

## PART ONE

**‘When both armies were too exhausted and thirsty to march any further, they joined battle near Tewkesbury.’**

*Crowland Chronicle*

‘**B**less me, Father, for I have truly sinned. It is a month, yes, it was on the second Sunday of Lent that I was last shriven of my sins.’

Margaret of Beaufort, Countess of Richmond, widow of Edmund Tudor, mother of Henry, their only son, and now wife to a very frail Henry Stafford, paused in her prayers. Margaret crossed herself and desperately tried to recall her examination of conscience. She had sat in the lady chapel judging herself, weaning out her faults, but now she could not recall them.

‘My Lady?’ Brother Ambrose, priest-monk of the Benedictine community of Tewkesbury Abbey, was now quite alarmed. He moved the shriving veil which hung between the mercy pew where he sat and the prie-dieu against which the young countess leaned. Ambrose scrutinised Margaret’s thoughtful face. She was not beautiful or even pretty, but she had a look of considerable charm; her complexion was pale and clear, her eyes grey as a morning mist beneath dark, arched brows. She was full lipped and generous mouthed; other monks judged her to be solemn, even severe. Brother Ambrose, however, could detect good humour, even merriment beneath that studious face, ever ready to smile even as the world turned against her. Ambrose realised that was now happening as Fortune’s fickle wheel was about to be given another cruel spin.

‘My Lady,’ he whispered, ‘I shall pray for you.’

The countess abruptly rose. She clutched a pair of doeskin gloves and used these to smooth down her fur-trimmed red dress. She touched her dark-auburn hair, as if to make sure it was almost hidden by the exquisitely bejewelled and embroidered headdress.

‘My Lady?’ Brother Ambrose rose but then fell silent as Lady Margaret raised a hand.

‘Can you hear it,’ she whispered, ‘the noise of battle?’

‘My Lord Edward of York and his brothers, Richard of Gloucester and George of Clarence are moving swiftly,’ Brother Ambrose replied. ‘Abbot John receives a constant flow of intelligence from the battlefield. York intends to put Queen Margaret of Anjou, the Angevin she-wolf and her son Edward to the sword. My Lady, our prayers are with you. I understand that your kinsman, Edmund Beaufort, Duke of Somerset, also intends to end all troubles and bring this war, short and cruel, to an end.’

Lady Margaret, however, was no longer listening, but moved to the window of the guesthouse chapel deep in the enclosure of Tewkesbury Abbey. Margaret pulled back the shutters; she turned slightly. ‘What date is it?’ she murmured.

‘Saturday the fourth of May. The feast of St Pelagia and Florian . . .’

‘. . . The year of our Lord 1471.’ Margaret finished the sentence. ‘Truly a day of destruction,’ she added.

The countess broke off as a chapel door was flung open. Reginald Bray, accompanied by Margaret’s chancery clerk, Christopher Urswicke, hurried into the small chapel. They paused just within the doorway and Margaret heard the distant but chilling sound of mortal combat; the vengeful, vicious crash and clash of steel. Sharp bursts of cannon echoed above the murmur of men roaring their hate and screaming their pain on this hot, early summer’s day around the village and abbey of Tewkesbury.

‘What is it?’ Brother Ambrose demanded.

‘Madam,’ Urswicke ignored the Benedictine, ‘madam, you must come now. We have news from the field. Somerset has broken. He and his army are in full flight.’

Margaret swallowed hard, the pain at what she’d just heard, despite her own secret dreams and ambitions, was a blow to both body and soul.

‘How can that be?’ she demanded.

‘Urswicke is correct,’ Bray declared, his harsh voice rasping and loud. ‘Madam, do not busy yourself in prayer, but come.’

‘To do what?’ Ambrose protested.

‘What can be done?’ Margaret glanced to all three men. ‘What can be done when worlds collapse and chaos sweeps in?’

‘Come, madam.’ Urswicke grabbed his mistress’s hand: he nodded at Ambrose and hurried the countess out of the guest-house chapel. They hastened along paved alleyways where stone-faced saints and angels peered down at them from corners and enclaves. On the tops of pillars, the gargoyles, with their monkey-faces and snarling mouths, seemed to mock Margaret’s mood. She decided not to look but kept her gaze down on the ground as they swept around the small cloisters. Here the air was sweet and heavy with the constant tang of incense and the flow of fragrant smells from the abbey kitchens. The day was drawing on and the abbey bells would soon toll, summoning the brothers to break their hunger before returning to the church for another hour of prayer. The battle raging in the fields around the great abbey was certainly making itself felt. Black-garbed monks, hoods pulled close, hurried backwards and forwards, caught up in a panic-growing fear. Margaret glimpsed Abbot John Strensham, deep in conversation with other senior monks in the small rose garden which stretched in front of the chapterhouse.

‘Ignore them,’ Urswicke whispered. ‘Mistress, ignore them! Play the part! Play it now, for the game is about to change if York carries the day.’

Margaret stopped. She squeezed Urswicke’s arms and stared into his face. He always reminded her of a choirboy, an impression heightened by his soft, precise speech. Urswicke was smooth-shaven with pale, almost ivory, feminine skin, light-blue eyes as innocent as any child’s, merry-mouthed with a mop of dark-brown hair which he apparently never combed. ‘A simple-faced clerk’ was how someone had described Christopher Urswicke, son of Thomas Urswicke, Recorder of London. Margaret smiled faintly as she held Urswicke’s innocent gaze. She looked at him from head to toe. He dressed like a clerk garbed in a dark-brown gown over a jerkin and loose-fitting hose, yet beneath the gown were dagger and sword, and the boots on his feet were spurred as if he was ready to ride at a moment’s notice.

‘My Lady?’

‘I must remember,’ she replied. ‘There is more to a book than

its cover, and that certainly applies to you, Master Christopher. But come . . .’

All three hastened down the cloistered walk and out into the warm sunshine. They approached the abbey church and entered through a postern gate, climbing the rough-hewn steps leading up into the great tower. Bray was insistent that they reach the top to see precisely what was happening. The steward’s sallow, close face, pointed nose, thin-lipped mouth and square chin were laced with a fine, sweaty sheen. Hot and exasperated, Bray plucked at his chancery robe, running a finger around the neckline of his cambric linen shirt to clear the sweat coursing down his neck. Margaret noticed the cut marks on Bray’s cheeks, a sure sign of her steward’s agitation when Bray had shaved that morning. Margaret paused on the first stairwell.

‘The page boy, Lambert, who brought messages from kinsman Tudor,’ she whispered, ‘how goes he in all of this?’

‘Safely ensconced with the grooms in the abbey stables. Ignore him,’ Bray hissed, ‘and everyone else will. Start fussing and the world will fuss with you. Isn’t that right, Christopher?’

Urswicke just pulled a face. Reginald Bray, chief receiver and principal steward in the countess’s household, was regarded as most skilled in his trade, but his dark humour and blunt speech were equally well known. They continued to climb, becoming more aware of the strong breezes piercing the lancet windows. The horrid din of battle was also becoming more pressing. Lady Margaret, still praying quietly that her own boy would stay safe, listened to the gasping breath of her two companions, aware of the sweat now soaking her own clothes. She tried to distract herself by glancing at the bosses carved in the different stairwells and turnings. Most of these were heavy-winged angels, each carrying a musical instrument, be it the bagpipes, flute or trumpet.

‘We need the protection of St Michael and all his heavenly cohort,’ Urswicke exclaimed, following her gaze.

‘I am sorry,’ Lady Margaret paused, resting one hand on his shoulder. Bray stood just behind her ready to help. ‘You are limping, Christopher?’

Urswicke turned and grinned. ‘My ankle is slightly twisted but I am sure you have other concerns. Madam, we live in hurling times. Kingdoms are now lost and won in a day.’

