THE JOURNEY, OCTOBER 1546

WE LEFT HERTFORDSHIRE ON the 1st of October in the year of our Lord, 1546, with a small caravan of two wagons and six guardsmen to protect us on our way.

Mr Ascham rode out in front astride his beloved courser, a big mare that had failed woefully as a jouster. My teacher didn't care; he had bought her for her gentle temperament. He rode with his longbow slung over his shoulder. He had written a book on the subject of archery in which he argued that every male of adult age in England should be compelled to become expert in the use of the bow. Indeed, whenever he travelled, he always wore his leather archer's ring on his right thumb and a bracer on his left forearm should ever he be required to notch an arrow at short notice.

Riding in the main wagon with Elsie and me was Mrs Primrose Ponsonby, who even in that bouncing cart sat with perfect poise, her back erect, her hands placed neatly in her

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lap. She was twenty-six years old, married but childless, and was more pious than a nun. The hood of her sky-blue travelling cape was perfectly pressed (its pale blue colour brought to my mind images of the Virgin Mary and I wondered if this was her intention), the powder on her face was flawlessly applied, and her lips were, as always, pursed in a scowl of disapproval. Everything offended her: the low neckline of Elsie's stomacher (a sign of the loose morals of the day), the mud-spattered armour of our escorts (lack of discipline), and, of course, Moslems ('Godless heathens who will burn in Hell'). At times I thought Mrs Ponsonby actually *liked* being offended.

Elsie couldn't stand her. 'Sanctimonious prude,' she muttered when Mrs Ponsonby yet again told Elsie to cover her décolletage with a shawl. 'We'd have more fun with Pope Paul himself as our chaperone.'

Mrs Ponsonby's husband, Llewellyn—a short, ruddy-faced man, as pious as his wife but from what I saw, more her servant than her equal—rode on a donkey beside our wagon. He was ever scurrying about doing her bidding, tripping over himself in his haste to effect commands that always began with the shrill call of: 'Llewellyn Ponsonby!'

I sighed. They were not exactly a winning example of the benefits of marriage and as chaperones, well, I feared that Elsie was right.

We had to pass through London on our way to Dover. There Mr Ascham and Mr Giles stopped briefly at Whitehall

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to collect something from my father: a gorgeous scarlet envelope with gilt edges similar to those of the Sultan's original invitation. This envelope was sealed with a dollop of wax that bore the imprint of my father's ring in its centre. A private note from king to king. My teacher would carry this envelope on his person for the duration of our journey.

I did not know what message or messages it contained. As I would discover later, neither did my teacher.

While I would have liked to, I did not accompany my teacher into the palace at Whitehall. I rarely saw my father and never in the harsh light of court. He loomed at the fringes of my world, a godlike figure whom I glimpsed occasionally but rarely saw in full.

Of course, he was spoken about every day. He was loved and feared, admired and feared, respected and feared. It was said by many that my father had executed more people than any English monarch before him. But he was also known for his keen, educated mind, his prowess at any kind of sport, his ability to write music and his fondness for any pretty thing in a skirt, even if she was married to another.

His interactions with me were usually perfunctory, businesslike affairs. I was a by-product of kinghood and a bothersome one at that: a daughter. He had been tender toward me on perhaps three occasions and on each of those occasions I'd adored him. His recent observation about me being 'old enough to bleed' was more the rule: my ability to marry and breed for England suddenly made me useful.

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Elsie and I lingered outside the palace under the watchful gaze of our two chaperones, our six guardsmen and seven recently beheaded traitors mounted on spikes above the gates.

The angry roars of a bear being baited rose from a nearby alley, followed by the cheers of a crowd. I peered into the alley and saw the poor animal: it was a mighty beast chained by the neck to a stake lodged in the ground and it bellowed with impotent rage as two mastiffs attacked it, drawing chunks from its hide. The bear managed to hit one of the dogs with a lusty swipe, and the dog went flying with a yelp into a wall, where it collapsed in a heap, mortally wounded. As it lay dying, another mastiff was released to take its place. The crowd cheered even more loudly.

Mrs Ponsonby was predictably appalled. 'I thought Englishmen were made of better stuff than this. Come, girls. Avert your eyes.'

On this rare occasion, I found myself agreeing with her.

After our short stop at Whitehall, we proceeded apace to Dover and thence across the Channel to Calais.

