The Cousins' War

The Red Queen

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The light of the open sky is brilliant after the darkness of the inner rooms. I blink and hear the roar of many voices. But this is not my army calling for me, this whisper growing to a rumble is not their roar of attack, the drumming of their swords on shields. The rippling noise of linen in the wind is not my embroidered angels and lilies against the sky, but cursed English standards in the triumphant May breeze. This is a different sort of roar from our bellowed hymns, this is a howl of people hungry for death: my death.

Ahead of me, and towering above me as I step over the threshold from my prison into the town square, is my destination: a wood stack, with a stepladder of rough staves leaning against it. I whisper: 'A cross. May I have a cross?' And then, louder: 'A cross! I must have a cross!' And some man, a stranger, an enemy, an Englishman, one of those that we call 'goddams' for their unending blaspheming, holds out a crucifix of whittled wood, roughly made, and I snatch it without pride from his dirty hand. I clutch it as they push me towards the wood pile and thrust me up the ladder, my feet scraping on the rough rungs as I climb up, higher than my own height, until I reach the unsteady platform hammered into the top of the bonfire, and they turn me, roughly, and tie my hands around the stake at my back.

It all goes so slowly then that I could almost think that time itself has frozen and the angels are coming down for me. Stranger things have happened. Did not the angels come for me when I was herding sheep? Did they not call me by name? Did I not lead an army to the relief of Orléans? Did I not crown the Dauphin and drive out the English? Just me? A girl from Domrémy, advised by angels?

They light the kindling all around the bottom, and the smoke eddies and billows in the breeze. Then the fire takes hold and a hot cloud shrouds me, and makes me cough, blinking, my eyes streaming. Already it is scalding my bare feet. I step from one foot to another, foolishly, as if I hope to spare myself discomfort, and I peer through the smoke in case someone is running with buckets of water, to say that the king that I crowned has forbidden this; or the English, who bought me from a soldier, now acknowledge that I am not theirs to kill, or that my church knows that I am a good girl, a good woman, innocent of everything but serving God with a passionate purpose.

There is no saviour among the jostling crowd. The noise swells to a deafening shriek: a mixture of shouted blessings and curses, prayers and obscenities. I look upwards to the blue sky for my angels descending, and a log shifts in the pyre below me, and my stake rocks, and the first sparks fly up and scorch my jacket. I see them land and glow like fireflies on my sleeve, and I feel a dry scratching in my throat and I cough from the smoke and whisper like a little girl: 'Dear God, save me, Your daughter! Dear God, put down Your hand for me. Dear God, save me, Your maid …'

There is a crash of noise and a blow to my head and I am sitting, bewildered, on the floorboards of my bedroom, my hand to my bruised ear, looking around me like a fool and seeing nothing. My lady companion opens my door and, seeing me, dazed, my prayer stool tipped over, says irritably: 'Lady Margaret, go to bed. It is long past your bedtime. Our Lady does

not value the prayers of disobedient girls. There is no merit in exaggeration. Your mother wants you up early in the morning, you can't stay up all night praying, it is folly.'

She slams the door shut and I hear her telling the maids that one of them must go in now and put me to bed and sleep beside me to make sure I don't rise up at midnight for another session of prayer. They don't like me to follow the hours of the church, they stand between me and a life of holiness, because they say I am too young and need my sleep. They dare to suggest that I am showing off, playing at piety, when I know that God has called me and it is my duty, my higher duty, to obey Him.

But even if I were to pray all night, I wouldn't be able to recapture the vision that was so bright, just a moment ago; it is gone. For a moment, for a sacred moment, I was there: I was the Maid of Orléans, the holy Joan of France. I understood what a girl could do, what a woman could be. Then they drag me back to earth, and scold me as if I were an ordinary girl, and spoil everything.