They continued on till they reached the top of the tower, pushing back the heavy trapdoor, helping each other through the hatchway to stand on the gravel-strewn top. They crossed this and leaned against the moss-encrusted crenellations. All three stared out over the murderous mayhem spreading out across the abbey's great water meadow, fed by the twisting Severn glinting sharply in the early afternoon sun. The Lancastrian battle phalanx had buckled and broken; already both foot and mounted were streaming away in retreat, pursued by the fast-moving, vengeful Yorkists in full battle array. Even from where she stood, Margaret could glimpse the Beaufort standards and pennants quartered with the royal arms of both England and France. Other standards were also visible: those of Beaufort's allies such as the Courtenays of Devon and the De Veres of Oxford. The Lancastrian banner bearers, standards held high, were desperately trying to make a stand to mount a defence. The Yorkists, however, were pressing hard, breaking the Lancastrians up, filleting their battle formation like a butcher would a slab of meat. The bitter sound of the bloody conflict now carried stronger: shrill cries and screams, bellowed curses, shouts of defiance and the heart-stopping groans and moans of the wounded and dying. Margaret also glimpsed the streaming banners of Edward of York as well as those of his two brothers, Gloucester and Clarence, a host of Yorkist insignia, be they The Sunne in Splendour, the Bear of Warwick or the Boar of Gloucester. These billowed around the royal banner, which rippled in a gorgeous sea of colour: blue, scarlet and gold. The Yorkists had unfurled the sacred standard of England, usually kept behind the high altar of Westminster Abbey. Edward of York was using this to emphasise his right to the Crown, as well as his solemn assurance that he would show no mercy or pardon to the enemy fleeing before him. The course of the battle was becoming more distinct as the Lancastrians retreated even more swiftly and the Yorkists followed, spreading out to curve inwards so as to complete their encirclement.

The fresh, green grass of the great meadow was now decorated with the colours of the fallen; their tabards, pennants, shields, banners and standards. Columns of smoke smudged the horizon as other Yorkists broke off from the pursuit to pillage and burn the Lancastrian camp. Margaret shaded her eyes and prayed for

her kinsman, Beaufort. Early that day Margaret had learnt how the Lancastrians had camped the previous evening at Guphill Farm, in a stretch of the twisting Gloucester countryside known as the Vineyards. The Yorkists were now pillaging this and Margaret wondered what had happened to the Angevin queen and her son. The roar of voices, men screaming their pain or laughing in their victory, made her close her eyes and whisper a further prayer. Beside her, Urswicke was threading his ave beads whilst Bray quietly cursed. A blood-chilling roar forced Margaret to open her eyes and stare down. The Lancastrian line had buckled and snapped completely. Any resistance had collapsed. Men were now retreating across the great meadow and the thick press of the Yorkist banner bearers were surging forward.

‘They are fleeing,’ Urswicke exclaimed. ‘My Lady, your kinsmen are desperate to seek sanctuary here. Come, they will soon be below us.’

Margaret followed her two henchmen down from the top of the tower. She tried to curb the sheer terror welling within her. They reached the shadows of the northern transept. Lancastrian knights and footmen were already thronging through the main entrance, desperate to shelter in the abbey’s cool darkness. Monks came hurrying along the nave, hands fluttering in agitation at the first sharp echoes of weaponry just outside the main door. The Yorkists had dismounted, fully intending to continue the slaughter even in these sacred precincts. Urswicke, quick-thinking and eager to escape what could be a bloody massacre, pushed Margaret towards a doorway, beckoning at Bray to follow them through into a musty, cobwebbed chamber, with steep steps leading up to a small choir loft. Urswicke turned the key in the lock and placed the bar in its slats before leading the countess and Bray up the narrow, spiral staircase. The choir loft was small and cramped, angled into the wall so the singers and trumpeters could clearly see what was happening just within the main doorway below, as well as the porch beyond: here processions would assemble before sweeping up the long, cavernous nave towards the majestically carved rood screen which shielded the sanctuary and choir beyond. No such procession would assemble now. Margaret stared pitifully down at the frightened, blood-streaked men

surging through the main door, desperate to escape their furious pursuers who now edged in, shields locked, swords flickering out like the poisonous tongues of a host of vipers.

The fighting below grew more intense. Margaret glimpsed her kinsman Edmund Beaufort, helmet cast aside, as he backed further up the nave, his gloriously embroidered tabard with its glowing colours drenched in blood. On either side of the duke, his remaining household knights were desperate to mount a defence, but they broke up as the Yorkists pursued them further down the nave, hacking and hewing so blood swirled along the ancient paving stones. The struggle often became solitary, individual Lancastrians being surrounded by Yorkist knights. No mercy was shown. Margaret watched as one of Beaufort's banner knights fell to his knees in abject surrender. His tormentors simply tore his armour and weapons from him, pushed down his head and severed it with one clean blow. The Yorkists laughed as the head bounced across the paving stones, whilst the still upright torso spouted blood like a fountain before toppling over. The nave was no longer a Benedictine house of prayer, more like a butcher's yard in the Shambles.

Men shrieked in their death agonies under a hail of cutting blows from mace, sword and axe. The Lancastrians tried to hide in the chantry chapels along each transept, but the trellised screens of such small shrines proved to be no protection. Nor were the tombs of the former lords of Tewkesbury such as the Despencers and the Fitzalans. Margaret, standing in the corner of the choir loft, gripped the balustrade in sweaty fear as more and more vengeful Yorkists poured through the main entrance, as well as through the Devil and Corpse doors along the transepts either side. Abruptly trumpets shrieked, their noise braying along the nave.

'The King, the King!' a harsh voice bellowed.

Margaret peered down, twisting to see the three men who now strode into the church, all armoured and visored for battle. They stood like spectres from a nightmare; each of them had removed their war helmets, thrusting these into the hands of one of the squires milling about them. The central figure, his blond hair shimmering in the sunlight, lancing through the great windows of the nave, turned slightly. Margaret narrowed her eyes as she

recognised the smooth, tawny features of Edward of York, Edward the King, the great killer of Margaret's kinsmen, the Beauforts. Beside Edward stood his two brothers: on his left George of Clarence, thinner than his brother, his wine-fat face laced with sweat. On the King's left, the small, wiry, sharp-featured youngest brother, Richard of Gloucester, his long, reddish hair framing an unusually pallid face. All three princes were armed with sword and dagger. Edward raised both hands in a sign of victory before lowering them, pointing both sword and dagger down the nave.

'Kill them all!' Clarence bellowed. 'Show no quarter, give no mercy!'

A scream answered his words as a Yorkist squire, holding a dagger to his prisoner's throat, now drove it in. More shouts of despair and cries of triumph broke the stillness, followed by a clatter of weapons. This abruptly ceased as the abbey bells began to toll, crashing out their peals as a deep-throated chanting rose from the sanctuary. The heavy curtain across the rood-screen entrance was abruptly pulled back. A hand bell rang as a line of monks, cowls pulled close, left the sanctuary and processed into the nave. A cross bearer and two acolytes together with three thurifers preceded Abbot John Strensham who, garbed in all his pontificals, walked slowly down the church. He had removed the golden pyx from its silver sanctuary chain and now held this up in both hands.

'Behold the Lamb of God,' he intoned in a hollow-sounding voice. 'Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.' He walked on, holding the pyx high as he gazed directly at the King. 'I hold here,' he declared, 'the body and blood of the Risen Christ. I hold it here in this terrible place which is supposed to be the House of God and the Gate of Heaven. Yet you, your Grace, have turned our abbey into a butcher's yard. Look around you, do not pollute these sacred precincts. Desist! The killing must end.'

Margaret could only agree as she murmured a prayer in reparation at the abomination which now stretched along that shadow-filled nave: wounded, tired men, broken in body and shattered in soul, clinging to the pillars and trellised screens of the different chantry chapels. Some of the wounded, terrified at the prospect of immediate slaughter, crawled across the blood-drenched

floor in a vain attempt to hide amongst the long line of black-garbed Benedictines.

‘Look,’ Urswicke hissed, Margaret did so. George of Clarence was now walking forward, pointing his glistening, blood-wetted sword at the abbot.

‘Be careful,’ Strensham warned. ‘These are sacred precincts, God’s own sanctuary.’

