Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

War of the Roses:

Book Three: Bloodline

Written by Conn Iggulden

Published by Michael Joseph

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Wars of the Roses

Book Three: Bloodline

CONN IGGULDEN

MICHAEL JOSEPH
an imprint of
PENGUIN BOOKS

MICHAEL JOSEPH

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Michael Joseph is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.

Penguin Random House UK

First published 2015
001

Copyright © Conn Iggulden, 2015
Endpaper map and insignias copyright © Andrew Farmer, 2015

The moral right of the author has been asserted

Set in 13.5/16 pt Garamond MT Std
Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

HARDBACK ISBN: 978–0–718–15987–0
OM PAPERBACK ISBN: 978–0–718–15988–7

www.greenpenguin.co.uk

MIX
Paper from responsible sources
FSC® C018179
FSC www.fsc.org

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

To my father, for his patience and humour.

Acknowledgements

The loss of my father in September 2014 was a terrible blow. Given that he was ninety-one, it should not have been unexpected, but it was. The trees of your childhood don't just fall – until they do, and the world no longer holds them.

Without the support of a few key people, this book would certainly never have been finished. With their support, I think it could be the best I've written. It helped that I was writing Edward of York and Richard, Earl Warwick, right after they lost their fathers, five hundred years ago.

I give thanks then, for my agent, Victoria Hobbs, my brother David Iggulden, my friend Clive Room and chief of all, my wife Ella.

Conn Iggulden

List of Characters

– *Queen Margaret/Margaret of Anjou*: Wife of Henry VI, daughter of René of Anjou
– *Derry Brewer*: Spymaster of Henry VI and Queen Margaret
– *George, Duke of Clarence*: Brother of Edward IV and Richard, Duke of Gloucester
– *John Clifford, Baron Clifford*: Supporter of Henry VI, killer of Richard of York's son Edmund
– *Andrew Douglas*: Scottish laird and ally of Henry VI
– *Edward IV*: King of England, son of Richard Plantagenet, Duke of York
– *William Neville, Lord Fauconberg*: Uncle of Earl of Warwick
– *Richard of Gloucester*: Son of Richard of York, brother of Edward IV and George, Duke of Clarence
– *Sir John Grey*: Supporter of Henry VI, first husband of Elizabeth Woodville
– *Mary of Guelders*: Widow of James II of Scotland
– *Henry VI*: King of England, son of Henry V
– *Sir Thomas Kyriell*: Bodyguard of captured Henry VI
– *Albert Lalonde*: Chancellor to King Louis
– *King Louis XI*: King of France, cousin of Queen Margaret
– *John Neville, Baron Montagu*: Brother of Earl of Warwick
– *Anne Neville*: Daughter of Earl of Warwick

– *George Neville*: Archbishop of York, brother of Earl of Warwick
– *Isabel Neville*: Daughter of Earl of Warwick
– *John de Mowbray, Duke of Norfolk*: Supporter of Edward IV
– *Henry Percy, Earl of Northumberland*: Head of Percy family, supporter of Henry VI
– *Henry Percy*: Disinherited heir to Earl of Northumberland
– *Hugh Poucher*: Chief steward of Richard of York, factor of Edward IV
– *Richard Woodville, Baron Rivers*: Father of Elizabeth Woodville
– *Edmund, Earl of Rutland*: Son of Richard, Duke of York; killed at battle of Sandal Castle
– *Alice Montacute, Countess of Salisbury*: Wife of Earl of Salisbury, mother of Earl of Warwick
– *Richard Neville, Earl of Salisbury*: Grandson of John of Gaunt, father of Earl of Warwick; killed at battle of Sandal Castle
– *Henry Beaufort, Duke of Somerset*: Supporter of Queen Margaret; inherited title after his father's death at the first battle of St Alban's
– *Owen Tudor*: Second husband of Catherine de Valois (widow of Henry V); killed after battle of Mortimer's Cross
– *Anne Beauchamp, Countess of Warwick*: Wife of Earl of Warwick
– *Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick*: Head of the Neville family after the death of the Earl of Salisbury, later known as the Kingmaker
– *Edward of Westminster*: Prince of Wales, son of Henry VI and Queen Margaret

– *Abbot Whethamstede*: Abbot of St Alban's
– *Anthony Woodville*: Brother of Elizabeth Woodville
– *Elizabeth Woodville/Grey*: Wife of Edward IV
– *John Woodville*: Brother of Elizabeth Woodville
– *Cecily Neville, Duchess of York*: Wife of Richard, Duke of York, granddaughter of John of Gaunt, mother of Edward IV
– *Cecily of York*: Daughter of Edward IV and Elizabeth Woodville
– *Elizabeth of York*: Daughter of Edward IV and Elizabeth Woodville
– *Richard Plantagenet, Duke of York*: Great-grandson of Edward III; killed at battle of Sandal Castle

Prologue

The wind snatched at them, alive and full of malice. It filled their chests in sudden gusts and made their mouths ache with cold. The two men shuddered under the assault, yet continued to climb, on iron rungs that stung their hands. Though they did not look down, they could sense the watching crowd below.