'Our Lady Mary guide me, angels come back to me,' I whisper, trying to return to the square, to the watching crowds, to the thrilling moment. But it has all gone. I have to haul myself up the bedpost to stand, I am dizzy from fasting and praying, and I rub my knee where I knocked it. There is a wonderful roughness on the skin, and I put my hand down and pull up my nightgown to see both knees, and they are the same: roughened and red. Saints' knees, praise God, I have saints' knees. I have prayed so much, and on such hard floors, that the skin of my knees is becoming hard, like the callus on the finger of an English longbow-man. I am not yet ten years old; but I have saints' knees. This has got to count for something, whatever my old lady governess may say to my mother about excessive and theatrical devotion. I have saints' knees. I have scuffed the skin of my knees by continual prayer, these are my stigmata: saints' knees. Pray God I can meet their challenge and have a saint's end too.

I get into bed, as I have been ordered to do; for obedience, even to foolish and vulgar women, is a virtue. I may be the daughter of a man who was one of the greatest of English commanders in France, one of the great Beaufort family, and so heir to the throne of Henry VI of England, but still I have to obey my lady governess and my mother as if I were any other ordinary girl. I am highly placed in the kingdom, cousin to the king himself – though dreadfully disregarded at home, where I have to do as I am told by a stupid old woman who sleeps through the priest's homily, and sucks sugared plums through grace. I count her as a cross I have to bear, and I offer her up in my prayers.

These prayers will save her immortal soul – despite her true deserts – for, as it happens, my prayers are especially blessed. Ever since I was a little girl, ever since I was five years old, I have known myself to be a special child in the sight of God. For years I thought this was a unique gift, sometimes I would feel the presence of God near me, sometimes I would sense the blessing of Our Lady. Then, last year, one of the veteran soldiers from France, begging his way back to his parish, came to the kitchen door when I was skimming the cream, and I heard him ask the dairymaid for something to eat, for he was a soldier who had seen miracles: he had seen the girl they called the Maid of Orléans.

'Let him come in!' I commanded, scrambling down from my stool.

'He's dirty,' she replied. 'He's coming no closer than the step.'

He shuffled into the doorway, swinging a pack to the floor. 'If you could spare some milk, little lady,' he whined. 'And perhaps a crust of bread for a poor man, a soldier for his lord and his country—'

'What did you say about the Maid of Orléans?' I interrupted. 'And miracles?'

The maid behind me muttered under her breath, and raised her eyes, and cut him a crust of dark rye bread and poured a rough earthenware mug of milk. He almost snatched it from her hand and poured it down his throat. He looked for more.

'Tell me,' I commanded.

The maid nodded to him that he must obey me, and he turned and bowed. 'I was serving with the Duke of Bedford in France when we heard of a girl who was riding with the French,' he said. 'Some thought her a witch, some thought her in league with the devil. But my doxy ...' The maid snapped her fingers at him and he choked down the word. 'A young woman I happened to know, a French young woman, told me that this girl Joan from Domrémy had spoken to angels and promised to see the French prince crowned and on the throne of France. She was only a maid, a girl from the country, but she said that angels spoke to her and called her to save her country from us.'

I was entranced. 'Angels spoke to her?'

He smiled ingratiatingly. 'Yes, little lady. When she was a girl no older than you.'

'But how did she make people listen to her? How did she make them see she was special?'

'Oh, she rode a great white horse, and she wore men's clothes, even armour. She had a banner of lilies and angels, and when they brought her to the French prince, she knew him among all his court.'

'She wore armour?' I whispered wonderingly, as if it was my life unfolding before me, and not the story of a strange French girl. What could I be, if only people would realise that the angels spoke to me, just as they did to this Joan?

'She wore armour and she led her men in battle.' He nodded. 'I saw her.'

I gestured to the dairymaid. 'Get him some meat and small ale to drink.' She flounced off to the buttery and the strange man and I stepped outside the dairy and he dropped to a stone seat beside the back door. I stood waiting, as she dumped a platter at his feet, and he crammed food into his mouth. He ate like a starving dog, without dignity, and when he was done and draining his mug I returned to the inquiry. 'Where did you first see her?'

'Ah,' he said, wiping his mouth on his sleeve. 'We were set for siege before a French town called Orléans, certain to win. We always won in those days, before her. We had the longbow, and they didn't, we just used to slice them down, it was like aiming at the butts for us. I was a bowman.' Then he paused as if ashamed at stretching the truth too far. 'I was a fletcher,' he corrected himself. 'I made the arrows. But our bowmen won every battle for us.'

'Never mind that, what about Joan?'