‘Tewkesbury,’ Clarence bellowed back, ‘does not possess such a right. It cannot grant sanctuary. The men who shelter here are traitors taken in arms against their rightful King, who has unfurled his sacred banner and proclaimed his peace. They have insulted that. They are blasphemous liars.’ Clarence edged forward. ‘These miscreants have sworn, on other occasions, to be loyal and true to my brother the King. They are oath-breakers as well as traitors and so deserving of death.’

‘They are also,’ Richard of Gloucester stepped forward to join his brother, ‘murderers. They have the blood of our House and kin on their hands, including the unlawful slaying of our beloved father and brother after Wakefield fight.’

‘Deliver them!’ Clarence shouted, shaking his sword. Abbot Strensham walked as close as he could to the pointed blade.

‘George, Richard,’ Edward the King dramatically re-sheathed his weapons, ‘our quarrel is with traitors, not Abbot Strensham and his Benedictines,’ a note of humour entered the King’s voice, ‘and certainly not with Holy Mother Church. These malefactors, double-dyed in treason and treachery, men twice as fit for Hell as any sinner, have sought sanctuary here. Let them have it.’

The King stepped forward, one hand raised. ‘Abbot Strensham, you have the word of your King.’ Edward turned away and, escorted by his brothers who also re-sheathed their weapons, left the abbey church. The Yorkist knights streamed after them. Abbot Strensham gave a deep sigh, raised a hand, snapping his fingers. Two monks hurried forward to close the heavy, double portals, turning the key in its lock and bringing down the great bar whilst others of the brothers did the same at both the Devil’s porch and Corpse door.

‘Are you ready?’ Urswicke bent down and stared at his pallid-faced mistress, mouth all puckered, her tired eyes watchful and

wary. 'Abbot Strensham has arranged for you, and you only, to slip through the rood screen into the nave.' He gestured at Bray. 'Reginald and I will accompany you into the sacristy but no further. Mistress,' he added, 'be careful. You know you have to be. A person claiming sanctuary cannot, according to canon law, receive any visitors who might bring weapons, purveyance or comfort, be it physical or spiritual, to a sanctuary seeker. So be vigilant and remember the risks both you and the abbot are taking, not to mention your kin.'

'Yes, yes.' Margaret sighed. She got to her feet, took a deep breath, pulled up the hood of her gown and, with Urswicke leading the way, they left the guesthouse. Urswicke paused whilst Bray locked the doors behind them; they then continued along stone-paved passageways where harsh-faced angels, sullen saints and smirking gargoyles peered down at them from the shadows. An eerie silence had crept through the abbey, as if it was part of the thick river mist now seeping in from the Severn. All sound was dulled, the echoing song of plain-chant, the ringing of bells, the slap of sandalled feet on stone and the cries and shouts of the lay brothers working in the vast abbey kitchen and buttery. All this seemed to have been cloaked by an ominous silence. Occasionally black-garbed figures, robes flapping, would flit across their path. Now and again Margaret glimpsed peaked, white faces of monks peering out at them from some window or embrasure.

Edward of York's men were also there but Abbot Strensham had issued his own orders. The sacristan of the abbey did not fire the sconce torches, light the powerful lanternhorns or lower the Catherine wheels, their rims crammed with candles. This lack of light proved to be a real obstacle to York's soldiers, who did not know the abbey with its twisting runnels, narrow winding paths, different gardens, herb plots and flower beds. They had to thread themselves through a veritable maze of stone where it was so easy to lose their way. Urswicke, however, faced no such difficulty as he followed the precise directions provided by Abbot Strensham.

At last they reached the small door to the minor sacristy of the great abbey church. Urswicke knocked and Abbot Strensham himself ushered them in. He had a hurried, whispered conversation

with Urswicke and Bray ordering them to stay then, taking Margaret by the hand, he led her out of the sacristy. They crossed the darkened sanctuary, through the rood screen, down steep steps into the nave and across to the chantry chapel of St Faith. Margaret felt she was walking through the halls and chambers of the underworld, where ghosts gathered and pitiful moans and groans mingled with the whispering of desperate men. The light was very poor and this only deepened the illusion that all of this misery was part of some blood-chilling nightmare. At the entrance to the chantry chapel Margaret paused and stared at the dark shapes huddled along the nave.

‘We do what we can for them,’ the abbot murmured, ‘but they are all doomed men. Edward of York is intent on their deaths. Both I and Somerset know that.’

The inside of the chantry chapel was opulently furnished with blue-dyed turkey rugs. The polished woodwork of both the screen and the chapel furniture gleamed in the light of the six-branched altar candelabra. Edmund Beaufort, Duke of Somerset, the leader of the Lancastrian host, sat slumped in the celebrant’s chair, feet resting on a stool. On the floor around him lay his battle harness, his weapons stacked in the far corner. Margaret, aware of Abbot Strensham leaving and the door closing behind him, walked softly around and stared into the face of a great lord whom she knew faced certain death. At first Somerset did not even acknowledge her but sat cradling his head in one hand, the other tugging at the sweat-soaked tufts of his blond hair which fell down to his shoulders.

‘My Lord,’ she whispered, ‘my Lord I am here. Margaret Beaufort, daughter of the first Duke of Somerset.’

‘Margaret, Margaret, Margaret.’ Somerset’s hand fell away. He straightened up, removed his feet and pointed to the stool. He then abruptly leaned forward. He grasped her hands, drew her close and kissed her softly on each cheek before gesturing at the stool. ‘Margaret, my little Margaret.’ He sat back in the chair. ‘How long has it been?’

‘Four years.’ She smiled through the dark. ‘Four years almost to the day. You remember, the May Day celebrations?’

‘Yes, yes.’ Somerset gestured at his stained but still glorious tabard lying on the floor beside him. ‘*Sic transit gloria mundi*,

he murmured, 'thus passes the glory of the world, Margaret. My brother John was killed in today's battle, Courtenay of Devon likewise. God knows where the rest are or what the future holds for them! And as for you, the last of our line.' Somerset joined his hands in prayer. 'Little Margaret, since I heard of you visiting me, I have been reflecting. I shall give you a homily, a sermon on the times. Much of it you will already know but some of it points to the future. So Margaret, let me begin my sad story of kings. Remember the verse that all the waters of the sea cannot wash away the balm and chrism of coronation? A king is sacred! Henry VI, son of Henry V and Catherine of Valois, is God's vice-regent here in this kingdom. True,' Somerset wiped his sweaty, bewhiskered face, 'our enemies claim that Henry sits closer to the angels than any of us; that he is not of this world yet he is still our King. We Beauforts descend from John of Gaunt, son of Edward III and his mistress Katherine Swynford; we also have a claim to the throne. We are legitimate and have been declared such by both King and Parliament, yet we support the Crown. Henry VI, holy but witless, married Margaret of Anjou, the so-called Angevin she-wolf. She produced an heir, Prince Edward.' Somerset shook his head. 'A most unlikeable young man. Another killer! God knows what will happen now to Henry or his son because the House of York, also descended from Edward III, believe they have a claim to the throne, one superior to anyone else's. Richard of York was killed at Wakefield but his three remaining sons Edward, Richard and George have continued the struggle and so we are here. We have been brought to this pass. The Beauforts and the House of Lancaster are truly finished. Margaret of Anjou and her son will be captured and slain. Many of those who supported them, men such as Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick – the so-called King-maker – was killed at Barnet along with many of our comrades.' He paused and peered at Margaret. 'You will need protection. You are a Beaufort, Margaret. Your husband is Sir Humphrey Stafford?'

'Fought for York to protect us all,' Margaret replied. 'He too was at Barnet, and grievously wounded! I cannot say if he will survive. Thankfully his kinsmen the Staffords of Buckingham are well protected by Edward of York and sit high on his council.'

‘And if Sir Humphrey dies, Margaret, as I too am going to die very soon. Oh yes.’ Somerset held a hand up. ‘I am reconciled with that. Edward and his brothers want to destroy Lancaster root and branch. You Margaret,’ again he touched the back of her hand, ‘you are the last sprig of our tree, or at least your son is, Edmund Tudor’s golden boy. Where is he?’