Both men had been raised far to the south, in the same village of the county of Middlesex. They were a long, long way from home, but with their master, they'd been given a task by Queen Margaret herself. That was what mattered. They'd ridden further north from Sandal Castle, leaving behind the bloody ground and the pale, stripped bodies lying on it. They'd taken cloth sacks to the city of York, with the gales rising around them.

Sir Stephen Reddes watched from below, one hand raised against ice flecks on the wind. The choice of Micklegate Bar was no accident. English kings had always used that tower to enter York from the south. It did not matter that hail stung his men or that darkness was thick as dust in the air. They had their charge, their orders – and all three were loyal.

Godwin Halywell and Ted Kerch reached a narrow wooden ledge above the crowd. They edged out on to it, leaning back when they feared a wild gust might snatch them off. The crowd thickened beneath them, gleaming just a little with white hail resting on dark hair. Shuffling

figures still came out of houses and inns, some of them demanding answers from the local men on the walls. There were no replies called back. The guards had not been told.

Short iron spikes had been set a dozen feet above the ground, too high for friends of executed men to reach. There were six in all, driven deep in good Roman mortar to lean out over the city. Four of them bore rotted heads, gaping at the night.

'What do we do with these?' Halywell called. He gestured helplessly to Kerch over the row of heads between them. There'd been no orders about the remains of criminals. Halywell swore under his breath. His temper was shortening and the hail seemed to blow even harder, a lash against his skin.

He let anger smother his revulsion, reaching out to the first head and taking hold. Its mouth was full of white beads of ice, shifting. Though he knew it was idiocy, a fear of being bitten meant he could not bring himself to put his hand between the jaws. Instead, he hooked his fingers under and just heaved the thing off its spike into the darkness. The lurching effort almost sent Godwin Halywell after it. He grasped the stones with white fingers, panting. Voices cried out below and the crowd surged back and forth, shocked at the idea that heavy, dangerous things might come flying down amongst them from the gatehouse tower.

Halywell looked along the wall to Kerch and they exchanged a glance of grim resignation, just two men getting on with unpleasant work while others watched and judged them from relative safety. It took time to remove and throw down the remaining heads. One of them all but shattered on the stones below, with a noise like pottery breaking.

Halywell supposed they did not *have* to clear all the spikes. They carried only three heads in the two sacks they bore, but somehow it did not seem right to set their charges alongside common criminals. He had a sudden thought of Christ sharing the hill of skulls with thieves, but he shook his head, concentrating on the job at hand.

While the wind howled, Halywell brought his sack up to his right shoulder, fumbling in its depths to wrap his fingers around locks of hair. Blood had stuck the heads to the cloth, so he had to wrestle the sack half inside out, almost tumbling off the wall again with his efforts. Gasping in fear and weariness, Halywell held it steady enough to snatch out the head of Richard Neville, Earl of Salisbury.

The hair wound around his fingers was iron-grey and the eyes had not rolled up, so that the slack face seemed to peer at him in the torchlight. Halywell muttered a prayer he had almost forgotten, wanting to cross himself, or at least to close the eyes. He had thought he was inured to horrors, but having a dead man watch him was something new.

It was no small task to spike a head. Halywell had received no instructions, as if every man of sense would have known immediately how it should be done. As it happened, he'd spent a summer of his childhood slaughtering pigs and sheep with a dozen other lads, earning the odd silver farthing or a bit of glistening liver to take home. He had a vague idea of there being a space at the base of a skull, but he couldn't seem to find it in the dark. He was almost sobbing as he worked the head back and forth, his hands slipping and his teeth chattering. All the time, the crowd were watching, murmuring names of men.

The iron rod sank in suddenly, piercing the brain and running up against the inside of the skull. Halywell sighed

in relief. Below his feet, many in the crowd crossed themselves, like a flutter of wings.

