for his life.
To Settle the Counts

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

9th of August, Pembroke

Anne hastily opened the letter, eager to receive at last some news from London and her daughters. But the message was not exactly the one she had expected.

My lady,

It would be wise of you to come back to Court as fast as possible. The king is critically ill again due to his old wound, and his health has deteriorated more than usual.

As you can imagine, the Lords of the realm are becoming restive. None of them openly declared his support for the Lady Mary, but for your and princess Elizabeth's safety, come back. The king allows you to leave Pembroke. He apparently wishes for one last interview with you.

Your dutiful servant,

Th. Cromwell.

#
#

17th of August, Hampton Court

When the queen entered the palace, it was for some people as if lightning had just struck them. Waiting at the entrance of the royal chambers, Cromwell watched her walk all the way. Seymour had told the truth: her stay in the country had done her a lot of good. The sun had given a light golden hue to her skin and some colour to her pale cheeks she had even put on some weight and walked as if an heavy load had been taken from her shoulders. She nodded to Cromwell while passing and he bowed, muttering some courtesies. They acted like two complete strangers.

On the queen's heels followed a huge, hairy Irish greyhound. Apparently, someone in Pembroke had presented her this gift in order to replace little Pourquoi, with an obvious difference in size. At least the animal seemed properly trained, and when its mistress arrived at the king's door, it followed her gesture and sat beside a banquette, casting a curious eye on all the unknown humans around it. A servant went to the queen's chambers with a basket holding two rather small dogs with a high-pitched bark.

Before the door to the royal chambers was Doctor Butts, talking with several surgeons, who respectfully parted before the queen and her minister.

The smell in the king's bedroom was revolting. One could have believed that the monarch was already dead and his body was rotting on the sheets. Anne stopped on the threshold, holding a handkerchief soaked in vinegar to her nose.

"What did they do to put him in such a foul health?"

"As the incisions and cleaning the wound did not give promising results, those idiots decided to bleed the king to take out all the 'rotten blood' he had", Cromwell explained in a low voice. "It is a complete... medical heresy. Nine times out of ten, it causes the abscess to burst inside the body and
poison the blood, which did not fail to happen."

"And no one protested?" the queen asked, choked.

"The duke of Suffolk did try to intervene, but they were old-fashioned surgeons and refused to hear a thing. Give me a practitioner trained in Montpellier, good Lord, and it would have never happened."

She nodded and entered the room.

Two servants remained by the bed, despite their obvious repulsion. The valets had certainly set a system of relays, or they had drawn lots to determine who would be the unlucky souls forced to attend the king. The queen gestured them to go, and the two young men left the room with unmasked relief.

Henry was impressively pale and wide purplish rings spreading under his eyes. His lips were almost white and all his visible skin was covered in sweat. His feverish gaze fell on his wife, who bowed to him.

"Your Majesty..."

"Get up and come closer."

Anne took some steps forward and leant against one of the bed columns.

"I took a decision", Henry croaked. "Since... God did not wish it another way, Elizabeth will succeed me, and you will be her regent."

She did her best not to smile in triumph.

"Chose a powerful Lord Protector."

*In your dreams...*

"And eliminate the Poles as soon as possible."

*Don't count on it. Dead, they would be useless, and this annoying Reginald would have nothing to lose anymore. It is much better to keep them alive, with a sword above their neck.*

"But before I confirm these dispositions to the Council, you must... swear."

Anne nodded, knowing what he would ask.

"Have you ever welcomed other men into your bed?"

"No, never."

And it was true. Henry had really been the only man to enter her bed. He had not asked anything about desks or certain walls, had he?

"I can swear it on the Scriptures, if you wish."

"No, no," the king groaned. "No time for embellishments. You swore. Send for Risley, and see that he brings me my will, I must sign it. Ask Brandon and the others to come, there must be witnesses."

Anne went back to the door and whispered some words in one of the servants’ ear. The young man nodded and called for the councillors that were waiting in the corridor. They entered the room in a
line with properly saddened faces.

"Risley," Henry muttered, pointing a parchment on his table, "read..."

The king's secretary unfolded the parchment and began to read.

"We, Henry, by the grace of God king of England, France and Ireland..."

##

19th of August

The night had just begun and candles were lit in the queen's chambers when a very ill-at-ease page asked for an audience.

"Your Majesty... the king..." he stammered and lowered his head.

"I see. Please, I would like everyone to leave."

The ladies-in-waiting, the page and the servants left in silence, believing they were giving the queen some space to express her sorrow.

Anne remained thinking for a while. A part of herself which did not show up very often was hopping in delight and suggested to celebrate the tyrant's death properly. She barred the door of her office, took off her shoes and her heavy jewels, then walked to the centre of the room. Listening to an imaginary music, she performed a series of uncoordinated entrechats, a liberating dance which only ended when the queen fell on the carpet, out of breath.

If I look back, I am lost.

##

20th of August, Hampton Court

I hate this bloody work more with each passing day, Thomas Cromwell thought while going to the council that morning. At least, when I was a mercenary in Italy, I knew who the enemy was, even if he changed every morning. Here, not only does he change every day, and even twice a day, but there's no one to tell me his name.

Quite... The duke of Norfolk was perfectly invariable in his contempt for the royal minister. For such a high-born man, to be seated beside a blacksmith's son was an insult to his dignity. As the queen's uncle, no doubt he would ask his beloved niece to put an end to this tasteless mistake. No doubt His Grace was expecting her to obey without protesting.

No one could fault her on her punctuality, he thought when he entered the council room. The queen was already seated at the end of the table, her back straight, her hands flat on the armrests of her chair, clad in black from head to toe. Without any of her fabulous jewels, she looked like a small crow lost amongst the brightly clothed lords lining before the table. With a nod, she signalled them to sit. He saw her bite the inside of her cheek when the numerous relics carried by the duke of Norfolk rattled as he took his seat. The French ambassador had once said in jest that My Lord the Queen's uncle was more covered in holy medals than the late king Louis XI at his worst. Superstition and utter stupidity! But quite profitable...

"My Lords, I thank you for answering my call"", the queen began in a neutral tone. "The unexpected death of my lord husband left me in such a stupor that your good advice will be the most precious
"My lady," chancellor Audley assured, "we are your dutiful servants."

Anne thanked him with a tense smile before resuming her speech.

"Before anything else, we must make the necessary arrangements for the king's funeral."

"The event took us all by surprise, my lady," Cranmer gravely said, "and it will not be easy to schedule a ceremony on such a short notice."

"I know it, my lord", the queen assured. "Thus I required the body to be brought back to London and exposed in the royal chapel for some days, before its transfer to Westminster. Summer is upon us, you will not have more than one week to organize the ceremony. I trust you for the minute details, but I do not want any excess. The situation is painful enough without adding crowd rushing in and trampled people. My Lord of Suffolk," she said, turning towards Charles, "I leave you in charge of the security. I know you will do well."

"As you wish", Suffolk approved.

"And be moderate," she advised. "We are not inviting the English people to a celebration."

Affected nods punctuated this last request. Then Norfolk, after a quick glance to his brother-in-law Boleyn, rose to speak.

"My lady, here comes an essential question: the nomination of a Lord Protector for the duration of princess Elizabeth's minority."

If looks had had this power, Cromwell thought, Norfolk would have already gone through the floor and found himself six feet under. But Anne did not lose her composure. She made a small gesture – *do not worry, my good uncle, it will be done, but after the king's funeral*. The duke smiled, as well as Thomas Boleyn. One of them would receive the title, and the other would not lack in power nonetheless.

At the end of the council session, Cromwell let them exchange some congratulations. After the burial, he knew that Norfolk would ask for a new minister. He could not help but feel his stomach knotting. Not for his own safety; it was common, when the monarch was replaced, to replace the rest of the government, without necessarily killing or mistreating his retainers. He was more worried about years of hard work being destroyed. The rationalization of the royal finances, the slow but steady progress of the Reformation... No, he should be more trusting, the queen would not throw him out... if she could resist the demands of her cumbersome family.

He was stopped in his dark thoughts by a small hand on his arm.

"Master Cromwell? I need to talk with you, if you have some time to spare."

"I am the queen's servant."

Anne carefully closed the door before she started to speak.

"I need your advice about two or three details", she said, leaning against the table to relieve her back. "We will have to tell Lady Mary of the king's death, as respectfully as possible. I refuse to send someone too insensitive."

A polite way to say that neither Lord Boleyn nor the duke of Norfolk would go to Hatfield any time
"You could send Suffolk, my lady," he suggested.

"No," the queen said at once. "I would rather keep an eye on him. He is no friend of mine, and I do not want him to speak too often with Mary. I was thinking of Sir Anthony Knivert, if he is willing to leave his fields. What do you have to say about it?"

"He does not have enemies on any side, he is a courteous and sensible man... Yes, I suppose he will do. May I give you my advice?"

"I am still paying you for advice", Anne retorted with her first true smile of the day.

"Concerning Lady Mary, it would be a good idea to let her come to the funeral. I know your feelings towards her, but the people would not understand if you forbade her to say farewell to her father. It is not as if you put her back in the line of succession."

Once again, he feared he had said too much. The queen stared at him, studying him, then gave one sharp nod.

"Excellent suggestion. We do not want the reputation of the Crown to be damaged in any way, do we? On this topic, we will have to take care of More. Fisher's execution generated some turmoil, to put it mildly, inside the realm as well as outside. I do not wish to stumble twice on the same stone. We do not need a new martyr and no matter what he professes, he is a man who loves life. And now... Goodbye, sir."

Her black skirts billowing behind her, she turned and left the room.

##

**25th of August, Hatfield**

Anthony Knivert was not really pleased with the mission that Queen Anne had given him. She showed a great trust in him, indeed, but still... Anne was certain he would come through it with his usual tact. Mary had no reason to harbour any bad feeling towards him and would listen to him.

Nonetheless, he was feeling rather ill-at-ease while he was waiting in the anteroom of Elizabeth's chambers in Hatfield for Lady Bryan to bring in Mary FitzTudor. Oh, how much he would have given to be in Bridget's arms rather than be the bearer of bad news... He had at last managed to marry his lovely cloth weaver, and she was already pregnant. Anthony hoped he would soon introduce her to Court. For now, he focused on the 'best' way to announce her father's death to Mary.

The young woman came in, almost running, certainly curious to discover the wonderful news that could justify sending the king's friend to Hatfield. Knivert felt sympathy for the former princess. He bowed before her and brushed a very formal kiss on her hand.

"Sir Anthony, what kind of event brings you here?"

"My Lady", Anthony said, "the news I bear will hurt you, I know, and I beg you to forgive me if I tell them so bluntly, but they pain me a lot as well... It is about the king... I am sorry to say that His Majesty left this world five days ago..."

A shrill cry interrupted his sentence. Her hands clasped on her mouth, Mary fled to her room. Knivert cast a desolate look to Lady Bryan, who was watching over the discussion. The governess shook her head.
"You did as well as you could", she assured.

"Not enough", Anthony groaned. "Tell her I must bring her back to Court as soon as possible, as well as Princess Elizabeth. I am... forgive me, but I do not have the courage to go and see her. I want to weep half the time."

"I understand. I will explain her."

Lady Bryan left with her usual dignity, and Knivert remained alone in the anteroom.

On the following day, Elizabeth and Mary left for London with Lady Bryan and servants, escorted by Knivert and the small group of guards he had taken with him.

Chapter End Notes

You got your wish... ;)

Anna Regina

28th of August, London

For six days, the people of England had filed past their king's body. Some visitors had come from the counties, and even from Wales. The coffin was currently going slowly through crowded streets, followed by the Court and the high lords of the realm, all on foot, something that under other circumstances would have brought a smile on the commoners' faces.

First came the new queen regent. Anne was looking straight ahead, barely nodding when a voice shouted 'God bless you ma'am!' from the crowd. At least no one was calling her a witch. Not now.

Behind her came Elizabeth in Lady Bryan's arms and Mary. Everybody had understood that the queen wished to honour the royal blood. Everybody except one Lord Boleyn, who had been thrashing about like a devil in holy water to prevent his daughter from acting as she had planned. Did she want a riot, a revolution? Anne had been tempted to send him to meditate in his lands on the drawbacks of dressing down the Queen of England, but she still needed him... for now.

The Londoners' reactions all around her told her she had chosen the best strategy. They admired their princesses, felt sympathy for Elizabeth, whose tender age prevented from understanding the whole situation, muttered some blessings, bowed... No matter their personal feelings towards Mistress Boleyn, they respected her mourning.

After what felt like hours of walking, the cortège reached Westminster. The crowd there was even denser than in the streets, and much to her horror, Anne caught a glimpse of children dangerously perched on narrow balconies, or worse, on the rooftops, in order not to miss anything of the impressive ceremony. Suffolk had also noticed them, and his men-at-arms were already heading towards the buildings in order to chase the children. Once the coffin was inside the abbey, the duke got down from his horse to join the courtiers.

The ceremony itself passed as a blur for Anne. She was thinking less of Cranmer reciting the office than of the gigantic task she was facing. She had to protect her kingdom (was it now the proper word?) from revolts, Imperials, bankruptcy... She would have to raise the future queen, fight against her overly ambitious family...

A sudden curl of incense brought her back to reality by getting in her eyes. Some pews behind, Mary was silently sobbing, a handkerchief twisted between her fingers. Anne felt a surge of pity for her rival's daughter. Mary had quite literally worshipped her father, she had been his 'pearl of England'... The king's death had certainly broken her heart. Close to her, Suffolk and Knivert were praying with all the religion they had (needless to say, the two of them combined did not even make an acceptable catholic). Uncle Norfolk was telling his beads and muttering prayers. How many in this black crowd were sincerely mourning their king? Anne wondered while staring blindly at Cranmer. If Thomas More had been present, she could have said: at least one, but the former chancellor was still rotting in the Tower. This being said, he had to know, the racket caused by the bells announcing the news was quite enough.

The ceremony had lasted more than five hours. Once back in Whitehall, Anne ordered Lady Bryan to put Elizabeth in bed, and to send all the ladies-in-waiting to their rooms. Anne herself just plopped down on an armchair and sent her too tight shoes flying across the room. Her back was killing her.

She felt something stinging the corner of her eyes. Some tears, which had stubbornly refused to show during the whole week were now starting to break the dam.
"You bastard", the queen croaked.

"I beg your pardon?"

Anne raised her head and discovered the king's... her minister standing on the threshold of the room, looking quite embarrassed.

"No, no, not you, Thomas", she hastily amended. "I am sorry. What do you need?"

"If I may be so bold... When will you name a Lord Protector?"

He had no hope of receiving this prestigious title. Boleyn and Norfolk were the best to act as a support for the queen; but he held some doubts regarding their ability to adapt to the quick changes that were shaking Europe.

"Tomorrow during the council", Anne said. "Be patient..."

She remained silent, not giving him leave. Then:

"When will Elizabeth be crowned?"

"When she comes of age, my lady. When she is twelve. At three, she is far too young to undergo such a ceremony."

Anne rose and took some steps towards him.

"It means we will have to hold this realm for eight years, can you imagine?"

She burst into a hysterical laughter which turned into nervous sobs. Cromwell hesitated, then took a step and reached for her. Anne grabbed his hand, then came to seek refuge between his arms. He did his best to calm her, gently patting her shoulders, rocking her against him, but it took her several minutes to find her voice.

"Thomas... I am afraid", she confessed.

"I know. So am I."

#

29th of August, Whitehall

Cromwell was leaving his office, his files tucked under his arm, to join the council, when he met with Francis Bryan, apparently lost in thought. Since the king had called him back from the continent, it seemed that the queen's cousin was getting bored.

"Sir Francis..."

"Eh? Ah, good evening, Lord Cromwell. I think I need your help", Bryan went on with an apologetic face, "it may help me win some money."

"How could it?"

"The whole Court started a betting pool on the Lord Protector's identity. Suffolk thinks it will be Lord Boleyn, Knivert, that it will be the duke of Norfolk... I have even found some who are betting on you."
Cromwell raised an eyebrow.

"Not many", Bryan amended. "As for myself, I know the lady and I say she will not name anyone. What do you think?"

"I will also take this bet."

"Excellent!" Bryan said cheerfully, as if smelling victory. "We will share the spoils!"

The council session was almost comical. Anne was of infringing upon the rule of isolation for the widowed queens to take a seat with her ministers and councillors, and amongst them, Lord Boleyn and the duke of Norfolk were eyeing her almost greedily. If they had not been respectively the queen's father and uncle, one would have suspected them of indecent intentions towards her.

"Now that we have reviewed the most pressing matters, here is my decision concerning the Lord Protector."

They all tensed.

"There will be none. I will take on the regency alone until Queen Elizabeth comes of age."

Chancellor Audley vigorously stomped on George Boleyn and Wriothesley's feet to keep them from laughing right at the two lords' faces.

The minister met with Francis Bryan minutes later; when he heard the news, Sir Francis whistled loudly, rubbing his hands in glee.

"And here comes the money!" the knight happily concluded.

Some hours later, as her working day ended at last, Anne let her anger explode in the secrecy of her chambers. Naturally, the two frustrated candidates had contested her decision. She punched the column of her bed, forgetting for a moment that her mother was present in the room.

"My child, it is not by damaging your fingers that you will hold this kingdom any better", the old lady said in an emotionless voice. "But it does not matter, you are most certainly right. Why did you refuse to name a Lord Protector?"

"Papa and Uncle Norfolk are the only ones who could claim this title since the duke of Buckingham was executed ten years ago. But if I trust Papa as a diplomat, and by the way I will make sure he plays this part again, I do not trust him to rule a country with... moderation. No more, forgive me Mother, than your brother, who is always too eager to play the warmonger. I have other people in mind, but I would have all the nobility of the realm against me if I tried to appoint them. I have the choice between people who have either talent, money or a name, but never the three at the same time! It seems impossible to get such a trio in one man!"

Lady Boleyn nodded with an amused smile. Her daughter was learning quickly and truth be told, the prospect of sending her husband abroad was quite appealing. If they remained in England, he would not rule his household with an iron fist, and if she came with him, she would have the opportunity to meet with fine lords and ladies. No matter the option, she would be on the winning side.

Madge entered the bedroom and bowed.

"Your Majesty, Lord Cromwell wishes to speak with you."

"Excellent, Madge, have him wait in the drawing room. I am coming", Anne said, getting out of her
bed, grabbing a dressing gown on her way out.

"Can you not receive him here?" her mother asked, surprised.

"Dressed like this?" Anne scoffed, pointing to her light shift. "Can you imagine the rumours that would circulate on tomorrow morning?"

"While I am present?"

"Oh Mother, when slanderous courtiers will care about plausibility, Charles Brandon will be the pope!"

Lady Boleyn disguised her laugh into a snort, then followed her daughter into the drawing room.

Cromwell was waiting in the middle of the room, looking like a raven amongst the brightly-coloured birds surrounding the queen. Anne sat near a window and gave her ladies their leave. When the colourful swarm had left, she asked her minister to sit.

"Good. Your frank opinion on our situation, Master Thomas?"

"I think that the most pressing issues will come from Spain. It seems that the imperial ambassador, Eustache Chapuys, is still trying to contact Lady Mary."

"I see. Try to intercept the letters, have them copied and then send them to their addressee. They must not suspect we are reading their mail. Lord", Anne sighed. "I think we will really miss el señor Mendoza. He was more... diplomatically neutral."

"A pity, my lady, his health was so poor that God called him back soon after our dear cardinal Pole left the Netherlands", Cromwell noted with a grimace. "No more good advice for Lady Mary."

"It is sad for her. By replacing Mendoza with Chapuys, the emperor took her last serving knight to replace him with a weasel. But from a political point of view, maybe it is wiser."

Then Anne shook her head, fatally.

"Chapuys under watch", she ordered. "I believe I know a bait he will not be able to resist..."

Cromwell exchanged a look with Lady Boleyn, who merely shrugged.

##

9th of September, Tower of London

The sunlight blinded him when he exited the Tower on weak legs. How long? He had remained in the darkness, at every sense of the word, for more than three years.

When he was accustomed again to daylight, he noticed a black silhouette waiting near the gates. He walked towards his guide.

Cromwell nodded a greeting to the man the queen had just freed.

"Can you explain what game you are playing?" the former prisoner asked in a strained voice.

"On the way out", the minister answered. "Please follow me, Sir Thomas."

##
On that morning, the council was studying the budget. One had to confess, even if it seemed cynical, that the king's death and the dissolution of his household, though coming with comfortable compensations, had allowed the Chancellor to make huge amounts of money available for the next year. A third of these sums had already been sent to Italian bankers to be lent with comfortable interests. The rest was devoted to less pleasant things. For instance, recruiting and training crews for the English fleet. The duke of Norfolk, who had a certain experience on that topic, had sent letters to some old acquaintances in the Netherlands in order to take some sailors and officers as teachers for the recruits, while Boleyn was actively negotiating with shipowners from Brest and Nantes, with the same goal in mind.

"If Emperor Charles tries to attack us in order to contest Queen Elizabeth's rights to the throne of England", Norfolk explained, "we will have some time to prepare and welcome him. He has to collect money to pay his men and his officers, and maybe to have some new ships built. The ones available in Flanders are far too small to transport his troops in one trip; he will need others."

"He already has a fleet in the Atlantic", Anne pointed out.

"It shows the same flaws. The military ships sent on the ocean are mostly small escort vessels for the galleons coming back from the West Indies. It does not prevent some... accidents on the way, mind you", the duke added with a nasty smile.

"The Spanish infantry is considered the best in all Europe", George said thoughtfully, "but if the emperor lacks the ships to bring it in England, it will not be really useful. Could he call his fleet in the Mediterranean back to make up for this gap?"

"No", Norfolk answered firmly. "The galleys from the Mediterranean would not hold long in the Atlantic. They are not made for that. And they are too busy facing the Turks and the Algerians as we are speaking, anyway. Or people who disguise themselves as Turks", he conceded with a little laugh.

"As for the army itself", Cromwell pointed out, "it is indeed excellent, but it has some weak points. The cavalry which should support the footsoldiers is mostly made of German mercenaries. Very good men, but quick to leave with their payment if they see any profit in it."

"And you know som... OUCH!"

Chancellor Audley and the other councillors watched in surprise as My Lord Norfolk suddenly bent to massage his leg. It seemed that someone wearing very high and pointed heels had just stomped on his foot or kicked him in the calf to keep him silent. George Boleyn had to bite his lips to keep from smiling too openly.

"Furthermore", the minister went on as if he had not been interrupted, "given the tensions between the German principalities and the empire, the princes could be tempted to pay a bit more to keep their mercenaries at home. Amongst the weak points of this army, we can also consider the fact that it will be far from its bases, and even further from its paymasters if it ventured to England. And last, the Spanish artillery has been a bit behind recently, particularly when compared to what the French have developed. They learnt their lesson and worked hard to remedy their flaws: their guns are made of better metal and the officers of this corps now receive a special training. In a nutshell, if we could unite France, England and Germany, we would certainly have the best army in the world."

He did not get enthusiastic very often, but this idea of a common army seemed dear to his heart.

"Lord Wiltshire, Lord Rochford", the queen said, "you will negotiate a treaty with our neighbours. I
give you carte blanche to operate, but do not promise royal marriages too quickly, please."

Both men bowed with a smile.
20th of September, Chelsea

"Thomas?"

His wife’s voice rang from the entrance of the garden.

"There is a Mister Chapuys who wishes to see you."

"I am coming."

As he slowly walked back towards the house, Thomas More remembered the little conversation he had had with Lord Cromwell when they had left the Tower.

First, there had been a moment of disbelief when he had learnt of his release, and the presence of a royal minister had added to that impression. Why would the king’s... no, the regent’s very powerful right-hand man have come? Once they had boarded the boat that would take them to Chelsea, Cromwell had explained everything in very clear terms.

"Please consider, Sir Thomas, that the Queen Regent is not acting out of charity. She is only doing fine politics."

"Did you lend her your Machiavelli books?"

"I did not need to. She has quickly learnt to handle the public opinion carefully, something none of the great lords of the Court will think about. It is the same train of thought as allowing Lady Mary to come to the king’s funeral."

More had winced when he had thought about Henry’s death.