‘Safe.’

‘Where?’

Margaret just stared back.

‘Yes, yes,’ Somerset whispered, ‘it’s best not to say . . . But to return to you. If Stafford dies, will you take a third husband?’

‘God will decide.’

‘Yes, *Deus vult*,’ Somerset replied. ‘Listen Margaret, your father, my kinsman, the first Duke of Somerset, died out of sheer despair. Some even claim that he took his own life.’

‘Some are liars. Why do you mention that?’

‘I just wonder if we Beauforts are cursed, whether we are doomed to fail. This morning I thought we would carry the day. I really,’ he paused to control the stutter which marred his speech, a legacy, or so they said, of a powerful blow to the head during a tournament at Windsor, ‘I truly thought victory was within our grasp. I plotted to clear the field and destroy York.’ He clenched his fist. Margaret watched and recalled how Somerset was a man of bounding ambition and fiery temper: she secretly wondered if such faults played their part in his defeat and that of Lancaster along the meadows outside.

‘Pity poor Warwick killed at Barnet. Pity your brother-in-law Jasper Tudor did not reach us in time. Pity that we were unable to ford the Severn.’ Margaret flinched at the self-pity which curled through Somerset’s voice. ‘Pity us all Margaret.’ Somerset, eyes closed, rocked backwards and forwards. A loud scream echoed down the nave and Somerset broke from his reverie. ‘Be on your guard against Clarence.’ He hissed. ‘Clarence is a killer to the very marrow, a Judas soul bound up like Lucifer with his own ambition. He intends to kill you, murder your son and anyone else of Lancastrian blood. He will do all this and then, like the rabid wolf he is, turn once again on his own kith and kin. He will prowl both court and kingdom. Murder, treachery and ravenous ambition will trail his every footstep: these hounds of

Hell will be famished, hungry for the taste of blood and for Clarence's self-preferment . . .'

Christopher Urswicke gently removed Mauclerc's hand and pushed it away.

'What is the matter, Christopher? Are you not interested in the male as you are in the female? Do you not prefer the company of men to that of women or are you . . .?'

'Hush now.' Urswicke leaned over and pressed a finger against Mauclerc's lips. 'Remember why you are here,' Urswicke hissed to this most sinister henchman of George Duke of Clarence.

'Yes, here we are.' Mauclerc's voice was mocking. He fell silent as Urswicke drew his dagger: the blade gleamed in the light of the lanternhorn set on the garden table deep in a rose-fringed arbour overlooking the kitchen garden of Tewkesbury Abbey. Urswicke placed the dagger on the table before he twirled it; the blade spun, glittering and pointed. 'Do you threaten me Urswicke?'

Mauclerc leaned closer, the lantern light casting shifting shadows. Urswicke watched intently. Mauclerc was a dagger man and Urswicke wondered if others lurked in the darkness behind. He held Mauclerc's gaze, studying him carefully. Clarence's henchman had a wolfish face with those narrow, slightly pointed eyes, the hollow cheeks, squat nose, and a mouth which seemed unable to close fully around the jutting teeth. A man who wore a perpetual sneer, as if he had judged the world and found it wanting to himself. Mauclerc scratched his black, glistening shaven pate, then abruptly snatched at the dagger, but Urswicke was swifter. He grasped the knife, twisting it in his hand so it pointed directly at Mauclerc's face. Clarence's henchman smiled thinly.

'I've heard of that Urswicke.' He murmured. 'Fast you are, swift as a pouncing cat. A born street fighter, despite your delicate frame.'

'Or because of it? So Master Mauclerc, put both hands where I can see them and do not think of even touching either the dagger in your belt or the Italian stiletto in the top of your boot. Nor must you whistle or, indeed, make any sound to draw in your escort which must not be far from here. Good? Do you understand?' Urswicke didn't even bother to wait for an answer.

He re-sheathed his blade and leaned against the table. ‘So we are,’ he began, ‘at the witching hour on this balmy May evening in Tewkesbury Abbey. A short distance away the corpses of the Lancastrians are being stripped and collected like faggots of wood for the fire. Here in this abbey, the remaining surviving Lancastrian leaders lie bloody and besmirched: their only defence is Holy Mother Church in the person of Abbot John Strensham—’

‘They’ll die,’ Mauclerc interrupted. ‘They will all die. Clarence my master is insistent on that.’

‘Even though, for a while, he turned coat and fought for Lancaster, changing back to his royal brother when Warwick and Somerset seemed weaker?’

‘My master,’ Mauclerc retorted, ‘had no quarrel with his brothers but only with the Woodvilles. The King’s marriage to Elizabeth of that name offended many of the lords. The Woodvilles are grasping, a family greedy for power, deeply ambitious without the talent to match . . .’

‘Like so many of our noble lords.’

Mauclerc drew his breath sharply. ‘You insult my master?’

‘No Master Mauclerc, I tell the truth, but enough of this fencing, this sham swordplay.’

‘You talk of my master betraying his own brother,’ Mauclerc jabbed a finger at Urswicke, ‘yet you are here to act the traitor to your own mistress, Margaret Beaufort.’

‘My loyalty is to the King,’ Christopher insisted. ‘My own father is Recorder of London, an important judge and the most fervent supporter of Edward of York.’

‘Though your relationship with your father is hardly cordial?’

‘We have our differences.’

‘You mean he has his women who, I understand, drove your mother to an early grave . . .’ Mauclerc paused as Urswicke’s fingers fell to brush the hilt of his dagger.

‘My father is my father,’ Urswicke murmured. ‘I am who I am, a clerk, a lawyer well versed in politics who now accepts his hour has come. The House of Lancaster, the fortunes of the Beauforts are finished, shattered and pushed into the dark.’

‘We were not talking about them but your mother?’

‘Leave that, Master Mauclerc. Let us concentrate on what’s going to happen.’

‘Oh, that’s easy enough. The King, not to mention Gloucester and Clarence, are determined to pull Lancaster up by its rotten roots and consign that stricken tree to the fires of history.’

‘And my mistress, the countess?’

‘You mean your former mistress?’

‘True.’ Urswicke half smiled. ‘But her fate?’

‘She is married to a Stafford who, like many of his tribe, fought for our King, in particular at Barnet. Consequently she is safe providing she behaves herself. Her son is another matter. You see, once all this is over, the English court will divide. There will be the King, his wife Elizabeth Woodville and her brood. Close to them Richard of Gloucester and George of Clarence. Then there are the Yorkist warlords, men such as William Hastings, Stanley, Buckingham and the others and, of course, Holy Mother Church. We now deal with the Lancastrians. There is Henry VI, that holy fool who lies locked up in the Tower. He can stay there, he will never come out.’ Urswicke tried not to flinch at the venom in Mauclerc’s voice. ‘Yes, yes Christopher, Henry VI will not be making any more royal progresses through the kingdom. He can stay imprisoned, pattering his prayers and preparing for his own funeral. We, however, are going to hunt for his Queen, Margaret of Anjou, and the bastard Edward, her son. We want to capture them. In the meantime, those who have taken sanctuary here must die and my master intends to kill any other remaining Lancastrian with even the weakest claim to the throne.’ Mauclerc pushed his face closer. ‘And that includes your mistress’s son, Henry Tudor, the offspring of her former husband Edmund who was, as you know, half-brother to that holy fool Henry. What we now want to know are the whereabouts of your mistress’s son?’

‘In a while,’ Urswicke replied. ‘We must not travel that road so swiftly. We must proceed at a canter, not at a gallop.’

‘Time is passing, Urswicke. You must make choices. As I have said, Somerset and the others are for the slaughter. You want protection from my master and you shall have it, but it comes with a price . . .’

‘It always does.’

‘Or it can be interpreted as a token of good faith by yourself.’

‘I offer you three such tokens.’

‘And what are these?’

‘The whereabouts of Margaret of Anjou and her son.’