'I am telling about her. But you have to understand that they had no chance of winning. Wiser and better men than she knew they were lost. They lost every battle.'

'But she?' I whispered.

'She claimed she heard voices, angels talking to her. They told her to go to the French prince – a simpleton, a nothing – to go to him and make him take his throne as king and then drive us from our lands in France. She found her way to the king and told him he must take up his throne and let her lead his army. He thought she might have the gift of prophecy, he didn't know – but he had nothing to lose. Men believed in her. She was just a country girl, but she dressed as a man at arms, she had a banner embroidered with lilies and angels. She sent a messenger to a church and there they found an old crusader sword exactly where she said it would be – it had been hidden for years.'

‘She did?’

He laughed and then coughed and spat phlegm. ‘Who knows? Perhaps there was some truth in it. My dox ... my woman friend thought that Joan was a holy maid, called by God to save France from us English. Thought she couldn’t be touched by a sword. Thought she was a little angel.’

‘And what was she like?’

‘A girl, just a girl like you. Small, bright-eyed, full of herself.’

My heart swelled. ‘Like me?’

‘Very like you.’

‘Did people tell her what to do all the time? Tell her she knew nothing?’

He shook his head. ‘No, no, she was the commander. She followed her own vision of herself. She led an army of more than four thousand and fell on us when we were camped outside Orléans. Our lords couldn’t get our men forwards to fight her; we were terrified of the very sight of her. Nobody would raise a sword against her. We all thought she was unbeatable. We went on to Jargeau and she chased after us, on the attack, always on the attack. We were all terrified of her. We swore she was a witch.’

‘A witch or guided by angels?’ I demanded.

He smiled. ‘I saw her at Paris. There was nothing evil about her. She looked like God Himself was holding her up on that big horse. My lord called her a flower of chivalry. Really.’

‘Beautiful?’ I whispered. I am not a pretty girl myself, which is a disappointment to my mother; but not to me, for I rise above vanity.

He shook his head and said exactly what I wanted to hear. ‘No, not pretty, not a pretty little thing, not girlish; but the light shone from her.’

I nodded. I felt that at that very moment, I understood – everything. ‘Is she fighting still?’

‘God bless you for a little fool, no: she’s dead. Dead, what – about twenty years ago.’

‘Dead?’

‘The tide turned for her after Paris, we threw her back from the very walls of the city but it was a close thing – think of it! She nearly took Paris! And then in the end a Burgundy soldier pulled her off her white horse in a battle,’ the beggar said matter-of-factly. ‘Ransomed her to us, and we executed her.We burned her for heresy.’

I was horrified. ‘But you said she was guided by the angels!’

‘She followed her voices to her death,’ he said flatly. ‘But they examined her and said she was a virgin indeed. She was Joan the Maid in truth. And she saw true when she thought we would be defeated in France. I think we are lost now. She made a man of their king and she made an army out of their soldiers. She was no ordinary girl. I don’t expect to see such a one again. She was burning up long before we put her on the pyre. She was ablaze with the Holy Spirit.’

I took a breath. ‘I am such a one as her,’ I whispered to him.

He looked down at my rapt face and laughed. ‘No, these are old stories,’ he said. ‘Nothing to a girl like you. She is dead and will be soon forgotten. They scattered her ashes so no-one could make her a shrine.’

‘But God spoke to her, a girl,’ I whispered. ‘He did not speak to the king, nor to a boy. He spoke to a girl.’

The old soldier nodded. ‘I don’t doubt she was sure of it,’ he said. ‘I don’t doubt she heard the voices of angels. She must have done. Otherwise she couldn’t have done what she did.’

I heard my governess's shrill call from the front door of the house and I turned my head for a moment as the soldier picked up his pack and swung it round on his back.

'But is this true?' I demanded with sudden urgency as he started to walk in a long, loping stride towards the stable yard and the gate to the road.

'Soldiers' tales,' he said indifferently. 'You can forget them, and forget her, and God knows, nobody will remember me.'