"Do not be too affected and do not mourn him", his interlocutor had said rather rudely. "If he was still alive you could be dead."

"I mourn for the boy he was, not the man he became", the former chancellor had confessed. "Have you ever felt like you were an architect that finished a beautiful house, the pride of his life, only to discover he has built on the most slippery ground?"

"I know this feeling indeed."

Silence had settled for a while.

"What are the conditions for my release?" More had then asked.

"You are under house arrest in Chelsea, and your visitors will be watched. Furthermore, mail is allowed without restrictions, but be warned that it may arrive to you slightly... crumpled."

"I understand. It seems rather light. It must hide something else."

"You will receive visits from people who do not wish any good to the queen regent and her children. I want to know what those persons are hatching. In detail. Am I perfectly clear? I will know if you had visitors, and if I do not have news on that topic..."

Cromwell’s expression had been almost fierce when he had hammered those words, and More had
sworn he had perfectly understood the message. His safety against some kind of betrayal.

"Tell me, Lord Cromwell", he had resumed after a while, "who do you serve exactly?"

The minister had relaxed for the first time since the beginning of their travel and the smile on his face had confirmed to More that they had now an understanding.

"Why... the realm, Sir Thomas, the realm and nothing else. Did you doubt it?"

"Of course not."

"And the realm needs peace."

"On that we agree."

Silence had come back until they had reached Chelsea. It was a good thing they had discussed during the trip, since Alice More's happy cries and passionate hugs left no time for any serious conversation.

##

Before meeting with the imperial ambassador, More had a quick word with his wife.

"Are you busy?"

"I am peeling fruits for preserves, why?"

"I think a second pair of ears will be useful to listen to this conversation. Remain out of sight, but listen to everything."

Alice nodded before hiding in her kitchen.

Chapuys was waiting, nonchalantly leaning against the mantelpiece. He behaved a bit better when his host was chancellor, how amusing... The Savoyard seemed in good health, still exuberant when he left his contemplation of the landscape to turn toward More, smiling broadly.

"My dear Thomas, it is such a blessing to see you again! And to see you free!"

If his sincerity was proportional to the strength of his handshake, everything would be fine.

Both men sat near a window and immediately, Chapuys started on his favourite topic, i.e. to restore Mary Tudor in the line of succession. As long as the king had been alive, Chapuys had firmly believed that he would be able to manage such a feat, but Henry's death had changed his line of thinking. It was obvious that the 'concubine' would never leave willingly, and that Emperor Charles would thus have to act more directly in order to protect his beloved cousin's rights.

"Do you think you master could plan a military action?" More asked, already wary.

"But of course", Chapuys answered. "It is even the best thing to do. To sweep off the clique of wicked men and heretics who oppress this poor kingdom and restore the true queen and the true faith."

More felt something tense violently in his chest. No, now was not the time to have one of those fits that left him breathless and unable to rise from his seat for hours. Most importantly, he should not let the ambassador see the dread his words had generated.
"Mister Chapuys", he started prudently, "is it not conflicting with Queen Katherine's wishes? I seem to remember that she was firmly opposed to the use of violence."

"While the king was alive, it may have been possible, but now that the Boleyn woman holds the throne, only my master's army will allow the return of the legitimate queen."

"Who will rule without any other interference, I assume?"

"But of course. Princess Mary is of age and completely able to rule. She will be queen on her own."

More politely raised an eyebrow. Either Chapuys was mistaking him for a fool, or he was a fool himself to tell such things. It was widely known that Emperor Charles had slowly but surely driven his mother, Queen Juana, towards madness and life-long committal in order to wear the crown of Castile a bit sooner. Nothing would prevent him from using Mary as a nice screen for a board of governors which would administrate England for their master's greatest benefit. And this was only the first of the numerous stumbling blocks he could see in this project.

"Tell me, Chapuys", he went on, "how do you think English people will react when they see the imperial army on their lands?"

The ambassador blinked, clearly surprised.

"I can imagine they will gladly welcome the end of the Boleyns' corrupted rule", he said, though his voice lacked some conviction, "and the return of their legitimate queen."

"I am going to tell you something that may surprise you, but that will be certainly very useful to you", More retorted. "People do not care about who sits on the throne of England. People want good harvests, healthy children and peace. If they are not pleased with their monarch, they will take care of him by themselves. It does not matter what people may think of the Queen Regent; as soon as they see an foreign army landing on their lands with the whole trail of misery it usually involves, they will forget everything they felt against Queen Anne to remember that she is as English as themselves, that the emperor was the most fickle ally, and that Katherine was Spanish before everything else, always favoured the interests of Spain and could never manage to speak their language properly. If you choose this solution, you will face a slaughter of unseen proportions."

"I see", Chapuys said slowly. "I must confess I was expecting something else, coming from you."

"You asked for my opinion, not my blessings", More retorted, annoyed. "This is what may happen to your master if he insists."

"Of course. I do not think going on with this discussion is really useful. Please allow me to leave."

The ambassador gathered the folds of his cloak and his damaged dignity, and took leave after a very brief salute.

Lady Alice emerged from the kitchen, a doubtful expression on her face.

"My God, is he truly willing to go that far?"

"I would like not to believe it, but with the emperor – as with the king of France – one can never be sure of anything, unfortunately."

"Well, he did not like the way you described the situation", she noticed, shaking her head.

"And yet I spared him the probable reactions from the French and the others if Emperor Charles
carried out his project. Now... Do you remember what was said?"

"Indeed."

"Then you will help summarize it, and I will send it to whoever it may concern."

Alice forgot her fruits and preserves to sit besides her husband, adding a word here, changing another there until their report seemed nearly perfectly truthful.

##

The boy More had sent with his message found – for once – the numerous Cromwell family reunited in Austin Friars. Gregory was not in session at Parliament – that he had joined during the previous autumn - for some days, and the minister's nieces, nephews, apprentices and associates had invaded the house. It was Gregory who fetched the letter and brought it to his father with a disappointed face.

"Were you waiting for some mail?"

"Hmm... Not really", the young man groaned. "Well, maybe..."

"Greg has a new lady", his cousin Johanne sang while running through the office.

"Just go and take care of your flowers! And do not eavesdrop!" the young man shouted, furious. "I was not waiting for a letter from 'a lady friend', specially when I want to get married", he added for his father when Johanne had left. "I was hoping one of my former inmates from the university would tell me some interesting rumours."

Because he did not possess a mind as sharp as his father's (to be honest, not many people did), it was often believed that Gregory Cromwell was a bit slow to understand the world and not very smart. It was a mistake. He had two very enviable gifts: he made friends easily, and had a good memory. It allowed him to receive confidences he should have never heard, and to repeat them, if he thought they could be useful to his father. He also had a lot of success amongst ladies, but remained stubbornly faithful to Elizabeth Seymour, waiting for the queen regent to call the girl back from her exile in the North.

"I suppose I am asking to share a secret of state if I want to know the content of these papers", he said, pointing to the letter.

"Not at all. Sit here, we will study this together."

"Thank you, Father."

Both men read the papers in silence. It did not need comments. After a moment, Gregory could not refrain from asking some questions, though.

"I am surprised that while he considers you and the queen as downright evil, More takes such lengths to inform you. Why?"

"It is the price of his freedom, and he knows it. Luckily enough, he shares his friend Erasmus' opinion on war. It is amusing only for those who have no experience of it."

"But the duke of Norfolk is experienced in this field", the young man pointed out. "And Suffolk, too. And even Emperor Charles."

His father sighed.
"They are nobles. Those people do not think the same way as we common folk, you have to understand that."

Gregory let out a little laugh.

"They never have to suffer from the consequences of the conflicts they generate. They only see glory and prestige. Walking for miles and miles on an empty stomach, without a single penny in your pocket, they do not know what it is like any more than seeing their homes and lands completely devastated. You must be a commoner to understand it. Furthermore, the emperor would make a poor bet trying to attack England. The French would not ignore such an opportunity. Queen Anne is an ally. François will defend her. The German princes will be tempted to enter the conflict to repel the imperial troops far from their borders, and I do not see why the Dutch would not attack the Spanish fleet when it comes close to their coasts."

"So it will be an European war if Chapuys sends such a report to his master."

"Even a civil war, again, if Mary's supporters hatch a revolt in England. And if the oh so Catholic emperor wins here, it will be the end of our Reformation. It is all the more necessary that the Boleyns bring us back a proper treaty with France, no matter what I think about it. I will go and see the queen immediately."

# #

The minister's report led the queen regent to take some preventive actions. Knowing that Lady Mary had gone to pray in one of the very few convents still existing near London, Anne went to fetch the girl herself.

The former princess of Wales was not feeling at ease when her stepmother urged her to climb into her coach. What did Lady Anne want of her? She gasped when she found herself facing the chancellor and Minister Cromwell.

"What happened?" Mary asked, worried.

"Lady Mary, for safety reasons, neither you nor your sisters will go back to Hatfield", Audley explained in a reassuring voice. "You will all remain at Court."

"Why?"

"It is quite certain that Emperor Charles is planning an attack against England, and to that effect, he may try to take the princess and queen captive. Or take you out of the kingdom", the chancellor went on.

So, this is certainly what Chapuys wanted to discuss with me, Mary thought. But I will not flee, even to wear the imperial crown. I am a princess of England, not an Spanish infanta.

"You will remain in Hampton Court", Cromwell added.

"Will I be allowed to go out?" Mary inquired, fearing she would remain a prisoner.

"Naturally", the regent assured, "but not without an escort. One way or the other, London is not a safe city for a young woman alone."

Mary huddled up in a corner, her stomach one giant knot. He cousin would not start a war, it was not possible. As much as she wanted to recover her rights as Crown Princess, she refused the price of so many battles.
The coach stopped in the main courtyard of Whitehall, just enough for the queen and her councillors to get out, then two ladies-in-waiting climbed in with Mary, and the coachman spurred his horses back to a trot.

Anne watched them leave from the front steps.

Once this worry was lifted from her shoulders, she went back to her office and wrote a letter to Elizabeth Seymour, ordering her to leave York to come back in London as soon as possible.

Never an order was obeyed as swiftly.
Here comes the storm...

October, London and other cities

It began very discreetly - some words exchanged in a tavern, a man more sober than the other customers who evoked the possibility of a war against Spain to put Mary on the throne of England... It was just some words said casually, but they had their effect. If Katherine's memory was still remembered with some fondness in England, her nephew was seen as an unreliable ally, too quick to forget his promises, and on top of that, he had had the gall to break his engagement to the former Princess Mary! An insult to national pride!

Days after days, as October went on, the conversations came more and more often on this topic. Rumours left London to spread in the surrounding areas. It was said that the little queen's crowning, now scheduled before Christmas, remained uncertain. If the Spanish attacked before...

#

Those disquieting murmurs came back to the Queen Regent and her minister's ears. The agitators paid by the Lord Privy Seal had worked well.

"We could go on paving the way..." the Regent suggested.

Cromwell waited to see where she was going.

"Tell me, Thomas, do you know if the Guide of Fees for the Papal Shop is well-spread in England?"

He nearly choked so much he laughed. The satire Luther had published years before had doubtlessly caused more damage to the Church than all the theses written by the German monk. It described in great detail the various fines the sinners had to pay to be forgiven and hope a little place in Heaven. Everything was taxed, even sins considered as unforgivable. As they were often sins of the flesh, the book had had a considerable success on the continent, if only to give more ideas to twisted minds.

"Well... not that I know, my lady", he answered after reining in his laughter.

"It is time to take care of that. You surely know how to proceed."

"As you wish, Majesty."

Seldom had a royal order been so pleasant to carry out.

#

Cromwell knew indeed who could have the book printed in a short time and cheaply. Roy Harper, a man he had met during his years of travel all across Europe, would be perfect for the task. Like himself, Harper had done all sorts of works, the most dangerous included, and the two men had regularly helped each other. Harper too had chosen the Reformation, even before Cromwell got interested in the topic. His friend, being older, had introduced him to preachers and helped him to discover the true faith. The gift he had for engraving and printing allowed him to earn his life well... and to propagate more or less illicit books. Thus when his former protégé came to visit and ask to put the Guide back in the printing press, Harper barely refrained from singing Hosannah.

"Such requests, they warm my heart. Is it personal business, or... ?"
"You have the Queen Regent's permission", the royal minister assured. "Unofficially, of course."

"God bless your little lady, then", Harper said, fetching his copy of the Guide to check it for mistakes.

"She is not my little lady, Roy. For Heaven's sake, do not spread such rumours."

Harper shrugged.

"King Henry, may he rest in peace, cut all links with the bishop of Rome to have her in his bed, she had God knows how many gentlemen at her feet, and you tell me that you don't want to do her?"

"Roy, ENOUGH!"

The printer jerked abruptly. Then he laughed.

"It is just as I said, you are severely touched, my dear. Well", he added hastily, noticing his friend's murderous glare, "I wrote a little satire that I'd like you to read. I have had a bit of fun at the papal Court's expense by studying the Pope and his cardinals' fascinating family life. There, have a laugh."

Cromwell picked the book up and started to read. This parody of a genealogy was indeed quite amusing.

He spent some minutes on it, then put it back on a shelf.

"So?"

"It will sell well", Cromwell assured, smiling again. "But you committed some imprecisions, Master Harper."

"Really?"

"Campeggio did not break his vows. He spent the first part of his life as a layman, got married, had children like everybody else... It was only after his wife's death that he entered the holy orders."

"You tell me! Well, thank you, it would have harmed the veracity of my booklet. And my apologies to Cardinal Campeggio for calling him a dirty old man. It does not matter, I will find something else. On another topic, I heard that your boy would be married before the end of the year. Is it true?"

"Yes indeed. He and his Lizzie were patient enough, I think."

"Isn't that sweet..." Harper then pushed his former colleague towards the exit. "There, out with you! I have work to do. You'll see it when I am done with it."

He was going to close the door of his workshop, then changed his mind.

"Oh, before I forget: did you know that Sir Thomas Wyatt is coming to London?"

He saw his friend's face darken all of a sudden, then the door slammed hard behind him.

"Something tells me that Mr Wyatt could very well be sounding the Thames in no time", Harper concluded philosophically.

###

3rd of November
Soon after All Saints' Day, Whitehall suffered a little shake-up. The late king’s chambers being – according to the Queen Regent – better suited to receive the council, she had decided to move into these rooms, leaving her former chambers to her daughters since they were, as she said, sunnier and perfect for hosting children.

# #

6th of November, London

Anthony Knivert felt as exhausted as his horse when he came back to London at last, when autumn was at its end. When the Queen Regent had offered him a new job, he had welcomed the news. Unfortunately, acting as building inspector was excessively taxing and left him too little time to take care of his wife, now five months pregnant. This being said, the security of England partially relied on his work, so he took it very seriously.

Until then, England had been fine with being an island and having excellent ships. Except for Dover, it did not really have any coastal defence. Wolsey had barely begun the work, Henry had carried on, but England had to redouble its efforts in order to finish everything before the very likely visit of the Spanish fleet. The official mourning period had barely ended before Anne had summoned architects and officers, spread maps on her desk and put everyone at work to complete the fortifications holding the coasts.

Then the project managers had left for Plymouth, Southampton, and many other places that Anthony had reluctantly visited one after the other, followed by an awful weather. He was not sure he would be completely dry before the following spring.

The Court and the city were buzzing with an increasing activity. Reports had arrived from France, as Knivert learnt, notifying England of the arrival of imperial troops from the German borders in the Dutch harbour of Antwerp, which was not a very good sign. He also heard that the armourers in London were making a fortune by selling swords and crossbows.

Anthony found his old friends passably disgruntled when he finally managed to enter Whitehall, after making his way through the rabble of the streets. Suffolk thought Knivert was falling low by doing Cromwell's courses, and Norris grumbled relentlessly about Sir Thomas Wyatt's presence in the castle. Knivert rolled his eyes when he heard about that. Wyatt had not recovered very well from the ending of his relationship with Anne Bolyen, and it was said his mind might be slightly perturbed. He had been besieging the Regent's door for days and she had finally relented and accepted an interview. Anthony sat near the entrance of the royal chambers, curious to see Mr Wyatt's face and behaviour when he left.

Inside the chambers, Anne Saville opened the door for Mr Wyatt and introduced him at last in the queen's rooms.

Anne was waiting for him, strapped into a high-cut black dress, a string of small jet beads around her neck, her dark hair bound in a tight bun. Her only other jewels were her wedding and engagement rings, one a gold band with a diamond and the other an emerald set in silver. Wyatt had fondly kept the memory of a joyous young lady dressed in colourful clothes who loved flashy jewels, who had then turned into an elegant and dignified queen, and he felt confused at the contrast. But what bothered him most was the presence of both Anne's daughters, playing on a carpet behind her. He hated this reminder she had belonged to another man...

He scolded himself and dove in an elegant bow, his velvet cap sweeping the floor.
"Your Majesty..."

"Mister Wyatt, welcome back. We remained a long time since without news from you. How fare the United Provinces?"

Again, it took Wyatt some seconds before recovering. Why did she want to talk about the Low Countries? He had so many things to tell her, much more interesting and pleasing. He thought hard to find a proper answer.

"Well... The negotiations were fruitful in all regards. But this is not what I wished to discuss with you, Majesty."

"You did not come here to offer me your deepest sympathy for the death of my husband, I assume."

"My lady..." the diplomat said in his most wheedling voice. "By the affection that united us, I would like..."

Anne raised a hand to stop him.

"My dear Thomas, I cannot let you go on. I am very flattered that you still consider me this way, but my situation has changed. I am the king's widow, and permanently living under the courtiers' eyes, watched by the rest of the country as well, and I will not even mention our allies. Can you imagine the scandal if I marry again too soon? I cannot allow it. I would not be able to come and live on your lands either. My charge holds me here. As long as Elizabeth is not of age, I am married to my work, I am afraid."

"But the queen's majority will be in eight years!" Wyatt lamented.

"Indeed", the Regent answered in a neutral tone. "I have too many responsibilities for now."

She did not mention the argument of Wyatt's own marriage. He would be too quick to answer that divorce was not an issue any more in this country. To tell him that the Queen Regent of England could not be a Mrs Wyatt was closer to the truth but really lacked some tact. And to admit she had another man in her life... Thus she chatted about frivolities, before gently but firmly pushing him towards the exit all the while thanking him for his kindness.

In the corridor, Knivert saw a kind a desperate ghost, who barely managed to find his way in the castle, followed by Anne Saville's mocking eyes. When the unfortunate man had left, Knivert ran to report to Cromwell.

Not a real surprise, the minister listened to Anthony's tale with as much delight as a cat given a bowl of cream. Wyatt had once shamelessly shouted Anne's generosity towards him from the rooftops. And now his siren sent him away like a naughty child. It was excellent for the queen's reputation, but they would have to keep watch over Wyatt and hope he would not do anything stupid.

"Did you really think she would greet him with a smile, even put him in her bed?" Knivert finally asked after a moment of thinking.

"No, I did not think that", the other man answered.

"But you may have feared it."

Knivert knew at once he had crossed the line.

"Good Lord, what is your problem, all of you?" Cromwell barked. "Do you believe that we do not
have any other means to ensure each other's loyalty?"

The knight seemed to shrink on his seat to the point he almost disappeared behind his desk.

"I have something more useful in mind for you. The queen regent will soon inspect the fortifications, and you will be her guide. I do not wish for any trouble during the journey."

"It would surprise me if there was any", Knivert said prudently. 
"Several thousand of men and their families have their purses and their bellies full thanks to these building sites. Small chance they bear ill thoughts towards the queen."

"Agitators are paid for that purpose. I do not want a single incident."

Anthony nodded. In case some... things happened, he would be given a private tour of the Tower. Nonetheless, he still had a question.

"If I am not mistaken, it is Brandon who should take care of the Regent's security", he pointed out.

"I do not trust Mr Brandon. I know that in private he still supports Lady Mary and that he allows people to claim she is not treated well here, which is not true."

Anthony shook his head. Mary, though still officially a bastard, had her own chambers in Hampton, a decent household, and the atmosphere between her and the queen-mother seemed to be – slightly – less tense. At least, Mary did not call her stepmother a whore any more. It was a real improvement. 
Damnit, Charles...

"Right. I should rather go back to work at once."

# #

19th of November, Plymouth

The cobblestones of Plymouth were slippery with rainwater under the horses hooves. Furthermore, the inhabitants massed in along the houses did not leave much space for the Regent's cortege to make its way towards the harbour, and the horses were walking slowly and carefully. The cold weather which had fallen on the city had not deterred the crowd from coming in numbers, and though they were almost silent, they behaved rather respectfully. A hand emerged here and there from the crowd to touch the Queen's black dress, the harness of her brown mare, or just the tip of her boot. Each time, the regent nodded and amiably acknowledged her subject.

Anthony, as inspector of the fortifications, was waiting for the Regent at the entrance of the harbour watch tower. The building was almost finished, and the masons were already busy on the surrounding walls. Quite proud of their work, the workmen themselves came to explain to their lady how they processed to make the battlements more resistant to cannon balls and the way to build a wall that would hold against the tide. Knivert relaxed visibly while watching his queen conversing with the master builder. She seemed perfectly at ease with those people. When he remarked on it while they strode along the piers, she answered with a happy smile:

"What can I say, it must be the spice trader in me who is talking right now!"

Unlike Lord Boleyn, the Regent had always been completely unaffected by the modest origins of her paternal family. Another reason why Anthony really liked her.

"Well, it is time to leave", the Queen added, straightening her cloak. "We have a long way to go."
God Save the Queen!

27th of November, London

No one had ever worked so fast to prepare a crowning ceremony, as agreed all the servants and builders coming and going through the great nave of Westminster, some putting up the platform, others hanging banners... Rumours were spreading about a Spanish attack during the coming spring, and the Regent now wanted her daughter to be officially acknowledged and crowned as Queen of England before the troubles began. The ceremony would not be as magnificent as for the girl's mother, though Elizabeth was Queen Regnant and not simply a king's consort. If they had stuck to the original idea, a ceremony for the child's twelfth birthday, the artisans would have had time to prepare something fitting for such an event: the first true ruling Queen of England. But the war was coming, the people needed a symbol... and all the money held by the Treasury was used in military preparations.

In her room in Whitehall, Elizabeth was staring at the dress spread on her bed. It was splendid, all woven silver and covered with pearls. The cloth had been taken from the dress Queen Anne had worn on the day of her own crowning, four years prior. When her mother had worn this dress, Elizabeth had been still growing in her belly. The little girl was feeling a bit weird. Something told her that once she put this dress on, she would not have the opportunity to play with her dolls, to race in the corridors with the kitchen boys or her little sister any more. Of course, she did not fully understand what it meant to be a queen. Elizabeth had no idea about the mountain of paperwork the ministers treated every day, international diplomacy or other notions of that kind, but her mother had already warned her that she would have to take regular lessons to learn her duties as a monarch.

##

8th of December

Despite the cold and the wind blowing in the streets, the inhabitants had left their houses in huge crowds to watch the Queen's cortege from Whitehall to Westminster. Some said that with three great ceremonies in less than four years, they were truly spoiled. When you were lucky, you could watch a crowning, a wedding or a royal burial once in your life, so several of them... Really good luck!

Thus the onlookers were pleased to see a royal coach with gildings, white horses and all carrying the little Queen, seated with her mother, her grandmother and His Grace the Duke of Norfolk, and waving enthusiastically.

Sitting at her daughter's right, Anne allowed herself a satisfied smile. Elizabeth was receiving a warmer welcome than her mother for the same occasion. It was promising. A bit further in the cortege, Cromwell was thinking the same as he rubbed his fingers together to prevent them from going numb. Good Lord, what a winter!

It was terribly cold in the abbey when the royal cortege entered it. The courtiers had wrapped into layers and layers of wool and fur in order not to shiver too violently, but with each breath a small cloud of white steam rose and a thick condensation was covering the stained glasses. Closer to the throne, Suffolk almost looked like a bear, so much his coat broadened his already impressive silhouette. His guards were in place; no one would disturb the processing of the ceremony. Everything would have been perfect if his wife Catherine had been at his side.