Mauclerc’s surprise was palpable. He half rose, gasping for breath. ‘Nonsense.’ He breathed. ‘How can you?’ Mauclerc sat down. ‘Why should she . . .?’

‘Margaret and her son are desperate to cross the Severn and seek the protection of my mistress’s brother-in-law, Jasper Tudor, who hides behind the vast fastness of Pembroke Castle where, by the way, her own son also shelters. So,’ Urswicke waved a hand, ‘you have two tokens, take them or leave them.’

Mauclerc stretched out a hand, Urswicke clasped this. Mauclerc squeezed, let go and got to his feet. ‘Hold.’ Urswicke peered up through the dark as he gestured with his head towards the abbey. ‘The Lancastrian defeat, so swift, so crushing. What happened? And I might be able to give you another token.’

‘Edward of York,’ Mauclerc paused as if gathering his thoughts, ‘Edward of York,’ he replied, ‘came on fast, passing through Southwick, aiming like an arrow for this abbey. Margaret of Anjou and her army were desperate to cross the Severn but they failed. She and Somerset had no choice but to advance to meet us. The Lancastrians divided their host into three battle groups. Prince Edward and Lord Wenlock held the centre. Somerset their right, Courtenay of Devon their left flank. They advanced swiftly through the Vineyards and reached the south of the abbey.’

‘And King Edward’s army?’

‘Also divided into three phalanxes. King Edward held the centre, Gloucester the left, Lord Hastings the right. What the enemy didn’t know was that King Edward had hidden a host of two hundred mounted spearmen on a wooded hill a little to the south of Gloucester’s phalanx.’

‘We heard the sound of cannon fire?’

‘Yes. King Edward brought up his artillery and archers to deliver a shower of missiles on Somerset’s battle line: this proved to be a sharp and deadly hail. Somerset was left with no choice but to attack, and became embroiled with Gloucester and the King’s phalanxes. The Yorkists held the attack until the spearmen King Edward had hidden on that wooded hill charged out to smash into Somerset’s line, forcing it back. The Yorkists then

began to roll the Lancastrian line up as you would a piece of piping . . .’

‘But the Lancastrian centre, surely . . .?’

‘Ah.’ Mauclerc tapped the side of his nose; he paused as an owl hooted hauntingly through the dark.’

‘Three times!’ Urswicke exclaimed.

‘Three times what?’

‘If an owl hoots three times through the dark, it’s a prophecy for those who hear it. If there are two people in the same place, one of them will die and the other will be the cause of it. Do you believe that, Mauclerc?’

‘Aye, as I believe harridans fly through the air and the Hounds of Hell prowl this abbey. I don’t believe in such babble talk.’

‘The battle?’ Urswicke asked, quickly trying to conceal his own unease.

‘Ah,’ Mauclerc laughed abruptly, ‘the Lancastrian centre should have come to Somerset’s aid but Lord Wenlock froze, God knows why?’

‘I do,’ Urswicke replied. ‘And here’s your third token. I met Wenlock secretly on his march to the Severn. I pretended to be sending messages to the Duke of Somerset from his kinswoman, my mistress. Anyway, Wenlock who, as you know, once fought for the House of York, was open to suggestion. After all, King Edward had once appointed him to be captain of the English fortress at Calais. My couriers delivered messages informing Wenlock that if the battle went against Lancaster and he survived, my mistress would intercede for Lord John Wenlock and so would her husband, Sir Humphrey Stafford.’

‘So that explains it,’ Mauclerc interrupted. ‘Wenlock didn’t freeze, he just didn’t commit his forces to confront the Yorkists who inflicted great damage along the Lancastrian battle line. Courtenay of Devon was killed in the bloody hand-to-hand fighting, as was Beaufort’s brother John. Somerset was furious. He left the battle and galloped up to Wenlock to remonstrate. Wenlock argued back, so Somerset, and he has a fiery temper, smashed Wenlock’s head with his battle-axe.’

‘God and all his angels,’ Urswicke breathed.

‘The Lancastrians witnessed this savage clash: their leaders were killing each other whilst the rest were being cut down as

you would lop branches in an orchard. The Lancastrians broke. They fled towards Abbot's Mill, one of the Severn tributaries, but this was swollen due to recent rains. Many were drowned, the others tried to flee across the sunken water meadow only to be cut down. A day of great slaughter. Parts of the meadow were knee-deep in gore; there was enough spilt blood to float a boat. Edward's victory was complete, a sign of God's pleasure for the House of York. Now we must go.' Mauclerc beckoned. 'Our masters await.'

Urswicke picked up his cloak lying over the table and followed Clarence's henchman out of the arbour and across the kitchen garden. He made Mauclerc, who carried the lanternhorn, walk ahead of him. Urswicke watched the moving circle of light as they made their way under the looming mass of Tewkesbury Abbey. Night had fallen but the abbey didn't sleep. Knots of well-armed household knights, sporting the blue and yellow of York as well as the personal coat of arms of the three royal brothers, guarded all entrances to and from the abbey.

Urswicke and Mauclerc eventually left the precincts by a postern gate. They hurried down a narrow trackway into Tewkesbury village, its usual silence and tranquillity broken by the mass of soldiers camped out in the streets which led into the market square, dominated by a soaring stone cross. Edward and his brothers had taken over a merchant's house overlooking the market area, a majestic three-storey mansion built out of honey-coloured Cotswold stone; both its door and windows were flung open in a blaze of candlelight. The royal brothers were gathered in the long, wood-panelled dining hall. They lounged at the top of the common table, Edward the King slouched on a throne-like chair, his brothers either side of him. Further down, clerks of the royal chancery copied and sealed letters, proclamations and indentures. The hall was perfumed with the sweet smell of scented candles and the rich odour of melting wax. Around the room stood York's leading henchmen. Urswicke recognised Lovel, Catesby, Ratcliffe and others of Gloucester's household, as well as those of the King, such as William Hastings who played such a prominent role in the Yorkist's victory. The royal standards and other banners filled one corner of the hall. Strewn on the floor beside them were those of the defeated Lancastrians, besmirched

with urine, faeces and other dirt. Urswicke glimpsed the Lilies and Portcullis of Beaufort and hurriedly glanced away. Mauclerc told him to stay before handing the lantern to a retainer and hurrying up to kneel between the King and Clarence, with Gloucester leaning over to listen to what Mauclerc whispered as he pointed back towards Urswicke. The King raised a hand, snapping his fingers, gesturing at Urswicke to approach. Mauclerc brought a stool, placing it where he had knelt. Urswicke went to bend the knee.

‘No need,’ Edward barked. ‘Not now. Time is passing.’ The King’s light-blue eyes creased into a smile. ‘I know you, Christopher, or rather your family. Your father’s loyalty provides great comfort to me and mine. Now.’ Edward raised himself out of his chair, ‘Hastings!’ he shouted. ‘Clear this room. You sirs,’ Edward bellowed at the clerks further down the table, ‘gather your manuscripts, get out and do so quickly.’ Edward rose and clapped his hands, the hall swiftly emptied. Urswicke glanced at the royal brothers. All three had stripped themselves of their mail and armour and now wore puffed, sleeveless jerkins, displaying the blue and yellow of York, over stained cambric shirts. The royal brothers were still blood-streaked and, as they moved on their chairs, the spurs on their boots jingled like fairy bells. They had taken off their broad, studded warbelts and hung these over the back of the chairs. Waiting for the hall to be fully cleared, Urswicke studied all three brothers closely. Edward the King, he concluded, certainly deserved the title as the handsomest man in the kingdom. Despite the exertions of the day, Edward still looked serene and composed, his beautiful face seemed slightly burnished as if with gold dust: Edward’s nose was thin and aquiline, his lips full and merry, his blond hair closely cropped and sheened with sweat whilst the light-blue eyes were bright with mischief and merriment. The King had retaken his seat and now sat, mouth slightly open, staring down the hall, a heavy-lidded look as he watched Hastings usher a bevy of young damsels out of a window seat towards the door. Clarence looked almost identical to his elder brother, though sharp observation would soon notice the reddish, vein-streaked drinker’s face, the mouth slightly slobbery, lips twisted into a perpetual pout. Clarence, Urswicke concluded, believed the world owed him much and still had to pay. Richard

of Gloucester was remarkably different from both his elder brothers. He had long, reddish hair which framed a pale, severe face with watchful eyes and tight-lipped mouth. Rather small in height, Richard sat slightly twisted as he favoured a birth injury to his back. He kept drumming his fingers on the table while staring around the hall, as if he suspected enemies still lurked nearby. A man of nervous energy, Richard of Gloucester was totally devoted to his eldest brother, as well as to the memory of their beloved father, slain at Wakefield. Over the last few months Richard had emerged as a fierce warrior skilled in battle and totally ruthless in the pursuit and destruction of the enemies of his House. Richard turned and caught Urswicke staring at him. He winked and Gloucester's severe face creased into a genuine smile which completely transformed him.

