

TO SERVE A KING

Donna Russo Morin

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*“It is the little victories,
That bring us the big ones.”*
--Ignatius de Loyola (1491-1556)

1520

Beneath an unmerciful sun, the squire dropped the flag with a flourish. Riders kicked at glistening flanks; horses charged forward with little between them save the narrow wooden poles of the lists. Hooves thundered upon the jousting field; the pounding boomed in the ears. Dirt clumps flew up into the air as if tossed in celebration. Weighted and encased in full armor, plumes on helmets bobbing with every gallop, the combatants raised their lances with steely determination, eyes locked upon the impending opponent as they cradled their weapons in the crook between bicep and chest.

Nobleman, courtier, commoner, and peasant jumped to their feet in the overflowing, banner festooned stands, holding their breath as the two kings bore down upon each other. The impact, when it came, burst out, like two worlds colliding. Lance met armor, snapping with a riotous crash and a splintering of wood, and the air ruptured with gasps and cheers. Each competitor had broken their lance upon the other; yet both had kept their saddle. The match was a draw, again.

François quit his black steed with deft agility, tugging off the cumbersome helmet with agitation. Beneath it, his thick chestnut hair lay matted with sweat to his face and jawbone.

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“Well done, Your Majesty,” Montmorency called out as he approached, raising his voice above the unabated cheering. Beside him, a slight man brandished a satisfied sneer as he scissored his short legs, hurrying to keep up.

With a sidelong look of annoyance, the young king of France scoffed, struggling to remove his gauntlets.

“Do not patronize me, Monty.” Finally relieved of them, François threw the thick padded leather gloves to the ground, words slithering out between grinding teeth. “Damn it all, I cannot best the man.”

“That is true,” Philippe Chabot said as he picked up the gloves and slapped them together to dislodge the fresh mud. “But neither can he best you. There are worse ways to spend a day of sport.”

In the bright sunlight, François squint slanted eyes at his companions, his valued friends since childhood, his closest advisors since becoming king five years ago, and felt the heat of his ire cool. Perhaps there *were* other ways to triumph over this adversary yet.

In Henry VIII, François found everything he detested in a king—a hedonist obsessed in the quest for power and pleasure—and yet a part of him strove to imitate this nemesis whom he would never concede to respect, though respect Henry he did. The faults François railed against in his archrival were ones others attributed to him. How disgusted he would be to know it.

“Besides,” Chabot continued with a shrug of his small shoulders, “you are much better looking.”

Monty barked a laugh as François snickered, cuffing Chabot in the arm.

“You must pay your respects to your opponent.” The gruff, aged voice doused the conviviality of the young men. Chancellor Duprat approached, skinny legs waddling under a rotund body. “King Henry awaits your hand, Sire.”

“Of course.” François accepted the intrusion and instruction without argument. Accompanied by his triumvirate of men, he stalked across the rutted tourney field.

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“Well ridden, Your Majesty,” he called as he approached his challenger, outstretched hand in the lead.

With a devilish smile upon his plump, freckled face, Henry accepted the hand thus offered. “And you, Your Highness.”

Cardinal Wolsey, rotund form looming in red cassock and mozzetta, hovered by Henry’s side as always, as did the dukes of Suffolk and Norfolk.

These two rivals politely embraced, between them a pull of genuine affection, more potent after the last few days together, yet sharp with the edge of competition, like two loving brothers forever bent on besting the other.

“A worthy match indeed,” François conceded. “One deserving of a hearty toast.”

“More than one, I should think,” Henry agreed. “I will see you at table?”

“It will be my honor,” François accepted the invitation with a flourishing bow.

As the men separated and made to quit the field, the crowd erupted into another burst of applause, colorful banners flourishing. With magnanimity, each sovereign acknowledged the accolades with a wave, a nod, and a smile as they quit the field.

A young man standing along the front rail took his pretty wife by the arm, hoisting his daughter higher in his grasp, and began to lead them through the departing congested throng. “Come, *mes amours*, I must prepare to attend the king at table.”

