

## Built to Destroy

“Tis’ finished, son. I’ll nail the last board while you gather straw.”

“Why must we build a new platform?”

“This one is lower—special—the only true kindness King Henry bestowed on this queen.”

“When does the spectacle begin?”

“In the morning hour. At nine.”

“Will we watch?”

“I advised against it but your mother has prepared a basket with barley bread and salted cod. Her mind is set on spending the day outdoors. We’ve had our yearly baths, and the weather is fine.”

“Is that why they chose this month of May? Has the lady had her bath too?”

“Never you mind! Back to work!”

“Father, where do I put the straw?”

“To the side. Gather it into a mound long enough to hide the weapon.”

“I know the purpose of the straw. I’m ten years old!”

“Then also check the stairs for weakness.”

“Father, look! I am taller than the platform.”

“Only by a hair.”

“I’ve heard her hair is so long she can sit on it.”

“A coif will contain her tresses.”

“Will it fly into the crowd?”

“Locks of her hair?”

“No. Her head.”

“Heaven forbid! A skilled headsman comes from Calais, France.”

“Is it heavy?”

“What a question! You have one attached to your own neck.”

“I mean the sword.”

“I beg you, son, stop your prattle.”

“But what does the sword weigh?”

“Maybe the heft of a small leg of lamb.”

“Will she see the sword?”

“A cloth covers her eyes.”

“Is she guilty?”

“That is for the king to decide. I fear his heart no longer distinguishes between justice and injustice, love and hate. They are so often yoked.”

“Father, you are standing where she will kneel tomorrow.”

“That I am, son. That I am.”

“Anne is Mother’s name, too.”

“And they share the same birth year.”

“What becomes of the queen’s little girl?”

“Yes, poor unfortunate Elizabeth. No doubt a woman has already been placed in care of the child. The king wanted a male heir.”

“But no one could replace *my* mother. Were you happy I was born a boy?”

“Enough tongue wagging. Our task is finished.”

\*\*\*\*\*

“The platform is grand. Excellent work, my husband.”

“Our boy was a helpful yet talkative apprentice.”

“Father. Have people come to pray for the queen, just like Mother?”

“No, son. Not everyone will pray.”

“I thought she was to be burned at the stake.”

“The king has granted unaccustomed mercy to his wife. Aye. The crowd is pressing. The populace of London is nearing the tower.”

“She’s arrived! Oh, husband! The queen’s face is regal even under dire circumstances. Her neck, so slender and white.”

“White as yours before we married and toiled under the red sun.”

“Where are her jewels—what am I thinking? She has no need of them now.”

“Mother, if I were rich I’d buy you a string of pearls.”

“If you wasted twopence on vain decorations I’d give you a thrashing!”

“Mother, I’m hungry.”

“First, serve your father the top crust of our loaf.”

“Nay. My appetite has vanished.”

“If only she had birthed a future king . . .”

“Oh wife, you know he regards women as chattel, mere objects—”

“Hush, husband! The queen is ascending the stairs.”

“Our steps are strong, Father. I jumped twelve times on each. Not a wobble.”

“She’s about to speak her final words.”

“Wife, your cheeks are pale.”

“I was not prepared for such emotion.”

“Father, why do some people weep and others laugh?”

“Everyone is unsure how to behave. Woman! Your grip is biting my arm.”

“Will no one stop this?”

“A madman with unfathomable powers gave the orders. Release your relentless grasp!”

“Husband, lower your voice when speaking of our king.”

“I prefer *never* to speak of him.”

“Such a senseless loss.”

“Do not distress yourself, my dear. Every life carries a death sentence.”

“To observe the occasion feels criminal.”

“For the love of God, woman!”

“Oh, husband, I’ve made a poor decision to come.”

“Father, did the queen make a poor decision?”

“Yes. She confused power and noble rank with love.”

“We love each other, right, Mother?”

“Take my hand, dear, it’s trembling.”

“The lady just forgave the masked man. For what?”

“For the deed he must perform.”

“The queen is kneeling. Will it be soon?”

“Too soon, son. We should not bear witness!”

\*\*\*\*\*

“I’m grateful we averted our eyes.”

“We should have covered our ears.”

“The gasp of the crowd will echo forever in our minds.”