He pulled out the second head on good, dark hair, much thicker than the grey locks of the first. Richard, Duke of York, had been clean-shaven at the moment of his death, though Halywell had heard bristles would keep growing for a time, after. Sure enough, he could feel an unpleasant roughness on the jaw. He tried not to look at the face and jammed the head down on to its own iron point with his eyes pressed shut.

With hands smeared in seeping muck, Halywell made the sign of the cross. Along the line, Kerch had spiked the third head alongside York. That had been an evil thing, everyone said. The rumour was that York's son Edmund had been fleeing the battlefield. Baron Clifford had caught him and cut the boy down, just to spite his father.

All the heads were fresh, with their jaws sagging open. Halywell had heard of undertakers who sewed the lower jaw to the cheek or stuck it shut with a mouthful of tar. He didn't think it mattered. Dead was dead.

He saw Kerch was turning back to the iron rungs set in the stone, their work done. Halywell was about to do the same when he heard Sir Stephen calling up to him. He could barely make out words over the wind, but the memory sprang alive and he swore aloud.

A paper crown nestled at the bottom of his sack, stiff and dark with dried blood. Halywell unfolded it, looking askance at the head of York. He had a handful of thin split-pegs in a pouch at his waist, cut from dry reeds. Muttering about foolishness, he bent to the head and fixed the thing on to the dark hair, lock by lock. He thought it might remain for a while, in the shelter of the tower, or be blown

across the city by the time he was down on solid ground. He didn't much care. Dead was *dead*, that was what mattered. All the hosts of heaven wouldn't care if you'd worn gold or paper, not then. Whatever the insult was meant to be, Halywell couldn't see it.

With care, he swung on to the ladder and climbed down the first couple of steps. As his eyes came level with the row of spiked heads, he paused, looking across them. York had been a good man, a brave man, so he'd heard. Salisbury too. Between them, they'd challenged for the throne and they'd lost it all. Halywell thought about telling his grandchildren he was the one who'd spiked York's head on the walls of the city.

For an instant, he had a sense of presence, of a breath on his neck. The wind seemed to fall away in a lull and he was staring across three humiliated men in silence.

'God be with you all,' he whispered. 'May He forgive your sins, if you had no time to ask at the end. Let Him welcome you lads. And bless you all. Amen.'

Halywell descended then, away from the moment of terrifying stillness, back into the heaving crowd and all the noise of men and cold of winter.



PART ONE

1461

The smylere with the knyf under the cloke.

Geoffrey Chaucer, 'The Knight's Tale'

I

'You make too much of it, Brewer!' Somerset snapped, raising his face into the wind as he rode. '"The Lord went before them in a pillar of cloud", yes? "*Columna nubis*", if you knew your Exodus. Black threads in the air, Brewer! It puts the fear of Almighty God into those who might yet stand against us. And there is nothing wrong with *that*.' The young duke turned to look over his shoulder at the greasy trails still rising behind them. 'The men must be fed: that's the long and the short of it. What are a few peasant villages now, after all we have accomplished? I'd scorch the sky black if it meant the lads ate well. Eh? Anyway, in this cold, you'd think they'd welcome a good fire.'

'Yet the news will run ahead of us, my lord,' Derry Brewer said, ignoring the rough humour. He was striving for politeness, though his stomach felt as if it touched his backbone and hunger gnawed at him. At moments like this, he missed Somerset's father, for the old man's subtlety and understanding. The son was quick and clever enough. But there was no depth to him. At twenty-five, Henry Beaufort had some of the military confidence men liked to follow. He would have made an excellent captain. Unfortunately, he was in sole command of the queen's army. With that in mind, Derry tried again to make his point.

'My lord, it's bad enough that messengers run south with news of York's death, while we stop for supplies in

every town. Our skirmishers loot and murder and the men spend the full day catching up to them – while local lads race to warn the next village in our path. It is harder and harder to find food, my lord, when those who prefer to keep their goods have hidden them all away. And I'm sure you know why the men set fires. If they cover up crimes in each village we pass, we'll have the whole country in arms before we even see London. I do not believe that is your intention, my lord.'

'I'm sure you could persuade a man to sell you his own children. I do not doubt it, Brewer,' Somerset replied. 'You always seem to have a fine argument ready. Yet you have been too long a *queen*'s man.' So confident was Somerset in his own rank and strength that he thought nothing of adding a certain insulting emphasis to the words. 'Yes, that is the trouble, I think. There are times for your long plans, of a certainty, for your . . . French whispers, Brewer. Perhaps when we reach London. I don't doubt you would have us wait patiently at all the local markets, bargaining or begging for bowls of stew or a fine capon or two. And you would see us *starve*.' His voice rose in volume to carry to the marching ranks around. 'Today is for these men, do you follow? See our lads march a stripe down the country – miles wide of archers and men-at-arms, fresh from victory. With their weapons held ready! You can see by looking at them, they have had a fine battle. See their pride!'

