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The Queen's Choice

Written by Anne O'Brien

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The Queen's Choice

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Chapter 1



October 1396: the town of Ardres, near Calais

It was to be the day, although I did not know it when my women confined my hair to a jewelled caul and coronet, my feet to gilded-toed shoes, and all in between to layers of fine linen, silk damask and fur.

It was to be the day that my life tilted on its even keel; the day that my ordered existence warped, as a tapestry, ill-formed in the hands of a careless Arras weaver, would stretch immoderately in the damp of winter. I had one such in my audience chamber at the Château of Vannes, until I dispatched it, ruined, to some distant storeroom. On this day it was as if some power had disturbed an exact balance that throughout my life had been secure and unquestioned.

It was the day that I met Henry, Earl of Derby.

Not that I had any presentiment of such meddling in what fate, my father and my husband had decreed for me.

Nor did I look for such turbulence in my life, for I lived in placid luxury, always predictable, sometimes dull, but never less than harmonious. My life demanded no emotional response from me, rather a practical acceptance of my role as wife, mother, ducal consort. Indeed my whole life had been one of acceptance. I was particularly good at it. I was nobly born, twenty-eight years old, and had been Duchess of Brittany for ten of them. But on that bright morning, my thoughts occupied far from any intrusive dabbling, all was overset.

'What do you think?'

A soft voice in my ear managed to pierce the snap and flap of canvas of the dozens of pavilions, a huge encampment constructed for the occasion. The voice of John de Montfort, my husband, the fifth Duke of Brittany.

'Poor mite. It's no age to be wed,' I whispered back. I would not wish for one of my daughters to be wed at so tender an age, but dynastic marriages demanded sacrifice. My mother, undoubtedly a sacrifice in her union with my father, had been wed at eight years.

'He'll only get her allegiance.' John frowned at the charming scene where the bridegroom kissed the cheek of his child-bride. 'Not her body.'

'So I should hope.'

I smiled.

I liked weddings. Such an opportunity to reunite with family and friends, and erstwhile enemies too, without the prospect of drawn swords or blows traded in the aftermath of too many toasts to the happy couple. Although, I considered as the two puissant kings, one of England, the other of France,

drew close to exchange the desired kiss of peace, that could not always be guaranteed. I remembered occasions when good manners had drowned in a pot of ale almost before the marriage vows had been taken.

But not today. Today, we had been assured, would be a day of good omen. We all knelt in a gleaming shiver of silk and satin as Richard of England and Charles of France clasped hands and beamed their goodwill.

I particularly like French weddings, with the wealth of aunts and uncles and a fistful of cousins here for me to enjoy, for through my mother's blood I was a Valois princess. And now that the greatest blot on the political landscape, my father, no longer defiled this earth with his presence, there was no need for me to hold my breath as I had as a young girl. My father was dead, and had been for almost ten years. He and his vile temper and even viler habits would not be missed.

My father, of atrocious repute, had been King of Navarre, that prestigious little kingdom which bordered with France and English possessions to the south, and so was much desired in alliance. But it was my mother, daughter of the Valois King John the Good, who gave me my true rank. King Charles the Sixth of France was my first cousin, the Dukes of Berry and Burgundy my uncles. I could claim cousinship with every man or woman at the Valois Court of France. Every man or woman who mattered in the politics of Europe. I had been raised to know my worth.

'I see that Charles is in his right mind,' I observed, my eyes lowered in deepest respect for this royal cousin who was acknowledged as mad and could become violent in the

blink of an eye. 'I expect the whole Court has been offering up novenas to St Jude.'

'Ha! It would take more than a petition to lost causes. I wager it would take a full Requiem Mass to guarantee Charles's sanity for more than a day at a time,' my husband replied.

We were here for a momentous alliance that might bring some vestige of peace to our troubled lands. And there he was, the bridegroom, tall and resplendent in red, smiling and gracious, luminous with satisfaction. We had heard that it was not altogether a popular move across the sea, a French woman to be crowned Queen of England, but the English King would have his way. King Richard the Second, a widower, was in need of a wife and an heir. A country was precarious without heirs, and here I could admit to my own smugness. I came from fertile stock, with six stalwart children of my own, four of them sons to safeguard the inheritance of Brittany. I had every reason to enjoy my own achievements. Was family not everything?