I let him go, but I did not forget Joan, and I will never forget Joan. I pray to her by name for guidance and I close my eyes and try to see her. Ever since that day, every soldier that comes to the door of Bletsoe begging for food is told to wait, for little Lady Margaret will want to see him. I always ask them if they were at Les Augustins, at Les Tourelles, at Orléans, at Jargeau, at Beaugency, at Patay, at Paris? I know her victories as well as I know the names of our neighbouring villages in Bedfordshire. Some of the soldiers were at these battles, some of them even saw her. They all speak of a slight girl on a big horse, a banner over her head, glimpsed where the fighting was the fiercest, a girl like a prince, sworn to bring peace and victory to her country, giving herself to the service of God, nothing more than a girl, nothing more than a girl like me: but a heroine.

Next morning, at breakfast, I learn why I was banned from praying through the night. My mother tells me to prepare for a journey, a long journey. 'We are going to London,' she says calmly. 'To court.'

I am thrilled at the thought of a trip to London but I take care not to exult like a vain proud girl. I bow my head and whisper: 'As you wish, Lady Mother.' This is the best thing that could happen. My home at Bletsoe, in the heart of the county of Bedfordshire, is so quiet and dull that there is no chance for me to resist the perils of the world. There are no temptations to overcome, and no-one sees me but servants and my older half-brothers and -sisters and they all think of me as a little girl, of no importance. I try to think of Joan, herding her father's sheep at Domrémy, who was buried like me, among miles of muddy fields. She did not complain of being bored in the country, she waited and listened for the voices to summon her to greatness. I must do the same.

I wonder if this command to go to London is the voice I have been waiting for, calling me to greatness now. We will be at the court of the good King Henry VI. He must welcome me as his nearest kin, I am all but his cousin, after all. His grandfather and my grandfather were half-brothers, which is a very close connection when one of you is king and the other is not, and he himself passed a law to recognise my family, the Beauforts, as legitimate though not royal. Surely, he will see in me the light of holiness that everyone says is in him. He must claim me as both kin and kindred spirit. What if he decides I shall stay at court with him? Why not? What if he wants to take me as his advisor, as the Dauphin took Joan of Arc? I am his second cousin and I can almost see visions of the saints. I am only nine years old but I hear the voices of angels and I pray all night when they let me. If I had been born a boy I would be all but the Prince of Wales now. Sometimes I wonder if they wish I had been born a boy and that is why they are blind to the light that shines within me. Could it be that they are so filled with the sin of pride in our place that they wish I was a boy, and ignore the greatness that is me, as a holy girl?

'Yes, Lady Mother,' I say obediently.

‘You don’t sound very excited,’ she says. ‘Don’t you want to know why we are going?’

Desperately. ‘Yes, if you please.’

‘I am sorry to say that your your betrothal to John de la Pole must be ended. It was a good match when it was made when you were six; but now you are to dissent from it. You will face a panel of judges who will ask you if you wish your betrothal to be ended and you will say “Yes”. Do you understand?’

This sounds very alarming. ‘But I won’t know what to say.’

‘You will just consent to the end of your betrothal. You will just say “Yes”.’

‘What if they ask me if I think it is the will of God? What if they ask me if this is the answer to my prayers?’

She sighs as if I am tiresome. ‘They won’t ask you that.’

‘And then what will happen?’

‘His Grace, the king, will appoint a new guardian, and, in turn, he will give you in marriage to the man of his choice.’

‘Another betrothal?’

‘Yes.’

‘Can I not go to an abbey?’ I ask very quietly, though I know what her answer will be. Nobody regards my spiritual gifts. ‘Now I am released from this betrothal can I not go now?’

‘Of course you can’t go to an abbey, Margaret. Don’t be stupid. Your duty is to bear a son and heir, a boy for our family, the Beauforts, a young kinsman to the King of England, a boy for the House of Lancaster. God knows, the House of York has boys enough. We have to have one of our own. You will give us one of our own.’

‘But I think I have a calling ...’

‘You are called to be mother of the next heir of Lancaster,’ she says briskly. ‘That is an ambition great enough for any girl. Now go and get ready to leave. Your women will have packed your clothes, you just have to fetch your doll for the journey.’