“Of course, my dear,” replied the delicate woman at his side, skin flush from a day in the sun.

The toddler in her father’s arms put her head down onto his strong shoulder, blond curls falling on her face as her eyes grew heavy and closed. Exhausted from the excitement of the long day, she would sleep peacefully tonight.

The royal combatants retired from the tourney field, entourages in tow, each to his own opulent encampment. These men of power and privilege endured no discomforts; though

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ensconced in makeshift and temporary lodgings, each camp contrived astounding accommodations for this auspicious meeting.

Months in the making, the summit was unlike any conducted before, and leaders overlooked waited with equal amounts of wonder and fear, for any accord between France and England could only spell trouble. The possibility of orchestrating a great peace enticed the English King. The opportunity to bring another to his cause against his rivalry with Charles V of Spain, newly appointed Holy Roman Emperor—chosen by the new pope over François himself—had inveigled the French King forth. A grand meeting, an opportunity to talk; diplomacy and deal making decorated by a grand festival. And yet the undercurrent of competition between the two young and brash *chevaliers*, the constant quibbling for any modicum of superiority over the other no matter how miniscule, permeated every facet of this audacious assembly.

In the shallow Val d'Or at the very edge of English occupied France near Calais, half way between the castle ruins of Guînes and Ardres, they had met on an early June afternoon.

Henry would have a castle no matter where he laid his head. In the shadow of the Chateau de Guînes, the Palace of Illusions had been erected with sections brought from England already assembled. Covering an area of more than two acres, it was a convoluted construction of wood and earth covered with a painted canvass to resemble stone and formed with turrets, parapets, and windows. Within its vast rectangular interior lay a courtyard boasting two magnificent fountains fed by three pipes—one for water, one for hippocras, and one for wine.

In a meadow on the outskirts of Ardres, the French had pitched their tents, almost four hundred of them, some as large as any castle's great hall. Many of the nobles in attendance had forfeited all property, selling their fields, their mills, their forests to figure themselves here with appropriate honor. Surmounted by pennants of golden apples and emblazoned with their owner's coat of arms, the tents of velvet and cloth of gold spread out across the countryside like wild flowers. The field shimmered as if the gold grew from its earth. But no pavilion rivaled the splendor of François' tent.

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Taller than any other and sixty feet on a side, two ship's masts lashed together supported the mammoth cloth of gold. Blue velvet lined the interior, decorated with fleurs-de-lis and gold embroideries from Cyprus.

Beyond splendid, yet the kings' accommodations paled in comparison to the events conducted over the course of the summit.

Banquets, dances, and mummings filled the nights, a feat of arms—jousting at the tilt, an open field tournament, a foot combat at the barriers with puncheon spears, swords and two-handed swords at the barriers—filled the days. The kings the most rowdy and jubilant attendants of all. In their company were their nobles, their friends, and their women. François had brought his mother, his wife Queen Claude, and his mistress the Countess de Chateaubriant. Regal and silent by Henry VIII's side, stood Catherine of Aragon with countless fair maidens waiting to warm his bed. As the kings made merry, their ambassadors and delegates made diplomacy; Wolsey speaking foremost for England, while the Queen Mother, Louise de Savoy spoke for France. Many words passed between these two of equally keen minds, but little of lasting consequence was said.

Henry rubbed at his midsection, a replete resounding belch coaxed forth from the embroidered brocade-covered protuberance. Attendants scurried around him, cleaning the remnants of the evening's festivities like ants upon an abandoned picnic grounds. He watched them from his elevated perch on the velvet chair in the corner of the vast room; watched, but cared little about their performance. The last of the guests had retreated in the early hours of the morning, leaving the King in the company of his most reliant confidantes.

“Have we found out who the young women are?” Henry spoke to his men, but his unfocused, bloodshot eyes never strayed from the buzzing workers before him, mesmerized, in his hazy stupor, by their tedious, repetitive movements.