The crescendo in his voice demanded a response and the men around him cheered his words. Somerset looked smug as he faced Derry Brewer once again.

'They have been blooded, Brewer. They have brought enemies down. Now we'll feed them on red beef and mutton and turn them loose on London, d'you see? We'll make

Earl Warwick bring out King Henry and humbly beg our pardon for all the trouble he's made.'

Somerset laughed at the thought, carried away by his own imaginings. 'I tell you, we'll put the world to rights again. Do you understand, Brewer? If the men ran a little wild in Grantham and Stamford, or Peterborough, or Luton, it doesn't matter! If they take the winter hams they come across, well, perhaps those men who owned them should have been *with* us, making sure of York!' He had the sense to drop his voice to a murmur as he went on. 'If they cut a few throats or steal the virtue of a few country maids, I imagine it will fire their blood all the more. We are the *victors*, Brewer, and you are not least among us. Let your blood seethe for once, without spoiling it all with fears and plots.'

Derry looked back at the young duke, his anger poorly hidden. Henry Beaufort was charming and handsome – and he could speak in a great flow of words to bend someone to his will. Yet he was such a *young* man! Somerset had rested and eaten well while towns that had belonged to the Duke of York had been burned to the ground. Grantham and Stamford had been torn down and Derry had witnessed horrors in those streets as cruel as anything he'd seen in France. It galled him to have a cocky young nobleman tell him the men deserved their reward.

Derry glanced to where Queen Margaret rode ahead in a cloak of dark blue, her head bowed towards Earl Percy as they talked. Her seven-year-old son Edward trotted a pony on her other side, the boy's pale curls dipping with weariness.

Somerset saw the spymaster's glance and smiled wolfishly, confident in his youth compared with the older man.

'Queen Margaret wants her husband back, Master Brewer, not to hear your womanish concerns over the conduct of the men. Perhaps you should let her be the queen, eh? In this one instance?'

Somerset took a breath to throw back his head and guffaw at his own humour. As he did so, Derry reached down to the man's boot and gripped the shank of his spur with his gloved hand, giving a heave. The duke vanished over his horse's side with a roar, making the animal skitter back and forth as the reins sawed. One ducal leg pointed almost straight up to the sky and Somerset struggled madly to regain his seat. For a few stupefied instants, his head jogged along with a good view of the horse's leathery genitals swinging below.

'Careful there, my lord,' Derry called, prodding his own nag to trot a little distance between them. 'The road is most uneven.'

The greater part of his irritation was at himself, for losing his temper, but Derry was infuriated at the duke as well. The source of Margaret's strength, the source of a large part of her authority, lay in her being *right*. The whole country knew that King Henry was held prisoner by the Yorkist faction, traitors to a man. There was sympathy for the queen and her young son, forced to roam the land and find support for her cause. It was a romantic view, perhaps, but it had swayed good men like Owen Tudor and brought armies to the field that might otherwise have stayed at home. It had given them the victory at the end, with the house of Lancaster rising up, after so long with its face pressed down.

Letting an army of Scots and northerners murder, rape and loot their way to London would not help Margaret's

cause or bring one more man to her side. They were fresh from their triumph, still half drunk on it. They had all seen Richard Plantagenet, Duke of York, forced to his knees and killed. They had seen the heads of their most powerful enemies taken away to be spiked on the walls of the city of York. For fifteen thousand men, after the rage and wild panic of battle had settled, they still had the victory like coins in a purse. Ten years of struggle had come to an end and York was dead on the field, his ambitions broken. The victory was *everything*, won hard. The men who had bared York's head for the blade expected rewards – food, wine and gold altar cups, whatever they came across.

Behind Brewer, the column stretched into a haze, farther than the eye could see on a winter's day. Bare-legged Scots stalked along with short Welsh archers and tall English swordsmen, all grown thin, with ragged cloaks, but still walking, still proud.