He had fought teeth and nails to convince the duchess to come, but she had categorically refused, claiming that he would have to pull her there by her hair to make her attend. Though he had legally
the right to do so, Suffolk had not deemed necessary to go to such lengths, and had left his wife alone, bringing his four daughters and his son Henry with him (Baby Charles, being just born, had of course remained with his mother) to witness this major event.

He knew the ceremonial had been shortened and would last an hour at most, but with this cold, it would be a lot to bear for the little girl. If everything went according to plan, Cranmer would make do with a homily listing the monarch's duties, then the anointing, and after that would put the crown on Elizabeth Tudor's little red head. The child had learnt her part during the previous week, repeating the moves again and again to ensure she knew them perfectly, he had been told. It had made him smile; at least the young Queen was taking the whole matter very seriously.

Beside him, Henry shuffled and stomped his foot on the floor to get warmer.

"Is she coming soon?" the boy whispered.

"Of course", Suffolk promised. "But the royal coach cannot go at top speed in the streets. People must see the queen before she enters the abbey. If you cannot see the monarch, you cannot love him."

Henry nodded gravely.

"Oh. I understand."

The courtiers' patience was quite quickly rewarded, however. Half an hour after the last nobleman had reached his place in the nave, the queen finally entered Westminster.

The last ranks of the audience had to crane their necks in order to see the child walking by them, followed by her mother and Lady Howard-Boleyn, three steps behind her. Her half-sister Lady Mary had not been required to attend the ceremony, to spare her feelings, but she had insisted on being present, arguing that it was her right as a sister and her duty as a good Christian. She was still dressed in black, just like her step-mother, but both had chosen much more flamboyant jewels than usual. Mary was wearing a heavy gold necklace, formerly owned by her grandmother Isabella, a little bit old-fashioned (she was considering having the gems reset) but adapted for the circumstances. Anne had elected one of her favourite pieces: a long necklace of faceted rubies, worn with the matching ring.

Elizabeth was walking carefully, the short train of her silk and silver dress trailing on the stone floor behind her. She went to kneel on the prie-dieu at the threshold of the chancel to listen to the archbishop's sermon.

At first, all went on fine. But as Cranmer got carried away by his eloquence and described the golden age that was awaiting England, Elizabeth started to fidget, still kneeling on the cushion. In her defence, the courtiers were losing patience as well, not wishing to freeze to death. From her seat in the chancel on Cranmer's right, Anne coughed loudly enough for the man to falter and stop, then he resumed his sermon, shortening it of several paragraphs, to everyone's relief.

He ended it by blessing the little girl, then led her to the centre of the nave, where she had to lie down on the floor. Elizabeth did her best not to touch the ice cold floor, remaining in a rather precarious balance on her hands and the tip of her feet. Then again, Cranmer took all his time to recite the prayers coming with the anointing before allowing the child to get up to put a tiny drop of holy balm on her forehead, her hands, the crook of her elbows and her chest. From her seat, Anne sighed in relief. For now all was well. Now all that remained was the crown itself. Anne hoped the two goldsmiths she had hired had understood her recommendations when they had modified the small piece of jewellery made for FitzRoy. Yes, she had allowed herself this little joke at her
deceased husband's expense, having the daughter he had not really wanted crowned with the
emblem crafted for the bastard Henry had wished to name king of Ireland.

Elizabeth went to sit on the throne, which seemed huge for such a young monarch. The sceptre did
not bother her too much since she could wedge it against the seat, but she had to put the orb, too
heavy for her, on her lap. Anne kept her fingers crossed so that her little girl did not forget to put it
aside before getting up, else it would fall, and all would whisper about bad omens...

Cranmer delicately put the crown down on the child's head and gently tapped it to straighten it on the
girl's red hair. Elizabeth let out a small sigh of relief. Just some more minutes and the ordeal would
come to an end.

Cranmer turned to face the courtiers and announced:

"God give us Her Grace Elizabeth, Queen of England and Ireland!"

"God guard the Queen!" the assembly answered in a quite neat unison.

Anne relaxed in her seat. They only had to go through the Lords' oath and it would be done, almost
in time in spite of Cranmer's lyrical improvisations.

One after the other, the duke of Norfolk leading them, all the highest-ranking nobles of England
came to kneel before their new queen and swear fealty. Elizabeth remained stony-faced during this
parade of noblemen, except for Suffolk, who was greeted by a "Thank you, Uncle", and the earl of
Shrewsbury, who received a huge grin from his new monarch.

Apart from that, no particular incident deserved to be reported.

When Elizabeth left Westminster, a huge clamour greeted her apparition. The spearmen stationed by
the duke of Suffolk were hard-pressed to contain the crowd who tried to come closer to the queen
and touch her dress or say a word. Despite their orders, some people managed to slither in until they
reached Elizabeth to brush her hand. A monarch was the Lord's envoy. A simple contact was akin to
a blessing.

Some steps behind her daughter, Anne was listening to the people whispering thanks to Elizabeth
and were considering a four-year-old girl as if she was the Saviour made flesh. Such a responsibility
for the adults around her, to change this smiling child into a competent queen mastering all the
mysteries of politics...

The coach went back to Whitehall at a slow pace, the driver taking all precautions not to knock
down anyone on the cobbles.

If the crowning ceremony itself had been of an exemplary sobriety, the feast that followed at
Whitehall was more fitting for such an occasion. Christmas was coming and the powers that be also
needed some distraction. Mark Smeaton, who had left Court during Anne's exile and made a living –
a rather comfortable one, truth be told – of giving music lessons to noble children, had been called
back for the occasion. Standing on a platform with other musicians, he was livening up the reception
with joyful tunes and dances, while the guests tried to keep their composure. They drank, they
danced until they were breathless, they were happily dining on the delicious dishes provided by the
palace kitchens, but no one could forget their current predicament. England would soon have to face
a war and the new monarch was only four...

##

20th of December, Whitehall
The last days had passed like a bad dream. The king had died four months ago, the war would be soon declared, and no one felt like having some good time. Even Gregory Cromwell and Elizabeth Seymour's rather discreet wedding could not bring any real distraction at Court. All the assistants were far too worried to really smile.

The Queen Regent and her councillors were spending their days locked up in a room reading reports, answering mail and dispatching funds for troops and ammunitions. Anne had scraped her income from Pembroke over the last two years to the last penny, meaning almost two hundred thousand pounds. With this money, they would be able to pay a lot of sailors and artillerymen, Chancellor Audley thought while sealing the last chest of gold sent to Dover.

It was high time for the army to be ready to fight. According to the information provided by the French and Dutch spies that were literally swarming in Spain, Emperor Charles would be able to launch his fleet in April, if the weather allowed it. Always a smart one, he had dispatched the ships between several harbours - Cadix, La Coruña, Vigo... - to avoid having them all destroyed by one pre-emptive strike. As for the plan, it was relatively simple: some of the ships would sail directly towards England, the others towards the Netherlands to embark troops, then would head for Dover. The agents who had sent the report added that the French would be able to attack the first fleet from La Rochelle and the Breton harbours, while the United Provinces would attack the second.

Buried in his papers, the duke of Norfolk felt a little more at ease, even if their allies were lacking ships to completely destroy the Spanish fleet. Nonetheless, he specially trusted the Dutch to wreak chaos amongst the Spanish ships, even if the privateers of La Rochelle had an excellent reputation in that regard too; he had not seen them at work yet.

The rest of the Court was possessed by the same feverish activity, though Whitehall and Hampton seemed a bit deserted. All the gentlemen who commanded, equipped or belonged to a regiment were now doing their service. Knivert had left London for Dover, and Norfolk was sent to Plymouth. The old duke had all the required experience to lead the fleet and furthermore, the council was relieved not to face him every day.
Diplomatic exchanges

3rd of January, 1538

In Paris, the discussions between the King and the English ambassadors were still underway. François, willing to put an end to Emperor Charles' ambitions, was too happy to help Queen Anne, but he was not entering an alliance just for her sake. If the emperor managed to invade England, France would be completely encircled by Habsburg possessions or allies. It would not be long before Charles invaded his rival's kingdom, and despite the reforms initiated in the French army, it would simply not have enough soldiers to face the threat. In order to save face, François was ready, in case Charles would actually launch an attack on France, to send his wife Eleanore, sister of the emperor, to negotiate a peaceful solution to the coming conflict. But the good queen had refused.

"My dear husband, you know as well as I do that Carlos will never take my advice into account. He would rather want me widowed again so he can use me as a bargaining tool in another alliance."

François did not know who had said that his wife was stupid, but that person was clearly wrong. Under her shy appearance, Queen Eleanore was anything but stupid, and during François’ captivity in Valladolid, he had taken advantage of it. Freshly and happily widowed by the old king of Portugal, Eleanore had helped him to pass time in his cell, in all the ways she had been able to imagine. The least you could say was that the woman had an unlimited imagination! When his sons had been sent in Spain in his stead, the good princess had fed them and taken care of them, had sent their letters to France... He might not have been in love with her, no more than with the poor Claude of France, but he respected her intellectual abilities nonetheless.

# #

5th of January, London

The council was still busy with the organisation of the coming war. It seemed it had already begun within the corridors of the palace. On one hand, the French and Spanish ambassadors were strictly avoiding each other. On the other hand, Castillon spent most of his time in fierce negotiations with his German colleagues. Cleves, Bavaria, Palatinate... They were all discussing in one or the other's chambers, and sometimes you could see the duke of Lorraine's envoy join them and participate. Perpetually trapped between France and the Holy Empire, his master was in a rather uncomfortable situation, and never knew which side he should choose, though the current duke was rather francophile. Most of the time, the House of Lorraine used to sell its very expensive loyalty to one of his powerful neighbours (as Savoy would do), and switch side when the prices on the other side became more attractive. For the time being, the duke was strongly influenced by some of his vassals, the Guises, who were highly popular at the French Court. This family, eager to be in King François' good graces, were rooting for the French monarch. Just a little push in the right direction and some more gold, and Lorraine would join the side of the coalition. Anne had sent her cousin Francis Bryan to come and go between all the diplomats, relying on his skills in languages and negotiation to smooth every difficulty. As the former ambassador in France, Bryan felt perfectly at ease in that snakes pit. The unrepentant schemer had even convinced, with some gold, one of Chapuys' servants to give him the drafts of the letters sent by his employer. It was enlightening, though not really rejoicing.

A particular document attracted the attention of the queen's spies. It was a kind of plan to ensure Mary Tudor's rule after she was crowned queen, but a plan executed by her imperial cousin without her knowledge or consent. Chapuys had listed in great detail all the possible pretenders - Tudor, Plantagenet-Pole, Stuart - and the way they should be treated according to the validity of their claim
to the crown. The Poles were coming far ahead of the young queen and princess, still labelled as bastards by the ambassador. The man had good intelligence; even Mary Stafford Boleyn's children, though of disputable paternity, and Mistress Audrey Dingley, whom Henry had fathered in 1520, were listed.

Bryan brought the note before the council. The reactions were varied. As usual, the duke of Norfolk lost his temper. Anne was secretly delighted by the discovery of this paper. Suffolk was trying not to cut a sorry figure, but inwardly, he was aghast. Chapuys's imprudence was ruining all the plans he had imagined. If the Court or the commoners were to learn about this note, it would be an irreversible calamity. Those at Court who were still favouring a Spanish alliance would be forced to keep silent, or even sent into exile, and Princess Mary would lose all her popularity. Her own cousin, planning to murder children of royal blood to put her on the throne!

No one heard Suffolk's prayers. The rest of the council shared his opinion on the danger this list represented... and thus decided to publish it.

Chapuys should not have been so surprised to have stones thrown through his windows...

To say that the note made a scandal, inside and outside the kingdom, did not even begin to cover it. King François had kindly warned his Spanish neighbour that the tiniest accident happening to any of the people listed in the note would be considered as a casus belli. In the same time, François put two of his regiments under the orders of his brother-in-law the king of Navarre, in case Emperor Charles would be tempted to invade the small kingdom. George Boleyn, who had remained in Paris while his father was working with the German princes, was more than happy to report this news.

Naturally, the ambassadors of France and England in Valladolid were immediately expelled from the country. François sent the Spanish envoy back home at once in answer.

Anne nearly squealed in delight when her poor ambassador came back home, truly sorry to have been thrown out in such a dire way and afraid he would be punished by the Queen. Quite the opposite, Anne gave him a warm welcome, promising to find him a quieter charge for the remainder of his career, and the diplomat left the throne room with a smile on his lips.

"You know how to make friends," Cromwell commented approvingly. Here is one man who will praise you wherever he goes.

"Perfect. You cannot have too many of them. Now, we only have to return the Emperor's favour by sending Chapuys away."

He let her make her intentions known to Chapuys with the indulgence of a father giving a Christmas present in advance to his favourite daughter. The Regent and the ambassador hated each other so much that their meeting would be hilarious to witness.

Unfortunately, he could not be present, but the details quickly spread out in all the inns of London, and it was said that Chapuys had left the throne room with a stick up... well, with a stick replacing his spine. This being said, Cromwell was not completely done with the irritating little man.

##

15th of January, Austin Friars

"Do you know what More told me when I went to bid him farewell? That a universal Habsbourg monarchy was a nightmare he hoped to never see, in this world or the other!"

The small Savoyard was shaking with indignation and his lace cuffs were drawing complex figures
in the air as he moved through the room. Cromwell watched him without any emotion. He was used to this show since the ambassador had become a regular visitor at Austin Friars. With a small nod, he made Gregory and Ralph Sadler leave the room. No need to provide Chapuys two relatively innocent targets for his anger.

"How can someone say such a thing?" the ambassador went on while pacing the office. "My master is the best defender of the Faith!"

"Go and tell the Roman priests his soldiers killed," Gregory muttered just before exiting the room. It was fortunately lost on Chapuys.

"One dominion over all Europe will only bring injustice, he says! A king is unable to see what is going wrong in his country if no one is brave enough to tell him! Can you believe this nonsense?"

"No monarch is completely omniscient," Cromwell answered wearily. "Of course he needs people to report what is happening in his kingdom and yes, they need some courage to say that, sometimes, not all is perfect in this world. It is then the king’s duty to take the right decision; this we cannot do for him. If he reacts to his subjects' discontent without looking for its causes, prefers an injustice to some disorder, then he is a bad monarch."

Chapuys stopped his pacing. One would have believed he had taken a blow to the head.

"And to think I believed you to be the firmest support of an imperial alliance..."

"That was before your dear master decided to meddle into our politics and threatened us to send troops if we did not obey his commands. We are not a Spanish colony yet, Chapuys. You cannot just order us around. By acting this way, the emperor damages his cousin's interests. The Queen Regent may even thank him for that!"

The ambassador blinked several times like an owl blinded by the sun. Reining his anger, the little man picked up his heavy fur coat and left, slamming the door behind him. Ralph and Gregory watched him go with a kind of mocking sympathy.

##

"Will my cousin really dare declare war on us?" Lady Mary asked, worried, while she took a walk in the gardens of Hampton Court with Margaret Pole, Countess of Salisbury.

"People who do not think or think little about the consequences of their actions can dare anything, my dear," Lady Pole answered. "It is even this way you can identify them. Between you and me, if it comes to this, you should pray for England to be victorious. This is what I will do. I do not wish to see my country in the same state of subjection as Flanders and Germany."
Hello to all my readers. Here is at last a new chapter. This is one of my favourite, since it takes place in Paris and some of my characters are speaking French. Don't worry, I added the translation at the end of each line in French.

21st of January 1538, London

The proposition transmitted by ambassador Castillon was intriguing enough to deserve attention. King François was suggesting a meeting in Paris, gathering, in addition to himself and the Queen Regent of England, representatives from the United Provinces, and several German princes. A kind of informal alliance already existed between the French and their guests; it was only a matter of making it official. Nonetheless a rather touchy subject remained: who would in fact rule the country during the Regent's leave? Anne stubbornly refused to leave her uncle in charge; she was not sure she would be able to reclaim the power on her return. No way she could let a Pole come close to the seat of power, for the very same reason. Officially, Uncle Norfolk was too valuable to the fleet and was left to his ships, while the Poles were requested to make themselves useful by equipping one or two regiments. That would warm the Plantagenet cardinal's heart when he heard about it... Finally, Anne decided to let the council treat everyday business, under the lead of Chancellor Audley. He was seconded by a whole army of competent administrators. The Regent could thus leave the country with her chief minister without anxiety.

"And Ralph? I will need him there", Cromwell worried.

"And I need him in Edinburgh to make sure our good neighbours will not ally with Spain in case of open conflict. Nothing guarantees they will follow the French this time."

He protested out of habit, but had to admit she was right.

##

27th of January, Dover

The few ladies-in-waiting the Queen Regent was taking with her looked positively green at the mere idea of boarding one of the ships moored in the harbour. The poor women had certainly never tried anything worse than a barque on a placid lake or the Thames. Anne did not make such a fuss. She had already travelled from Dover to Antwerp, from Antwerp to Boulogne and from Le Havre to Southampton, following her father and his embassies. The steep stairs and the deck were almost like old friends to her. Cromwell did not seem anxious either at the prospect of crossing the Channel in mid-winter.

##

8th of February, Paris, the Louvre

The rooms given on the previous day to the English delegation were quite clearly one suite that had been hastily remade into rooms and antechamber with removable dividers. At least, the small area of
the rooms made them easier to warm, Anne thought as she kicked her shoes off and sent them flying under a chair. Coming in winter also spared her the rather... particular smell of Paris during the hot season. Though London was not much better. She sat heavily on her bed. Within two days at most, her father would be back from the United Provinces with the Dutch delegation. She would have to watch everything she said and did... The regent glared at the other beds set in the room. Her ladies-in-waiting would be sleeping by her side. This excluded any kind of "distractions" during their stay in Paris.

Despite this drawback, Anne was happy to be back in the Louvre, which was slowly leaving his armour of medieval battlements to take a more modern aspect. This being said, knowing the Parisians' rather rebellious temperament, the moats and portcullis would not disappear any time soon. Gardens were growing along the river under the influence of the duchess of Brittany, Catherine de Medici, who had brought some talented artists with her from Italy.

"-Maddie?"

"Yes, Majesty?" Lady Dormer answered, running to her queen's side.

"I will sup with the king this evening. Do you know where my brown dress is?"

It was sober enough for a widow, without being too gloomy, after five months of wearing only black. And François would be expecting to see her at her best. No one else was invited. Queen Eleanore would certainly be entertaining the rest of the English group... An interesting task for the very pious and Catholic Queen of France.

##

King François had not changed much since Anne's return in England. His thick black hair had not a single thread of grey yet and he still took care of himself. He still had the same taste for light colours contrasting with black thread patterns, and Anne wondered if Eleanore made the embroideries herself, or if it was his current mistress doing the needlework. She bowed in a half-curtsey, and her colleague bent down his considerable height in answer, before leading her to her chair. She hoped he only wished to talk about politics. An attempt to seduction, so close to a resigned but still proud Eleanore, and a minister a little bit over-protective of "his" queen would only lead to unwanted frictions.

Once they had taken their seat, François gave an order to one of the servants waiting by the door, and the man quietly left the room.

"Cela fait... cinq ans, si je ne m'abuse", the king commented, "que nous nous sommes rencontrés à Calais." (It has been... five years, if I am not mistaken, since we saw each other in Calais. )

Anne nodded.

"Je vous ai naturellement écrit au décès de votre époux, mais permettez-moi de renouveler mes condoléances de façon plus personnelle. Je sais par mes ambassadeurs qu'Henry n'était pas l'homme le plus facile du monde..." (Of course I wrote a letter when I heard of your husband's death, but allow me to repeat my condolences in a more personal way. I know through my ambassadors that Henry was not the easiest man to live with... )

You have no idea.

"... mais la situation dans laquelle il vous a laissée est si... inquiétante. Ceci dit, jusqu'à présent, vous gérez vos intérêts et ceux de votre pays avec beaucoup de succès." (... but the situation he left you is
so... worrying. This being said, until now you have managed your interests and your country's in a successful way.)

Were you expecting me to be kicked out or hanged so soon?

It was likely. Without Spain's combative intentions, Anne would have not remained a month as regent. Kicking Gardiner out of the council was not enough. Lady Mary still had fervent partisans in the realm, that imagined her married to Reginald Pole. With some luck, this particular cousin would have understood why one of his nephews was now a « perpetual guest » at Court while his mother and brother were subjected to constant watching...

François went on with the reports sent by his spies. Almost fifty ships would leave Spain for England, and ten from the Netherlands. It was a lot compared to the twenty-five vessels of the English fleet. The fact that the Spanish ships would have to sail past three nests of pirates... my apologies, privateers, before reaching the English coasts might make the balance a little more even.

While the two monarchs were discussing strategy, the servants brought the different courses of the supper. François was not eating as much as Henry. A fine pâté of hare saddle with small pickled onions, a roasted chicken, some desserts and preserved pears, a plate of various cheeses to finish, and all that washed downs by an excellent wine from the Loire. When she left the king's chambers, Anne was feeling her head spin, and did not pay much attention to her surroundings.

"So? His French Majesty agrees to lend his help?"

Anne almost jumped.

"Thomas, how many times will I have to tell you not to appear without warning? One day I will die of sheer fear because of you! To answer your question, we only have to define more precisely the practical aspects of this help... once the Dutch delegates will have joined us. Why on earth are you so grumpy?"

He muttered something she could not catch.

"Aren't we a little jealous?"

He had a disenchanted expression.

"Who would not be?"

She patted his cheek with a lopsided grin.

"It is the advantage of being a widow. As soon as a man acts too forward, the woman just has to gather her dignity and tell him no. Do not fret so much."

He relaxed slightly before offering her his arm and leading her back to her rooms.

###

9th of February, the Louvre

If a Court without ladies was compared to a flowerless garden, then surely the French Court was the largest and most varied flowerbed. It even seemed there were more women than men in the Louvre. Most certainly because of the high number of princesses living in the castle: Queen Eleanor, Queen Marguerite of Navarre, Catherine duchess of Brittany, the other princess Marguerite (the king's daughter)... and of course the Queen of England. You could also see François' «friends » and their
numerous handmaids. Interesting detail, all the noble ladies could at least read fluently, write, count and speak some Latin. Many of them had achieved further studies. Small wonder that England was, on that topic, considered a slightly barbaric nation.

Though a certain aura of sorrow surrounded all the place. The royal family was still mourning the short-lived Queen of Scotland, Princess Madeleine, who had died during the previous summer, and some thought unbecoming that King James should chase after a new wife with such haste, a wife who would certainly be Marie de Guise, of Lorraine. This being said, Cromwell thought, the Scottish king had to marry again and quickly, to produce an heir, or his kingdom would fall into the hands of his Tudor cousins. It would be an excellent operation, the minister calculated while walking along the gallery bordering the Seine. Elizabeth and Mary were James' closest royal relatives. They could claim his throne.

While he extrapolated on the topic, two courtiers emerged from the king's chambers and reached his position.

"Ah ! Messer Cremuel..."

Thus called, he came closer, and, identifying the woman, bowed before the duchess of Brittany and queen-in-waiting, Catherine de Medici. She was short, with a rather unpleasant face, but elegant hands, a very good taste in fashion and jewellery and, it was said, the most beautiful legs of the Court. She was also, according to the ambassador of England in Paris, very obedient and clever, and her father-in-law liked her well, enough to refuse to send her back in Italy, even though the princess had not yet managed to get pregnant... while the crown prince Henri had gotten one of his Italian mistresses with child. The man who escorted her, though, was completely unknown to Cromwell.

"Gaspard, mon ami, pourriez-vous nous laisser un instant, je vous prie ?" Catherine asked. (Gaspard, my friend, could you please leave us for a moment?)

"Naturellement, ma dame." (Of course, my lady.)

The young courtier - a tall, lean, blond man - of an age with the duchess, bowed and quickly took his leave. The minister watched him walk away with a measure of curiosity.

"Gaspard de Châtillon", the duchess said with a smile. "Un des nombreux neveux du connétable de Montmorency, et l'un des rares hommes de la Cour, avec Tavannes et le roi, qui ne me prennent pas pour une idiote. Mais ce n'est pas de lui dont je souhaitais vous parler. Ni de vos séjours en Italie, bien que l'endroit nous tienne à cœur à tous les deux, j'en suis certaine." (Gaspard de Châtillon. One of Commander Montmorency's numerous nephews, and one of the very few men at Court, with Tavannes and the king, who do not treat me as a stupid doll. But I do not want to talk about him now. Nor about your travels in Italy, though the place is so dear to us both, I am sure.)