'Christopher Urswicke.' Gloucester leaned across, hand extended for the clerk to clasp. He did so, moving to the side as Edward sat back in his own chair to allow Christopher to respond. Abruptly Urswicke felt his shoulder tightly gripped. He turned. Clarence pushed his face close, lips glistening with red wine, which drenched his breath as well as the front of his doublet. 'And how's your mistress little Meg? We will deal with her and her by-blow, the imp Henry Tudor. She cannot hide behind the Staffords of Buckingham forever. We will . . .'

'George.' Edward leaned over and gently prised Clarence's hand away. 'First,' the King beamed at Urswicke, 'we must deal with troubles of the day. Yes?'

Urswicke nodded his agreement. Deep in his heart, however, he would certainly remember what the King had just said. 'First we must deal . . .' He glanced quickly at Clarence. Then what, he wondered . . .?

'I have thrown the dice in my last game of hazard.' Somerset took his hands away from his face and stared up at the cross above the chantry chapel altar. He had described the battle outside, freely confessing how he had committed one mistake after another, explaining in detail his execution of Wenlock. 'Our only hope,' he murmured, 'is that the Angevin crosses the Severn, to be welcomed and protected by Jasper Tudor. If not . . .' His voice trailed off. 'If not,' he repeated, 'you Margaret and your boy are

the last remaining hope of Lancaster. Now listen.’ Somerset stared around the chantry chapel. ‘You know, Margaret, that George of Clarence, like Neville of Warwick, clashed bitterly with the Woodvilles. Both nobles were furious at Edward’s secret marriage to Elizabeth Woodville, an insult which has rankled deeply. Warwick and Clarence left the Yorkist camp in open rebellion. However, the Queen Mother, Cecily, the Rose of Raby, successfully persuaded George and Edward to be reconciled.’ He paused at the cries of some wounded man further down the nave, a shriek of agony at the pain as well as the despair which now darkened the souls of all those facing imminent death. ‘Soon,’ he whispered, ‘we will be past all sorrow.’

Margaret, despite her revulsion at Beaufort’s arrogance, which had brought him and thousands of those who trusted him to this sorry pitch, leaned over and stroked Somerset’s blood-streaked wrist. He grasped her hand and gently squeezed her fingers.

‘Anyway,’ he released his grip, ‘you know the rest. Warwick and Anjou invaded, only to be brutally defeated. Clarence, as usual, survived. As I warned you, be most wary of that most sinister prince of blood. When Clarence was with us, I heard strange rumours, stories and whispers. Some of these concerned you and yours . . .’

‘In what way?’

‘Apparently Clarence boasted how he has a spy deep in your household: I suspect this is most probable because Clarence is committed to the total destruction of the Beauforts and all whom we hold dear. However, Clarence nurses a diabolic pride, a real hubris which could bring him down. Such a weakness would give you the power to meddle in his affairs. Trust me, Margaret. I confess I have been guilty of following my own pride, of not listening to more subtle counselling. However, here on my death watch, let me assure you: Edward of York’s greatest weakness is his own family, his queen and the Woodvilles, a pack truly hated, cursed and reviled. Clarence will not change his nature. He is as committed to their destruction as he is to yours. The Woodvilles will supply all the necessities for the coming conflagration.’

‘And Gloucester?’

‘Loyal to his brother: “loyalty is mine” is Richard’s motto.

He will stand by Edward for as long as Edward lives. What might happen if Edward died?’ Somerset pulled a face. ‘To return to my argument, Clarence is the real weakness in the Yorkist defences, his soul burns with ambition. He sees himself as the rightful Lord of England. When he was allied to Warwick and the House of Lancaster, he actually proclaimed himself King. He will now return to such idle boasting like a whore to her trade.’ Somerset wiped the sweat from his face. ‘And so we come to the Secret Chancery. Clarence’s cabal of clerks, three in number, Rhinelanders in origin, former friars. Clarence depends on these for providing grist for his mischief.’

‘Which is?’

‘We do not know, except the clerks are called “the Three Kings”, after their city of origin, Cologne where, according to tradition, the Three Kings mentioned in the Gospel lie buried. They also take the saints’ names: Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar. You may well ask, Margaret, why should I, a duke, a prominent leader of the Lancastrian cause, be interested in Clarence’s Three Kings . . .?’ Beaufort rose and crossed to the wall recess where the cruets were placed during Mass. Beaufort picked up an earthenware jug and drank greedily before offering it to Margaret who shook her head. ‘A gift from the abbot,’ Beaufort whispered, coming back to his chair. He sat down cradling the jug. ‘From the little we have learnt,’ he continued, ‘The Three Kings have drawn up a book, a manuscript, a secret document called “Titulus Regius”.’

‘The Title of the King,’ Margaret murmured.

Beaufort stared at his young kinswoman, the last true surviving Beaufort. He wondered if she would be safe, surrounded as she was by the different wolf packs which prowled the Yorkist court. Despite the poor light, Beaufort glimpsed a shift in Margaret’s clever eyes as she stared back. A knowing look, as if Margaret Beaufort had studied the Duke of Somerset and knew his true worth. A small nun-like woman, Beaufort reflected, and again he wondered how she would cope with the victorious, vicious Clarence, who would watch her and her household with his spies and paid assassins.

‘The “Titulus Regius”.’ Margaret demanded: ‘What is it?’ She paused as a door was flung open further down the nave. Margaret

sprang to her feet and hurried out of the chantry chapel. She feared armed Yorkists might have broken in but it was only Abbot Strensham. Apparently one of the wounded Lancastrians, realising he was in danger of death, had pleaded with one of his companions who, in turn, had begged a sympathetic Yorkist guard to fetch a priest so the dying man could be shriven. Margaret watched the shifting shapes of Abbot Strensham and his prior, who followed the lead of the bobbing light from the sacristan's lantern-horn down the nave. She froze at another fierce cry which was answered by raucous singing from the Yorkist soldiers outside. Margaret returned to the chantry chapel where Somerset was drinking from the wine jug.

'Remember this,' he continued as Margaret sat down, 'our three Yorkist warlords have a strange family history, or so rumour has it: their mother, Cecily Neville, daughter of the Earl of Westmoreland, was apparently an outstanding beauty, so much so she was called the Rose of Raby. She also has a hideous temper. Rumour has it that Clarence, using the Three Kings as searchers and scribes, is investigating his own family hunting for this and that.'

'Why?'

'God knows, but Clarence is continuing such searches. I am not too sure what he wants to prove but, to get his own way, Clarence would go down to Hell and challenge the Lord Satan. Believe me, kinswoman,' Somerset pulled his chair closer, 'if you can, strike back, meddle in his affairs. Clarence is undoubtedly doing the same to you and yours but he's even a greater threat to the House of York. Ah well,' Somerset gestured with his head, 'Abbot Strensham is still tending to that poor comrade. He might as well shrive me for by this time tomorrow; I will be brought to judgement before God's tribunal . . .'