I fetch my doll and my own carefully copied book of prayers too. I can read French of course and also English, but I cannot understand Latin or Greek and my mother will not allow me a tutor. A girl is not worth educating, she says. I wish that I could read the gospels and prayers in Latin, but I cannot, and the handwritten copies in English are rare and precious. Boys are taught Latin and Greek and other subjects too; but girls need only be able to read and write, to sew, to keep the household accounts, to make music and enjoy poetry. If I were an abbess I would have access to a great library and I could set clerks to copy all the texts that I wanted to read. I would make the novices read to me all day. I would be a woman of learning instead of an untaught girl, as stupid as any ordinary girl.

If my father had lived, perhaps he would have taught me Latin. He was a great reader and writer; at least I know that much about him. He spent years in captivity in France when he studied every day. But he died just days before my first birthday. My birth was so unimportant to him that he was in France on campaign, trying to restore his fortune, when my mother was brought to bed, and he did not come home again until just before my first birthday, and then he died; so he never knew me and my gifts.

It will take us three days to get to London. My mother will ride her own horse but I am to ride pillion behind one of the grooms. He is called Wat and he thinks himself a great charmer in the stables and kitchen. He winks at me as if I would be friendly to a man such as him, and I frown to remind him that I am a

Beaufort and he is a nobody. I sit behind him, and I have to take tight hold of his leather belt, and when he says to me; 'Right and tight? Righty tighty?' I nod coldly, so as to warn him that I don't want him talking to me all the way to Ampthill.

He sings instead, which is just as bad. He sings love songs and hay-making songs in a bright tenor voice and the men who ride with us, to protect us from the armed bands who are everywhere in England these days, join in with him and sing too. I wish my mother would order them to be silent, or at least command them to sing psalms; but she is happy, riding out in the warm spring sunshine, and when she comes alongside me she smiles and says: 'Not far now, Margaret. We will spend tonight at Abbots Langley and go on to London tomorrow. Are you not too tired?'

I am so unprepared by those who should care for me that I haven't even been taught how to ride, and I am not allowed even to sit on a horse of my own and be led, not even when we arrive in London and hundreds of people in the streets and markets and shops gawp at the fifty of our household as we ride by. How am I to appear as the heroine who will save England if I have to jog behind Wat, seated pillion, my hand on his belt, like some village slut going to a goose fair? I am not at all like an heir to the House of Lancaster. We stay at an inn, not even at court, for the Duke of Suffolk, my guardian, was terribly disgraced and is now dead, so we cannot stay in his palace. I offer up to Our Lady the fact that we don't have a good London house of our own, and then I think that She too had to make do with a common inn at Bethlehem, when surely Herod must have had spare rooms in the palace. There must have been more suitable arrangements than a stable, surely? Considering who She was. And so I try to be resigned, like Her.

At least I am to have London clothes before we go to court for me to renounce my betrothal. My Lady Mother summons the tailors and the sempstresses to our inn and I am fitted for a wonderful gown. They say that the ladies of the court are wearing tall, conical headdresses, so high that a woman has to duck to get under a seven-foot doorway. The queen, Margaret of Anjou, loves beautiful clothes and is wearing a new colour of ruby red made from a new dye; they say it is as red as blood. My mother orders me a gown of angelic white by way of contrast, and has it trimmed with Lancaster red roses to remind everyone that I may be only a girl of nine years old but I am the heiress of our house. Only when the clothes are ready can we take a barge downriver to declare my dissent against my betrothal, and to be presented at court.

The dissent is a tremendous disappointment. I am hoping that they will question me and that I might stand before them, shy but clear-spoken, to say that I know from God Himself that John de la Pole is not to be my husband. I imagine myself before a tribunal of judges amazing them like Baby Jesus at the synagogue. I thought I might say that I had a dream which told me that I was not to marry him for I have a greater destiny: I am chosen by God Himself to save England! I am to be Queen of England and sign my name Margaret Regina: *Margaret R*. But there is no opportunity for me to address them, to shine. It is all written down before we arrive and all I am allowed to say is, 'I dissent', and sign my name, which is only Margaret Beaufort, and it is done. Nobody even asks me for my opinion on the matter.

We go to wait outside the presence chamber and then one of the king's men comes out and calls 'Lady Margaret Beaufort!' and everyone looks around and sees me. I have a moment, a really wonderful moment,

when I feel everyone looking at me and I remember to cast down my eyes, and despise worldly vanity, and then my mother leads the way into the king's presence chamber.