The young duchess sat on a bench by a window above the Seine.

"Vous n'avez sûrement pas eu l'occasion de vous en rendre compte, but mais cette Cour est extrêmement divisée." (Surely you did not have the opportunity to notice it, but this Court is extremely divided.)

Wary, Cromwell waited for more.

"Sur la question religieuse", Catherine added. (Over religious matters.)

"Ah, here we go..."

"Mon époux, les Guise, et la pu... et Madame de Poitiers sont farouchement catholiques et prônent
une politique très dure à l'encontre des réformés. Je ne sais comment l'alliance avec l'Angleterre influencera leur ligne." (My husband, the Guises and the who... and Madame de Poitiers are fierce Catholics and advocate a very harsh policy against the Lutherans. I do not know how the alliance with England will affect their views.)

"Nous sommes toujours un pays catholique", he objected. (We are still a Catholic country.)

"Officiellement." "Officiellement." (Officially.)

The word escaped them both at the same time. Catherine giggled behind her fan.

"Hem... Lorsque mon époux deviendra roi, il pourrait être tenté de vouloir orienter la politique anglaise dans ce domaine." (Hem... When my husband becomes king, he may be tempted to try and direct the English policy on this topic.)

"Un genre de chantage à l'assistance ? Intéressant. Seriez-vous favorable à une Réforme, ma dame?" (A sort of blackmail for assistance? Interesting. Would you favour a Reformation, my lady?)

"Je suis avant tout favorable à la paix", Catherine said firmly. "Si cela veut dire faire bon ménage avec le camp réformiste, ainsi soit-il. Vouloir vous forcer la main n'est pas idéal pour une relation apaisée... L'empereur Charles est entrain de s'en rendre compte." (Above everything else, I favour peace. If it means going along with the reformist side, so be it. To try and force you is not the best for a peaceful partnership... Emperor Charles is beginning to understand it.)

The duchess of Brittany closed her fan and rose, ending the meeting.

No need to ask if she read her Machiavelli. I hope she will keep her place, it would be a shame to lose such a fine mind.

##

10th of February

As anticipated, the Dutch ambassadors arrived in Paris with the Boleyns, father and son. Thomas Boleyn looked like a cat who had just swallowed a nice fat mouse. No need to ask him if his negotiations had gone well. Once the formalities had been fulfilled, he proudly announced that he had not even needed to pay the Dutch a bribe. The promise of favourable commercial contracts had been enough to convince them.

Their delegation made a certain contrast with the French and English lords, all dressed in colourful clothes and warm velvets. The Dutch were mostly wearing woollen fabric, unadorned white collars and high, black hats with a silver buckle. Most of them were wealthy traders. There was not a single nobleman in their diplomatic team, except Wilhelm of Nassau-Dillenbourg, born to an old aristocratic family and gifted with both numerous descendants and a great fortune that had earned him the nickname of « Old Rich Man ». He had denounced the Pope for the Reformation, and his compatriots were more numerous each day to do the same, which in return prompted Emperor Charles to come and put an end to this spark of rebellion in the flat country.

After bowing before the King of France and the Queen Regent of England, the Dutch ambassadors were led to the conference room, French and English diplomats on their heels. As she sat at François' right, Anne felt that the day would be very, very long...

Once she was back in her chambers with her minister, Anne found Gregory Cromwell waiting before her door, a paper in his hand.
"What news can you bring that make you so impatient?"

"A message from the Assembly of the Bohemian Lords, my lady", Gregory said, almost hopping in his good mood. "They will rise against the emperor. They have planned to launch the fight on the 21st of February."

"Why on that day?"

"It was on that day, in 1411, that the bishop of Rome excommunicated their great reformer, Jan Hus", the older Cromwell pointed out. "It is their way to wish a « happy remembrance » to Rome and the emperor. And the piece of cake they wish for is the independence of their province."

"God give them what they want, then; it would take one fine thorn out of my foot", Anne sighed.

##

12th of February

"Je me demande quand nous verrons la fin des exigences de ces satanés Hollandais", Admiral Philippe Chabot sighed, stretching his long legs. "Pardon, ma dame", (I wonder when we will see the end of those damned Dutchmen's demands. I beg your pardon, my lady.) he hastily added for Anne, who was collecting the notes she had taken during the last round of negotiations.

"Il n'y a pas de mal", she answered. "Ils se montrent en effet assez gourmands." (There is no offence. They are indeed quite greedy.)

The admiral smoothed his long beard. He was very close to the king, Anne knew, and not only thanks to the offices he held at Court. The smart man had married Françoise of Longwy, daughter of one of François' half-sisters. The Chabots were relatively low-ranking nobles, so managing to tie their House to the royal family, even through a bastard's daughter, was an impressive feat.

"Votre Monsieur Cromwell a de la chance de bien les connaître", he went on. "Cela lui permet de les supporter sans se mettre en colère. Avez-vous jamais rencontré des gens aussi fâcheux ?" (Your Mister Cromwell is lucky to know them so well. It helps him bear them without getting angry. Have you ever met such irritating people?)

"De temps en temps", Anne said. "Mon cher papa me presse depuis son arrivée de trouver un nouveau mari, pas trop élevé dans la noblesse, pour me décharger d'une partie de ma tâche. C'est un autre genre d'ennui, mais il vaut largement nos marchands." (From time to time. Since his arrival my dear father has urged me to find another husband, not too high-ranking, to discharge me from a part of my tasks. It is another kind of worry, but it has the same effect as our traders.)

The admiral laughed heartily at that, but promptly stopped when he saw Thomas Boleyn watching them with a sour expression on his face. Anne shrugged. Did her father fear she could be tempted by the admiral? Chabot was a rather handsome man, but he cared deeply for his Françoise. And she did not consider herself as « free ». She picked up her papers and left the room, Boleyn on her heels.

"Do not let this pretentious twit try to seduce you", Lord Boleyn warned. "François must think he is the only one to do so."

"Do not worry so much, Father. I know how to behave."

She managed to get rid of him before coming back to her rooms. Her ladies-in-waiting were not back yet from their exploration of the castle, so Anne took off her jewels and her heavy formal cloak to pay a visit to her minister, and share what he had learnt during his discussions with the German
As usual, she found him sitting at a desk, reading notes. He rose quickly when she arrived, but she made him sit back, and took a seat for herself.

"I hope our German friends will be less greedy that the Dutch, or the emperor will have taken London even before we are done with the negotiations."

"I believe so", Cromwell assured. "After all, they just want a marriage in the royal family for one of their princes to give us their support."

"Elizabeth is more or less betrothed to Charles of Orleans", Anne pointed out. "And Alice is still too young for that."

"Oh, they would go for Lady Mary of one of Suffolk's daughters."

"All of them being in the line of succession, one way or the other. Well planned."

Cromwell laughed heartily at that.

"Speaking of the devil, does your uncle still annoy you about a new marriage?"

"No, he finally gave up. No doubt he was afraid I would make good on my promise to choose someone like Knivert. This being said, my father has taken that topic in hands."

He lowered his head to hide the wide smile that came to his lips.

When he raised his eyes again, he found Anne watching him closely. Her well-known lopsided smile reappeared on her lips.

"I have a present for you, that can be opened before Christmas", she said with an impish grin.

"What did I do to deserve it, my lady?"

"You are always here when I need you, you do not treat me like a fragile doll, you respect my intelligence, and not only the crown on my head..."

As she spoke, she had walked the distance between them, and was now so close he could smell the perfume she was always wearing, amber and rosewater. She slid her fingers between the links of his chain of office and pulled lightly on it to make him lower his head.

"You are my child's father..."

He looked back at her at that, only for Anne to pull again on the metal links of his chain to make him bend his neck. This time, he could not interrupt her, the queen's lips brushed his and her fingers left the chain to slide under the collar of his shirt.

That she could desire this as much as he did completely took him unaware, and some seconds passed before he rested his hands on her waist to pull her closer and prevent her from running away.

Not that she tried, mind you. She pushed him just to catch her breath. He helped her to sit on the desk, then began to caress lightly the long and gracious neck Anne let out a kind of small satisfied purr, then her hands pulled him close again.
"Good LORD!"

The outraged cry startled them so much that Anne slid from the desk to get back on her feet. From the sudden burning of her ears, she guessed she must have turned a nice shade of red, while Cromwell had become very pale.

Of all the courtiers who had come in France with them, it had to be Thomas Boleyn who found them. Behind him, George seemed torn between stupefaction and a growing hilarity.

"How DARE YOU?" Boleyn yelled, purple with rage.

"He dares nothing more than I allow", Anne retorted, quickly coming to her senses.

"And where do you allow him? In your bed? Do you wish to be seen as your minister's whore?"

"Ouch... that was low", George said, lowering his head.

"I have been the king's whore, it would not make such a difference", the regent snapped. "And of this whore, Father, you were the procurer, because God knows you did all you could to put me in Henry's paws!"

"Game to the queen", George commented.

"Just keep in my mind, my lord father, that you cannot sell my body any more, and that I give it to whoever I wish! But if you truly want to check if your domains are doing fine, please, feel free to go on like this! I want nothing more than to send you away from Court."

Boleyn turned from scarlet to deathly pale. He put his hat back on his head and left, slamming the door behind him. George whistled with admiration.

"I am really sorry..." Cromwell began.

"We will resume this discussion another time", Anne cut him. "By your leave, my lords."

"I will not tell you « hands off »", George said after his sister left the room. "But if you make her unhappy, I can... and I will kill you."

# #

27th of February, Calais

Anne had never been so relieved to return to England. The French stay had begun to turn sour. Nor François nor his guests had anything to do with it, but since her father had found her with Thomas, the atmosphere had been positively awful.

Luckily enough, the three delegations had managed to reach an agreement before the Queen Regent committed a political blunder by snapping her father's neck. The English and the Dutch would provide ships and crews, France would send guns, powder and officers to train the newly recruited sailors, not counting the regiments marching to the frontiers. The matter of Calais would be discussed after the war. If they won it.

Now they had to prepare England to receive Emperor Charles properly.
Hello to my readers. Today we will discuss strategy. If you like playing at Risk, you'll like this chapter. Else... well, my apologies, we won't be at war forever. :) 

13th of March, Hatfield

It seemed to Mary Tudor that the Lord had neglected to listen to her for years. In spite of her prayers, she had lost her rank as Princess of Wales, her status at Court, her parents... and now, any chance to win back her rights and her throne. Her cousin Emperor Charles had officially declared war on England. Now she had really lost all her supports. The European monarchs did not care about a young woman without money or titles or an army... They were too many that wished to defeat the Imperial power in order to spread their own wings. Common folk only saw new calamities ahead, and their love for "their" princess was transferred to Elizabeth. *The true daughter of England!* as some indelicate people call her. Oh, of course, Lady Anne was courtesy made flesh with her step-daughter, now she did not have to fear her any more. It would not be long, Mary thought, before she was sent to a convent. It was what the duke of Norfolk advised, the very few times he left Plymouth to come in London for a report. Fortunately Anne was listening less and less to his advice. If she thought more seriously about it, Mary would certainly not spend the rest of her life under a nun's veil. Given what the queen's first minister thought about these institutions, it was unlikely that he would provide them with new residents.

There were even fewer chances that she would manage to marry. She was not so attractive any more in terms of political advantages. Elizabeth and Alice were much more valuable.

##

16th of March, Whitehall

"Message from the French, my lady. The Spanish fleet just left its ports of registry."

"And from the Netherlands?" Anne asked

"Not yet. They want two coordinated attacks."

"In that case", Shrewsbury pointed out, "why would our friends of the United Provinces not pay them a visit while they are anchored Antwerp?"

If they managed to destroy part of the enemy's ships, it would indeed greatly relieve the anti-Imperial alliance. For a month and a half, the Bohemians had been launching surprise attacks against the troops of the Holy Roman Empire stationed on their lands, decreasing a bit the number of available soldiers, but it was still not enough.

"If they agree to help us", Richard Rich pointed out, "we will have to send them reinforcements. Half a dozen vessels at least, else they will refuse to risk their ships."

"It is useless to send large vessels. The estuary of the Schelde is a very small area", Cromwell added. "We will need fast ships, with the smallest possible draught."
On the following day, a messenger left for Dover with a letter for Sir Anthony Knivert, ordering the knight to pick ships and crews for the mission. A second messenger was sent to Amsterdam to warn the Dutch and coordinate the attack. They would need at least two weeks to ready the vessels and send them to Antwerp, hoping that no Spanish spy would warn his employers about the ‘visit’. Suffolk and Cromwell had harbours and taverns combed by their men to catch potential spies, but their agents often came back empty-handed. Important rewards were promised to anyone who would identify a sneak. Unfortunately, every worthy piece of intelligence had to be sorted out amongst a profusion of rubbish.

##

30th of March

"The five ships left, Your Majesty", Francis Bryan reported. "Within a few days they will have joined the Dutch fleet and will pay a little visit to our Spanish friends. We will need at least a week, however, to know the result of their expedition."

"Thank you, cousin. Go take some rest before you travel back to Plymouth. You deserve it. I believe that amongst my ladies there is a young beauty who would be very happy to see you again."

Bryan bowed with a grin and departed, leaving his cousin brooding on sad news. Some days before, she had received a letter from Hever. Lady Boleyn was critically ill and no one felt very optimistic about her survival. The old lady was coughing until she was breathless and her fever would not decrease, despite all the medicines - even that strange bark powder coming from the West Indies – that her doctor had given her. How could the Regent bear this announced death in the feverish, overworked state she was already? And how would she explain it to Elizabeth, who loved her grandmother dearly?

##

5th of April

The messenger had certainly exhausted several horses to bring the news so fast. Anne locked herself in her office to read the letter sent by the steward of Hever. Even her sister Mary, despite being free of any political obligation, had not come to her mother's deathbed, and Lady Elizabeth Howard-Boleyn had died without any of her children at her side.

The regent left from the room some hours later, pale as a corpse, to give her almoner orders for the celebration of several masses for her lady mother. Then she gritted her teeth and went to talk to her daughters.

Still a toddler, Alice was completely clueless about the whole thing. She would certainly have forgotten her grandmother when she reached adolescence, and even before that. Elizabeth, however, had a very good memory, and at three and a half, remembered very well the old, dark-eyed lady who came at Whitehall for Christmas with her arms full of presents.

The little princess remained straight as a line for a moment, as if struck by lightning.

"So my lady grand-mother is in Heaven?" she asked. "Certainly, she was not nasty enough to be sent to Hell, was she?"

"No, of course not", Anne reassured her. "She had a difficult character, but she was a very generous lady who prayed very often. God will not deny her a place in Heaven."

However, He could very well force her to spend some centuries sweeping the corridors in Purgatory,
to punish her typical Howard pride. If Purgatory existed.

Elizabeth accepted her mother's reasoning, and Anne saw that the child did her best not to cry.

"Kings and princes must not do it", the child explained when her mother noticed.

"But we are alone here. No one will scold you for it."

Anne left much later to go back to her own rooms, after her elder daughter had finally cried herself to sleep.

# #

11th of April

Anthony came back from Dover with a limp, but nonetheless satisfied with his work. The ten or so Spanish ships anchored in the harbour of Antwerp were now at the bottom of the river and the harbour itself blocked until the wrecks were removed. The Dutch had an interesting technique consisting in loading old, useless ships up to the hatch with powder kegs, pitch and tar, and towing them towards their targets, before setting fire to them and let the tide carry them to the harbour. All those fire ships had not reached their destination. Some had beached, others had ended crashing into a pier, but most of them had reached the Spanish ships and then... such a nice bonfire!

Naturally, it had led to a retaliation by way of cannonballs, and Anthony had been injured in the leg by some shards from the rail. Nothing serious, the ship's surgeon had assured him, which had greatly relieved the knight. The surgeon in question seemed more a bone-cutter than a real practitioner. At least this injury would allow him to take some rest on his lands, and he would have some time to spend with the son Bridget had birthed a month ago. He wondered if baby William would inherit his mother's dark eyes, or his father's gift for horse-riding. He had years ahead to discover all this.

# #

15th of April, Plymouth

To the inhabitants' surprise, the Queen Regent had come back into their city, wishing to monitor more closely the evolution of the conflict in order to shorten the transmission of information. It was not such a long way to London, but if the messengers could skip it, it could give another little advantage to the English fleet.

Plymouth was delighted, despite the circumstances, to have "the crow" back in its walls, and was extremely pleased with such an honour, particularly when the poor Queen Regent had just suffered such a painful blow.

One who did not approve that decision at all was Minister Cromwell. Not that dwelling in the port city bothered him much - he had known worse, but he considered this trip as a useless risk. If the Spanish reached the harbour, the English government could very well find itself utterly annihilated. But Anne proved inflexible. Without even considering her public relations, it was her duty and her place. A monarch had to remain close to his subjects during hard times. Finally, Cromwell gave up. The Queen Regent was the only one to whom he could admit defeat.

Freshly arrived, Anne summoned the commanders of the fleet, her uncle Howard and her cousin Bryan, as well as the young earl of Shrewsbury and Suffolk, who were in charge of the infantry and artillery.

"What news from the Spanish?"
"They sailed past La Rochelle, my lady", Norfolk answered, "but not without a fight. They lost two ships near Biarritz, and five between Bordeaux and the mouth of the Loire. They still have to sail past Brittany, which will not be easy. The privateers from Nantes want their share of Spanish gold as well, and so do Brest and Saint-Malo. The good point is that they have already lost seven ships."

"Which still leaves, according to our spies, forty... six ships to face our fleet if the Bretons come back home empty-handed, if I am not mistaken?"

"Indeed", the old duke sighed, "which still makes a lot for such fresh levies..."

##

19th of April

"Good news!" Francis Bryan exclaimed as he dropped several letters on his cousin's desk. "Our friends in Brittany did a number on the Spanish fleet. Charles lost six ships, and our French friends have their pockets full now. There are happy men on all the Atlantic coast."

Anne smiled. Her future did not seem so bleak any more.

"Another good point," Bryan went on, "the Dutch left their harbours and sailed for the Channel. French ships also left Le Havre to join them. Adding all the allied vessels, we have twenty more than the Spanish. I do not know if it is enough to make them turn their tail, but given that the Bohemians and the Germans are keeping part of their troops busy, maybe they will give up."

"Furthermore, on the long term, England would not be easy to keep", Anne muttered while reading her mail.

"Cousin, I would like to be allowed to join the fleet and take part in the fights. I am experienced enough in that field, and we need all men."

"Granted. But take care of yourself. Lady Saville would be cross with me if you came back in bad health."

Bryan bowed so low he touched the carpet, laughing.

"I promise, I will not do anything stupid."

Then he proudly put his feathered hat back on his head and left the room with a triumphant stride, leaving his cousin still torn between laughter and anxiety.
The Best Year of our Life

27th of April, Plymouth

The soldiers saw a kind of madman with a black beard and an eye patch, without a cloak, his hat in his hand, running through the city as if he had Satan on his heels. Francis Bryan reached the house where the queen was staying, shoved the sentries aside and climbed up the stairs at top speed, before opening the door to the queen's office... and finding silence, barely disturbed by a light snore.

Anne was lying on a long chest, using her cloak as a pillow, and was sleeping soundly. Cromwell had sprawled on the desk and was sleeping as well, his head propped on his arm. Sir Francis was torn between amazement and indulgence. After nearly four days without sleep, it was bound to happen. He hesitated for a moment. The opportunity was too good to miss. He put two fingers in his mouth and whistled as loud as he could. Both of them woke up with a start, as frightened as if he had found them in the same bed.

"And you think it is funny?" a furious Anne yelled at Sir Francis, who was holding onto the table in order not to fall on the floor laughing.

"What's the matter?" Cromwell groaned, feeling a headache forming. "Spanish coming?"

"Right, they came!" Bryan yelled, throwing his hat to the ceiling. "They gave up, these good-for-nothing cowards! They turned their tails when they saw the allied fleets! Charles did not send enough ships! Thank the French and the Germans!"

He caught his cousin by the waist and dragged her into a wild jig. Suddenly he tripped on the carpet and the dancers lost their balance, dragging Cromwell along in their fall. The three of them landed rather brutally on the floor, but Bryan was still laughing so hard that tears were rolling down his cheeks.

Anne snorted, before turning slightly more serious.

"It might be time to share the new with all Plymouth, do you not think?"

They realized quickly that the news had spread in the whole city thanks to the sailors who had disembarked with Francis Bryan. The taverns were literally invaded and the innkeepers would be making a wonderful business during a week at least. The inhabitants were disappointed that the Queen Regent left them so soon, while admitting she had to go back to the capital. Anne entertained no delusion; even with this almost deathless victory, too long an absence could cost her much.

"We were extremely lucky", the queen commented darkly during the trip that brought her back to London with Cromwell. "Our operation was effective only because France, Germany and the United Provinces supported us. Charles could not remain on so many fronts at the same time. Not to mention that all the money he already owes the Fuggers prevented him from recruiting more mercenaries. And let us not forget the treaty between France and the Ottomans. Suleiman's sailors blocked part of the Imperial troops in the Mediterranean. As scandalous as it is, this alliance is a true blessing. If one of them, or more, defected, the situation would have become much more problematic."

"As long as Lady Mary remains a potential heiress for the throne of England", her minister agreed, "the emperor will try to force her on us as queen. We must marry her as soon as possible to eliminate her claim. Now, to find the ideal betrothed. They are quite a number on the market."
He suddenly realized that he had just compared the princes and high lords of Europe to farm animals and started to apologize.

"But it is exactly as you say", Anne interrupted. "Breeding mares and stallions. We just have to choose the horse that will offer us the best price."

# #

3rd of May, Whitehall

London was boiling since the Regent's arrival on the previous evening. Of course, all the population already knew that Emperor Charles had been forced to retreat, but they were expecting their queen's appearance to celebrate the event appropriately. The Queen Regent had, however, some difficulties explaining that to one of her councillors.

"And I tell you that to go and show yourself to the common folk with the queen and the princess is a very stupid idea", the duke of Norfolk ranted. "Wave at them from a balcony, it will be enough."

"No, uncle, they deserve better than that. They will never follow an unreachable monarch. The must be allowed to see him, or her, to talk to him, to touch him. If he is only a remote idol, they will never love him, and will be a lot less prone to serving him during perilous times. You must use both the carrot and the stick."

"Another of your Lord Cromwell's ridiculous ideas, I suppose. Since he cannot raise the commons, he must lower the monarchy. When will you send him away?"

"Uncle", Anne growled, "even if he was a Jew or a Turk, I would still keep him in my service, because, as far as the State is concerned, no one is as efficient as he. Do you understand?"

The Queen Regent had decided to go on foot from the palace to the Parliament, Elizabeth perched on her hip.

The idea proved excellent and attracted nearly half the population of the city on the queen's path.

The soldiers supposed to direct the crowd had to let go of their spears and step back to avoid being crushed by the multitude pressing around the royal women to touch their little queen and her regent. Hands reached to brush their dresses or the child's hair. Delighted by so many kind gestures, Elizabeth stretched her small chubby fingers to wave back at her subjects. At this precise moment, the affection the people held for the child queen changed into adulation pure and simple.

Then things went slightly out of control.

# #

It was nightfall when Anne left her daughters' chambers, after finally managing to calm Elizabeth, who was jumping all around her bedroom while reliving her adventure in the streets. She did not stop repeating the tale to her sister, until she was finally too tired to go on.

Well, here is a child who loves being the centre of attention.

The Queen Regent went back to her rooms in her best mood since her husband's death. A passing glance revealed some light coming from under Thomas' door. Good. Once she reached her chambers, she gave leave to her ladies and maids, then locked her door and walked toward the gallery that led to Thomas Cromwell's rooms.
His first reaction, once he got over his surprise, amused Anne a lot.

"Good Lord, what happened to your dress?"

The hem of her skirts was torn, some pieces were missing on the sleeves and it seemed that the lace decorating her petticoat had partially disappeared.

"Over-enthusiastic Londoners, that is what happened," Anne said between giggles. "Who would have believed that only two years ago?"