From there, at Mr Ascham's suggestion, we all changed into garments that were decidedly less colourful than the attire we had worn across southern England. Elsie and I wore plain cassocks and skirts without farthingales (which I must say made movement considerably easier). With her graceful neck, blonde hair and nubile body, Elsie still managed to look angelic even in that crude smock.

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Mrs Ponsonby puckered her lips in outrage when Mr Ascham made her don a plain brown travelling cloak. Her blue one, he said, was not appropriate for an overland journey across the Continent—dressing so would almost certainly attract the attention of bandits. Elsie could barely contain her delight at this exchange.

Mr Ascham dressed for our journey in a fashion that I feel warrants further description.

In Hertfordshire he always wore the stiff formal attire of a gentleman: ruff, gown, bulging breeches and stockinged feet. But now he donned an outfit that was decidedly different: full-length brown trousers of a sturdy weave, knee-high brown riding boots and a brown jerkin made of tough Spanish leather. Over this he draped a longcoat of oiled black canvas that reached all the way to his ankles. On his head he placed a broad-brimmed brown hat that seemed impervious to rain.

All this gave my beloved schoolmaster a far more rugged appearance than that to which I was accustomed. He looked more like an explorer or an adventurer than a little girl's teacher from Hertfordshire.

He looked harder, rougher, and perhaps even a little dashing.

We made good progress through France.

Although nominally my father was the King of France, such an appellation seemed a sore point to the local inhabitants, so we travelled through the lands of the Franks incognito,

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disguising our status to the extent that we did not even stay overnight in the homes of royal relatives.

Instead we lodged at taverns and public houses which were usually foul-smelling and rancid places not suitable for dogs let alone human beings. On a handful of occasions—yes, it's true!—we even slept in our wagons by the side of the road while our guards stood watch in the firelight.

While I'd been somewhat saddened at Whitehall by the entertainments of my fellow Englishmen, I was shocked by the ways of the French countryfolk: at their wanton drinking and revelling, and their appalling personal hygiene. A man would piss into the gutter and then immediately use his unwashed hands to grasp a chicken leg and eat it.

I mentioned this to my teacher, asking what such sights could possibly add to my royal education.

'Bess,' he said. 'The majority at court may not think that you will ever sit on the throne of England, but in matters of succession one should never discount even the most remote heir. Should Edward catch smallpox and Mary, with her zealous faith, put the court offside, then you will find yourself Queen of England, Ireland and France. And if you do, then the education you receive from me will be decisive in whether or not you are a *good* queen of England. This journey will be the easiest lesson I shall ever give you, for all you have to do is watch. Watch and observe the customs, activities and proclivities of real people, for it is real people over whom a king or queen rules.'

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Although not entirely convinced, I said that I would do so.

Each evening, wherever we happened to be staying, Mr Ascham and Mr Giles would play chess. Usually Mr Giles won, but not before the game had lasted some time and only a few pawns and the kings remained on the board. I would often retire before they finished.

One day I asked my teacher why, if Mr Giles was such a highly regarded chess player, he needed to play every evening.

Mr Ascham said, 'It is especially important that Mr Giles keep his mind fresh and alert. Playing chess is no different from any other sport. As with jousting or archery, one must keep one's muscles practised and prepared.'

'Sport? You call chess a sport?'

'Why, of course!' Mr Ascham seemed shocked. 'It is the greatest of all sports, for it pits the player against his foe on an absolutely equal footing. Size is no advantage in chess. Nor is age or even—young miss—gender. Both players have the same pieces, which all move in accordance with the same rules. Chess is the sport of sports.'

'But a sport is a physical activity. Must not the definition of a sport be that a player is made weary from the exertions involved in its play or at least perspires while engaging in it? Chess is but a parlour game which fails on both counts.'

'A parlour game! A *parlour* game!' Mr Ascham exclaimed indignantly. But instead of arguing the matter further with me,

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he simply nodded in acquiescence. 'All right. Let us accept your definition for now, and from our observations of the upcoming tournament, let us see if chess qualifies as a sport in accordance with it.'

While they played their nightly matches, Mr Ascham and Mr Giles would converse casually—discussing that day's journey or the rise of Martin Luther or any other matter that took their interest.

I admired the easy way they chatted. They were, quite simply, good friends: so comfortable with each other that they could talk about anything, from honest advice to criticism. One day, as I rode on Mr Ascham's horse with him, I asked him how and when he and Mr Giles had become friends.

My teacher laughed softly. 'We were both hopelessly in love with the same girl.'

'You were rivals and now you are the best of friends? I don't understand.'