The king is on his great throne with his cloth of estate suspended over the chair and a throne almost the same size beside him for the queen. She is fair-haired, and brown-eyed, with a round pudding face and a straight nose. I think she looks beautiful and spoilt, and the king beside her looks fair and pale. I can't say I see any great light of holiness at this first inspection. He looks quite normal. He smiles at me as I come in and curtsey, but the queen looks from the red roses at the hem of my gown to the little coronet that holds my veil, and then looks away as if she does not think much of me. I suppose, being French, she does not understand who I am. Someone should have told her that if she does not have a baby then they will have to find another boy to be their heir for the House of Lancaster and it could well be mine. Then I am sure she would have paid me more attention. But she is worldly. The French can be terribly worldly, I have observed it from my reading. I am sure she would not even have seen the light in Joan the Maid. I cannot be surprised that she does not admire me.

Next to her is a most beautiful woman, perhaps the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. She is wearing a gown of blue with a silver thread running through which makes it shimmer like water. You would think her scaled like a fish. She sees me staring at her, and she smiles back at me, which makes her face light up with a warm beauty like sunlight on water on a summer's day.

'Who is that?' I whisper to my mother, who pinches my arm to remind me to be silent, 'Jacquetta Rivers. Stop staring,' my mother snaps, and pinches my arm again to recall me to the present. I curtsey very low and I smile at the king.

'I am giving your daughter in wardship to my dearly loved half-brothers, Edmund and Jasper Tudor,' the king says to my mother. 'She can live with you until it is time for her to marry.'

The queen looks away and whispers something to Jacquetta, who leans forwards like a willow tree beside a stream, the veil billowing around her tall headdress, to listen. The queen does not look much pleased by this news, but I am dumbfounded. I wait for someone to ask me for my consent so that I can explain that I am destined for a life of holiness, but my mother merely curtseys and steps back and then someone else steps forwards and it all seems to be over. The king has barely looked at me, he knows nothing about me, no more than he knew before I walked in the room, and yet he has given me to a new guardian, to another stranger. How can it be that he does not realise that I am a child of special holiness as he was? Am I not to have the chance to tell him about my saints' knees?

'Can I speak?' I whisper to my mother.

'No, of course not.'

Then how is he to know who I am, if God does not hurry up and tell him? 'Well, what happens now?'

'We wait until the other petitioners have seen the king, and then go in to dine,' she replies.

'No, I mean, what happens to me?'

She looks at me as if I am foolish not to understand. 'You are to be betrothed again,' she says. 'Did you not hear, Margaret? I wish you would pay attention. This is an even greater match for you. You are first going to be the ward, and then the wife of Edmund Tudor, the king's half-brother. The Tudor boys are the sons of the king's own mother, Queen Catherine of Valois, by her second marriage to Owen Tudor. There are two Tudor brothers, both great favourites of the king, Edmund and Jasper. Both half-royal, both favoured. You will marry the older one.'

‘Won’t he want to meet me first?’

‘Why would he?’

‘To see if he likes me?’

She shakes her head. ‘It is not you they want,’ she says. ‘It is the son you will bear.’

‘But I’m only nine.’

‘He can wait until you’re twelve,’ she says.

‘I am to be married then?’

‘Of course,’ she says, as if I am a fool to ask.

‘And how old will he be?’

She thinks for a moment. ‘Twenty-five.’

I blink. ‘Where will he sleep?’ I ask. I am thinking of the house at Bletsoe, which does not have an empty set of rooms for a hulking young man and his entourage, nor for his younger brother.

She laughs. ‘Oh, Margaret. You won’t stay at home with me. You will go to live with him and his brother, in Lamphey Palace, in Wales.’

I blink. ‘Lady Mother, are you sending me away to live with two full-grown men, to Wales, on my own? When I am twelve?’

She shrugs, as if she is sorry for it, but that nothing can be done. ‘It’s a good match,’ she says. ‘Royal blood on both sides of the marriage. If you have a son, his claim to the throne will be very strong. You are cousin to the king and your husband is the king’s half-brother. Any boy you have will keep Richard of York at bay for ever. Think of that, don’t think about anything else.’