"Of course", he conceded with a smile, "but it was not very careful of you. Imagine if..."

"Thomas, be a little less serious, just for once. Please. If you do not rejoice now, when will you?"

He held up his hands, indicating he gave up the dispute.

"As you wish. Nonetheless, I must thank you for defending me against your uncle this morning."

"It is the least I can do", Anne said seriously. "This country needs you to be ruled efficiently. My daughters need you to learn politics. And I need you too. Not the queen, only me."

She was not laughing any more. She took some more steps and closed the door behind her.

"You help me keep my balance. You are always here when I call for help. And you never ask anything in return. Why do you never ask anything, Thomas?"

While speaking, she had come closer and stood now right before him.

"Alice is my daughter", he whispered. "What else could I ask for?"

"Whatever you want. You are the only one who treats me as an equal."

"Equality between a smith's son and a queen", he laughed bitterly.

"Between Anne Boleyn and Thomas Cromwell", she amended, gently patting his short black curls. "Nothing more, nothing less. May I remain here this night? I believe we have something to celebrate."

The Queen Regent was asking for... No, no, he had to be dreaming. He reached for her. No. She was very much real.

She nodded and smiled.

"You first. You waited long enough."

He began by pulling off the pins holding her chignon, one by one. Her braid unravelled down her back and he undid it as well, allowing his fingers to get tangled in the heavy locks. He left the small pearl she wore as a pendant and untied the lacing of her bodice. The dark velvet slid from the queen's shoulders with a sigh. She did not move, waited for him to touch her. He rested his hand on her neck, let it slide down...

"If you tell me that you love my neck", Anne said, "I will have yours cropped, so consider yourself warned."

She managed to make him laugh. He put a kiss on the back of her neck and completely unlaced her bodice, then untied the liens fastening the sleeves on the shoulders. After a while, the last knot was
unfastened, and the heavy black garment fell on the carpet. Either she had planned to join him, or she had feared the heat that prevailed in London. A shirt, a corset, two petticoats. Nothing more. He started with the corset, cursing the tight lacing, but with a bit of patience, he managed to get it off. Then the petticoat fell. Then the shirt. He took Anne by the shoulders to make her face him.

He felt as shy as a young boy again when he reached for her. He touched her shoulders, her arms... She closed her eyes when he dared put a hand on her breasts, still a bit on the small side even after two successful pregnancies. Then she pushed him away lightly.

"My turn."

Anne undid his doublet, cursing the numerous, tiny buttons and slid the garment over his arms before dropping it on the carpet. She loosened the collar of his shirt and as she was shorter than him, he had to help her to pull it off. She felt her cheeks burn when she asked him to sit so that she could take his breeches off more easily, and he felt strangely ill-at-ease. He sighed; they looked like two young people on their wedding night. The comparison embarrassed him even more.

At last, she managed to undress him completely and came to sit in front of him.

Anne proved curious. Her slender fingers began to explore, following the line of the collarbone, pausing on the small indentation created there by the repeated use of an arquebus during several years, when he was still a mercenary in Southern Europe. Then she studied a scar on his arm, a memory from Italy. Then she ran her hands flat on his chest, as if she wished to print every single detail on her palms. He took in a sharp breath and grabbed her wrists. He touched her throat, her arms, the soft flesh of her belly, with the very tips of his fingers. She still had some marks on her hips from her daughters' births, but they remained rather faint. He put an arm around her waist and pulled her closer. Anne's hands caught his neck and she made him lower his head to kiss him more easily.

She shifted and he felt rather than saw her long legs lock around his waist. Just a twist of the hips... and he had his own heaven back.

"Hmm, hmm", Anne purred. "This time, we do not need to hurry."

No one to knock on the door, no one to disturb them. They had all the time in the world.

##

The following morning found them comfortably nestled amongst the rumpled sheets. Anne had naturally curled up between her lover's arms, as if she had been doing that for years. Behind her, Thomas was still sleeping and she remained perfectly still not to disturb him. She wondered how many times he had slept so long since he had started to work in Whitehall. Not very often, she assumed, given the gigantic amount of work waiting for him. As for company... she knew there had been no other woman since Liz Wykes' death. Yet there was no lack of ladies and countesses looking for an ally at Court or trying to readjust the due date of a repayment.

"Must we get up already?" an unhappy voice muttered from behind her. "I hate mornings."

Anne turned to face him.

"To think that everyone believes you love leaving your bed early to go and study your files..."

"As a principle, I do not like being locked in an office before dawn, even if I must. And..." He put a quick kiss on her lips. "… I hate leaving so quickly such a charming lady."

"I remind you that my rooms are very close to yours."
"I doubt that your relocation was purely fortuitous."

"So smart."

He was going to answer when she saw him frown. He often had that expression when he forgot something important.

"Trouble in paradise, master Cromwell?"

"I completely forgot to tell you yesterday", he muttered, slightly embarrassed. "Gregory announced it when I came back home. Lizzie is with child. It will be born in October."

"Are you telling me I am sharing a bed with a grandfather?"

An indignant exclamation answered her and Anne stifled her laugh in her pillow. Then she rose to pick up her shirt and her petticoat, that she quickly put on.

"It is time I went back to my rooms. My ladies will be coming soon."

"Constraints again", Thomas sighed, handing Anne her black dress.

"If I had wished to avoid constraints", Anne grumbled while fetching said dress, "I would have avoided Henry and married you instead."

"I can just see the scandal from here."

"But my dear, I have been living in a perpetual scandal for ten years..."

##

When Nan Saville entered the royal chambers to comb her mistress' hair, she wondered what could bring this dreamy smile on the queen's face. What could cause it? Nothing but the Londoners' delirious welcome, surely?
Marrying Mary

16th of May, Hatfield

Elizabeth's household had come back to Hatfield Castle for reasons of salubrity. Summer was coming fast, and the heat prevailing in London was not good for the royal children's health. If the governess and the young princesses saw this relocation as a blessing, others perceived it as another trouble. Lady Mary had been left relatively alone in London. Now, once again, she had to face the queen's cousin, Francis Bryan, who tried and convince her to swear the infamous Oath instituted by her father. And once again, the man felt like he was bumping into a very solid wall.

"Lady Mary", Bryan declared, "I must say that my cousin displays an incredible patience towards you, and that you absolutely do not understand your situation. Queen Anne is not just the king's widow. As long as Elizabeth is a minor, her mother is, de facto, the ruler of this realm. She holds all the power. And can send you to the Tower or anywhere else to meditate on the drawbacks of being too stubborn. Morality surrenders quickly before profits, and for the European kingdoms profits mean to go on trading with us, and to cultivate our favours to balance the powers in Europe. You know what you have to do. I will be back in a few days."

He left with a wide sweep of his hat, leaving the young woman alone and completely lost.

He was right. She had no one. Chapuys had travelled back to Spain, no ambassador had come to replace him yet and when the new one arrived, Lady Mary seriously doubted that he would be allowed to meet her. She had nothing. If she signed that tempting little paper, she could have a life again. Was is not an improper pride to lock herself in such an attitude? Whether she signed or not, she would never be Queen of England. She could still give herself a chance to be something in this world.

When Francis Bryan came back five days later, he received quite a shock when Mary announced that she wished to come to Court to swear the Oath.

##

27th of May, Whitehall

To avoid any slander and ensure her step-daughter would not be made a spectacle for the courtiers, Anne had decided that she would sign the Act of Succession behind closed doors, with only the members of the council as witnesses.

Mary had made an effort with her outfit before heading for the council room. She did not wish to appear as the poor relation in the family and for once, had switched her usual black dress for more colourful clothing and some small jewels. Just for a few more minutes, she wanted to make herself believe she was still a princess of England.

Then she sat before the writing case, took a quill, dipped it in the inkpot, and signed with a firm hand the declaration that officially made her a bastard.

##

10th of June, Hampton Court

Summer had settled in for good, and to avoid the awful smell of London, the Court had moved to Hampton Court, where it was not so hot and the stench of the Thames could not bother them.
The gardens were bursting with flowers: roses of Provins, honeysuckle, some newly-imported poppies... The poets amongst the courtiers claimed that the place carried the scent of Heaven. It was a pleasant interlude for most of them, and the young princesses were no exception. It was also the perfect atmosphere for amorous feelings, and the wedding, at the beginning of the month, of the queen's cousin Francis Bryan with Lady Saville, delighted the Court, even if it surprised some.

But for the heads of the state, there were no holidays. Numerous files were piling on the queen and her councillors' desks. And particularly, one concerning Lady Mary.

On that morning, Lady Mary entered the queen's workroom wondering what dreadful fate the Queen Regent might have in store for her. She curtsied gracefully. No matter what she thought of Anne Boleyn, it was not a reason to forget her courtesies.

"Your Majesty."

"Lady Mary. Come closer please, I have something to show you."

Mary walked to the desk, her curiosity aroused.

"It is very strange", Anne commented, pointing to the letters scattered on her desk. "Since our victory, many princes have been looking for an alliance with England, and the number of your suitors has increased. Greatly increased. Please sit, we will review them."

Intrigued, Mary seated herself in front of the regent. If she could judge by the amount of papers before Anne, at least half a dozen men were asking her in marriage. Indeed, that made a lot. She picked up a letter and read it quickly.

"My cousin James of Scotland..."

"We can forget him", her stepmother cut in. "The letter was delayed, and by the time it arrived, our good neighbour had married with Marie of Guise."

"A Frenchwoman again?" Mary asked with some amusement.

"From Lorraine and who acquired French nationality along with all her kin, to be precise. Her family is one of the most powerful in the realm and King François tries to remain friendly while keeping an eye on them."

"Oh... I see... Then... My other cousin, Felipe?"

Her eyebrows climbed up almost to her hairline.

"They lost the war against us, and still Felipe asks for me in marriage?"

Anne noted with satisfaction that Mary said "us" when talking about England. Not so completely won over to Spain, this girl. But then, her dear cousin Charles had totally ruined her hopes to sit on the throne...

"What do you think about it?" the queen asked.

Mary shrugged. Felipe was eleven years younger than her. He would still be a young man when she began to get old. Of course he would be tempted to take mistresses, and she did not feel able to accept such a betrayal as passively as her mother.

"I will take some time to study this question", she said. "Who are the others?"
"The king of Denmark, the duke of Bavaria, the duke of Savoy and an Orsini. They will all send an ambassador to... help you with your choice."

Mary snorted disdainfully. She knew that farce very well, having played it five or six times already. But now the roles were switched. She would be the one studying the advantages and the weak points of these lords, and they would be checked like horses in a fair.

After leaving the Regent's office, Mary went to her room besides her half-sisters' chambers, stood in front of her mirror, arranged her face in a dignified expression, then went to announce the news to Elizabeth. The little girl applauded with delight and congratulated her older sister for attracting so many important men. Then, very seriously, she decided she would study those potential husbands, and if she did not like one of them, she would warn Mary immediately. Alice, who was nearly two and not very talkative, merely watched in silence as her sisters laughed, her favourite doll tucked under her arm.

# #

The first suitor to send an ambassador was the Italian Orsini of Bracciano. The emissary seemed particularly aware of the enormity of the request he brought before the Regent of England. Of course, the Orsinis were not nothing in Italy, counted many generals and cardinals amongst them, but to ask for a king's daughter, even a bastard one, was a boldness that Lady Mary was the first to point out. It would be a complete mésalliance. She was the blood of kings, from both England and Spain, so marrying an Italian lord whose possessions were often disputed by his troublesome neighbours, who did not fare much better themselves... could not be seen as an acceptable opportunity. The ambassador was thus sent back to Italy with a present to make for his disappointment - and the probably furious welcome he would receive from his master.

"Who is the next one?" Mary inquired some days later with a bit of worry.

"The duke of Savoy", her sister answered, pointing the name on the list written by her mother. "He is a true monarch, even if of a very small state that quarrels all the time with France and Spain."

Mary thought about the proposition while playing with one of Elizabeth's small Welsh dogs. The duchy of Savoy was a perpetual bone of contention between the Habsburgs' Italian possessions and the kingdom of France, which meant at least one war each decade between the three parties involved. Of course the title did not lack advantages and was equivalent to princess or queen, but the political situation of Savoy was a major inconvenience.

Nonetheless, the ambassador of Savoy – who happened to be, amusing coincidence, one of Eustache Chapuys' cousins – was received with good grace and kindness... and sent back home without the first hint of a marriage contract.

# #

14 September, Whitehall

After the unsuccessful visits of the envoys from Italy and Savoy, the last three options all tried their luck at the same time. The ambassadors of Spain, Denmark and Bavaria arrived in London almost on the same day, which generated some rather comical situations when it was time to introduce them to the Queen Regent and Lady Mary. After a lot of negotiations, the Spanish delegate got the last word... and the right to go first.

Juan Esteban Manrique de Lara, duke of Najera, was one of the most important men in the Iberian kingdom. He belonged to one of the oldest Great Families of Spain, and people praised his military
talents as well as his genuine Christian qualities. Furthermore, his dignity as a knight of the Golden Fleece imparted him a great prestige. According to Cromwell's intelligence, the man had also made a successful and happy marriage with the countess of Valencia, who had given him two sons, one being of an age with Elizabeth. He had not much in common with the envoys that the English Court had hosted before.

Anne had feared the worst, after having to bear Chapuys, but the duke was very different from the petulant little Savoyard. He was still a rather young man, tall, dark-haired, elegant, handsome, and who never dared show what he really thought about his interlocutors, conscious of the important part he played. Better, he did not entertain too many delusions about his chances of success.

"Your Majesty, Lady Mary."

He bowed, sweeping the carpet with the feathers of his hat.

"My lord, welcome to England", Anne greeted him, holding out her hand.

He kissed it very formally. The kiss he gave Lady Mary's fingers was a little more affectionate.

"Your master wishes to wed Lady Mary to his son and heir. Explain us, please, the emperor's offers in exchange for this potential marriage."

Quietly hidden behind a curtain, Elizabeth was no missing a second of the meeting. It was an excellent way, her mother had decided, to teach her profession as a queen.

The offers and requests made by Emperor Charles were nothing new. The villain wished for his cousin to be reintegratged in the line of succession, for heresy to be more harshly repressed in England, before he could consider lifting the taxes on English products such as linen, wool, salted meat... taxes that the monarch had created just before starting the war. From the corner of her eye, Anne saw her step-daughter shaking her head. The emperor acted as if he had won the war... The council would just love those pretentions. When the duke finished his speech, she thanked him warmly before announcing that she would study these requests with her ministers and Lady Mary before giving an answer, and would make sure not to delay.

"He wants too much, doesn't he?" Elizabeth asked Cromwell a bit later.

"Indeed, Your Highness. He is not really in a position to negotiate, but he wants to save face."

"If it does not work, who will Prince Felipe marry? He will not find himself without a wife, will he?"

"It is kind of you to think about it, but he can look to his cousins in Austria or Portugal; he will not be lacking potential brides."

Lady Mary went back to her rooms feeling a bit frustrated. The ambassador's propositions regarding her status and household at the Spanish Court were tempting, but strategically, Spain was not a valid choice for England. And Prince Felipe was still eleven years her junior. She did not think that being married to a young boy would be thrilling. She would have to wait at least three or four years before being able to do anything with him... She would really feel like an old maid. Annoying. She was so deep in thought that she did not notice the gentleman coming the other way.

"Oh! Please excuse me, I am really sorry", she exclaimed after bumping rather hard into him.

"Of course, there is not harm done", the gentleman answered at once with a reassuring smile. "You are Lady Mary, if I am not mistaken?" he added, bowing low.
"You are not."

Mary immediately noticed that his clothes, rather elegant, were not made after the English fashion, nor the Spanish. Furthermore, he had spoken in Latin.

"Would you be one of the ambassadors, my lord?"

"Indeed. I leave it up to your perspicacity to determine which one."

Mary took a moment to think about it. She did not know the German fashion nor the Danish one, but something in the man's accent made her choose the Bavarian solution.

"Absolutely", the man agreed, smiling again. "I will nonetheless rectify a small mistake. I decided to be my own ambassador for such an important decision, you see."

The young woman's eyes widened.

"Dear God, you are the duke of Bavaria?"

"At your service, my lady", he said, laughing, before bowing again. "I will have the pleasure to see you again during the official presentation this evening."

"Indeed. Until then, I hope you will find Whitehall to your taste."

He came instead of sending an envoy. One point for him, Mary told herself with a small smile. And he is not hard to look upon.

She is absolutely charming, the duke thought. Shy, but so graceful. I was right to come in person, no portrait could do justice to the original.
Choosing your prince

20th of September, Whitehall

After a week of receptions and feasts, it was high time to put an end to the entertainment and to move into more serious business.

Thanks to the numerous spies she had in the palace, the Queen Regent knew that Lady Mary was particularly attracted to the duke of Bavaria, though he was thirteen years her senior. The fact he had come in person did a lot in his favour, as well as being handsome, courteous and very well-learned. If she had not had her Thomas, Anne would have been jealous of her stepdaughter.

After playing the diplomatic game for some days, the regent summoned Mary and questioned her frankly about the three suitors that had introduced themselves during the previous week. The young woman declared herself for Duke Philip. Bavaria was not a great state by size, but its military and economic importance made sure that all the kingdoms of Europe wanted them as an ally. And Mary was in love, simple as that. Her duke often came to visit her, talked about his country and had offered her a small gold cross with a pearl pendant, a gift the pious Mary had found very touching.

"But I worry about our divergence in religion", she finally admitted.

"Divergence? Duke Philip is just as Catholic as you."

"I had heard that he was a Lutheran", her stepdaughter answered with surprise.

Anne thought that the duke of Najera would have to answer for that bit of misinformation very soon.

"Absolutely not. It is just that he does not bring up torches and stakes each time he sees one of his Reformer subjects. This should soothe your worries. We will not have to beg anyone to grant you a dispensation. We only have to get the ruling queen's approval, but I am sure that Elizabeth will not object."

Indeed, delighted by her sister's good luck, Elizabeth signed all the papers her ministers put on her desk. But the negotiations and the haggling were not finished. In fact, they were only beginning.

Anne and her councillors were decorticating the conditions formulated in the marriage contract suggested by the Bavarians. One of them made them almost leap from their seats.

"Lady Mary would renounce any claim to the crown for a dowry of fifty thousand pounds!" Audley almost choked. "This one is new! We never talked about that during the negotiations."

"Where do they want us to find so much money?" Suffolk wondered. "The campaign against Spain was costly."

"And they know it very well", Cromwell grumbled. "They believe we will not be able to pay the dowry, and that it gives them an option on the succession."

"Who could we borrow from this time?" Wriothesley asked. "The Florentines may think we are going too far."

Anne and Thomas exchanged a look.
"I could wager some of my possessions", the regent suggested. "Or start on the income of Pembroke."

"My lady", Audley objected, "you have already used your own goods to fund the campaign."

Anne smiled and wondered if she would rope in her whole council. Suffolk could not be taxed again; he has not entirely paid yet the thirty-thousand pounds fine that Henry had imposed on him for having married Princess Mary Tudor without permission. However, Audley and the others could very well help out. But after some thinking, she rejected the idea. It would be better, not matter the reason, if they never had to mix their personal coffers with the State funds. If the queen was allowed to borrow from the Treasury for her personal expenses, it should also work the other way round.

"Then let us admit that I reimburse the sums withdrawn for me by the late king", she said.

"Should Lady Mary be told?" Cromwell inquired.

"The marriage contract is available in my office. She is free to read it."

# #

And Lady Mary read the draft of the contract very carefully. The topic of the succession did not shock her as much as Anne had expected. Since she had sworn the Oath, it seemed quite impossible to disconcert Mary. She had done the worst, the rest was only a formality.

However, Emperor Charles strongly disagreed, and through his representative, he tried to convince his cousin to change her mind. Despite his own opinion on the matter, Najera literally besieged the young woman so that she would give up her idea of marrying the duke of Bavaria, but the answer was a firm and irrevocable "No". Mary had for once the good fortune that her tastes coincided with her country's best interests, and she did not intend to lose such an opportunity. Najera had to admit defeat. As a punishment, the emperor ordered him to remain in England, not even allowing the duchess to come and join him. Charles hoped the English Court would turn for into the most unbearable stay on earth for his unlucky ambassador.

Fortunately for his mental health, Duke Juan still had many friends in London, as well as many female admirers - honni soit qui mal y pense.

The final version of the marriage contract was only written in mid-October. The wedding itself would take place at the beginning of the following year. Mary was a royal bastard, but she would be given to a reigning monarch, and all the official pomp was required for such a ceremony, without mentioning the time required by the fashioning of the bride's dress.

# #

3rd of October, Rome

Chapuys could not really tell what had prompted him to leave his comfortable sojourn with his brother and nephews. It was so peaceful and resting to live in that warm, welcoming house and keep an eye on the children trying to run down the snowy slopes without hitting a tree. Yet he found himself there in Rome, not far from the building site of the gigantic basilica of Saint-Peter, waiting for his correspondent. The man soon joined him in a swirl of scarlet robes, and barely bothered with a 'Good Morning'. Reginald Pole had the look of someone who had not slept much and wanted to break anything he could reach.

"My lord..."
Chapuys bowed as low as he could on gout-stiffened legs.

"Are the letters I received from the Netherlands authentic?" Pole asked.

"Regarding which matter?"

"The marriage of Princess Mary to the duke of Bavaria."

"Indeed they are..."

Chapuys did not have time to finish his sentence before Pole burst into a string of imprecations quite discordant with his dignity. Chapuys wondered whether he lamented more the loss of a potential bride or the loss of his claim to the throne. Knowing the man's ambitions, most certainly the throne. Should Chapuys lament as well this union that would disadvantage Spain so much, or rejoice that Lady Mary had found a man worthy of her? The Savoyard thought he might have need of Thomas More's advice in such circumstances.

Un fortunately, the king's former councillor had left this bleak world on the previous day, taken both by old age and the lung illness he had caught in prison.

# #

8th of October, London

You could have not stuck one more pin into Lady Mary's rooms in Hampton Court. A costumer, two drapers, four embroideresses and half a dozen seamstresses were there, surrounded by measuring tapes, paper sheets, pencils and pincushions. All of them were trying to create the ideal dress for the wedding of the young lady with the duke of Bavaria, which had been scheduled for January. While the Queen Regent worked on choosing the musicians, organizing the feast and picking the list of guests, her stepdaughter lost herself with great pleasure amongst drawings and precious fabrics. Elizabeth never lost an opportunity to take part in the preparations. Perched on a stool, Alice clinging to her skirts, she listened attentively to an embroiderer explaining the symbols that could ornament a dress - and if the two children got bored, they could leave and take refuge in their mother or "Uncle Thomas"' office.

After several tests, Mary opted for a thick, crisp, silvered-coloured silk. The model was sensible without making her look like a nun. Then the embroideresses started to work on it.

"I say that we need apples and wheat ears", one of them assured, "made in golden thread; they will make a lovely pattern on the grey cloth."

"But the petticoat, what colour should it be?" the second woman inquired. "Depending on said colour, the golden thread will not do."

"Then we'll make the petticoat with golden satin as well", the first one answered while picking a reel of metallic thread she put on the silver silk for testing. "Hum... Too bright, we need one more mat."

The whole group left only four hours later, taking with them their lengths of cloth and baskets full of threads, reels and needles.
Beginning of November, London

Sitting by a window, Mary was trying to decipher the text that the German teacher summoned from Bavaria had given her for reading. Always the perfectionist, Mary wished to speak at least some words of her future subjects' language. It would also make things easier with her betrothed. Betrothed... the word made her feel dizzy. For so many years she had been resigned to be used as bait for potential allies, and now it came to an end. She was going to get married. She would certainly have children... In a nutshell, Lady Mary was seeing the doors of Heaven opening before her.

As for the duke, he was sending one letter after another to Bavaria in order to prepare his soon-to-be wife's arrival and installation. He had gathered all the intelligence he could get about her tastes and had sent detailed instructions for the decoration of the future duchess' apartments. He would make sure that Lady Mary would not feel too homesick while she discovered her new country.