We rose to our feet, my husband's hand beneath my arm, allowing me the time to cast an eye over the bride, this child Isabelle who was still four weeks from her seventh birthday. I did not fear for her. She would be given all the time she needed to grow up before she must become a wife.

'He will care for her.'

I turned to the owner of the voice who had echoed my thoughts, John, solid in dark velvet, as handily at ease in silk and fur and jewelled rings as he was in armour. My lord was given to opulence when the occasion demanded it.

'He looks at her as if she were a present wrapped in gold,'

I said. The bride giggled as Richard bent again to kiss her cheek. 'Do you think it will bring an end to the conflict?'

'King Richard does not have a name for warfare,' John said, and in truth the rancorous relations between England and France had settled a little since Richard had taken the throne. 'He's not of a mind to pursue English claims in France, lost by Edward, the old King.'

And there the discussion of rights and wrongs, of who should wear the Crown of France ended, as the royal families moved towards the dais. The crowds milled. The musicians and minstrels puffed and blew with enthusiastic disharmony. Platters of food and vessels of wine were produced. I sighed a little.

'Do you wish to go? I can arrange for you to retire.'

John's hand was again solicitously on my arm, for I was carrying another child. No one would notice—there was no need yet for my sempstresses to loosen the stitching of my bodice—but John had a protective care for me and I covered his hand with mine.

'Certainly not.'

John, wisely, did not waste his breath in argument. 'Then if you are feeling robust, my love, come and meet a family for whom I have the greatest affection.'

John set about forcing a path, the bejewelled crowd parting before his impressive figure like the Red Sea before Moses. We were heading, I realised, towards the English contingent that had accompanied their King, now standing in an elegant little group to one side of the dais. Superbly dressed, superbly self-aware as they viewed the proceedings, they were here to honour the event and be gracious. I did not know them.

'John of Lancaster. The King's uncle.' My husband, coming to my rescue, shepherded me between two gesticulating parties, Burgundian by their accent. 'An interesting family and a powerful one. They make good friends and bad enemies. They're not without a little pride and their blood is more royal than most.' He looked back at me over his shoulder with a speculative gleam. 'Much like you. I think you will like them.'

Which allowed me in the few seconds left to me to claw through my knowledge of this illustrious grouping. For this was an important family: a family of the highest rank, a family worthy of my own status. Duke John of Lancaster, royal uncle to the King of England. His new wife Katherine, a woman of some scandals before marriage made her respectable. And with them a cluster of young men and women of their family and household, wearing conspicuous livery collars that bore the emblem of the white hart, the showiness of the enamelled gold at odds with the understated costliness of their robes. Clearly a gift from King Richard on this momentous day that they were unable to refuse.

Lancaster's face lit with pleasure when his eye fell on my husband, and rather than a formal handclasp, they embraced, two men who wielded power with utmost confidence in their right to do so, two men of an age although it seemed to me that my husband was carrying his years more easily than Lancaster. There was no reticence in the welcome.

'I hoped I would see you,' Lancaster said after some male shoulder-smacking.

'My wife would not allow me to stay away,' John replied, drawing me forward.

The introductions were made and I was drawn into the Lancaster circle, to talk with Duchess Katherine while Lancaster and my husband relived their youth, their boyhood rivalry and their military exploits when fighting together in France.

'I first recall your husband at Court when King Edward made him a Knight of the Garter,' the Duchess said. 'He enjoyed every minute of the pomp and pageantry.'

'Now, why am I not surprised?'

I turned my head to watch him with a certain pride, admiring his present flamboyance in managing the folds of a Court houppelande that swept the floor with hem and dagged sleeve. Many, who did not know us, would think him to be my father. There were twenty-eight years between us, all well lived by John through war and diplomacy.

'We are being summoned,' the Duchess remarked as Richard raised an imperious hand. 'We are to formally meet the bride.' And as the Lancaster family regrouped and approached the dais with suitable obeisance, I was left with John to watch the little ceremony develop.

'They were the strongest friends I ever had in England,' he said, 'when I was sorely in need of friends. I wonder where Lancaster's son is…?' As he turned his head, a man garbed in blue and white emerged from the crowd. 'Ah. There you are. I thought you'd made a bolt for it,' John observed with friendly cynicism.