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The bearded Charles Brandon, Duke of Suffolk, stepped forward, if a bit unsteadily, wine sloshing in a tightly gripped chalice. “They are Thomas Boleyn’s daughters, my lord, Mary and...Anne.”

Henry pulled himself up from his slump and whipped round, all at once full of eager attention. “Certainly not?”

“’Tis true, Your Highness, they have been in the French queen’s company for some years and are quite soon preparing to return to our homeland.”

With sensual, languid movements at odds with his rugged physique, the king reclined once more. “Be sure to send them a personal invitation to court.”

“Of course, Your Highness, as you wish,” Suffolk assured him, but not without a roll of his eyes and a salacious smile at the small group of men, gathered in duty and imbibing.

“Are we done here, Wolsey, I tire of these games.” Sounding like nothing so much as a spoiled, petulant child, Henry’s bulbous bottom lip stuck out in a pout.

“I believe we have done all we can here, Your Majesty,” the cardinal said with neither enthusiasm nor disappointment. “You have done well to sign the treaty.”

Henry snarled at him. To make peace with the posturing François rankled; the hand that wielded the quill itched.

“You will see great results from this, I assure you,” Wolsey pacified.

It was the slightest of changes, but the king’s pout reformed, a devilish grin blossoming in its stead. In the moment, Henry found the joy of the situation in which he found himself: As the lesser of the three world powers, both France and Spain courted him. A master manipulator, he intended to exploit the state of affairs for all it was worth.

“Send a message then, would you, Wolsey? Tell the emperor I would like to talk. He should know of the ostentatious display we have witnessed here. A man with so much to prove as our François, putting on such a show, must have something to hide.”

“Of course, Majesty, but per—”

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With the hand of his ruler flicked in his face, the cardinal's thoughts froze on his tongue. Henry leaned forward, resting his free hand upon one knee, eyes fixed upon the young man rushing toward him. The pale, snaggletooth youth approached his sovereign, lips forming words aching to launch from his mouth. Henry's quieting hand flicked from Wolsey to the approaching squire, who clamped his mouth shut, eyes bulging in fear at the abrupt command.

"Cease and desist." The king's booming voice pummeled the air. "You are all relieved. Make for your beds."

Every manservant and chambermaid dropped whatever lay in their hands, and took themselves off without thought or question. The small gathering of courtiers drew closer to the king, put on guard at once by the abrupt change in his tone and demeanor.

"Speak," Henry barked the instant the last servant had quit the chamber.

With a twitch and an Adam's apple-bobbing swallow, the young man made his report.

"Your fears have been confirmed, Your Highness. The man in question has indeed been seen in clandestine conversations with members of the French contingent."

"Bastard!" spat the king, pounding a fist on the arm of the chair and spewing upon the floor, as if the word and gesture were not enough to rid him of his venomous rage.

The messenger quaked in his worn leather boots, bulging insect eyes once more protruding from his long face. Only Suffolk remembered him.

"You may leave us, good sir. You have done well. Have no fear." With a calming hand upon the youngster's shoulder, the duke turned him toward the door, helping him away with a firm yet gentle nudge. Turning back, Suffolk met with the king's blazing stare.

"You know what to do?" Henry moved not a bit, his voice low and quiet, yet his rage was there for any to see did they know what to look for.

Suffolk's full mouth thinned in a grimace but he bowed, spun on his heel with determination, and left; not a one questioned his compliance with whatever the king demanded of him.

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The screams of human and animal mixed in a grotesque chorus, filling the predawn hours with their horror and revulsion. The monstrous flames rose into the black sky, roaring like cannon blasts in the day's most hushed hours. Men, women, and children fled from the orangey blaze in fright while soldier and guard ran toward it. But it was too powerful, too repulsive, and it was impossible to break through to its heart, to penetrate the barrier and save those trapped within. They stood at the aperture of the tent now fully ablaze in the apex of the English camp, waiting to catch those fortunate enough to escape from the fiery cataclysm.