Some forty yards back, the red-faced young Duke of Somerset had regained his seat with the help of one of his men. Both glared at Derry Brewer as he touched his forehead in false respect. Armoured knights had always raised their visors when their lords passed, showing their faces. The gesture had become a salute of sorts. Derry could see it hadn't eased the outrage in the pompous young man he'd unseated, however. Once more, Derry cursed his own temper, a rush of red that could overwhelm him so completely and suddenly that he'd lash out without a moment's thought. It had always been a weakness in him, though it was true that the abandonment of all caution could be quite satisfying. He was too old for it, though, he thought. He'd get himself killed by a younger cock if he wasn't more careful.

Derry half expected Somerset to come charging over to demand redress, but he could see the man's companion speaking urgently into his ear. There was no dignity in petty squabbling, not for one of Somerset's station. Derry sighed to himself, knowing he'd better choose his sleeping spots carefully for a few nights – and avoid going anywhere alone. He'd dealt with the arrogance of lords all his life and knew only too well how they considered it their right, almost their primary occupation, to demand redress for a grudge, openly or on the sly. Somehow, those they offended were meant to play along, to duck and weave as best they could until the natural order was restored and they were found beaten senseless, or perhaps with fingers or ears cropped short.

There was something about getting older that had stolen away Derry's patience with that sort of game. He knew if Somerset sent a couple of rough lads to liven him up a little, his reply would be to cut the duke's throat one night. If Derry Brewer had learned anything in the years of war, it was that dukes and earls died as easily as commoners.

That thought brought a vision of Somerset's father, cut down in the street at St Albans. The old duke had been a lion. They'd had to break him, because he would not yield.

'God keep you, old son,' Derry muttered. 'Damn it. All *right*, for you, he's safe from me. Just keep the preening bugger out of my way, though, would you?' He raised his eyes to the sky and breathed deeply, hoping the soul of his old friend could hear him.

Derry could smell char and ash on the air, touching him in the back of the throat like a waxed finger. Their outriders made new lines of smoke and pain rise ahead of them, dragging joints and salted heads from barns, or prodding

forth live bulls to be slaughtered in the road. At the end of each day, the queen's column would reach the furthest points of the sweeps ahead. They'd have marched eighteen or twenty miles, and for the sight of a flapping capon to be cooked and gnawed to the split bones, they'd be blind to a few more manors or villages burned, with all sins hidden in flames and soot. Fifteen thousand men had to eat, Derry knew that, or the queen's army would dwindle away on the road, deserting and dying in the green ditches. Still, it sat hard with him.

The spymaster glowered as he rode along, reaching down to pat the neck of Retribution, the first and only horse he had ever owned. The elderly animal turned its head to peer up at him, looking for a carrot. Derry showed his empty hands and Retribution lost interest. Ahead, the queen and her son rode with a dozen lords, still stiff with pride, though it had been weeks since the fall of York at Wakefield. The sweep to the south was no great rush to vengeance, but a measured movement of forces, with letters borne away to supporters and enemies every morning. London lay ahead and Margaret did not want her husband quietly murdered as she approached.

Getting the king back alive would be no easy task, Derry was certain of that much. Earl Warwick had lost his father at Sandal Castle. As the land was still frozen and the nights long, Warwick would still be about as raw with grief as York's own son, Edward. Two angry young men had lost their fathers in the same battle – and King Henry's fate lay in their hands.

Derry shuddered, remembering York's cry at the moment of his execution: that all they had done was unleash the sons. He shook his head, wiping cold snot

from where it had dribbled on to his top lip and set hard. The old guard was passing from the world, one by one. Those left to stand in their places were not so fine a breed, as far as Derry Brewer could tell. The best men were all in the ground.

A gusting wind battered the sides of the tent as Warwick faced his two brothers, raising his cup.

'To our father,' he said.

John Neville and Bishop George Neville echoed the words and drank, though the wine was cold and the day colder. Warwick closed his eyes in brief prayer for his father's soul. All around them, the wind snapped and fluttered the canvas, making it seem as if they were assailed on all sides, the very centre of the gale.

'What sort of a madman goes to war in winter, eh?' Warwick said. 'This wine is poor stuff, but the rest is all drunk. At least it gives me joy to be with you two great louts, with no *pretence*. I *miss* the old man.'

He had intended to continue, but a sudden wave of grief tightened his throat, so that his voice cracked. Despite his efforts to breathe, the air huffed out of his lungs until they were empty and his eyes suddenly blurred. With a huge effort, Warwick pulled in a long, slow breath through his teeth, then another as he found he could speak again. In all that time, his two brothers had said not a word.