'You're not far short of it. The temptation is strong. But, as you see, I am royally imprinted for the occasion, making me noticeable in any crowd.'

The voice was light-timbred, pleasant on the ear, with

a hint of humour beneath an impatience as he slapped his palm onto the arresting white hart on his breast. Then as he clasped hands with John, the man's gaze rested on me. 'And this must be your incomparable Duchess, of whom I have heard much but whom I have yet to meet. I am honoured.'

A tall man with a swordsman's shoulders and the mark of his father in his dark hair, uncovered now, kissed with autumn in the bright sunshine. His eyes were dark, direct and agate-bright.

I began to smile my appreciation of his flattery as I felt the weight of that gaze. I felt the authority of his soldierly presence. I felt a sense of him deep within me, a sense that continued to reverberate like the solemn tone of the passing bell in the Cathedral at Nantes. Unaccountably, for I was not inexperienced in the demands of polite conversation, I was at a loss for a response.

'This is Joanna,' John was saying whilst I grasped at good manners. 'Who rules my household with a rod of iron but a velvet glove and sleeve. Don't be fooled for one minute by this frivolity.' He lifted the gold-stitched fullness of one of my over-sleeves in wry acknowledgement. 'And this, my love, is Henry Bolingbroke, Earl of Derby. Lancaster's heir.'

I extended my hand as if this introduction was nothing more than a commonplace between members of one high-bred family and another, as I ignored the fact that my heart had given a little leap, as if it had recognised the imminence of something long yearned for. This was so far beyond my experience that I resented it. No man, however puissant his family, had the right to disturb me beyond my habitual poise.

'My lord Henry,' I murmured.

'Lady Joanna.'

His fingers, heavy with rings, were light around mine, the salute against my cheek such as might be exchanged between a man and woman meeting for the first time, but that formal embrace stiffened the planes of my face, seizing my pulses to set them alive. And as I sought for some comment suitable to the occasion, John's attention was claimed by my uncle of Burgundy, leaving me to take up the reins of prudent conversation.

I inhaled steadily, confidence restored. I had been conversing through the courts of Europe since before I had reached my twentieth year. Any strange imaginings were a product of the heat of the day, the weight of the fur at hem and neck and insufficient sleep in the closet that was called a chamber. I smiled with regal grace as the Earl restored my hand to me.

'My husband was pleased to meet with your father again,' I said.

But instead of responding in kind, he asked abruptly, 'Are you enjoying this?' He gestured with his arm to the royal party, as if it were a question that needed to be asked.

'Yes. Certainly I am.' It could be tedious with much posturing, certainly overlong, but what was there not to like?

'I can't imagine why.' The Earl's reply could have been presumed sour.

'Because I have enough relatives here to fill, and indeed overflow, one of these vulgarly glittering pavilions,' I said. 'I enjoy gossip.'

'You'll not be disappointed then. There's plenty to gossip about.' A frown was directed towards his royal cousin who

was still addressing King Charles with expansive animation. 'They say it has cost our illustrious King not far short of two hundred thousand pounds to stage this spectacle.'

I could not understand why the cost should trouble him. Given the quality of his raiment, a Court houppelande brilliant with spangles, sweeping down to his soft boots, and the size of the jewels in his rings, the House of Lancaster was not without wealth.

'Is the bride not worth the expenditure?' I asked.

'Is any bride worth it?' Earl Henry responded smartly. 'The English Exchequer will barely stand the cost. Besides, it's not the bride Richard seeks to honour. He'll make such a spectacle that no one will ever forget His Gracious Majesty King Richard the Second, condescending to take a French bride. No one is ever at the forefront of Richard's mind except Richard.'

No one could mistake the sardonic overtones, and not spoken softly. I thought it not wise, given the company, and risked a glance over my shoulder to guard against eavesdroppers. A quick movement that Earl Henry noted, with a frown, as if I had accused him of a wilful indiscretion. Which, of course, it was.

'There's no one to hear, or I wouldn't have said it.'

'There's me.' His observation had amused me. Shocked me.