The pandemonium swirled about the inferno like the oxygen that fed it so splendidly. For within every neighboring tent, the brilliance of the flame appeared alive upon the walls, the nexus of its glow indistinguishable through the pale canvass. In terror they ran out of their tents, into the fray; haphazard, undirected commotion. No matter how removed from danger, they ran and screamed, the sickening scent of burning flesh fueling their fear.

"Help us, please," one foot soldier yelled to a passing nobleman, a young man of strong arm and back, capable of hoisting a bucket of water as well as any. But the pampered gent continued his furious retreat, sparing not a glance at the soldiers begging his aid.

Coughing and sputtering, survivors staggered from within, but the child emerged without a sound—without a scratch—as if oblivious to the danger she escaped, her long curly blonde hair wafting upwards in the rushing air of the blaze at her back. From behind the soldiers, a woman clad in a silk nightgown flung herself forward, as if waiting for this very moment. Snatching the child in her arms she ran, a silent angel intent on her mission.

"How many billeted here, do you know?" one guard called to another as they stood together before the blaze. Few of them remained, so many of them had already rushed toward the physician's tent, the wounded leaning on their shoulders or cradled in their arms.

"No idea," his companion struggled to answer, the flames devouring all the air in and around the tent. "Can't be many. So many...already out."

The first soldier acknowledged him with a squinty eyed nod, holding up a hand in a vain attempt to block the heat from his face, feeling his eyebrows singeing upon his skin. With a hue

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and cry, both jumped back. The tent, devoured by fire, pitched toward them, collapsing forward with nothing but ash left at its base. Within the crumbling of the remaining wood frame and disintegrating canvass, a whoosh of flames rose higher as one wrenching, agonizing scream roared above the din.

For one suspended moment, the men stood motionless. In the next instant, they moved. Without word or gesture, each bent their head down and charged.

“Could we not have devised a less overt manner in which to deal with this matter?” Henry hissed into Suffolk’s ear.

Outside the smell of burning rubble clung to the air like a desperate grasp of a scorned lover. Dawn’s pale grey light tickled at the edge of the earth. In this broken place, physicians and surgeons attended to the wounded while soldiers and servants tread warily through the charred ruins in hopes of finding other survivors. Inside the king’s pavilion, the tension clung to every tendril of smoke that slithered in.

“Be gone.” Henry dismissed his attendants and guards with an angry flick of his hand, those who had rushed in at the first burst of flames, and threw himself into the embroidered crimson and wood chair in the corner. Head bent, shoulders curled, Henry pierced Suffolk with a potent stare through the tops of his eyes.

“I do not believe it was intentional, Sire—the fire, I mean,” Suffolk shook his head, unsure at this moment of the debacle’s details. He rubbed roughly at his forehead, as if to clear the jumble of thoughts in his mind. “He was wounded as well. Certainly it is not in an assassin’s plans to become injured while carrying out his duties.”

“Not a proficient one at any rate.” Henry bit off the snide words. “Was he at least successful? Did any others perish in this debacle?”

“The initial reports confirm the target has been eliminated. His wife and daughter as well. One other died, no one of consequence, but many are grievously wounded.”

Henry shook his head of red and gold curls. “Well, there is something in that I suppose.”

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“I will find out more.”

“Yes, you will.” With agitated impatience, Henry tapped his foot on the wood below his feet as Suffolk hovered by his side. “Now.”

“I...of course, Your Majesty.” With a quick bow, the Duke took his leave, fairly running as his sovereign’s ire pushed at his back. He stopped short at the door, halted by the apparitions standing in the aperture.

Wrapped in silk shift and dressing gown, the woman looked no less haughty; her soot stained chin rose from her chest and she walked toward them with shoulders squared. The child at her feet was nothing less than a saintly specter, dressed in white, blond curls forming a halo about her small face.

“I must speak with the king, *s’il vous plaît*,” the woman decreed, the English words lyrical upon her heavy French accent.