Margaret rose, she kissed her kinsman and crept out of the chantry, silent as a shadow back up the sanctuary steps and into the sacristy where Bray was waiting. He explained how the abbot, prior and sacristan were still in the church so he would escort her back to the guesthouse. They left the abbey precincts and made their way along paved passageways, tunnels of stone lit by the occasional lantern. They crossed the cobbled courtyard stretching in front of the guesthouse, clearly lit by sconce torches fixed to the walls. Margaret heard a sound from the sloping, tiled

roof of their lodgings. She glanced up and stared in amazement at the blaze of fire which came hurtling through the darkness towards her. She pushed Bray to the left even as she darted the other way. The flaming bag of oil crashed onto the cobbles, followed by another and then a third; all three bursting into spouts of flame and fiery oil. Bray raised the alarm screaming, 'Harrow! Harrow!' The door to the guesthouse was flung open and Owain Mortimer, principal squire to the Countess Margaret, darted out, followed by his twin sister Oswina. Margaret, gasping for breath, pointed up at the sloping roof. Once her trembling had subsided, she beckoned at her companions to follow her down the narrow gully which ran along the side of the guesthouse. They turned into the backyard, a place where the refuse was piled; a stinking, slimy midden heap, home for a horde of rats which squealed and scurried away at their approach. Margaret and Bray stopped by the narrow siege ladder leaning against the back wall of the two-storey guesthouse. Bray immediately climbed this to examine the broad ledge against which the rest of the roof rested. He glanced swiftly around and clambered down.

'So easy,' he gestured at the roof, 'especially for a trained assassin. He took those satchels of oil, each primed with a slow-burning fuse. He then crouched on the ledge before climbing up the tiles. Easy enough; he could rest against them and wait. He knew we would have to return here. He hears our approach, sees us clear in the light of our sconce torches. He takes his tinder, the first is lit and . . .'

'The back of this guesthouse is blind.' Owain Mortimer pointed up the wall. 'All the chambers are to the front. No one inside would even hear or see anything amiss. No one,' he repeated wearily in his sing-song voice, 'no one at all.'

'We were abed,' his twin declared, 'though we were not sleeping, I was worried about you mistress.'

Margaret held up a hand as she stared at the ladder. 'Let us go inside,' she declared. 'It's best to be there.'

They returned to the stark parlour close to the guesthouse entrance. Oswina busied herself lighting candles whilst Owain poured a jug of breakfast ale into four stoups on a wooden tray.

'Is Christopher back, has he returned?' Margaret asked, sipping her drink.

‘No he’s not here,’ Owain replied, ‘and nor should we, so close to your enemy; the rest of the household agree, they have gone to their chambers and locked themselves in. God knows mistress, what will happen on the morrow. The Yorkists will drink deeply tonight. They will all be in a bloodlust and looking for vengeance. Have you decided, Mistress – what we should do next?’

‘Not yet,’ Bray retorted.

‘Then when?’ Oswina replied.

Margaret, still holding the tankard, sat back in her chair. ‘The assassin,’ she spoke, her voice sounding harsher than she had intended, ‘the evil soul who tried to burn me alive, who could it be? Why now? Why now? Though I suspect,’ she put down the tankard, ‘that those fiery missiles were the work of York, Clarence in particular.’

‘They wish to root out the Beaufort tree.’ Bray lapsed into his usual homily, a whispered tirade against the House of York. Margaret sat back in the cushioned chair and let her mind drift. She had to curb the fear curdling within her. She closed her eyes and prayed for her husband Humphrey Stafford, now lying grievously wounded after Barnet. The news she had received from her manor at Woking was most disturbing. Humphrey, never the strongest of men, suffered from a life-long skin corruption, St Anthony’s fire, which some leeches likened to leprosy, so much so that four years ago, she and Humphrey had joined the confraternity of Burton Lazars. Margaret had bought statues, triptychs and other paintings celebrating St Anthony’s life to decorate the solar of her manor house, praying constantly beneath them, yet these supplications had not worked any miracle. Now the household leeches reported how the contagion had been grievously affected by the wounds Sir Humphrey had received: a knife cut to the thigh and a sword blow which had glanced off his shoulder. Margaret murmured another prayer and opened her eyes. She really should return to Woking but not until the present business, vital to her, was completed in London.

Margaret half listened to Bray and Mortimer’s heated whispering and her mind went back to her manor house, wondering what was happening there. She loved her Woking estates; she had inherited them as part of a legacy from her grandmother, the

redoubtable Lady Holland, along with a rich collection of manuscripts and delicately inscribed psalters and other devotional literature. Margaret tried to recall the manor in an attempt to soothe her humours: how her residence was screened by copses of ancient oak, beech and copper set in lush, fertile parkland. The house itself was twice-moated; the outer one contained the poultry runs, livestock sheds, warren, granges and a small deer park. The inner moat, crossed by a drawbridge leading through a fortified gateway, contained the manor itself, with its great hall, large pantry and spacious buttery. Then there was a chapel, chancery office and, above all, a range of private chambers overlooking the herb and flower gardens, a well-stocked stew pond and lush orchards.

Margaret felt her eyes grow heavy and she sank into a half-waking sleep; as she did so, the different visions which always swept in, returned clear and precise. Margaret felt as if she was staring at a finely etched painting or the brilliant illumination in some psalter. She sat and watched herself struggling through snow which had drifted heavily. There were trees, bushes and rocky outcrops, and she was sure that she was in Pembrokeshire. She was hastening towards a great iron wall which soared up into the wine-coloured sky. The wall was at least sixty yards high, entered through a fortified gateway guarded by snarling, black-haired war dogs. Margaret was not frightened of these; she was more anxious about what was waiting for her beyond the wall. She turned and glanced piteously at the corpses which sprawled against the hard-packed snow. She recognised that of her father, stretched out as they had found him in his chancery chamber; the goblet of wine he'd been drinking had rolled close to her dead father's head, turning his blond hair blood-red, as if he had been struck a grievous blow. She also recognised the other corpses, her first true husband, the beloved Edmund Tudor. He was lying all crouched as he had on his deathbed, consumed by a raging fever. Other corpses littered the snow, men and women of her family and household. She wanted to go back to them but the snow dragged at her, its whiteness hurting her eyes. She was sure she could hear her son crying from behind the soaring iron wall whilst the harrowing baying of wolves somewhere around her seemed to be drawing closer . . .

‘Mistress, mistress?’ Margaret opened her eyes. Bray was staring beseechingly down at her. ‘Mistress, you were chattering. Father Prior is here. He is very concerned.’ Margaret blinked, rubbed her face and sat up in the high-backed chair and smiled at Prior Anselm, who took the stool placed in front of her, his bony, angular face wreathed in concern.

‘My Lady,’ he began, ‘the good brothers have had their horarium severely disturbed; the abbey is full of armed men, more blood stains our flagstones than dust. Violence stalks the cloisters, our choir stalls, even the great sanctuary itself. Now we hear reports of fiery missiles being thrown down into the courtyard outside – that’s true, isn’t it? I have inspected the cobbles; they reek of burning oil whilst scraps of scorched leather scatter like leaves. One of our brothers glimpsed this as he hurried to fill waterskins from the well. What is this, why now?’ The prior joined his hands in prayer. ‘God knows what further mischief will raise its sinister head like some deadly vicious serpent – because that is what Satan is, he and his many legions.’

‘Father Prior?’ Margaret grasped the old monk’s right hand, raised it to her lips and kissed his thick, copper ring of office. The prior blushed.

‘I am sorry,’ he muttered. ‘But the truth is we are all terrified. We are not men of war.’

Margaret, throwing a warning glance at Bray, Owain and Oswina, quickly described what had happened, offering the conclusion that the assailant was probably some drunkard eager to do hurt to a Beaufort or a Lancastrian fugitive furious that a Beaufort should be sheltering amongst Yorkist warlords.

‘You see, Father Prior,’ Margaret gently touched the back of his hand, ‘I am living proof that you cannot serve two masters.’