A glimmer of a smile lightened the severe features, smoothing the indented corners of his mouth. 'You will think me too harsh. But you seem to me a woman of great common sense. Extravagance is a sin when a state lacks gold in its coffers. Do you not agree?'

'Certainly. As we know in Brittany.' I paused, then because

we seemed to have dived headlong into a stream of personal comment: 'But you are very judgemental, sir, against a man who is not only your King but also your cousin.'

'Forgive me.' He grimaced slightly, before allowing another more expansive smile. 'This is supposed to be a day of celebration. There's no reason to inflict my particular brand of disillusion on you, Madam Joanna. Will you forgive what must seem to you to be a nasty case of envy?'

'Yes.'

I said it without hesitation.

'Well that's got the introductions over with. What—or should I say whom, since you have a mind for gossip—shall we discuss now?'

I liked him. I liked his candour. As I allowed myself to acknowledge this, we found our attention once more drawn towards the royal tableau on the dais.

'Shouldn't you be with your family?' I asked.

'Richard won't miss me.' There again, the edge had crept back into his voice; the cynicism darkening his eye. 'Look at him, wringing every drop of glamour from this alliance. That's not to say that he will not do well by his bride. He will dress her in silk, laden her with jewels and treat her as she treats her dolls. She will be his little sister.' His mouth twisted. 'Perhaps he'll not allow her to keep all the jewels in her dowry. He'll wear most of them himself. Richard likes to glitter when in company.'

The bride had a collar of rubies that almost out-weighed her.

Aware of the sudden silence beside me, I turned to look, to see that Earl Henry was regarding the King of England,

and in the muscles of his jaw and the brilliance of his eye, I thought I read not so much displeasure at Richard's unwise open-handedness but a very personal dislike.

'You don't like him, do you?' I said before I could think of the wisdom of such an observation.

'Liking is too facile an emotion for my relationship with Richard. He is my King and my cousin. I am duty-bound to be loyal.' My companion's spine stiffened a little, words and expression immediately shuttered like a storm candle, obscuring the light. And I was sorry. I liked his honesty rather than the discreet presence bred in him by his father. I liked his smile, rather than the present grim demeanour. Perhaps I could entice him back into this intriguing view of the English King.

'You can admit to not liking him,' I said softly. 'Certainly in my company. I didn't like my father at all.'

Earl Henry's eyes gleamed with appreciation until suave diplomacy once more invested his features. 'I dare to surmise, Madam, that no one liked your august father.'

'It would be beyond the powers of any normal human to view my father with anything but disgust. My father was accused of every sin from poisoning to sorcery with a deal of blood-letting in between. And I expect he was guilty of all of it.' What point in being circumspect? 'Hence Charles the Bad. Charles the *very* Bad!' And when my companion's brows arched expressively, I continued: 'I say only what everyone here knows. There was much rejoicing at his death even if not for the manner of it, although many expressed the opinion that it was a well-deserved foretaste of the fires of Hell.' My father had been consumed in a conflagration in his bed

when the bandages he wore, soaked in brandy against some sweating disease, had been set alight by a careless servant with a candle. 'Why don't you like your cousin?'

Earl Henry slid a speculative glance but his response was smooth and I felt that he was restoring us to the realms of polite discourse. 'A mere memory of youthful frictions. Richard and I were raised together, and not always amicably, I suppose because our tastes and interests are vastly different. Richard is the most inept wielder of a sword that I know. There you are. Nothing more and nothing less than childhood conflicts. You might say that I should have grown beyond such trivial grievances.'

'I would not be so indiscreet as to say any such thing, sir.'

I did not believe him. There was a stern brooding involved here, but our acquaintance was so transient that I must allow his diversion, however much I might like to discover more.

'No. I don't suppose you would,' he replied, lightly now. 'Not only a lady of common sense but one of great discernment, I think. And of considerable presence. Duke John is a fortunate man to have a wife who is as handsome in character as she is in person.'

I wondered if he was guilty of a soft mockery at my expense, for I had never been considered a great beauty, even when touched with the kind hand of youth, and so I challenged him, my brows a little raised, but he met my provocation directly and held it. Once again I experienced that uncomfortable little jump of my heartbeat; a warmth spreading beneath my bodice as if a flame had been lit.