“I’m sorry, my lady,” Suffolk began, “but I’m afraid...”

“Let her pass,” Henry barked.

Stepping around a bowing Suffolk—perplexity emblazoned on his handsome face—the woman brought the child with her.

Henry rose from his chair, walking forward to greet her, and the crinkled confusion upon Suffolk’s ruddy face fell to slack jawed shock.

“Madame de Montlhéry.” Henry leaned over her hand as she made her obeisance. “Are you all right?”

“I am well, Your Majesty, *merci*.”

“I am most grateful for all your efforts on our behalf this night,” Henry said with a small shake of his head. “I am only sorry it has been botched so atrociously. But I am confident no dispersions will be thrown your way.”

The woman’s pale eyes strayed not a whit from his face. “I owe you my life. There is nothing you could not ask of me.”

Henry smiled benevolently, looking down at the child at their feet.

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“And who is this adorable creature you have brought to visit me?” he asked and began to lower his large frame.

“She is my cousin’s daughter.”

The King straightened as though struck, head snapping toward Suffolk, accusation sharp in his blue eyes. “His daughter? Are you sure?”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Madame de Montlhéry murmured, shuddering at the blast of her sovereign’s fury.

“I thought you said they had all perished?” the king snapped at the man hovering by the door.

“It is what I was guaranteed, Your Majesty,” Suffolk defended.

“Well, your assurances are meaningless, as is your control of this situation.”

“His wife lives as well,” the woman put forth. “She is...her face has been...no one will recognize her, I assure you. Nor do I believe, with the extent of her injuries, she will last much longer.”

Henry clasped his hands across his muscular chest, his knuckles turning white, the skin straining across the bone, clamping down upon his irritation though sorely tested.

“Suffolk,” the king hissed the name through barred teeth. “Take thee off and see for yourself that the man is dead. I trust nothing this day.”

“Your Majesty.” The duke bowed, rushing off, no doubt, with thanks to be gone from his incensed ruler’s presence, no longer certain his lifelong friendship could protect him further.

“Mum? See mum?” The tiny voice was no more than a squeak, the tug upon Madame de Montlhéry’s gown timid yet insistent.

They looked down upon the child as if seeing her for the first time, her presence all but forgotten in the turmoil of the past few moments.

Mme de Montlhéry looked at Henry expectantly, lips parting with elusive words.

Henry lowered himself on bending knees, making himself as small and unmenacing as possible. His smile spread wide, and it chased away any vestiges of annoyance left upon his

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features. The little girl shrank back, clutching the woman's legs, taking refuge behind the folds of her gown.

"Would you like a treat, my dear? Are you hungry?"

"She loves plum tarts, Your Highness," Montlhéry informed him.

"Is that true? Would you like a sugary plum tart?" Henry asked the wide eyed urchin.

Though she offered a halfhearted nod, the child remained in the wake of the woman's skirts, her large eyes growing moist and full with tears.

"Goodness, she is a sweet poppet, isn't she?" Henry's voice eased with tenderness.

"She is that, Sire." Montlhéry responded.

"How old is she?"

"A bit more than two."

Henry stared at the child, the pixie nose that spoke of her English heritage, the exquisitely shaped mouth of her French blood, the rosy cheeks, and the pale yellow ringlets.

Henry squinted, "Her eyes. Are her eyes...violet?"

The woman smiled with pride, but one edged sharply with bitterness. "They are, Sire, like her *grand-mère*."

"Do you know what I have learned in my few years as king, Madame?" Henry straightened, his gaze anchored on the child at their feet.

"No, Your Majesty, but I long for you to tell me."

"I have learned that weapons take on all forms. I have learned that beauty can be such a weapon."

The woman stared down at the child, a different light glinting in her eye. Where she had looked at the girl as a burden, she now gazed upon her as a blessing.

Henry began to pace, his slipper-shod feet plucking out a soft rhythm as he trod a circle around the woman and the child in the otherwise silent chamber, his hands once more clasped together, the steepled index fingers tapping lightly upon pursed lips.