The prior laughed and clambered to his feet. He walked to the door then paused and glanced at Margaret’s three companions. ‘I recognise you, Master Bray, as the Lady Margaret’s steward, but these young persons? They look alike. They must be brother and sister?’ The prior cocked his head sideways like some curious sparrow. ‘Yes, night-black hair, smooth, sallow faces, large eyes and full-lipped mouths. You must be Welsh, yes? We have some of those from the southern tribes here in the abbey.’

‘Owain and Oswina Mortimer,’ Margaret replied, gesturing

at the twins to grasp the prior's proffered hand. They did so hurriedly, then stepped back as if shy at the attention now being shown them. 'They are kinsmen of the noble Mortimer family, orphans raised by my brother-in-law, Lord Jasper Tudor.'

'Ah,' the prior sighed, 'a man the Yorkists would love to seize. And he is where?'

'Pembroke Castle,' Margaret retorted, 'where he will stay until he can take ship to France.' Margaret shrugged. 'Jasper entrusted Owain and Oswina to me. They, along with Reginald Bray and Christopher Urswicke, are my privileged chamber people.'

'Urswicke, ah yes. We have heard about him. A brother saw him leave for the town where more excitement is brewing. The King has taken over Merchant Stratford's house. A party of horsemen have been despatched on urgent royal business. I understand Urswicke was one of them. Now my Lady, take care. I understand my Lord of Clarence has insisted that he visits you to present his compliments.' The prior sketched a blessing in the air and then left.

Margaret would have loved to retire. She felt sweat soaked, heavy limbed, her mind fraught with anxiety which gnawed at her peace of mind, the prospect of meeting Clarence only sharpening this. She tried to compose herself, putting on a brave face while she and her chamber people hastily prepared the parlour. Clarence arrived and Margaret wondered at the sound of heavy cartwheels across the cobbles, the clatter of sharpened hooves and the deep neigh of dray horses. Owain volunteered to go and see. Margaret shook her head saying that he should stay at table and eat the light repast the refectorian had left in the small adjoining buttery.

Clarence arrived, he almost kicked the door open, mincing in like some court lady. He'd wrapped a bottle-green cloak around him which caught on the jingling spurs of his war boots. Clarence, grasping a wine goblet in one hand, simply tore the cloak free. He snapped his fingers and pointed at a stool. One of the three shadowy figures who accompanied him hastily brought this across. Clarence sat down with a heavy sigh, his sweaty face creased into a false smile, lips glistening with wine, eyes bright with malice. He stroked his finely clipped moustache and beard, dragging at the bits of dry wine caught there.

‘My Lord,’ Margaret turned in her chair to face him squarely.

‘My Lady.’ Clarence bowed mockingly, raised his goblet in toast and drank deeply. ‘Oh, by the way,’ he pointed at the shadowy figures behind him, ‘these are my chancery clerks who manage my Secret Seal.’

Margaret glanced up at them and tried to hide her fear at the three sinister figures garbed in hoods and blue-black robes. She recognised the colour and cut as belonging to some minor order of friars but she could not recall their name. These three were certainly not men of prayer. They stood, menacingly silent, hands up the voluminous sleeves of their robes which, Margaret suspected, concealed a dagger, stiletto, or some other such weapon. One of these leaned down to whisper in Clarence’s ear and, as he did so, Margaret, with her keen sense of smell, caught the odour of oil and smoke and she wondered if one – or all – of these macabre figures had been responsible for the recent attack on her. Margaret shifted her gaze from Clarence and stared hard at his sinister companions, refusing to be cowed or frightened by them. She found it difficult to distinguish individual features but she was aware of heavy-lidded eyes and noses as sharp as quill pens. All three were thin-lipped which, with their bulging foreheads and tight-lipped grimace, gave them an odd fish-like appearance. Wolfsheads, Margaret concluded: whatever their garb or whatever Clarence said about their status, these were predators ready to strike.

‘Three brothers,’ Clarence whispered, as if revelling in their company. ‘Excellent clerks!’

‘I have heard of them.’ Bray spoke up. ‘Former friars, the Three Kings from Cologne.’

‘Others call them that.’ Clarence lifted his goblet. ‘To me they are just the most faithful of retainers who accompany me here, there and everywhere. They do my bidding like the loyal lurchers they are. Now,’ Clarence smacked his lips, ‘I have brought you something, little Meg.’

‘That is not my name. I am, sir, the Lady Margaret Beaufort, Countess of Richmond.’

‘Which makes you a kinswoman to the Beaufort traitor and other vile miscreants lurking in the abbey church.’ Clarence, face seething with hate, jabbed a finger. ‘Where is your brother-in-law,

the traitor Jasper Tudor and your dearly beloved son Henry? Little Henry?' Clarence's voice became a squeal of mockery. Bray's hands went beneath the table, close to the long, stabbing dagger in his belt. Margaret glanced up. One of the Three Kings had brought his hand from the sleeve of his gown. Margaret glimpsed the glitter of the long, thin blade.

'My brother-in-law,' Margaret retorted quickly, 'resides in Pembroke. So does my beloved son.'

'Do they now?' Clarence taunted.

'My Lord.' Margaret fought to curb the almost overwhelming desire to claw at Clarence's false, fat, glistening face. 'My Lord,' she repeated, 'I am tired and I need to retire.' She made to move. 'I should do so now.'

'Oh no, no, no.' Clarence fluttered his fingers in her face. 'I must show you something before you sleep. You must say goodbye before they leave.'

'Who?'

'Come, come! You must see this.' Clarence rose to his feet and swept out of the guesthouse, Margaret felt that she had no choice but to follow. She stopped however, just before the threshold, and stared at the great war cart which stood in the centre of the small bailey. On each corner of the cart a cresset torch flared against the cold night breeze, the flames illuminating the horror displayed there. The sides of the cart were nothing more than sharp poles lashed together. Their sharp, spear-like tips provided gaps for archers inside to loose, whilst the poles would serve as a sturdy defence. Now these sharpened posts had been used to display, on all three sides of the cart, a row of severed heads thrust on the tips like so many ripe apples. The breeze shifted, rippling the hair of the decapitated heads, and Margaret caught the salty tang of dried human blood.

She walked slowly forward, fascinated by the abomination. She recognised some of the dirty, gore-stained faces, their hair pulled back and tied in a topknot so each face could be clearly seen. Margaret immediately glimpsed the once handsome face of John Beaufort, Edmund's younger brother, now contorted by a savage, bloody death. Clarence grasped Margaret by the elbow, a tight clasp as he moved her around the cart so she could clearly see the severed heads of Lancastrians killed in battle, their corpses

decapitated in preparation for being tarred and poled above the gateways of different cities. As she passed the tail of the cart, she glimpsed the blood-drenched sacks of severed limbs, which would also be displayed and proclaimed to the sound of horn, trumpet and bagpipe. Margaret could take no more. She turned, gagged and retched, going down on her knees. Clarence crouched beside her. Bray protested and tried to come between them. Clarence drew his dagger.

‘Enough George, enough!’ Clarence clambered to his feet as Richard of Gloucester strolled out of the darkness. ‘George, the King needs you. My Lady?’ Gloucester pointed to Margaret resting on Bray’s arm. ‘I bid you goodnight and good rest.’ He came closer, in the juddering light. Gloucester’s harsh face seemed softer and Margaret glimpsed genuine pity in those ever-shifting eyes. ‘George,’ Richard lifted a gauntleted hand, holding Margaret’s gaze as he spoke to his brother, ‘You have no further business with this lady, the hour draws on. Judgement awaits, come.’

Clarence backed away from Margaret, fluttering his fingers in mock farewell before spinning on his heel and following his brother into the darkness, his three sinister guards close behind. Margaret watched them go as she tightly gripped Bray’s arm.

‘Master Reginald,’ she hissed, ‘I swear by the light I will kill that demon incarnate and all his ilk. How dare he threaten my beloved son?’ She turned and Bray, who knew his mistress’s secret soul, was frightened by the look of intense fury which had transformed her usually placid face.

‘Master Bray,’ she whispered hoarsely, ‘this is truly *à l’Oustrance, usque ad mortem* – to the death, whatever form that death takes.’