And I was intrigued. There was no mockery in his steady regard. Instead there was a curious arrest, almost a bafflement

as if some unexpected emotion had intruded on our innocuous exchange of opinion. Even the air felt heavy with portent. His lips parted as if he would express what was occupying his thoughts.

Then it was gone, the moment broken, the tension that held us falling away, so that the air settled quietly around us again, as my husband, abandoned by Burgundy, rested a hand on Earl Henry's shoulder, and I was left to wonder if I had imagined the whole episode as John observed: 'You were a child when I saw you last. And here you are, Earl of Derby, with a reputation as an expert jouster.' His eye twinkled. 'How old were you? Ten?'

'About that. And I remember, sir.' Earl Henry was at ease again, and whatever he had been about to say was lost for ever. 'You gave me a hunting knife when we rode out at Windsor and I had lost mine. I still have your gift. It has a fine engraved blade. If I recall, I didn't let it out of my sight for months.'

John laughed. 'You'll do your father proud. It's good to have an heir. Richard will have a long time to wait for his bride to grow up and bear him a son.'

Once again we inspected the group on the dais where Richard spoke gravely to King Charles, who looked mildly interested, and Isabelle threaded her fingers through the gems on her girdle.

'Do you stay for the whole of the celebrations?' Earl Henry asked.

'Unfortunately, yes. My wife will not allow it to be otherwise.'

With promises to meet again, we prepared to follow the

royal party, Earl Henry saluting my fingers with a chivalric grace worthy of the most famous of troubadours.

'Thank you for your discretion, my lady.'

'It is my pleasure, my lord.'

'And what was that about?' John asked as Earl Henry threaded his way to his father's side.

'I have promised to keep secret the fact that Earl Henry detests his royal cousin,' I replied, following his progress, struck again by the unconscious grace.

'I expect King Richard knows it full well,' John growled. 'We'll do well to keep out of English politics, for our own health. And particularly out of the sphere of that young man. As your uncle of Burgundy was kind enough to advise, although why he should think that I cannot judge the matter for myself I have no idea. Who knows more about treachery than I? Burgundy says to steer clear.'

'Did he?' I was surprised.

'He considers the Earl of Derby to be a dangerous firebrand. There is already the taint of treason about him. He raised arms against Richard ten years ago.' John eased his shoulders beneath the weight of bullion. 'I see no danger but we will keep our friendship warm but appropriately circumspect.'

It was a warning but softly given and not one I needed. I had no intention of becoming involved. As for Henry, Earl of Derby, ours was a mere passing acquaintance. A friendship. An opportunity to give open and honest exchange of opinion, where neither of us needed to be circumspect. That was trust. Was that not the essence of friendship?

But then I recalled that first brilliant moment of

awareness. Something, some close link, like those in the Earl's glittering livery chain, had scattered my thoughts like the stars in the heavens, nudging into life a longing I could not recognise. It disquieted me, unnerved me. How could it be that I could trust a man within a handful of minutes of my setting eyes on him? I was certainly not given to immoderate confidences.

And he stayed in my mind as I retired to our cramped chamber to rest my ankles that, in these early days of my pregnancy, had a tendency to swell in the heat. With soothing cloths soaked in a tincture of red wine and cinquefoil, my hair loosed from its confines, I lay back against the pillows and had no difficulty at all in summoning the Lancaster heir into my presence. The fan of lines at the corner of his eyes that had smiled so readily, when not shadowed and sombre. The flare of passion when he had admitted his dislike of his King, even if one born out of childhood antipathy. The austere nose, a mark of all the Lancasters, that spoke of command. The agile carriage, albeit swathed in fragile cloth, of a man of action. Instinctively I knew that the extravagantly ringed hands could wield a sword and manage reins with force and skill. And as for the pride, it infiltrated his every movement, every turn of his head. He too knew his own value as a scion of the Plantagenets, raised into it by a powerful father, the most influential of the sons of old King Edward.

'This is inappropriate, for a married women who is content with her situation,' I announced aloud, dismayed by the detail of my recollection. 'And one who is carrying a child. He is nothing to you.'