"With your help, madame, I will make her my most powerful weapon."

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Madame de Montlhéry lowered her head of fading blond curls, and made her pledge. “I am yours to command, Your Highness, as always.”

Henry stopped before her, smiling with satisfaction. “Take her to your home, Madame, raise her as a proper French woman, but teach her to honor me above all, above God. Teach her not only to read and write, but languages as well, especially Italian.” Henry grew more and more inspired, moving again, spurred by dawning insights, striding to his chair and back again. The light behind his eyes glowing as his thoughts coalesced. “Teach her to cipher, and to shoot.”

Montlhéry’s head tilted. “To cipher and...and shoot?”

“Yes, my dear, to cipher and shoot.” Henry jumped to stand before her, grabbing the woman by her shoulders and leaning in, bringing his face within inches of her own. “We will make her the greatest spy there ever was, madame—not a person that became one in adulthood, but one *reared* as a spy. Is it not brilliant?”

“B...brilliant, *oui*,” Madame de Montlhéry responded, but with little confidence. She stared at the king with ill-disguised confusion.

“And most important of all, madame,” –he lowered his voice to a scheming whisper, conspirators bent over their cauldron of plans-- “we must teach her to kill.”

The heavy, dreadful words hung in the air between them; the silence hummed with their evil intent.

The child stared up at them, little comprehension of what passed between them, mesmerized by it all nonetheless.

“Can you do this for me, Elaine? Can you?”

She swayed at the sound of her name upon his lips. How well she remembered him speaking it as he saved her from the marauding French soldiers who violated her beside the lifeless body of her dead English husband; and months later, as he took her in the night with tenderness and passion.

“*Certes oui*, Henry. For you I can do anything.”

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He pulled her hard against him for a quick moment, only to thrust her back. Eager, he lowered again to the child. The small girl stared at the man before her, stepping out of the shadow of the woman, as if longing to bask in the magnetic man's light.

"What is her name?"

Elaine drew in a long draught of air, desperate to gain control, to breathe normally once more. "Geneviève, Geneviève de Hainaut."

"No, she cannot carry her father's name." He spoke with a soothing tone of comfort and kindness, knowing the child would understand this better than any words. With care he reached out a hand to Geneviève, watching for any sign that she might pull away from him.

"Come to me child," he cajoled, his voice as seductive as if he coaxed a lover to his bed. Their eyes met and he felt the thrill of capture. "You are mine now, and always will be."

The tiny bud-shaped mouth twitched with the slightest of smiles and Geneviève took a step forward, and then another. Henry reached out both hands to take her in his arms, and she surrendered as though capitulating to a beloved parent.

Looking up at the woman he had once known as a lover, Henry beamed, victorious. "Let her be known as Gravois, Geneviève Gravois, for it is indeed from out of the grave I have pulled her."

Elaine curtsied low, knowing she had secured the protection and loyalty of this king forever, yet feeling a tear of heartbreak and jealousy, as if she had lost him as well, lost him eternally to this child.

"As you wish, Your Majesty."

As Henry rose, child firm in his embrace, curled around his powerful form with head resting upon his shoulder, a squire rushed in, stopping short at the sight before him.

"Yes, what is it?" Henry demanded of the silent page.

"The French king, Your Highness. He is here and wishes to see you."

"Of course. Give me but a moment and send him in." Henry nodded with complete composure and turned to Elaine. "Quickly, madame, behind the screen."

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Elaine needed no further prodding; fear had gripped her at the thought of François I finding her in the chamber of Henry VIII. She scampered to the screen and its hidden chamber pot, her heels clicking out a frightened percussion. No sooner had the clacking faded away, then it was replaced by the clanging of armor and swords. Into the room François swept, contingent of fellows, as always, in his shadow.