Duke Philip sighed as he waxed his last letter sealed. All of this was going to increase his debts again. Of course he had won some significant sums of money fighting the Turks; the spoils had been impressive. But it had been barely enough to cover the amount of gold he already owed to his creditors. He had to admit, Mary's consequent dowry would avoid him some unpleasant discussions. And once he was back home, he would work seriously on a proper reform of the Bavarian tax system.

# #

End of November

The beautiful dress, made of a thick silvery silk and light gold satin, was finished, with its golden embroideries and seed pearls sewn on the collar and the sleeves. Mary had sneaked in the exhibition room during the night to admire it with her half-sisters, along with the jewels offered by Duke Philip. Alice had clapped when she had discovered the shining cloth and Elizabeth had claimed that her sister would look like an angel from Heaven when she wore it.

That little interlude did a lot to soothe their nerves. Now that the day of the ceremony approached, the high lords were beginning to quarrel to know which one would lead the bride to the altar. Mary could not stand such an attitude and the girls barely understood how adults could act this way.

The duke of Suffolk prided himself on his family ties with the young woman, the duke of Norfolk reminded everyone that he was the highest-ranking lord of the realm, the bishops demanded that honour since spiritual power took precedence over the temporal... Only Cranmer would not be an issue, but only because he would be the one to perform the ceremony.

"Will we let Gardiner come to the wedding?" Cromwell inquired. "He could make a scandal."

"Not as much as if I do not invite him", Anne stated. "He would claim that I forced him into exile. He will have to come. But it does not solve our current issue. I cannot let Mary come alone to the altar, it would be excessively rude. Maybe I should do it myself."

"It is supposed to be an honour for one of your courtiers. It would be like saying that none of them is worthy of it", Cromwell pointed out.

"Which is true", the Regent groaned. "Still... the Earl of Shrewsbury could do. He distinguished
himself during the Northern campaign as well as for leading the defense of the realm. It will be a reward for his good service; no one will complain about it."

Cromwell thought about it for a moment before nodding. He rather liked the young lord, a man as efficient and honest as his predecessor, with the advantage of not hating the minister, nor despising him for his origins.

The earl was just as surprised as he was delighted by this honour, and he had no petty comments to fear. The other officers approved of this distinction and the great Houses had nothing to reproach him regarding his letters of nobility.

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**Mid-December, London**

The wedding would not take place before three weeks, but all the lords of England were already flocking to the city in order to find a decent housing for a reasonable price. The innkeepers and citizens of London were rubbing their hands in glee. Renting their rooms would bring a lot of fresh money into their pockets. They would make sure to fleece all those rich barons and dukes who came into their city, showing off their jewels and brocades before the commoners.

Another reason for rejoicing was a rumour that quickly spread, that both queens would offer a free supper on the main market square during the wedding day, and the beggars were already planning in order to come by at the most favourable moment.

Meanwhile the Regent was turning Whitehall upside down in order to lodge all the foreign delegations in the palace without generating hazardous vicinities. Impossible, for instance, to create a suite for the French envoys too close to the Spanish, nor to set up the Lombard diplomats near the apartments kept for Savoy. Accommodating the whole European political chessboard in one building fell under the brainteaser category. The last straw was that Anne had to do everything with her brother only, Cromwell having decided to stay clear of this business. Anne knew he acted this way to force her to learn her job as the Queen Mother, but she could not help resenting him for that. Quite honestly, his distance might be caused by the return of Lord Boleyn the father to London. The old grouch would have caused another scandal if he had caught his daughter with her minister again.

As if all these worries were not enough, the queen also had to organise the revels for Christmas and New Year... Anne decided to leave all of it to George as well as Sir Bryan and his wife (if Nan, pregnant already, could ensure this service), and to have them seconded by the always-inventive Anthony Knivert. The knight accepted and left his lands and his little family to lend a hand. He would thus make up for the absence of Elizabeth Seymour-Cromwell, now held at home by her newborn son Francis.

---

**9th of January 1539, Whitehall**

The palace was surrounded by a compact crowd. So many people had not been seen gathered in the streets in winter since... the birth of Henry's first son, maybe, the little prince who had lived for fifty-two days. Children had climbed up to the balconies, the least lucky ones making do with their parents's shoulders to see the nuptial cortege when it left the chapel after mass. In such a cold season, they had no flowers to offer, but many onlookers had come with branches of holly and mistletoe, both symbols of rebirth and eternity.

Incredible stories got around about the marvelous gifts the duke had sent to his future wife, while
well-informed people treated their neighbours with all the tales and quarrels that had disturbed the Court for weeks.

Then the chatter stopped: the palace gates had just been opened. A great shout of satisfaction went out of the onlookers when the guards in full dress uniform opening the way appeared at last. The left line carried the banners of England, the right the banners of Bavaria. Hurrahs burst out from all sides when the newlyweds became visible in the great courtyard of Whitehall.

"Long live the Duchess Mary!" screamed a man from a balcony, and the shout was picked all along the street.

The soldiers holding back the crowd were busy trying to prevent the bystanders from rushing to the bride to touch her silver dress. The Londoners had to make do with waving the green branches they had brought and cheering the young couple. Mary was beaming, and Duke Philip still looked like he could not believe his luck.

Behind them walked the queen regnant, swaddled in a thick fur cloak, the queen regent, who wore the red dress of her elevation to the marquisate under her cloak, and Princess Alice, perched on her nurse's hip. Then followed the ministers and the lords of the realm. Amongst them came Bishop Gardiner, grinding his teeth, furious to be witness to a marriage that ruined his hopes. But, surrounded by the Regent's partisans, he did not dare make a scene. Furthermore, as a bishop, it would have been unwelcome of him to disturb a ceremony between two Catholics, even though it had been celebrated by a miscreant.

Anne did not notice those mood swings. She was only thinking that within three weeks, Lady Mary would embark for one of the German harbours and if everything went according to plan, she would never set foot again on English grounds.
18th of March, London

The Regent was studying a law draft about the creation of refuges in the main cities of the kingdom for homeless and orphans (who would work in said refuges to earn their keep, of course) when one of her ladies-in-waiting came into her office, looking completely distraught.

"My queen, Lady Rochford is extremely agitated! She broke a mirror and tore the curtains down in her bedroom after receiving a letter from France. No one can reason with her."

Anne sighed. If even the most patient ladies in Court could not calm Jane Parker Boleyn down, how would she succeed, when her sister-in-law hated her so deeply? This fit of rage could not have been caused by George's absence, as he had left for his embassy in France even before Lady Mary's wedding. The spouses got along as dreadfully as usual, and the removal of Lord Rochford could only please his wife.

Anne found her sister-in-law crying, sitting in a corner of her bedroom, her arms around her knees and her head bent low.

"Well... What befell you?"

"It is your GOOD FOR NOTHING brother!" Jane screamed, brandishing a worn paper.

Anne took some steps back, worried that the Fury would try to gouge her eyes out.

"He found himself some French whore and got her pregnant!" Jane roared.

Anne understood her distress better. After nearly fifteen years of a childless marriage, George had just proven he was not to blame for this situation. There was a kind of déjà-vu there. With the notable difference that Anne had always felt like a little girl before Katherine of Aragon, something which never happened with her sister-in-law.

"Please, show me this letter."

With some effort, she managed to take the paper out of Jane's clenched fingers. The letter was indeed extremely rude, George announcing without ceremony his affair with the daughter of a French baron and the lady's pregnancy, and while he was at it, his desire to divorce from his barren wife to marry his new lady. Anne shook her head, disappointed.

"Is there nothing you can do?" Jane wailed.

"Unfortunately, in this case I am afraid the law is on his side. And honestly, do you really wish to remain with him? You say yourself that this marriage is a failure."

"But it is humiliating!" the other woman protested.

"I do not say it is not, but believe me, it is better not to insist. Let him marry his French girl, and find a man who already has many children from a previous marriage, and who will not bother you. Or try and negotiate the conditions of the divorce, remain single and enjoy your newfound freedom. Just as
I did!"

Jane raised an eyebrow.

"Well, except I am a widow and not divorced, but the result is the same."

##

Following her sister-in-law's advice, Jane Parker did not oppose the divorce, but negotiated bitterly the conditions of the rupture. George was forced to give his former wife a large sum of money to allow her to settle decently. Anne would have liked to see her in a convent, but at least the insufferable nuisance was leaving the Court and would not pester the rest of the family. Now she would have to meet with Madame Second. Anne gathered her self-control and wrote her brother. In the name of the Queen she ordered him to come back to London with his "fiancée" as fast as possible in order to introduce her. The lady being pregnant, the couple should be married very quickly. The regent shook her head while sealing her mail. She really did not need such a scandal. Despite the renewal of popularity she had known after the successful marriage of the Lady Mary, and the people's love for Elizabeth, her position still remained unstable.

##

21st of June, London

George had taken his time to obey his sister's orders and arrived in England only three weeks after Lord Thomas Boleyn's death. Anne certainly saw evil where it was not, but she would have bet that George had deliberately delayed his trip, knowing their father was ill, to avoid meeting him for one last time... and getting scolded.

However, Lord Rochford had to follow the schedule established by the Regent. He would first meet her in private with his future wife; then, if the lady was deemed acceptable, she would be officially introduced to the Court.

Dressed in black once again, Anne met her younger brother with Elizabeth. The child was curious to meet her new aunt and furthermore, learning how to manage a familial crisis would certainly prove to be a bit of useful knowledge.

On the morning of the 21st of June at ten o'clock, George and his soon-to-be wife thus arrived at the Regent's door. Lord Rochford had put on his finest clothes to meet his sister. His cloak of blue satin was gleaming with silver thread and a long chain of the same metal, set with sapphires, hung from his shoulders. While he bowed before his sister and niece, Anne took a good look at her future sister-in-law, who was curtsying besides her intended husband. She was shorter than Jane Parker, blond and white-skinned, looking a bit like Jane Seymour-Darcy. However, she had a better sense in fashion than the former lady-in-waiting. She wore a dress of the same blue as George's doublet, and a set of jewels of gold and sapphires shone in her hair, around her neck and on her fingers.

When she rose from her curtsey, Anne noticed she was quite thin... Then she saw, far behind her masters, a servant holding a child wrapped in swaddling clothes her arms. She barely contained an angry sigh. And she thought the lady was still pregnant... The marriage question would be quite problematic now.

To break the silence, she nodded to Elizabeth.

"Lord Rochford, be welcome", the little girl recited. "I am very pleased to see you on this day. How do you fare, uncle?"
"I am very well, Majesty", George answered with a grin. "I hope it is the same for you."

"Yes uncle."

George stepped aside and took the young woman's hand.

"Allow me to introduce Françoise de Kéralan, my wife."

*Married without the queen's permission... Oh dear...*

"Good morning, my aunt", Elizabeth said with a formal tone. "It seems I have a cousin?"

George's pride flared immediately.

"A cousin indeed, Your Majesty", he said at once. "James Boleyn."

The new Lady Rochford ordered the servant to bring the child. The woman came closer and bowed before presenting the baby.

Elizabeth rose on her seat to see her new cousin better. Anne cast a glance to the child: tightly swaddled, only his small, surprised face could be seen, along with some thin locks of dark hair.

"I think I like him well", Elizabeth declared. "Congratulations, uncle. And to you too, my aunt", she added for Lady Françoise.

The young woman was reassured at last, and smiled to her little queen with affection. It pleased Anne. Her sister-in-law seemed a nice girl. She grabbed a tiny silver bell and called for a page.

"William, please lead Lady Rochford and her son in Lord Rochford's apartments. They must be both tired by their journey."

Once they were alone, Anne turned back to her younger brother without the smallest hint of a smile. Elizabeth considered safer to leave the room to take shelter in Uncle Thomas' office. Lady Anne was a very good mama, but sometimes she had a nasty temper.

##

Thomas Cromwell was sitting behind his desk, busy with the new version of his law for poor people's employment, when a murmur of respectful greetings came to his ears. Raising his gaze from his work, he saw a little figure in pale yellow velvet standing on the threshold, waiting for the permission to enter.

"Good morning, Your Majesty. What can I do for you?"

Elizabeth entered the room.

"Good morning, Uncle. May I remain here to read the next laws that will be brought to the Parliament?"

Since she had completely mastered reading, the young girl came regularly to dissect the rulings and royal edicts, a way as good as any other to learn her future job as a queen, which her mother and the councillors supported heartily.

"Of course, please take a seat."

The little girl hauled herself on a chair and grabbed one of the parchments discarded on the table.
"What really brings you into my office, Majesty?"

"Uncle George came back", Elizabeth explained while reading the document. "I saw my new aunt. She looks nice. But she and Uncle George are already married, when they should have asked permission, at least of Lord Boleyn. I think that my uncle and Maman are quarrelling again right now..."

Cromwell sighed. Once again, George Boleyn did as he wished, without thinking about the troubles he could generate for his sister... And as if it was not enough, the duke of Norfolk was adding his own two cents to the issues at hand.

##

25th of June

"Those rags are utterly disrespectful to the monarchy through your person!" the duke yelled.

Anne gave a wide shrug. She was not the first monarch that the common folks teased about her real or imaginary misdemeanours. The Netherlands were laughing freely about the lovely girls of Bruges that Emperor Charles used to frequent before his marriage, and François of Valois was regularly nagged for his spendings and his mistresses. The Parisians even organized demonstrations in the streets of their city to protest. So she would not fret about some bawdy songs.

"It is unspeakable!" Norfolk went on, raising his arms. "We must oppose with a formal refutation and arrest the scoundrels who print such slander!"

"And if we do so, my good uncle, everyone will say that it is because they are telling the truth. It is perfectly harmless. Find me one female regent in all the history of Europe who was not accused of sleeping with one of her ministers, will you? From Blanche of Castile to the Lady of Beaujeu, they all got it."

The duke left, slamming the door behind him. Anne sighed. Her uncle was making that kind of scenes more and more often. And what could she tell him? That it was hard to deny the truth? That the taverns regulars had more clairvoyance than him? Norfolk would kill her for such a disgrace, and he would send Thomas to the scaffold, not necessarily in this order.

After trying to reason his niece in all the ways he could imagine, the duke of Norfolk decided it was high time to take some more radical measures.

Chapter End Notes

I created Françoise de Keralan by mixing several real characters that belong to my French family. The castle of Keralan still exists; it's located near Guérande, and it's a delightful and quiet place, converted into bed and breakfast by its current owners.
2nd of August, Roma

Reginald Pole could hardly believe his eyes. And yet, after reading several times the letter he held in his hands, he had to admit that Thomas Howard, Duke of Norfolk, was offering him his help to, as he had written, "put some order back into the good kingdom of England". At last, it was the sign from Heaven Pole had been expecting for years. It did not occur to him that the Regent could, if he raised a revolt against her, have what remained of his family executed just by giving a word. He took his quill and a grid of codes to answer the duke and accept his plan.

Unfortunately, the encrypted letter was not intercepted. The duke of Norfolk received it, with the Cardinal's benediction to undertake whatever he deemed necessary to put the legitimate heirs back on the throne of England. Lady Mary would not bother them, being already pregnant with her Bavarian duke's child. Her absence was quite a pity for Pole, since a marriage with the daughter of a Spanish princess, the only legitimate offspring of the late King Henry, could have helped his situation. There were still Suffolk's daughters, that the duke had in plenty. Or a Scottish princess. Maybe, if the emperor warmed a bit toward the Plantagenet pretender, one of the imperial princesses, Maria or Juana of Austria. But the two girls were still too young for such a prospect. Furthermore, it was said that Emperor Charles was considering marrying one of them in Austria and the other in Portugal when they came of age.

##

5th of September, Paris

King François put the report from his agent in the Vatican back on his desk and frowned. Cardinal Pole had begun to make the round of all the religious orders and the princes of the Church, with the obvious goal of gathering money. Apparently, the Plantagenet had a new project for his conquest of the English throne in the making. It was hard to ascertain who had given their support this time, but the king thought more prudent to warn the English queen. Relations between France and England had quite brightened since the previous year, trade was thriving... the overthrow of the Tudor queen would not bring anything good to the kingdom of France.

##

18th of September, London

The royal postmen had not wasted time between Paris and England. The Regent was reading carefully the letter François of Valois had sent her through his new ambassador, Charles de Marillac. Reginald Pole seemed well-informed about the number of men in the army, the finances of the realm and the usual routine of the queen and her daughters. This information must have come from someone close to the royal family, or at least who spent a lot of time with the Regent and her ministers. In another time, one of the gentlemen serving the king, Brereton, had been suspected of being a spy for the Habsburgs, without the first hint of a proof, though at that time the man had often
been seen with Chapuys. But after Henry's death, Brereton had lost his charge at Court and had gone back to his lands, and no one had heard anything from him for a while.

Anne took some time to think about this new development. The remaining Poles could not be the source. They were living far from Court and held no important office in the administration of the country. She rather suspected a member of the council. Gardiner could act as an middleman, she thought. Rich only occupied a low-ranking charge. Wriothesley, who acted as his secretary, was still fiercely Catholic, and had married Gardiner’s niece, but he was also quite the opportunist, and he would risk a lot in such a trick. Ralph Sadler could be crossed out: he was too loyal to Cromwell, and by ricochet, to the Queen Regent, to try such a plot. In a nutshell, Anne remained puzzled.

However she decided not to change a thing to her routine, and to go on with the treatment of the affairs of state as if nothing had happened. Thus Sir Knivert went back to inspecting the numerous fortresses of the realm (grumbling, since his Bridget was pregnant again), and the council bravely attacked the tricky matter of reforming the tax systems, something that should keep the ministers busy for a long while... Unfortunately, Francis Bryan, always quick to smell a plot, was away, absorbed by his new duties as permanent ambassador in Venice where he, his wife and their young daughter were having a wonderful time. According to the last news, Nan too was pregnant with her second child. Anne would have to do it with her own means and wits.

##

1st of October

"Your Majesty? Ambassador Marillac requires an audience."

Anne gestured to the page, who introduced the French diplomat in the room.

He was a curious, elegant man with gaunt features, perpetually wearing a politely reserved expression, whose diplomatic adventures had dragged along from France to Turkey, before sending him to England. Charles de Marillac was also a churchman, though he had not been ordained yet, a matter which he would settle as soon as his mission in England would end. Yet it was whispered that the man felt some interest for the Reformation. How could you know? It was impossible, and rude as well, to try and extract the truth from him regarding that particular topic. It was certain, at least, that Marillac did not associate with high-class prostitutes and did not entertain a mistress in his dwelling.

"Your Majesty", he said, bowing deeply.

"Monsieur de Marillac, be welcome. Why did you require a audience with me?"

The ambassador took a step forward and produced a paper from the sleeve of his doublet.

"My lady, this came to me through some of my... contacts in the city. I thought it was a most pressing matter."

Anne grabbed the paper and quickly skimmed it. She frowned. What she was reading made no sense. When she made that remark aloud, Marillac nodded.

"Indeed, my lady, I do not understand either how and why Lord Cromwell would compromise himself in such an operation. He would not receive the slightest hint of clemency from Pole if the man became king."

"Do you think it could have been forged?"

"It is not impossible. You are best placed to get some samples of his writing for a comparison."
Anne sighed deeply. She hated what she was about to do to her councillor. But she had to make this inquiry alone, without warning him. She quickly gave leave to Marillac, with his promise to go on with his investigations.

As soon as the ambassador had departed, the Regent left her rooms. She pretended to stroll through Whitehall, while gathering intelligence from the agents she had scattered in the palace: here a window cleaner, there a chambermaid... These days, Cromwell did not leave his office before ten in the evening – she could confirm that – however, he always arrived around seven and a half in the morning. It left the Regent a comfortable length of time to obtain the papers she needed. For a small remuneration, the man in charge of cleaning the room surrendered the keys most willingly.

# #

When all the clerks had left, Anne went back to the office with only a small candle to lit the way, and took off some drafts that Cromwell had written earlier that day. The key was returned to its owner and on the following morning the Regent was comparing the paper transmitted by Marillac with the ones she had stolen.

If she was honest with herself, she had to admit the two writings were very similar. But she did not feel qualified enough to ascertain if they were truly identical. Truly, disinformation still looked like the best solution to discover the origin of the leak. To Cranmer she said she wished to go to France for a revision of the marriage treaty between Elizabeth and Duke Charles of Valois. To Norfolk she told she wanted to call in a summit with the Lutheran princes of Germany to enlarge the alliance made with Bavaria. Cromwell was notified of the Regent's intention to leave London for some weeks in Wales in order to keep an eye on her personal domain.

To avoid blurring the trail, Anne asked every councillor to remain silent regarding her projects until she made them official, to prevent any diplomatic panic in the chancelleries beyond the Channel. Ambassador Marillac was required to bring the Regent all the notes his agents would transmit him. This way she would find who communicated with Pole.

Elizabeth was left aside. The little girl was indeed more clever than the average child, but she was still young and could blurt a word that could compromise the whole business. Ironically, it was an adult who gave the first hint to her mother.

# #

The Duke of Suffolk came to see the Regent some days later, obviously worried. Despite his animosity towards her, Suffolk took his charge very seriously and insured the safety of the royal family and the city of London with efficiency. He tried to look contented with his life at Court, given that his own daughters got along very well with the young queen and the royal princess, thus Anne did not send him away. In fact, she listened to him with attention.

"Please have a seat, Charles, and tell me what drives you to such disarray."

The duke sat, twisting his velvet hat between his hands, et coughed nervously before speaking.

"I must tell you first that I can only report rumours, some servants' gossip..."

"I am listening."

"It looks like that someone in the council sends intelligence to a foreign country, my lady, and more precisely to Cardinal Pole, in Rome. About our army, the guards in Hampton and Whitehall... all kinds of useful tidbits for a plot or a coup."
"How did you come by this knowledge?"

"One of my men made a report, having heard them himself in the entourage of my lord Duke of Norfolk. After that, the trail is lost."

Anne nodded slowly. Maybe her uncle had started his own inquiry as well? She thanked Suffolk in plenty for his help, before taking her leave and starting her cogitations again. She did not dare imagine that her uncle had created this cabal from scratch to cause the disfavour – or worse – of a minister he despised and had come to hate. It would be going a bit too far. But Norfolk had already whispered rumours of treason into Henry's ears to get rid of Wolsey.

"Should I have my uncle's chambers searched to get an answer? That would be the icing on the cake", Anne mumbled.

If only to clear her doubts, she would have to resolve to do it. The duke frequently went to his domains to control the income calculated by his steward, so the opportunity would appear soon.

#

5th of November, Whitehall

"Here is what we found, my lady", the page said, bowing before the Queen Regent. "It is not much, but it should be enough to prompt a more official inquiry."

"Thank you so much", Anne said, taking the letters the young man handed her. "I hope you will remain silent on this topic", she added, giving him a full purse of silver coins.

Gathering her patience, Anne started to study the papers very closely. They looked like old drafts for a private correspondence, except they were not from her uncle's hand. The writing was clearly similar to Thomas Cromwell's. On others, it was completely different. On some, it only tended to imitate the minister's. The drafts not being dated, it was impossible to put them in the proper order, but a logic came out of them nonetheless. Someone had worked hard for weeks to get more familiar with Cromwell's writing and imitate it properly. Some of the papers contained sentences identical to the letters provided by Marillac. The information was very precise; only a member of the council could have been granted access to them.

If one added to these facts the last notes the Frenchman had sent her, pointing that the imperial forces were ready, if necessary, to take action in Germany if the Regent tightened her links with the Lutheran princes, it left little doubt about the identity of the sneak.

The Duke of Norfolk had done a good job, the Regent thought, clenching her fist around the paper. To have Thomas accused of treason with some proofs sowed here and there, well done. If Anne had not learnt to mistrust her own family, she would have certainly swallowed this plot, and sent her faithful friend to the scaffold...

The duke had been opposing the minister for years, under more or less futile pretexts. Before Henry's death, both men had already been at each other's throats. It was time to settle the dispute.

After supper, Anne summoned the captain of her guard and explained him the new mission he would have to carry out.

#

9th of November
Coming back from his inspection, the Duke of Norfolk had the unpleasant surprise to learn that almost all his servants had been arrested, by the Regent's orders. The captain of the royal guard explained that one of the servants was strongly suspected of having stolen some of his master's personal documents and sold them to a foreign country. As soon as he was alone, Norfolk sighed with relief. Anne had not thought about him. One of his men would confess to escape torture, and all would be well.