Yet the sense of distress would not leave me. And the little

punch of guilt. Engaged in a marriage not of my choosing to a man certainly of advanced age, I had discovered through this marriage, and to my delight, an unexpected blessing. John had given me his friendship and a deep respect that proved to be mutual, as was the firm affection that underpinned our life together as the years passed and our children were conceived. I could not have hoped for a better mate when, through necessity as a child of a royal family intent on building powerful alliances, I had been placed in this marriage with the Duke of Brittany.

Did I know love in my marriage? No. Not if love was the emotion of which our minstrels sang, extolling the heating of blood and heart so that the loved one was essential to the drawing of breath. For John I experienced a warm acceptance of all he was to me, but I was not dependent on him for every moment of happiness. Nor was I a necessity for him. We were content together but distance, when John travelled to the far reaches of his domains, did not destroy us.

Henry of Derby, in the space of that brief meeting, had forced me to consider an entirely new landscape.

'What is it, my lady?' Marie de Parency, the most intimate of my Breton ladies-in-waiting, was instantly at hand, always watchful for my needs.

I shook my head, sighing as I stretched on my bed, trying for comfort as my ankles throbbed. 'Hand me my rosary, Marie. I have need of a self-inflicted penance.'

A small flame that had been lit in some far recess still flickered, but of course it had not been lit for him. Earl Henry had been blessed with true love with his wife, now sadly departed this life. I closed my eyes as I spread my hands on

my belly where the child grew, confident in the knowledge that my own strange discomforts would soon vanish.

Early pregnancy made a woman overly imaginative.

★

A grand hunt brought to conclusion the wedding of Richard and Isabelle. We made a combined party, it becoming evident that the Lancaster family was as fiercely keen on hunting as we were in Brittany. An occasion of much laughter and chatter, of reminiscence and proposals for future meetings. My pregnancy offering no hindrance to my participation, when we halted in a clearing in the woodland to draw breath, I found myself in the close company of Earl Henry.

I had been aware of him, riding in the forefront, from the moment the royal huntsman had given us the office to start, and I had seen enough of him to know that he was a peerless proponent of the sport. Not that I had watched him, of course. Riding at a more sedate pace, not always of my own choosing, beside Duchess Katherine, I had made the most of the opportunity to darn the holes in my knowledge of this family.

Now it was Earl Henry who manoeuvred his horse to my side while I determined to keep him at an amicable distance. I noticed that he had dispensed with the white hart on his gold livery collar.

'I see you number horsemanship amongst your many talents, Madam Joanna.'

'As you have a silken tongue amongst yours, sir,' I replied smartly. 'This wretched animal, lent to me by my uncle of Burgundy, has barely extended herself out of a slow trot.'

He smiled at me. And I smiled back.

And there was that same intensity that had unsettled me on the previous day. A sense of closeness, of keen understanding. More than that. Like the click of a key turning in the lock of a jewel coffer so that all the intricate parts slid smoothly together as if our acquaintance was of long-standing. Why should I resist? Why should I not take him as my friend? I had few outside my immediate family. The household in which I had been raised in Navarre, redolent with suspicion and vicious deeds, had not encouraged friendship. I would enjoy what this man had to offer me, and it would be no sin.

This thought in your mind is not friendship, a whisper in my mind. *Don't pretend that it is. This is entirely different. Have a care.*

Wary now, even dismayed, I hid it behind a light smile and even lighter remark.

'That is a fine falcon you have, my lord.'

The Earl reached across to take the bird from his falconer, removing her hood, then one of his gauntlets so that he could run his hand affectionately over her head and wings. The finely marked bird bobbed her head and shook out her pinions.

'She is beautiful,' he agreed, indulgently possessive. 'She was bred from my own birds at Hertford. She is inordinately partial to chicken, when she can get it.'

'Extravagant!'

'If she is worth her value to me, then it behoves me to feed her well.'

I stroked the feathers of her neck, admiring the fervour of this man in his appreciation for his hunting hawk. 'What will you do after this gathering, my lord? I hear you have

been on Crusade.' Having discovered as much from Duchess Katherine.

'And I might again,' the Earl was replying as, with dexterous fingers, one-handed, he re-hooded the falcon. 'I have a desire to return to Jerusalem. To stand before the Holy Sepulchre and experience God's infinite grace. But I'm more like to go back to England. To see my own children, to take over some of the administration of the Lancaster estates. I have two young daughters as well as four sons to raise. The boys are as strong and active as a small herd of hill ponies. I think you have sons. You'll know what I mean.'