'She was a local debutante and the most beautiful girl in all of Cambridge.' Mr Ascham shook his head. 'Beautiful but also wilful. Giles and I were students, brash and young. We competed shamelessly for her affections—I with awful love poems, he with flowers and wit—and she happily accepted *both* of our advances before she ran off and married the heir to a vast estate who turned out to be a drunk and a fool and who eventually lost all his lands to a moneylender. I don't know what became of her but out of our combined failure Giles and I became firm friends.'

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'And now he teaches at Cambridge?'

'Yes. Secular philosophy. William of Occam, Aquinas, Duns Scotus, that sort of thing.'

'And he is a bachelor like you, is he not?' I asked, trying my best to sound innocent. Elsie was particularly curious about this. She thought Mr Giles quite fetching, 'in an intellectual kind of way'.

'Indeed he is,' Mr Ascham said, 'but unlike me, not by choice. Giles was married once—to the daughter of his philosophy professor, a brilliant and delightful girl named Charlotte Page. Charlotte's father allowed her to sit in on his lectures, hiding at the back of the room, and thus she learned everything the boys did. She was a match for any of them and Giles simply adored her. They married, but a year after they were wed, she took ill with the plague and died at the age of twenty-one. Giles has shown no interest in courting since.'

I looked over at Mr Giles riding on his horse nearby, staring idly at the landscape, lost in thought, and I wondered if he was thinking about her. 'Poor Mr Giles.'

Mr Ascham smiled grimly. 'Yes. But then, is it better to love deeply and truly for a short while than to never love at all?'

I didn't know. At that stage in my life, boys were an oddity. Whereas only a year before I had found them annoying, now I found them intriguing. The idea of actually loving one, however, was a vague notion at best.

'Is this why you are a bachelor?' I asked. 'Are you waiting for a similar all-abiding love?'

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'I may well be,' my teacher said. 'But the real reason is that I have certain projects I wish to complete before I settle down.'

'Such as?'

'Well, for one thing, you.'

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THE HABSBURG LANDS

AT LENGTH WE VENTURED ACROSS BURGUNDY, through the Rhine Valley, and into the lands of the Habsburgs.

Moving in a wide arc around the mountains that guard the Swiss Confederation, we passed through thick forests and spectacular valleys and beheld the soaring castles of the Germanic nobility.

I imagine that I travelled with a permanent expression of wonder on my face—every day of our journey brought new sights, new peoples, new cultures.

In the Habsburg lands, our lodgings improved. Through a labyrinthine network of intermarriage that not even the Astronomer Royal could calculate, my father's family had many distant relatives in these parts and it was their hospitality that we enjoyed. (It did not escape my notice that in France, where my father was supposedly king, we had moved with stealth and caution, while in the Germanic regions,

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where he held no such title, we travelled openly and freely.)

We stayed in grand country houses and sometimes in castles perched on hilltops, and we ate according to our station once again: roasted venison, manchet, red deer pasties and some of the most delightful gingerbreads. To the evident disapproval of our chaperones, on one occasion Mr Ascham and Mr Giles partook of Rhenish, a strong German wine (and I know that Elsie managed to quickly quaff a glass of the stuff, too). All three of them complained of stinging headaches the next morning. The pious Ponsonbys drank only pear cider and suffered no such ills.

The further eastward we travelled, however, the more we stayed at the taverns and *Bierhallen* found in the mining towns of Bavaria. Here Mr Giles would play chess against talented locals while we observed or ate.

I watched these games keenly, utterly enthralled, while Mrs Ponsonby knitted calmly by my side, outwardly uninterested but in truth, ever watchful.

Elsie, on the other hand—and it must be said, she was quite easily bored—would sometimes watch, but more often she would disappear to our rooms or to some other place I knew not where. And just as Elsie didn't care for Mrs Ponsonby, Mrs Ponsonby didn't care about Elsie: 'My job is to watch over you and you alone, Elizabeth,' she said to me once. 'I leave it to our good Lord to save the soul of that little slut.'

In any case, I thoroughly enjoyed watching Mr Giles play. He was a most inventive and clever player.

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Some evenings, he would give me lessons in chess. Like many inexperienced players, I was always using my queen to carve great swathes through his pieces, but then he would invariably take my rampaging lady with a knight I had not seen coming. Many times he would take her after checking my king with that same knight, a move he called a *fork*.