'I miss his counsel and his affection,' Warwick went on. 'I miss his pride and even his disappointment in me, for at least he was there to feel it.' The other two chuckled at that, something they had both known. 'Now it's all set, with no more change. I cannot take back one word or have him know one more thing I have done in his name.'

'God will hear your prayers, Richard,' his brother George said. 'Beyond that is a sacred mystery. It would be the sin of pride to think you might discover God's plan for us – or for this family. You never can, Brother – and you must not grieve for those who feel only joy.'

Warwick reached out and gripped the bishop by the back of the neck in affection. To his surprise, the words had brought him a little comfort, and he was proud of his younger brother.

'Have you news of York?' George Neville went on, his voice calm.

Of the three Neville sons, the bishop seemed to have taken their father's death with the least turbulence, with no sign of the rage that ate at John, or the grim spite that opened Warwick's eyes each morning. Whatever else lay ahead, there was a price owed, for all the troubles, all the pain they had endured.

'Edward writes nothing,' Warwick said, showing his irritation. 'I would not even know he had defeated the Tudors without their own ragged refugees, taken up and questioned by my people. The last I heard, Edward of York was sitting on a mound of dead Welsh archers and drinking away the loss of his father and brother. He has ignored the messages I've sent telling him how sorely he is needed here. I know he is only eighteen, but at his age . . .' Warwick sighed. 'I think sometimes, the great size of him conceals what a boy he still is. I can't understand how he can delay in Wales and revel in his grief, while Queen Margaret comes against me here! His concern is only with himself, with his own noble grief and rage. It's my feeling that he cares nothing for us, or our father. Understand me, lads: I say this to you, to no one else.'

John Neville had been made Baron Montagu by his father's death. The elevation showed in the richness of his new cloak, the thick hose and fine boots, bought on credit from tailors and cobblers who lent to a lord as they never had to a knight. Despite the layers of warm cloth, Montagu glanced at the billowing walls and shivered. It was difficult to imagine any spy being able to hear over the thrum and whistle of the wind, but it cost nothing to show caution.

'If this gale grows any more fierce, this tent'll be snatched up and taken over the army like a hawk,' Montagu said. 'Brother, we need that York boy, for all his youth. I sat with King Henry this morning while he sang hymns and plainsong under the oak. Did you know some smith has put a rope on his leg?' Warwick looked up from his thoughts and John Neville raised both palms to ease his concern. 'Not a shackle, Brother. Just a knotted rope, a hobble, to stop our royal innocent from wandering away. You talk of the boy in Edward, but at least it is a fine, strong boy, given to temper and firm action! This Henry is a mewling child. I could not follow him.'

'Hush, John,' Warwick said. 'Henry is the king anointed, whether he be blind or deaf, or crippled, or . . . simple. There is no evil in him. He is like Adam before the Fall, no – like Abel, before Cain murdered him for spite and jealousy. Telling me he has been tied brings shame on all of us. I will order him freed.'

Warwick crossed to the lacings of the tent, tugging at the cords until a widening flap brought the wind in. Papers in a corner flung themselves into the air like birds, escaping the lead weights that held them down.

As the entrance yawned open, the brothers looked out

on a night scene that might have been a painting of hell. St Albans lay just to the south of them. Before the town, in the torchlit dark, ten thousand men worked all around that spot, building defences in three great armoured 'battles' of men. Fires and forges stretched in all directions, like the stars above, though they gave a sullen light. Rain fell across that multitude in gusts and swooping slaps of damp, delighting in their misery. Over its noise could be heard the shouts of men, bowed down under beams and weights, driving lowing oxen as they heaved carts along the tracks.

Warwick felt his two brothers come to his side, staring out with him. Perhaps two hundred round tents formed the heart of the camp, all facing north, from where they knew Queen Margaret's army would come.

Warwick had been returning from Kent when he'd heard of his father's death at Sandal. He'd had a month and a half from that hard day to prepare for the queen's army. She wanted her husband, Warwick knew that well enough. For all Henry's blank eyes and frailty, he was the king still. There was but one crown and one man to rule, even if he knew nothing of it.

'Every time the sun rises, I see new strips of spikes and ditches and . . .'

Bishop George Neville waved his hand, lacking the words to describe the tools and machines of death his brother had gathered. The rows of cannon were just a part of it. Warwick had consulted the armouries in London, seeking out any vicious device that had ever proved its worth in war – back to the seven kingdoms of the Britons and the Roman invaders. Their combined gaze swept out across spiked nets, caltrops, ditch traps and towers. It was a field of death, ready for a great host to come against it.