Before all the gathered courtiers, the Duke loudly lamented his servants' treachery and promised to keep a closer eye on their hiring in the future.

##

In the Tower of London, the duke's valets were having quite an unpleasant time. Under the Seymour brothers' lead, the interrogations went on relentlessly, but – at the beginning at least – without manhandling the suspects. Edward Seymour was truly gifted for scaring people and getting their imagination to overwork. He let them wondering, and when they were terrified enough, he began asking questions.

Anne did not like employing Henry's pets. She had no love for these men, but had to admit they were efficient.

After a day, all the chambermaids who worked for the duke had been sent home with a nice word from Edward Seymour, something that had frightened them almost more than his threats. Norfolk used these ladies only as a pleasurable distraction, but did not trust them with his little secrets.

The following day, five other servants were taken from the Tower and went back to Whitehall without a scratch.

At last, after a week of careful selections, only one man remained in the Tower, one of the duke's secretaries.

"So, young man", Edward Seymour told his prisoner, "you are selling secrets of state to Spain? And you thought you could walk out of it unharmed?"

"No, m'lord. It was not me", the other whimpered. "It was not my idea. I just..."

He caught himself immediately, aware that he had already told a little too much.

"Just what? Obey someone else? There, unburden your conscience, it will do a world of good to you..."

Seymour certainly did not suspect how frightening he was when he tried to act nice. Even worse than when he questioned a man with a red-hot iron rod in hand. After some hours alone to dwell on in his cell, the secretary called for his gaoler, almost begging, and more than willing to spill everything in order to leave that dreadful place.

##

It was a great shock for all courtiers and London as a whole when, the following day, the Duke of Norfolk was arrested by the Queen's guard as he was leaving the council room.
Reginald Pole was re-reading the Duke of Najera's last letter, unwilling to believe or even understand it. The Spanish ambassador in London was giving the pretender a phenomenal telling-off; of course, he used the most courteous vocabulary and his letter was no missing a single 'my lord', but the tone was more condescending and aggressive than what Pole was used to reading.

*I cannot imagine*, Najera wrote, *why you decided to use the intervention of Norfolk to obtain this intelligence, when His Lordship has not enjoyed the Regent's trust for a long time. You knew perfectly well that I gather information from numerous agents in Whitehall, so why did not you share your intentions, and act by my intermediary in order to obtain the required informations? It cannot have escaped you that, as an ambassador, I enjoy a certain immunity, whereas the Duke of Norfolk, as an English subject, risks his head for your fantasies. Furthermore, did you think once about your family, who still remains in England? Your good behaviour guarantees their life, if I may remind you, my lord.*

##

15th of December, London

Najera's reproaches were perfectly justified. After the confession of Norfolk's secretary, the two adult Poles remaining in England had been summoned to Court. Nor Lady Salisbury nor her son Geoffrey felt at ease; they knew the royal order had come because Reginald had once again provoked the Crown. And once again, they would have to justify themselves, prove they had nothing to do with the Cardinal's plots...

This time, fear was mixed with humiliation: the Regent questioned them in the largest room in Whitehall, with Elizabeth and nearly all the Court present. It was truly unpleasant for Plantagenets to be forced to answer like unruly children before a whole pack of smirking courtiers.

They went back to their lands arguing over their future plans: to send Reginald a warning or do nothing.

##

Two other people were quarrelling in London on that evening. The relationship between the Regent and her minister was rather tense since Norfolk's arrest. Cromwell was furious that the queen had led the whole operation without warning him beforehand and was still waiting for an explanation. They would only communicate during council sessions, and each one, of course, spent the night in his or her own bedroom. For a married couple, it would have been labelled as having a domestic. Both were standing their grounds and their common stubbornness prevented them from admitting that they were – at least partially – wrong to act as they did.

Of course, this change in their attitude had been noticed by the young queen and princess. Elizabeth and her sister did not like seeing their mother and 'uncle' arguing. Their almost normal family seemed on the verge of disintegrating.

"This time, it is worse than usual", Elizabeth stated late one evening, when she and Alice were
supposed to sleep.

"Hmm, hmm..." her younger sister approved, nodding.

Contrary to George Boleyn's predictions, Alice was a discreet and not very talkative child. One would have some years to wait before ascertaining if she loved dance and music, but it seemed rather unlikely.

"I wonder if it's because of Uncle Norfolk", the child queen went on, frowning. "How are we going to force them to have a talk?"

"We sulk?" Alice suggested, for once forgetting her near mutism.

"It's an idea... but we'll have to put on a big show", Elizabeth decided. "If we just go sulking for three hours, they won't take us seriously."

##

On the next day, Anne was astonished to see her two daughters refuse to speak with her, limiting themselves to the courtesies demanded by the protocol. Cromwell received the same silent treatment. Elizabeth was still coming to his office to read some legal texts, but she would not say a word and kept looking at the paper she was studying. The two adults thus manipulated were forced to take some minutes in a very busy schedule to discuss this new phenomenon.

Cromwell attacked first.

"Elizabeth's behaviour became rather icy towards me. Would you have any idea about it?"

"None, she acts the same way towards me, and Alice is not much better."

And there was a long silence after that.

"I suspect they wanted to have us precisely where we are now", the Regent stated acidly.

Cromwell shrugged.

"I do not see what more could be said. I should have been kept informed of this inquiry."

"You were a potential suspect", Anne retorted. "You are familiar with the procedure, you should know that warning you would have been highly irregular."

"Did you really believe that I was involved?"

"Absolutely not. But the fewer people are aware of the operation, the more chances one has to obtain a result. You taught me this method yourself."

The minister did not answer. He did not want to quarrel with the Regent, not only because it put their little habits in question, but also because he still depended on the monarch's good will to keep his charge, his fortune, and possibly his life.

From time to time, one had to know when to capitulate.

"It is true, indeed. Please forgive me, this was uncalled for."

"I think it cannot be avoided", Anne commented, waving away the whole thing.
"And now, what do we do?"

"We must prepare my uncle's trial. This will not please my cousin Surrey. He hoped that his sire would be graceful enough to die in his cell, but it seems that my Lord Duke is still tough, and in rather good health. His family won't be able to escape the scandal."

# #

8th of January 1540, Westminster

A dense crowd was massing around the Parliament. Well, it was not every day you could see a duke on trial, and even better, the highest-ranking nobleman in the kingdom after the Queen, the Regent and the royal Princess. The guards were hard-pressed to hold back the people tip-toeing to have a better view and those who pushed their neighbours to clear the way.

At last, as a light snow was falling on the city, the old Duke appeared at last. He had been spared an arrival in a cage, but he still had his wrists chained and his guards were keeping him very close, no doubt more to avoid the projectiles the onlookers were already preparing than to prevent the old man from running away.

"D'you think they'll hang him?" one gossip asked to her neighbour while the prisoner entered the building.

"Silly goose, you don't hang a noble, you make him a head shorter!"

The two women stated to argue and calmed down only when the watchmen threatened them with a little dip in the Thames to freshen them up.

"And when do they nick him?" the first woman asked.

"Well you need time to judge a man like that", the other answered. "He's no common thief."

With those wise words, the two gossips split up. It would be hours before the Duke left Westminster, and they had other things to do than remain there to wait for him. They did not have servants at home to do their work.

# #

23rd of March

The gossips had been right, it took a lot of time to judge the Duke of Norfolk. The jury had decided far more quickly for Thomas More. It was always difficult to decide the fate of a great lord. But the sentence was finally pronounced. The Duke was declared guilty of treason and condemned to death. The verdict would be carried out during the following week.

He was certainly not expecting that, because the guards nearly had to drag him out of Westminster after the verdict the old man seemed paralyzed by shock. The score of soldiers guarding him brought him back to the Tower and it was only when the door of his cell had been locked that the Duke came back to his senses to insult his judges and demand to see the Regent at once.

# #

"Will you accept?"

Anne noticed that Cromwell seemed somewhat tense. Did he think that Norfolk would try to strangle
his niece if she came to visit him in his cell?

"Of course I will see him. He will feel better after insulting me, and it is my duty as a good Christian to soften his last days. Do not worry so much..."

"It is my job, my lady."

"I will not remain long in the Tower", Anne promised. "I must write to the Duke of Bavaria to congratulate him on Mary's pregnancy. We must celebrate this properly." And hope she will breed better than her mother, else the Bavarians will think that our alliance is a trifle one-sided.

##

Two hours later the Queen Regent was in the Tower of London.

_How curious... If I had not left for Pembroke the minute Henry ordered me to, I could have been sent here to allow him to marry the first little bitch he would have found, as soon as possible._

The guards saluted her respectfully and Master Kingston offered her his arm to lead her to the cell occupied by the Duke of Norfolk.

As soon as she entered the room, the old man yelled at her.

"You lock me in jail, me, your own uncle! You dare! Your own blood! And why do you commit such an infamy? To protect a commoner, a traitor who dishonors your government..."

"My dear uncle... My Lord Duke... Your Grace... You stand accused of treason, not him. You falsified several dispatches from my council to incriminate my best minister. You dishonored my government. Do not turn the situation over, please."

Norfolk looked her scornfully.

"As you wish, my lady. I can see I have nothing to expect from your little person."

"Your scheming could have gotten me killed, after making me the king's whore. You could have killed my best councillor as well, just to satisfy your desire for power."

He turned towards the window without an answer. She would not get more from him. Anne shrugged and knocked twice on the door. The guard waiting outside came to open.

"At least, I hope he's good in bed?" Norfolk snarled as she left.

Anne half-turned, and looked at her uncle with a mischievous expression.

"Excellent, Uncle. Excellent."

##

2nd of April

"I will go", Elizabeth declared firmly. "I must learn."

Neither her mother nor her governess could make her change her mind. Thus on the morning of her grand-uncle's execution, the young girl was sitting in the royal box with the Regent.

##
A feeling of complete disbelief ran through the Duke when the guards pushed him out of the Tower. A sound came to his ears, the rumble of an angry crowd. When he reached the bailey where the scaffold had been erected, a storm of insults greeted his arrival. Leaning on the guardrail of the platform, the executioner was waiting for his client to climb up to the block. Norfolk strode towards the scaffold. No one would call him a coward. Nonetheless, he was surprised by the hate he felt radiating from the crowd massing at the foot of the scaffold. They loved his whore of a niece so much? Damn! Maybe he should have gathered more intelligence about public opinion before starting his 'consultations' with Reginald Pole...

Norfolk climbed up the steps still wondering how his plan could have come to bite his ass in such a way. Someone threw a rotten fruit that landed at his feet with a disgusting noise.

"Do you have a last speech to make?" Master Kingston inquired.

"No", the Duke answered tartly. "I will not honor this scum with a single word."

Kingston shrugged not too discreetly and signaled the executioner to proceed. The man apologized to his soon-to-be victim, who dropped some coins in his hand. Behind his mask, the executioner grimaced. And a tight purse, on top of everything! His client kneeled before the block and laid his neck on it, grumbling curses because of his rheumatisms.

Well, man, one shouldn't start to plot so old... the executioner thought, while raising his axe.

He laid it delicately on his client's neck, took it off, put it back... Perfect angle. If the old man could remain still, it would go quickly. The executioner rose his weapon again...

The axe cut off the old Duke's head with a single blow, the blood spraying on the first row of onlookers.

In the royal box, Elizabeth had not even blinked.

Chapter End Notes

No Karma Houdini for old Norfolk, this time.
Hello readers, here is a new chapter for your evening reading. There's a time gap of five years with the previous episode and we're now in 1545, meeting a new character: Charles of France, Duke of Angoulême, and Elizabeth's future husband.

14th of May 1545, Hampton Court

The French delegation got out of its coaches in the main bailey of the castle, observed from the windows by the courtiers as well as their servants. It was not the first time that their neighbours from the other side of the Channel came for a diplomatic visit, but this one was quite different. The topic was, no less, Queen Elizabeth's marriage. Thus people rushed in to see what the young monarch's future consort looked like.

The queen herself would not appear before supper, to maintain a bit of mystery, so it was the Queen-Mother who greeted her guests with her most charming smile.

Now forty-three, Anne Boleyn was still slim and elegant, but all the worries of the previous decade had added some grey streaks in her dark hair. She did not wear her mourning clothes any more, but had nonetheless abandoned the flamboyant colours she had once liked so much for darker hues. To meet her future son-in-law, she had chosen a dress of dark plum silk embroidered with cream and gold thread, and set around her neck a double line of alternated pearls and amethysts.

Charles of Valois quickly dusted his travel cloak down before Anne reached him, and kissed the back of her hand.

"Votre Altesse, soyez le bienvenu à Hampton Court. Au nom de la reine, je vous souhaitez, ainsi qu'à vos compagnons, un excellent séjour parmi nous." ("Your Highness", Anne said in French, "welcome to Hampton Court. In the name of the Queen, I wish you and all your retainers a most pleasing stay amongst us").

"Please receive my thanks, Majesty", Charles answered in a stammering English.

Anne gave him her nicest smile. If the future prince would try and learn their language, his subjects would only like him more.

# 

The French were led to the rooms arranged for the duration of their stay. The Regent let them change their dusty travel clothes for fresh ones and prepare themselves for the evening reception.

Then she went to her elder daughter's chambers, where Elizabeth was dressing up as well. Five or six dresses were spread on the bed and the armchairs, with the matching shoes and jewels, while Alice was conscientiously helping the chamber maids to perfume her elder sister and style her hair. Elizabeth could barely remain still and fidgeted on her chair. She adopted a more dignified attitude as soon as she caught a glimpse of her moter in her mirror.

"I cannot decide," she complained. "I want to be perfect for my first meeting with the prince, but I do
not know what to choose."

Anne smiled. Despite her status and responsibilities, her daughter could still behave like a child.

"No grey," Alice said from the chair where she was sitting cross-legged. "It is too sad for such an event. You need something more joyful for a betrothal."

It was certainly one of the longest sentences the young princess had ever said. Unlike her parents and half-sister, Alice was still incredibly laconic.

"I think the pink and white will do nicely," the young girl added.

Elizabeth turned to the silk dress and its underskirt of white satin with a hem of fine gold lace. The matching set of pearls had once been part of the presents offered to Katherine of Aragon by her father-in-law for her wedding. All the old queen's personal jewels that Anne had managed to find after Henry had given them here and there had gone to Germany with Mary, but the English finery had remained in England, for Elizabeth and Alice's benefit.

She nodded.

"Perfect!"

The maid let out a discreet sigh of relief, and the Regent took her second daughter in her chambers to get both of them ready. Alice followed her mother, still silent. The child was not a lackwit (it would have been impossible with the parents she had, Anne thought with pride) and learnt easily everything she was taught, but she could have been a model for a statue of discretion.

# #

At supper time, the queen-mother and her youngest daughter appeared from their rooms and went to the great hall, a guard walking before them and a swarm of ladies-in-waiting following them docilely. Anne caught herself wishing that Lady Bryan was amongst her new ladies. She would have known how to teach them better manners, instead of whispering and endlessly casting dreamy looks to the French gentlemen who were waiting for their prince. What a pity that Nan was still in Venice, and... Anne shook her head. If she began to consider her companions as silly geese, it meant she was thinking like an old grouchy woman.

As they walked down the stairs, the musicians sitting in one of the boxes started their score. Anne cast a quick glance to the violinist playing the main theme. Though he had studied with Mark Smeaton, he still had some work ahead before reaching his master's level. Unfortunately, Mark had died four years ago, victim of his womanizing ways, and of a man who had not liked seeing his sister seduced, and then quickly forgotten by the musician.

There were many new faces in the crowd, and many members of the old guard had left the Court. Knivert had definitely retired in the country with his wife and their three children. His old friend Suffolk, now very ill, was left alone in his castle, separated from his wife, after losing one of his daughters to a sudden sickness. Mary Stafford née Boleyn had died two years prior, as well as Françoise, George's second wife, exhausted by repeated pregnancies, after giving her husband no less than four children. And Thomas Wyatt had quite sadly ended his career in the Netherlands, far from his family.

Only the Seymour brothers – Edward still with his Lady Anne and Thomas with a Lady Katherine, formerly the widow of Lord Latimer – truly ensured a kind of continuity amongst the courtiers.

Of course, the Cromwell clan was still present, but the two queens would not consider them as
courtiers, rather as distant cousins.

Gregory and Lizzie had come with their two eldest sons, Francis and Andrew, their daughter Eleanor (barely one year old) remaining at home with her nurse. Ralph Saddler remained in the back row, but he was still there with his wife Helen, close to his former employer. And Thomas himself... Well, Anne thought, smiling, he had finally gotten old. His hair, once as black as ink, was now greying and he was standing slightly stooped. However, he had not yet abandoned the simplicity of his black clothes, despite the efforts exerted by his son, his daughter-in-law, both queens and the royal princess to make him look like an esteemed councillor rather than a common merchant. The former Regent herself did not feel like she had lost the fire that animated her. It did not matter to her. There was such an age gap between them that this kind of shift in their relationship was unavoidable.

Some steps further, Anne and her daughter reached the French delegation. Ambassador Marillac bowed deeply and went on with the official introductions. The young Duke kissed his future mother-in-law's hand, then the young princess'. They had just exchanged some pleasant words when the herald stationed at the entrance of the great hall announced the queen's arrival.

The Duke carefully observed his young betrothed as she came to him. His brother Henri had made fun of him for days upon learning that Charles would marry Elizabeth Tudor. "Brother, I hope you will be patient enough to wait for your little princess! You will be married to a child!" Charles of Angoulême had gritted his teeth and swallowed back all the rude answers he had on the tip of his tongue. He would have wanted to tell his brother that, regarding marital business, he was not exactly an example, having one mistress after the other and only managing to get his wife pregnant after ten years of marriage. But Henri had now an heir, as well as a daughter. To remain silent had been safer.

Whatever Henri of France could say, Elizabeth was absolutely not a little person. The Tudor king had been a towering man, and his daughter was quite tall for her age. Furthermore she wore her flaming red hair pinned high on her head, which added to her stature. He knew by Marillac that she was clever and well-learnt. He would certainly not get bored with her.

Elizabeth was also watching her betrothed carefully. Very tall like almost all the Children of France, he kept his chestnut hair cropped close to fit under the helm he wore for tourneys. The son of a knight-king, Charles had been brought up in the respect of courteous traditions, and was an excellent rider, as well as an efficient swordsman. He had also received a very complete humanistic instruction, as well as his six brothers and sisters.

Elizabeth bent the knees slightly to greet him, and Charles bowed in answer.

"Your Highness, welcome to Hampton Court. I hope you will find the castle to your liking."

"Your Majesty, allow me to thank you for the truly magnificent welcome you are giving me."

It was not only courtesy and diplomacy. Hampton had never been so brightly decorated since the extraordinary feasts King Henry had staged to celebrate his last victories.

Elizabeth smiled a little less nervously, and the young man offered her his arm to lead her towards the high table. The Queen took the opportunity to introduce her courtiers.

First of all, the current Duke of Norfolk, Henry Howard, tenured for five years now. He had not been threatened after his father's... indiscretions, and perpetually sported a sort of satisfied little pout. The rest of the Howard clan spent most of their time in the country, save for Anne and Henry's cousin, the exuberant Kathryn. Now twenty-three, she was still acting like a carefree brat and her tutors despaired of marrying off such a light-headed girl. Anne had hoped to put some semblance of reflection in that bird-brained girl by making her a lady-in-waiting for Princess Alice, but to no avail.
The young woman kept on having fun without really thinking, and proved it again by bowing before Duke Charles so she could show off her lovely cleavage. At least she was smiling with her mouth closed, Anne thought. Kathryn's teeth were really awful.

Then came the Duchess of Suffolk and her brood. Catherine Brandon still hated the Queen-Mother as much as before, but not enough to refuse a place in Court now that her husband was too sick to represent the family. Suffolk's three daughters and two sons bowed to the prince with good grace.

A bit further, Elizabeth introduced the Earl of Shrewsbury and his wife with a smile. She felt very close to the Talbots, whose loyalty had always been spotless. The earl was her teacher of military strategy and they both spent hours leaning over large maps, moving pawns or tiny wooden ships to maneuver their troops in imaginary battles. That way, Elizabeth had also learnt a lot about European geography.

After some colourful anonymous courtiers, the Queen and her betrothed reached the Cromwells. Charles had heard of them thanks to his sister-in-law, Duchess Catherine de Medici, and knew that Thomas Cromwell was the most essential cog in the administration of the English kingdom, not to mention a very firm and loyal supporter of the Regent and Queen Elizabeth. So he answered courteously to the minister and his son's deep bow and Lady Cromwell's elegant curtsey.

He knew he was going to like his new country.
A glorious year

May 1548, London

Thomas Cromwell, for once, was staying in the family house with his nephews and nieces when he received a visit from a young man sent by his father to polish his education and take service with the minister. He was only the last from a long series that had begun with Ralph Sadler, a whole battalion of young, ambitious and gifted assistants he had chosen to work for the realm rather than only their own interests.

Cromwell greeted his visitor at once, and when he cast a glance at the boy, he had the feeling of seeing himself, only some decades younger. Dark of eyes, with black hair and sun-browned skin, his new pupil looked almost more like a Mediterranean native than an Englishman.

"So tell me, what is your name, young man?"

"Francis Walsingham, sir."

"And why did you ask to have your apprenticeship with me, Mr Walsingham?"

"I wish to serve England, sir, but I have no particular taste for a military career, nor an ecclesiastic vocation. So I thought of entering the administration of this country, and my friends as well as my father repeatedly advised me to address you directly, sir."

# #

Whitehall

Anne was carefully re-reading the letter she had received from Italy on the previous day, bearing the seal of the Este family. It had been a long time since she had gotten news from her childhood friend Renée of Ferrara, formerly Princess of France, and sister to the late Queen Claude. The woman made quite the original character. A devoted Reformer living in a fiercely Catholic Italy, a Daughter of France married to a minor monarch, wife to Lucrezia Borgia's son and still in good health...

However, the two spouses did not get along so well, particularly because of Madame's religious opinions. In 1536, the Duchess had hosted Calvin in her palace, and protected Protestants, which had forced her brother-in-law the King of France to intervene on her behalf. She still went on with her activities, though more quietly, something that led to endless quarrels with her eldest son, Alfonso. But it was said that the young man, living a life of excess, would not grow very old. Quite tellingly, in her letter Renée was only writing about her second son, Luigi, born in 1538, alluding to a possible English alliance through Princess Alice. Anne nearly danced in glee after reading this particular paragraph. If her daughter married one of Renée's sons, she would wear a triple ducal crown, no less.

Now she would have to speak with her daughter and observe her reaction.

# #

A man who happily supported this project was George Boleyn. Definitely settled in England after one last embassy during the previous year for King François' funerals, he spent most of his time at Court with his nieces, and the rest at Hever to manage his possessions, his fortune and see his children. Being a widower did not bother him much. His cousin and accomplice Francis Bryan, back in England for some months in order to handle a dispute with one of his stewards, also liked the idea, and would have to ensure that the Republic of Venice would not be adverse to an English marriage in Ferrara.
"Well", George claimed, laughing, "I say that we must absolutely marry our Alice in Italy. She looks like one of her ladies already, and thus will have no trouble making herself at home in this country! She will be our little Italian!"

Amongst the ladies' giggles, Francis Bryan cast a quick look to the princess and felt his stomach twist. She had the black eyes and dark hair of her mother, but... No. Anne's hair was a dark shade of reddish brown, not pitch black like her daughter's. Curly hair as well, oh not much, but enough to reveal what she was, and who had sired her. Only one man at Court had those thick black curls. He had been nicknamed "the Italian" for that very reason. Bryan swallowed nervously. He told himself he should rather mind his tongue, or it would not remain long in its usual location.

At the same time, Cromwell decided that he would bring the news to Princess Alice. But somehow she managed to get them faster.

They talk about sending me to Italy", commented Alice while she walked in her personal garden with the minister. "Uncle George and Mother are writing right now to the Duke and the Duchess Renée. Can you imagine? Me, duchess of Ferrara and Modena? Oh, and Reggio, I almost forgot."

He smiled with indulgence before such excitement.

"Not so bad for your bastard daughter, don't you think? You must be very happy."