'The knight is the queen's greatest enemy,' he told me at one tavern, 'for while the queen can replicate every other piece's moves, she cannot mimic the knight's leaps. Thus, whenever you move your queen, always keep an eye out for a knight's fork. Never let her land on a square that will allow an enemy knight to take her and your king at once. It is the amateur player's greatest mistake.'

After watching him play many games, I began to notice that Mr Giles used two kinds of openings, rarely deviating from them. When I asked my teacher why this was so, he explained that Mr Giles was 'controlling the centre of the board' and 'providing a foundation for later attacks'. I just liked taking pieces.

When he played with me, Mr Giles would often say, 'Now, Bess, in chess, never play the pieces, play your opponent. Watch his eyes, watch for the moments when he blinks excessively, or when he holds his breath: for those are the times when your foe is planning something. Likewise, control your own expressions, because in life as in chess, your face can betray your intentions.' As he said this, he gave me a meaningful look: 'This is especially important for queens and princesses.'

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He smiled. I smiled back. I liked Mr Giles.

Mr Giles also laid fiendish traps for his opponents and, again, after watching him play many times, I began to see when he laid them. On those occasions, I would wait tensely for him to spring his trap (and true to his own dictum, he never let his facial expression give away his intentions).

His chief trap occurred when his opponent castled. On seeing this, Mr Giles would casually position his queen in front of one of his bishops and wait for his moment.

Then just when his opponent thought the game was moving on to a new phase, Mr Giles would strike like a cobra. His queen would rush diagonally across the length of the board until she stood nose to nose with her rival king and, protected by her trusty bishop far behind her, Mr Giles would quietly say, 'Checkmate.'

At one tavern, Mr Giles did exactly this move and it enraged his opponent, a local salt miner who fancied himself at the game and was reputedly unbeaten in that town. Upon being mated, the miner kicked back his chair, rose and shoved Mr Giles harshly backwards.

Mr Ascham, standing nearby, moved with surprising speed and caught Mr Giles before he hit the ground.

The miner loomed above them, a stout fellow with a face enfilthed by his day's labour underground.

'You cheated!' he growled.

'I apologise for beating you, sir, but I did not cheat,' Mr Giles said in a conciliatory way.

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'We will play again!' the goliath boomed.

Mr Ascham stepped forward. 'I think we are done for the evening. Perhaps we can buy you a drink as thanks for a game well played.'

'Or maybe I will break you both in two, rut your little girl here, and then buy myself a drink!' the miner said. A few of his friends chuckled ominously.

'That will not happen,' Mr Ascham said, his voice even.

The big miner stiffened. The entire bar went quiet. I gazed around at the crowd who were now taking a keen interest in the confrontation.

The miner locked eyes with my teacher. 'I know you travel with guardsmen, foreigner, but your guards are outside now. I will have beaten you to a pulp before they get through that door.'

Then, with a suddenness that shocked me, the miner lunged at my teacher, swinging a massive fist at his face.

Mr Ascham moved with a speed I had not thought him capable of.

He ducked the behemoth's lusty blow and then bobbed up and loosed a brief but powerful punch to the big man's throat, striking him squarely in the Adam's apple.

The enormous miner stopped dead in his tracks. His eyes bulged red and he gasped for breath as if he were choking. His hands clutched at his throat as he dropped to his knees.

My teacher, calmer than calm, his eyes steady and unblinking, stood over him. The miner was at his mercy.

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'My friend played a fair game, sir, and he meant no offence. Nor do I. I do not desire to hurt you any more.' Mr Ascham's eyes scanned the hall for any who might wish to avenge their choking friend. 'But I will defend my travelling party if you make me.'

He pushed Mr and Mrs Ponsonby and me toward the door. Mr Giles followed, walking backwards. Elsie appeared then from somewhere—a side door, I believe; she must have heard the ruckus—and joined us at the exit.

Mr Ascham threw a couple of silver coins to the floor in front of the kneeling man. 'We bid you all good night and shall forthwith take our leave.'

We left that mining town immediately and made camp in some woods far to the east much later that evening. But as we rode away from that town I saw my teacher's hands on his reins.

They were shaking.

The following day, as I rode in the cart alongside Mr Ascham on his horse, I said, 'Mr Ascham, I was unaware you were so, well, capable in a fight. Have you always been so?'

My teacher shook his head. 'I'm no great fighter, Bess. In fact, had that fight gone on any longer, that miner would probably have knocked me senseless. But I did enough to get us all out of there safely, which was all I wanted to do.' He smiled sadly. 'Bess, despite all of humanity's many advances in medicine, the sciences, architecture and the arts, we live

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in a brutish world, one in which force is still the ultimate arbiter.'