His enthusiasm was compulsive. 'Indeed I do.'

'And then…'

Gravity descended, like an obscuring shadow. I considered it to be born of a concern long held, some bone of contention long debated. I saw it in John when he broached some intricate matter of business, most often Breton trade disputes with our mercantile neighbours.

'Is there a problem for you at home, sir?'

Handing the falcon to John who, approaching, was eyeing the bird with some envy, Earl Henry considered for a moment, then replied with striking frankness:

'I have a need to return. Sometimes it seems to me that my position in England is under a subtle duress. I am being pushed to the margins of political life. Positions and dignities are given elsewhere. My cousin Edward of York is preferred before me, even though as heir to Lancaster my supremacy is unquestionable.'

So here was pride again. And rightly so. With the death of two of King Edward's sons, Edward of Woodstock and

Lionel, Duke of Clarence, the Lancaster heirs with their true male line were foremost in the land after the King Richard. As I had suspected, the hostility between Earl Henry and King Richard, first cousins though they might be, was not merely a remnant of childhood tussles in the mud.

'Richard fears me,' the Earl said, the line between his brows dug deep. 'I dare not be absent from England any longer. It might give our King the opportunity to find some means of casting a pall of disgrace over my family. That must not be. My father is ageing. The duty is mine to protect and hold fast to what we have, and fight for what we should have.'

'Why would he fear you?' I asked bluntly. 'Do you threaten him?'

'It has to be said that I did,' the Earl admitted. 'In my youth I was one of the five Lords Appellant who forced Richard to rule more circumspectly after we removed his favourite de Vere from the scene. A decade ago now, but it will rankle still. Richard hadn't the strength to oppose us then, but he has never forgiven us.'

Which explained a lot. 'Hardly the basis for a sound friendship.'

'As you say. Although why I am burdening you with this, on a fine hunting day, I have no clear idea.'

'Because I can be a good listener,' I said.

He looked at me, eyes as incisively watchful as those of the hawk on John's fist, but there was a smile there too.

'So that's why I've been lured into this eddy of self-pity. Would you tell me that all is lost, between Lancaster and the King?'

I thought about it as my mare tossed her head, deceptively

eager to be on the move. 'I think you could well redeem yourself. I think you should…' I stopped. I was in no position to give him advice. He would find me intrusive at best, unjustified at worst.

Earl Henry tilted his head. 'Do you advise your husband in matters of government?'

'Most certainly I do.'

'Does he accept it?'

I thought about this. 'Sometimes.' And paused under John's sudden acerbic scrutiny. 'Often.'

'Almost always,' John added from behind my shoulder. 'I would not dare do otherwise. She has a rare talent for seeing the smoothest road between two irreconcilable parties. I'd take her advice if I were you.'

He rode off, still in possession of the hawk, leaving me to collect my composure.

'Then tell me, Madam Joanna. What should I do?'

'You should go home. Be gracious and charming on all occasions. Never criticise Richard's choice of counsellors. Make friends with your cousin of York…'

I hesitated, seeing a glint of speculation in his eye.

'Don't stop now. I stand corrected and ashamed for all past behaviour.'

How could I not continue? The rich wine of European government and intrigue ran in my blood. 'Then this is what I think. Set your jaw and tolerate Richard's behaviour towards you. It may be nothing more than jealousy and spite. He cannot harm you. You have your own authority over your Lancaster lands. How can he destroy your illustrious name? Give him gifts on every possible occasion and make

yourself pleasant to Isabelle. You have daughters. You know how to do it. She likes dolls.'

'What excellent advice.' And then, smoothing the leather of his reins between his fingers as he considered: 'There is some pressure on me to marry again. It has been two years since Mary's death. I have resisted taking a new wife so soon, but it would be wise, even if I have no need of an heir. A strong alliance with one of our English families would be good policy. It behoves me to do it, whatever my personal inclination.'