“*Majesté*,” He rushed to Henry’s side, no smile of greeting in his eyes or upon his lips, purposeful with sincere concern. “*Comment allez-vous?* Are you all right? We could see the blaze from our camp. I came as soon as I could.”

“Have no fear, I am quite well. Many thanks.”

François shrugged off his gratitude. “What has happened here? Do you know?”

“I am looking into it, but already I have been assured it was nothing more than an accident, an overturned andiron, it would seem.”

“How dreadful. Have many perished?”

Henry chose his words with great care. “Four are dead, and many more injured.”

Henry hefted the slipping child in his arms a little higher. Though she grew heavier, she appeared wide awake, watching and listening to the two men with great intent. Henry smiled at her and her attentiveness.

“I have brought my physician and my surgeons.” François gestured toward the group behind him. “They are at your disposal.”

“Quite generous of you, but there is no need. My people have everything under control, I assure you.”

The penetrating eyes of the French King scanned his rival’s face, mystified by Henry’s refusal of assistance. In the moment of any catastrophe, a helping hand should be accepted with grace.

Henry recognized the mask of displeasure but cared little. His goal was to keep François from learning much, not appeasing his magnanimity.

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“But I am deeply grateful, nonetheless,” Henry placated. “And I will alert you at once should the need for aid arise. You have my solemn promise.”

“*Tres bien*. As you wish, of course. You will keep me apprised of the situation, I am sure.” François gave a small bow of acquiescence. For the first time, he noticed the child cleaving comfortably to the king’s shoulder. “And who is this beauty?”

“This? This is my cousin’s child. She seems to have wandered from her family in the ruckus,” Henry said.

As if she knew they spoke of her, the little girl plucked her head off her pillow and looked the French king in the eye. François laughed at her charm.

“You will take good care of her, yes?” François gently patted the little girl’s slipper-clad foot.

“Rest assured, Your Majesty. It is my greatest mission.”

“*Bon, bon*,” François nodded. “We will talk soon, Henry.”

“Of course, François.”

With another bow, the Frenchman turned and with a gesture to his compatriots, began to exit the makeshift castle.

As the king and the child watched the group quit the chamber, Henry pulled Geneviève closer; the little girl squirmed at the intensity of his grasp.

Leaning down, his moustache prickling her soft, tender skin, Henry whispered in her ear.

“That is the man who killed your parents.”

The creature writhed on the cot, her whimpers accompanied by the shushing sound of ragged skin rubbing against rough muslin sheets. The physician and his assistant worked upon her wounds, but there was little effort in their ministrations. The burns covered more than half her body and most of her face, the flesh raging red, raw, and moist.

“Has no one come looking for her?” the physician asked.

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“Not a one.” The woman beside him shook her wimple-clad head.

“Perhaps there is no one,” he clucked pitifully. “Perhaps she had made her way to the tent for the night. Such carousing as took place, who knows who ended up where.”

“A paramour?” the woman suggested.

“Perhaps. In any case, she won’t last long now. Continue the acanthus and thorn apple until her time comes, which, God willing should be soon. The least we can do for the poor wretch is keep the worst of her pain at bay.”

The physician stepped away, off to administer to someone with a chance of survival, and the woman reached for the crushed herbs and warmed water on the small table by the bedside. In the dim light of the tent, she mixed the minced dried leaves with the liquid, stirring as she crooned to her patient.

“This will help you, my dear. I swear it will, you’ll see.” With the tip of the small wooden spoon, she drizzled the concoction into the wounded woman’s mouth whenever she opened it to moan and croon.

“I wish I knew what you were trying to say,” the caretaker told her patient, gaze pitiful upon the festering flesh. “I wish I could hold you, but it would only bring you more pain.”

She stayed with her patient for a bit a longer, stroking the small spot upon the woman’s head that remained unscathed, until the dying creature began to drift off to sleep.

“Gen...gen...viève...” Gnarled lips mouthed the words. In her haze-filled mind, the wounded woman reached out her hand to the handsome man and the beautiful, golden haired child but neither heard her cry, neither took her hand.