'But what about England? Is it not a nation of laws?' I argued, just as my teacher had taught me. 'The rule of law is what makes ours a civilised nation.'

Mr Ascham snuffed a laugh. 'We are not so civilised.'

'But I can walk down any street in Hertfordshire without fear of any bodily harm.'

'This is true. But do you know why that is the case?'

'Because of the rule of law.' I thought some more. 'Because the average Englishman knows that it is better for all if all obey the law.'

'Bess, if someone were to harm a hair on your head, your father would have that man's head cut off and placed above Aldgate. Your safety is guaranteed by the violence at your father's disposal. If you were to walk a street in the north, in a town where your identity as the king's daughter was unknown, you would not be so safe.'

'So what are you saying?' I asked. 'Might is right?'

'That is exactly what I am saying, and it was why as a young man I made sure I learned some incapacitating fighting moves such as you witnessed last night. It is also why I am an advocate of proficiency with the bow. Now that I think of it, it might be wise to add some basic defensive techniques to your curriculum.'

'You intend to teach me to *fight*?'

'*Mister* Ascham!' Mrs Ponsonby said indignantly from the seat beside me. She had been eavesdropping and not so subtly.

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'I must protest! A lady, much less a princess, needs no such skills. I pray that you will reconsider this rash idea.'

'Thank you for your concern and for your prayers, Mrs Ponsonby, but I feel this could be a worthwhile lesson for—'

'I might have to inform the king of this upon our return,' Mrs Ponsonby interrupted.

'Please do so,' Mr Ascham replied reasonably. 'I have always welcomed his views on my teaching methods. Until then, such decisions are mine, not yours, so I fear I must overrule you on this matter.' He was always courteous with her, despite her breathtaking pomposity. I barely contained my smile.

He turned to face me. 'Bess, perhaps I have not adequately informed you of my ultimate intention in your education. I intend to make you *formidable*. By the time I am done with you, I would hope that if you were turned out of England in nothing but your petticoat, you would be able to live capably anywhere in Christendom.'

I liked the sound of that education.

At lunch the next day Mr Ascham began my new curriculum in personal defence with a question: 'All right, Bess, what do you think is the first strategy you should employ in a fight?'

I raised my fists. 'This?'

'No. Wrong. You should run. If you are not there to be hit, you cannot *be* hit.'

My brow furrowed. 'That sounds very cowardly. And not very English.'

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'The world is not very English. Be it a stupid tavern brawl or a naval battle, a scrap avoided is the best result for everyone concerned.'

'But last night you did not avoid the scrap.'

'Last night I had a responsibility that I could not run from, namely your safety. I had to end that confrontation as quickly as I could and then get us all out of there.'

'So what if I cannot run?'

'Then you do this.' He held up his right hand, palm vertical with every finger extended forward—and then suddenly he thrust that hand toward my eyes. I flinched as his fingers gently jabbed my face, two of them touching my eyelids.

Nearby, Mrs Ponsonby snorted in disgust. She glanced at her husband and he dutifully echoed the noise.

Mr Ascham ignored them.

'Given your age, Bess, most assailants will be larger and stronger than you, so you will need to use guile instead of muscle. Extend your fingers like so and poke him in the eyes. Blind him. Everyone's eyes are vulnerable, even those of the biggest thugs. And not even thugs can fight without sight. But make sure you keep your fingers bent, otherwise you will injure them in the jabbing. Now try it.'

I did so and was surprised at how easy it was to strike my teacher in the eyes with at least one finger or thumb.

'Now,' he said, 'what do you do after you poke your opponent in the eye?'

'Punch him in the throat. Like you did.'

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'No. Wrong. You run.'

'*Again?*'

'A scrap avoided is the best result for everyone concerned,' he repeated like a mantra. 'You are only trying to disable him long enough for you to get away.'

'But what if he is not so disabled?'

Mr Ascham then taught me to punch someone in the throat as he had done the night before. 'Some men strike at the jawbone, but this is foolish because punching a bone is like punching a wall. Hitting the throat, however, will stop your attacker from breathing and if he can't breathe, he can't fight. Now, what do you do after you have struck him in the throat and made him gasp for air?'

I grinned. 'I run.'

He smiled. 'You, my princess, are such a quick learner.'

We journeyed on.

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