A coldly sobering thought that took me aback, when it should not have. Were we not surrounded by death; by marriage and remarriage to tie powerful families with bonds of blood and allegiance? Would John feel a reluctance to remarry if I were to die within a few months in childbirth? Or would he wed again within the year? I was his third wife. He might happily take a fourth, and why should he not? Marriage for us was a matter of politics, not of passion, and Brittany must look to the security of her borders. My husband would be looking for another bride, and perhaps another Valois princess, within the week of my death. Which made me observe, with an intimacy I could not claim:

'You were fortunate indeed, sir.'

'In what manner?'

'To find such love with your wife. That you would consider not marrying again after her loss.'

He looked at me, his brows raised in query.

'It does not come to everyone of our rank,' I reminded him, not that he would need the reminding. 'Some would say it is a rarity.'

He looked as if he might have replied with some polite usage. Instead: 'Are you happy in your marriage?'

Since no one had ever asked such an intrusive question, I did not readily reply. I had never had to consider it in quite such terms. Content yes. Happy? What constituted happiness? And for a moment I resented the question. But since mine to the Earl had been very particular, I could hardly take issue with him. But I was aware of the chill in my voice.

'Why do you ask that? Do I appear discontented?'

'No. But your husband is more my father's age than mine. How old are you?'

'Twenty-eight years.'

'As I thought. We are much of an age. I warrant the Breton Duke is at least in his fiftieth year.'

'And a better man I do not know.' I was sharp. I would not be pitied, or made to feel uneasy by what could be counted an impertinence. 'It could have been worse.' Never had I spoken so openly, so plainly. 'My father was not known for altruistic gestures. I could have been married to a monster such as he. I thank God daily for an amenable husband who speaks to me as an equal, considers my wellbeing before his own and does not berate me when I am undoubtedly extravagant in the purchase of a gown or a new hound. No, I have never experienced the love that came to you and your wife, sir, if that is the overblown passion of which my troubadours and minstrels sing, but I have experienced much affection, and for that I am grateful.'

Earl Henry inclined his head in acceptance of what was undoubtedly a reprimand. 'Then I too will thank God for

his blessings on you. It was not my intention to discomfit you. If I have offended, I ask pardon.'

'You have not.'

Off to our left, a horn blew, as if to call a halt to such an exchange. We gathered up our reins and turned our mounts to follow the massed ranks.

'And will you?' I asked, importunate to the last.

'Will I what? Return to England?' He was thoughtful. 'Yes. I think I would be wise to act on your advice.'

But that is not what I had meant. I should have let it lie. I did not. 'Will you wed again?'

He turned his head to look at me, foursquare, bringing his animal to a halt again so that others perforce must jostle round us. His eyes skimmed my face.

'I have no plans. I have not yet met the woman whom I would choose to marry,' he said simply.

His gaze as bright as the dark jewels on his breast, Earl Henry lifted his hand, so that I thought that it was his intention to touch my arm. Instead he raised it to his cap, to touch the feather secured by a jewelled pin in a smart salute. Then, using his heels, making the high-bred animal he rode jump, he urged his horse on. Another raucous blast prevented any reply from me as we once more followed the hunt, the hounds picking up the scent of our quarry, leaving me to follow slowly, unnervingly wistful, in his wake.

Not that there was anything of merit to say.

'You have only met him twice.' I took myself to task.

Sadly twice was enough. For joy. For dismay.

Next morning I turned my back on the pavilions, urging my horse to keep up with John's mount as we began our

long journey to the west, to Vannes. As the miles unfolded, I considered with some grim amusement what I had learned about myself at Isabelle's wedding; that the state of unrequited love, however mild a form it might take, did not suit me. Too much superfluous emotion to disturb the even tenor of my days. Too much uncertainty. Too much undignified craving. I had too much self-esteem to allow myself to succumb to an emotion that could never have a future. It would be no better than suffering a permanent stone in a shoe: an aggravation, an annoyance, with no resolution until the stone was removed. I did not want such uncertainty in my life. I would accept a simple steady platform of equanimity without the highs and lows of blazing desire.

But there it had been: a touch of minds, a brush of yearning, which I would never forget. A thing of wonder, an awakening. A response to a man that was neither friendship nor affection but something far stronger and beyond my control. Indeed it was a hunger. A taste, a sip, of what had never been part of my life's banquet, and never would.