The smile immediately disappeared from Cromwell's face.

"I beg your pardon, princess?"

"Do not take me for a silly girl. I do not speak much, but it does not mean I am blind, nor deaf. I look into my mirror, and I listen when you speak with my mother. Then I only have to draw my conclusions. So, tell me I am wrong, now."

He shook his head. Lying would be useless.

"Why?"

She needed a son to keep her place, or at least her head, but the king's sons... never lived very long."

"Oh... I see. But it did not happen as planned, did it?"

"God alone decides, princess."

Alice raised an eyebrow.

"Do you really think that He has nothing better to do?"

He did not know what to answer then. Maybe it was indeed far too proud to believe that God kept an eye on his creatures' little lives. But Henry VIII's untimely death still looked to the minister as a sign of fate. At last, he asked the child the question that tormented him most :

"Are you angry with me, Princess?"

"When we are alone, you can just call me by my given name", she answered. "It is your right."

It was an indirect answer, but he took it for what it meant : his daughter accepted him. Alice went to sit on a bench and opened the book she had brought with her. The audience was finished, but as
Cromwell took his leave, he caught a glance of the child lifting a hand to her lips and blowing a kiss towards him.

##

*End of July*

While the preparations for Elizabeth's wedding went on and Anne exchanged one letter after the other with Renée of Ferrara, sad news came from Bavaria.

After nearly ten years of a happy marriage that had made many a princess envious, Mary Tudor had just become a widow, and the regent of her small German state for her eldest son Matthias, a boy of eight. Aware of the immense sorrow her sister must feel, Elizabeth rushed to her writing case as soon as she learnt of the Duke's death and wrote a lengthy letter to try – if only a bit – to comfort her. During the following week, the young queen sent more letters to ensure Mary of her support and offer her all the help she could provide.

Mary's answer came a month later, some days before Elizabeth took Charles of France for her husband. The duchess thanked her sister for her kindness, and would remember her promise for assistance, which Mary would certainly need as the regent of a country more or less controlled by the Habsburgs.

##

**10th of August, London**

Cranmer felt particularly proud. He had married the Queen's parents, had christened her, crowned her... and now he was going to celebrate her own wedding. How many archbishops could boast of so much? It would be the most beautiful and moving wedding ceremony England would ever see, he promised himself. With some luck, if he lived long enough, he would even christen the couple's children; who knew? Within some hours the Queen would enter the royal chapel and for Cranmer time could not fly fast enough.

##

For Elizabeth, the situation was quite different. She did not know where she stood anymore, torn between excitement and a certain fear of the unknown. She would spend her last evening as a maid with her sister and Lizzie Cromwell, and was doing her best to adopt a serene countenance.

"Does it not worry you to marry a man eleven years your senior?" asked Mrs Cromwell while they were chatting, sitting on cushions.

"Why should it? It is precisely the age gap between my parents", Elizabeth pointed. "And Duke Philip was thirteen years older than my sister Mary, which did not prevent them from being happy." *And my mother took for her lover a man seventeen years her senior, with excellent results.*

Lady Cromwell nodded and reached for a card game without another word. She had married a man three years younger than herself, an unusual combination, and had had four children, two daughters and two sons, from this union on the whole successful.

The ladies and Princess Alice took their leave early to allow the future bride to prepare herself for the ceremony with a good night of rest.

But one hour later, when everything was silent again, Alice came back in her sister's room, a candlestick in her hand. Both girls, wrapped in one of Elizabeth's travel coats, ran through the
corridors towards the room where the dress the Queen would wear on the next day was stored. Anne and the seamstresses had wished to surprise the bride, but she had decided again to act first. After avoiding two guards and a page coming back from the kitchens, they reached their target.

Alice and Elizabeth slithered in the room and rushed to lit all the candles they could find to admire the wonder. When they were done, a kind of soft shimmer illuminated the side of the room where the dress had been put on a wooden shape. Alice cast a look to the garment and knelt on the carpet. For such a silent girl, it was worth a whole speech. Elizabeth came closer to her dress with an incredulous smile. As was usual for royal brides, it had been cut into a heavy cloth-of-silver softly shining under the candlelight. The wide square collar was framed by a line of flowers made of pearls and diamonds, and the underskirt of pinkish-orange silk had been trimmed with gold lace. The costumer and the seamstresses had been wise enough to stop at that. Completed by the Crown jewels, the dress would be fastuous enough to make everyone forget Mary FitzTudor's, and would rather well matched with the blue and gold of the House of France that Charles would certainly wear.

The two girls traded a satisfied smile before going back to their rooms.

# #

11th of August, Whitehall

On the next morning, the young queen's mood was not inclined towards teenagers' mysteries any more. The beginning of the ceremony was growing closer and the bride was surrounded by a swarm of ladies-in-waiting and servants who laced her bodice, helped her to put on her shoes, adjusted the lace wrists of her shirt, checked the folds of her skirts... Elizabeth smiled nervously at her mirror. Her chambermaids had put some powder and rouge on her cheeks to hide her pallor, but it did not manage to make her look all right. She had not slept after her getaway with her sister. She had not eaten either, her stomach too tightly knotted to bear any food. She let Lizzie Cromwell put on the last touch: round emerald earrings, a heavy necklace with two rows of small clusters of pearls and square emeralds, and a brooch of the same stone, set right under the low neckline of her dress. Last, Lizzie fastened a diadem made of a thin golden net in the monarch's red hair.

"Et voilà" (Here we are), she said in a still slightly accented French.

Elizabeth nodded, then felt her friend slid something into her hand. She lowered her eyes and found some marzipan stuffed with candied fruits.

"It would really be a shame if you fainted during the ceremony, my lady..."

She nodded again and hurried to nibble on the confection.

# #

With a huge grin contrasting with the bride's serious face, Alice was holding her sister's train with the Suffolk ladies, Elizabeth Seymour-Cromwell and one of her Howard cousins. Of course, it was her sister's big day, but while the queen was reciting her marriage vows, the audience was eyeing the young women surrounding her, the royal princess first of all. Without entertaining any kind of lasting delusion regarding their chances of marrying the princess, the lords and courtiers allowed themselves to dream a little bit. Kate Howard, however, was still single and her family would certainly give her a lovely dowry on the day she married. This spirited young woman was a golden opportunity. Soon, the young queen's cousins and the Cromwell girls would make lovely matches as well.

When Cranmer finally delivered the nuptial blessing, the assembly broke into cheers.
The feast that followed was a lot less solemn and much more profane. Bawdy songs began to rise up as the guests emptied their cups, then the long trestle tables were pushed against the walls to clear the hall and allow the dancers to move without bumping into the furniture.

At last, around one in the morning, the newlywed were allowed to go to their room, under applauds and salacious comments.

##

In her nightshirt, Elizabeth cast one last glance at her mirror and pinched her cheeks to give them some colour. She must not be afraid. She was the Queen of England, and nothing should frighten her. She straightened up like a soldier in a parade, spun on her heels and left her wardrobe to enter her bedroom.

##

On the following morning, Elizabeth woke up with a grimace. She had cricks in places she would have never imagined... Yet the night had not been too unpleasant, just a bit uncomfortable at the beginning. No surprise there, Charles of Valois really knew his business. Marital duties should not be a chore for the young queen. Her husband had already left the royal chambers without making a sound, no doubt to celebrate his success with his friends.

The young woman stretched, making her joints crack. Dancing would be out of question for today. She needed a bath, a long, very hot bath to relax. She waved a hand to the servants waiting for her orders, and they rushed to prepare the queen's wooden tub. They had not gotten much sleep, if any, since they were supposed to keep a close eye on the proceedings of the wedding night, and Elizabeth knew that as soon as she left the bedroom, one of them would rush to display the sheets before the whole Court. That ritual disgusted her, but that way, no one would be able to contest the validity of the marriage.

While splashing around in her bath, the young woman thought about the best way to keep her husband busy while herself would take care of her country's matters. Officially, the monarch's consort did not have to interfere with political decisions, and nothing in the law pointed that it should be any different if said consort was a man.

##

During the following weeks, all kinds of small changes happened amongst the entourage of the newlyweds. In the prince's wake had come many French and Italian artists: painters, sculptors, musicians and masters-at-arms. The English Court was progressively looking more and more like the Val de Loire and the most fashionable courtiers prided themselves on learning Italian and taking on the dainty manners taught by those refined immigrants.

As for Charles, he had quite fallen in love with the English country. As most of the French princes, he loved hunting. He was able to go tracking harts, hares or foxes almost every day, and never missed an opportunity to have some fresh air, leaving all the administration of the realm to his queen and her councillors. However, he accomplished his marital duties regularly, his wife having proven just as energetic as himself. All was well.

Of course, it would not last.
The end of an era

Chapter Notes

Hello readers!

One chapter after this one, and the first part of this fanfiction will be finished. After that, I'll try and start on Elizabeth's reign, and maybe a third queen after her, if I still have some inspiration and will left.

I confess this chapter may be a little sad. It was certainly not easy to write.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Beginning of December, 1548

Even before Elizabeth's wedding, Thomas Cromwell had not been feeling well. He had more and more trouble working late and had been coughing for weeks. Not wishing to worry his family nor his queen, he had kept his problems to himself, and had not called for a doctor. Thus when Gregory realized that something had gone wrong, the illness had developed too much already to be treated efficiently.

# #

Winter came and brought no improvement to the minister's health; quite the opposite. He was coughing more than ever and sometimes even had troubles leaving his house to get to Whitehall.

Anne started to worry seriously about this illness. She insisted that Thomas leave a part of his responsibilities to Rich or Wriothesley. After what looked like a quarrel, he accepted and gave up a part of his participation to the royal council. But things did not change even after that. The minister had to delegate more and more work to Ralph Sadler and Gregory, who also partially assured Francis Walsingham's training. The boy still spent most of his time with Cromwell, though, and learnt eagerly the basis of politics. Seeing that even her mother could not make the minister see reason, Elizabeth decided to help her and sent the royal doctor to see the reluctant patient, with the express order from the monarch not to throw him out before he had finished his examination. Being careful, the young Queen wrote everything on a parchment that she marked with her personal seal.

Doctor Barnaby, who had replaced Butts at Court at the beginning of that year, thus visited the patient, though Cromwell could not stand doctors, and came back to the Queen-mother with a sad face.

"My lady, I fear that the news is not good. Lord Cromwell is too exhausted by the amount of work he forced on himself... Making him delegate was a good idea, but it came too late."

Anne gritted her teeth.

"Is there anything you could do, or is he lost?"

"It would be better to call for a priest, my lady."

She nodded silently, while musing it would be difficult to have the dying man confess. The list of his
wrongdoings was lengthy, and small chance that he would ever admit a priest in his rooms. She hesitated to visit him, but the page serving in the minister's chambers told her that he was neck-deep in his papers to try and put them into some order, and that he had also called for a clerk to clear out some points of his succession. He was not entertaining any delusion about his chances of survival... Anne suspected that he was deliberately burying himself in the subtleties of the law to keep her away. She chose not to go. She started to grow angry, however, when the two written messages she sent her minister remained without answer. It would have been easy to come and knock on Thomas' door to demand some explanations, but it would have meant taking the risk of being seen by a courtier, who would spread the news in less than an hour. Then again, she let her elder daughter act in her stead. You could not say no to the ruling Queen.

Cromwell finally gave up and let the three royal ladies come for a visit, not without protesting.

"My ladies, what can I do for you?"

"You do not have to do anything", Elizabeth said. "Rather, it is us who should be doing something for you. Can you at least accept that we are worried for you?"

A tired smile appeared on the minister's drawn face. He gestured to two armchairs where Anne and Elizabeth took place, while Alice sat at the foot of the bed.

"I can accept it, yes, but not so much that you would neglect your work. What would the realm do without its three good ladies?"

"Something silly", Elizabeth retorted at once. "Look at what happens when we let men rule a country. A war here, a bankruptcy there..."

"And you intend to do better, my lady?" Cromwell inquired with his usual snark.

"Of course. I had the proper teachers for that, don't you think?"

No one had anything to answer, and the little time the queens and the princess spent in the minister's room was filled with friendly trifles. What could you say when facing an impending death?

##

Three days before Christmas, a page from Cromwell's household bowed before the Queen-mother, his face seemingly made of stone.

"My lady... He went with God this past night."

"Bring me to him."

The page bowed and led her to the minister's chambers. Elizabeth and Alice were already waiting at the door, looking pale and drawn. Anne approved the restraint displayed by her second-born, though the child looked ready to scream or run away. The girls flanking their mother, the three women entered the room.

The doctor had put some order into the room. All his tools had disappeared, and Lord Cromwell was lying on his bed, dressed in his black velvet coat, his chain of office around his neck. It looked so unlike him that one could have believed that the body lying there was a wax model and not the minister's mortal remains. Anne quickly crossed herself, while all around her the servants began to mumble prayers. After some minutes, she pushed her daughters and the servants out, then closed the door behind them. With mechanical steps, she came back to the bed and knelt, her elbows on the blanket, and began to pray.
Suddenly, as if someone had cut the invisible threads keeping her up, she fell forward, her head hitting the sheets, and started to cry. She spent a long time that way, deaf and blind to the world around her.

Then she realized that the servants would be coming back to prepare their master for his last journey, and would see her thus, then would tell what they had seen, and the whole Court would know... Refusing to give the courtiers such an opportunity to gossip, Anne got up, left the room by the small hidden gallery that linked both chambers, and started to run towards her quarters, holding her skirts with both hands to go faster. Once she was safe behind her own door, she locked herself in her bedroom and sat in a corner, her knees folded against her chest.

"I am alone, alone, alone", Anne said, staring at the wall. "I will mourn him with all my soul. My great sorrow is that he will never know it. God, what a life..."

She spent the whole evening that way, sitting against the wooden panel under her window, without fire nor a single candle, shivering.

At first light the following morning, she crawled to her bed so that her chambermaids did not find her crumpled on the floor, and curled under her covers.

##

Gregory wanted to give his father a discreet burial and have him rest with his wife and two daughters. Anne could not object. The young man probably did not know about her and Thomas. And had he known, what would have he thought about the fluctuating relation his father had kept with the former Queen Regent? She would rather not know. She would not even be able to go in that small graveyard without attracting unwanted attention and questions. Thomas' nieces in particular were very strict Reformers, and the Queen-mother knew their opinion about relations out of wedlock, even between a long-time widow and a even longer-time widower. Unlike Jesus Christ, those ladies would not have forgiven the adulteress. It would be counterproductive to give them something to chew over. Anne would have to make herself nearly invisible if she wanted to pray at her old friend's grave. She could not even imagine how Alice could feel, when the child had acknowledged her relation to Thomas barely some months ago.

##

The princess did her best to hide her sorrow in front of the courtiers, but alone with her sister, she allowed herself to grieve, and the young Queen tried to cheer her up by telling her amusing anecdotes.

"What I like to remember," Elizabeth said on one evening her younger sibling was feeling particularly down, "is the day he shamed Uncle Charles in an archery contest. In front of the whole household, no less. Henry told me once, and his father was really furious. Our poor cousin got such a scolding!"

Alice giggled behind her sleeve. Everybody knew that the late Duke of Suffolk was excessively proud of his prowess with a bow. It was him who had insisted that the girls train in that noble sport with his son Henry, and they had both really enjoyed that present. They truly had a gift for hitting their targets.

##

January 1549
Once the modest New Year celebrations had ended, the Queen-mother progressively withdrew from Court life. She reduced the number of her ladies-in-waiting and stopped going to every single ball as she did before. She also gave her seat in the council to her son-in-law, and worked almost exclusively for the schools and hospitals she had created years ago.

At the end of January the wedding of Kathryn Howard and the Earl of Shrewsbury was celebrated in Whitehall. The first thing the groom did was to send his wife away from London, to his lands, to learn the management of the family domains... and get her away from all the seducers swarming around her. The earl was a good-natured fellow, but he was also a dangerous swordsman, and it was better not to give him a pretext for starting a duel.

The feast was a poor one. Queen Anne did not appear at the wedding, though the bride was her cousin, and Princess Alice did not come either, even though Kathryn had served her during two years as lady-in-waiting. Queen Elizabeth, however, led the revelry with her husband, smiling and cheerful, though she knew that all the lords of the kingdom were staring at her to find out whether she was already pregnant or not.

The wisest courtiers considered that the old Court had just ended, and the new one was finally going to take over.

Chapter End Notes

I've just found this gem:
https://www.themarysue.com/ao3-hugo-award-nominations/
The Old Guard Surrenders

May 1551, Dover

One of the doctors in town was eyeing his newest patient with worry. The man was shivering, said he could not breathe properly and, according to his wife, had been plagued for a whole day by sudden panic attacks. After gathering some information to make sure the patient had not, for instance, any trouble with the authorities or with the headhunters for the local coast-guards, the doctor began to wonder if that old sweating sickness was not making another appearance in the country. He recorded the facts in his register, then wrote some colleagues to inquire about similar cases in their districts.

Mail was circulating slowly and he only received the desired answers after the issue had been proved, and a persistent rumour now whispered of several suspicious cases.

As summer started, the dreaded news were confirmed. The sweating sickness had come back. The epidemic had started near Dover, then had gone back up the Thames to London and from there, had spread in the whole country without sparing the Court.

##

July 1551, London

As soon as people began to talk about an epidemic of sweating sickness, many wealthy Londoners sent their families to the country in order to breathe some fresher air. Gregory Cromwell was no exception: he sent his pregnant wife and their four children to Launde Abbey. However, he remained in the city. He was only working occasionally in the family trade and his charges at Court were lighter than his father's but he considered as his duty to remain.

At mid-July, the first cases were reported within Whitehall.

The Court learnt it on the following day: the Queen had caught the disease. Her mother and the doctors were not leaving her bedside.

For four days the city - and by extension all England - remained waiting and praying. Then, at last, the royal doctors announced that Elizabeth was safe, but she would have to remain bed-ridden for at least two weeks to ensure a proper recovery. The Dowager Queen, however, had also caught the sweating sickness while taking care of her daughter. She had already survived the disease once, but it had been nearly thirty years prior, and meanwhile Anne Boleyn had ruined her health ruling the realm. So the courtiers were rather surprised when she left her rooms a week later, undoubtedly much thinner, but definitely not dead.

And while her daughter finished her convalescence, the Queen-mother took control of the kingdom again for some time, having to manage, amongst other things, some problems of public relations.

"I think we should not make the news public, but the Queen was pregnant", the royal doctor explained, lowering his voice. "The fever and her weakened state caused the loss of her child."

Anne hid her face in her hands.
"The pregnancy was roughly three months old. I cannot say if we lost a prince or a princess."

"Does she know?"

The man shook his head.

"Then tell her nothing."

Elizabeth had already lost one child during the previous year, in the first half of her pregnancy, nobody knowing exactly why. She had been healthy, then, and nothing could have foretold that end.

##

When the epidemic ended at last two months later, it had devastated the "old guard", and few remained from King Henry's Court. The first death to reach Anne's ears was Anthony Knivert's. The old knight had not resisted the illness long. Lady Bridget remained alone with three children, the eldest of which was barely thirteen. Anne wrote her to invite her and her family to Hampton and try to entertain them all. Bridget accepted gladly to leave the countryside and arrived two weeks after receiving the queen-mother's letter. Elizabeth and Alice were delighted to have some companions closer to their age.

The Sweating Sickness had also taken Jane Parker. George Boleyn's former wife had followed the Queen's advice, had not remarried, and had settled in the manor George had been forced to give her in Kent, where she had lived in a way that the most polite people would describe as eccentric.

Wriothesley and Gardiner, the two demons of Anne's regency, had disappeared as well.

Suffolk's two sons had both died within a handful of days, leaving their elder sister Frances and her husband to inherit the title and the duchy. The new duchess did not mourn her brothers very long, ambitious as she was.

##

A few days later, Lizzie Cromwell came back from her stay in Launde Abbey, having lost a lot of weight but still pregnant. And once again dressed in black from head to toe, like the day she had first taken her service with the Queen. Anne felt her heart clench when she saw her friend looking so broken.

"Who..?"

"He left me alone", Elizabeth stammered, "he left me all alone..."

before falling on her knees on the carpet, crying.

Anne understood that this time, Gregory had not escaped the disease – he had in fact died on the 4th of July. In order to help the grieving widow to face all the inheritance issues caused by Baron Cromwell's death, the queen-mother sent her one of her own lawyers, as well as a doctor.

In November, poor Lizzie gave birth to a boy, named Thomas for his grandfather, then the whole family went back to Leeds Castle, a residence that Cromwell had once bought for his son and daughter-in-law.

##

If Lizzie Cromwell managed to find some joy with her children and her numerous nephews and
nieces that her sister Jane regularly brought to Leeds, the same could not be said for the Queen-
mother. Of all the little troop that surrounded her at her beginnings at Court, only Thomas Cranmer
and her cousins Madge Shelton and Henry Howard remained. All the others, Francis Bryan being
the last one to depart, were dead. And she knew she would join them soon.

Anne entertained no delusion about her chances of survival. The disease had not killed her, but had
weakened her body so much that she could not remain amongst the living for long. On one evening,
sitting in front of her mirror, she observed herself closely. Twenty years earlier, she would have
never thought she would one day see white strands in her hair. They showed against the dark brown
of her locks like the Howard long nose on Elizabeth's face. She had never imagined she would grow
old, she realized with sadness. Not that she was proud enough to believe that time would spare her,
but she had just convinced herself that she would die before discovering the first wrinkles on her
face. Being married to Henry Tudor could do that to you...

Anne patted the side of the mirror, then went to her desk, took a quill and some paper, and began to
write her will.

##

21st of March 1552, Whitehall

After a very long day spent at the Queen and Prince Consort's side to meet ambassadors from Venice
and the Netherlands, the Queen-mother felt tired, really tired. She resisted sleep in order to write a
letter that she wished to be sent after her death. After some minutes, she set the quill back on her
desk. Her letter was finished.

It was time she got some sleep.

##

On the following morning, the lady-in-waiting that came to wake her hastily took three steps back
after she touched the old Queen's cold hand. She quickly crossed herself, then ran towards
Elizabeth's chambers.

##

Anne had specified that she refused to be buried beside the king, and neither with her father in
Hever. Elizabeth decided nonetheless to give her the honours of Westminster, but in a grave far away
from Henry VIII Tudor's and close to the place the ruling Queen had chosen for herself. The effigy
showed her wearing the dress of her coronation, her crown on her head, the orb laid at her feet and
the sceptre in her right hand. The sculptor had individualized the statue by adding around her neck
the well-known pearl necklace and its golden "B" that Queen Anne had worn before her marriage.

##

Mid-April 1552, Leuven

Though he had definitely retired from diplomacy, Eustache Chapuys never lacked for news of the
outside world, and an impressive amount of mail was always piling upon his desk.

On that day, at the top of the pile, he found a letter from England. Who would write him? Since
Gardiner's death on the previous year, nobody English would send him mail. That bitch Boleyn, may
the Devil have her soul, had made sure of it.

He unsealed the letter and began to read. He first believed it to be a joke. The message was not very
long, traced in a neat, small writing.

Monsieur Chapuys,

I do not doubt that when you receive this letter, you will have already learnt of my death.

You will surely be disappointed to learn that no appointed assassin from the Vatican caused it. I simply caught ill and my age did not allow me to recover. I finally became the « old thin woman » that you described fifteen years ago.

I do not think you should find any joy in it.

Despite all your efforts, I led the regency to its term, and my daughter is now Queen of England, and married to a French prince. Lady Mary became the very happy Duchess of Bavaria rather than a lonely queen cloistered in some palace in Spain. England, France, the German princes and the United Provinces are bound by a strong alliance. Your master cannot threaten one of them without facing the others.

And last, and it is certainly what makes me particularly proud, people in my country can pray as they like without risking their lives.

I wish you, Monsieur Chapuys, a pleasant retirement.

Anne, the queen

Addendum : we will not meet again in Hell...

Chapuys crumpled the letter in a tight ball and threw it at the other end of the room. Even in death, the Boleyn woman was able to exasperate him.

Chapter End Notes

And that's all folks!
Thanks a LOT for all the comments and kudos, making this story my most successful on AO3 so far ♥

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!