

Pox

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The only time he is alone is just before dawn. When his servants hear him waking, they will rush to his side to dress him, daub him in makeup, assemble their monarch out of bits of paint and cloth like a child would make a doll. His maid, slapped just a touch too hard last week, shaking like a player who's forgotten his lines. A bee hive, and he is the queen. But not yet. For now, it's not until he rustles his blankets, stretches and reaches for his pitcher of water, that his ladies-in-waiting will unfurl themselves like clockwork dolls to fetch his robes. For now, he is alone.

The shadows creep a smidge farther along the walls. Time's up. A ruler can't get much done alone, after all. He throws the covers off abruptly enough to send them all skittering like mice. A squadron of skirts parades military style to his drapes, flinging them open. That stammering maid appears at his elbow. "E-Elizabeth. Your Majesty. Your tea, if you please."

1557

The parade of his retinue toward the Privy Council chambers is as important as anything he does once inside. The flaming head of hair, teased up in elaborate knots and imitated by half the ladies in court, is as important as his crown. They pass through hallways dripping with brocade, through stone arches cut as fine as any jewel, past the indoor fencing courts, where the men are crossing wooden blades. His ladies in waiting giggle at their sweaty vigor, angling their reactions toward their audience like players cheating out onstage. Meanwhile his fingers are making

small mirroring motions hidden inside their dainty gloves; his ladies will never know that their queen is fantasizing about stabbing the Earl of Lancaster, that pasty cock. What his subjects don't know is as important as what they know. What they believe is more important than anything.

When his half-sister Mary reigned there were fifty members of the Privy Council, a whole gaggle of old men in long robes shouting bombast and looking for all the world like a disorganized rehearsal at one of those playhouses across the river. As he settles down with his more intimate Council of eleven, it's like each man at the table is afraid of being next. Good. He arranges his skirts in a feminine but firm, a delicate but strong, a queenly but a kingly way. He motions to the maid to bring him a scroll, and stretches the fine vellum out on the table.

“Sirs, I have received a request from Parliament that I marry.” Their beards all waggle yes like they're going to fall off. “I have prepared a response, which I shall send to the good gentlemen upon the morrow. If you would be so good as to hear it, and tell me your thoughts?” More wagging. He inwardly smirks, and smooths out the scroll. “I give you all my hearty thanks for the good zeal and loving care you seem to have, as well towards me as to the whole state of your country.”

A Polish ambassador once debuted in court with a Latin speech in praise of the Queen; it sounded like he had memorized the sounds and not the words. When he was finished Elizabeth rose from the throne and, with perfect Latin fluency, excoriated him before the entire court without declining a single noun wrong. Later his right hand man, Robert Cecil, marveled that it was

the most skillful display of extempore Latin he had ever seen: “She is more than a man, and in truth, sometimes less than a woman.” The Privy Council’s faces remind him of the Polish ambassador’s as he reads.

By the time he is finished with this soliloquy, the beards have stopped wagging entirely. “I have said it before and I shall say it again, sirs. I may have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king—and a king of England too. As a king, I declare this matter closed. *We* declare this matter closed.” He mentally kicks himself for lapsing into the singular “I” when he should have been using the royal “we.” Pronouns are important. They force people to see you as you would like to be seen. They make you who you would like to be. As a self-proclaimed prince, he should know better than to let language get out of his control.

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The beards exit stage left the very moment he gives them leave. All of them, except one rather handsome beard.

“Your Royal Majesty. I take this speech to mean I should delay my proposal until next week?” Robert Dudley. Childhood friend, trusted courtier, married man.

“We trust your wife would want you to delay your proposal indefinitely.” No one in Richmond Castle looks at anything else when he is in the room, but it only flatters him when Dudley does it.

“So she is the only reason you would not say aye?” Dudley grins.

His Queen affects a small regal smirk. “I say ‘we,’ my Lord.”

“Aye. I mean, we.”

“Your Highness. If I may?” Standing a head shorter than him when he isn’t boosted by his high heeled boots, John Dee serves as Elizabeth’s court astrologer and unofficial ‘Privy Councilor of the Cloak and Dagger.’ According to Dee, a Virgo and a Taurus can hatch all kinds of delicious plots together. Unlike most of his astrology, this claim tends to prove true. Elizabeth beckons him, treating Dudley to a steamy neutral expression as a goodbye. He does that grin again. Elizabeth may not be able to marry that grin, but he certainly wants it to happen for only him for the rest of his life.

“Dee. Have you made contact with the woman?”

“I have, Your Majesty. But--”

“Have her brought to our chambers tonight. We have use for her services.”

“Your Majesty, I must protest, out of my exceeding love for your royal self, and in perfect accord with the urgings of my Lord our God as well as mine own heart—“

“John.”

A pause, a frustrated sigh that ruffles his prodigious beard. “I will do it, Your Highness. But I will not like it.”

It was done indeed, though he waits for over a year to hear the outcome. In the meantime:

“Most Serene Prince Our Very Dear Cousin,” he writes to the decidedly unserene Prince Erik of Sweden, “a letter truly yours both in the writing and sentiment was given us on 30 December...while we perceive there that the zeal and love of your mind towards us is not diminished, yet in part we are grieved...” He stifles a yawn of grief. “As often we have testified both in words and writing...we have never yet conceived a feeling of that kind of affection towards anyone. We therefore beg your Serene Highness again *and again* that you be pleased to set a limit to your love.” Sweden made the same mistake as many of Elizabeth’s father’s mistresses: giving away the milk without selling the cow. Except here the cow is a smallish armada and a slice of Schleswig-Holstein. He writes to the prince in Latin as easily as he speaks it, or as easily as he writes in Flemish, French, Italian, Spanish, Greek, and Welsh. That is to say, as easily as he speaks all those languages.

That night almost a year ago he had sent his terrified maids, who normally never left his side, down to the kitchens for the night. The Queen needed a better quality of butter and it was imperative that they supervise its churning at midnight. “But Your Highness, this is the witching hour, when spirits walk and e’en the Devil himself may creep—.”

“Fascinating, yes. Now kindly leave my chambers. Our chambers.”

The witch looked like Dee had dragged her to Richmond Castle through all the loam and bracken in the forest; he could swear there were actual twigs knotted into her hair. Elizabeth sup-

posed her slovenly appearance was just like Dee's bejeweled zodiac pendants, and the way he frothed at the mouth about the full moon every month--or Dee's perfectly slicked hair and beard, for that matter. Elizabeth more than anyone knows how important it is to put on the proper show.

"Your Highness. You have summoned me here for murder most foul."

"Madam, please just bring out the dead chicken or whatever such thing and get on with it."

The witch huffs like one of the graybeards in his Privy Council when he cuts them off.

"Majesty, it is unwise to treat such with the spirits, for to offend those on the other side of the veil will surely—"

"The dead chicken, please."

He is jolted out of his remembrance by a knock on his door. The maid cautiously pads across the floor, like a skittish kitten. "Your Highness. Lord Dudley's wife has fallen down a flight of stairs. She broke her neck."

She knows nothing of the ritual that took place a year ago, or who knows what hysterics she would give herself to. Even so, she is in tears when he sends her away. That night, he notices an odd bump has come up on the back of his neck, but doesn't inspect it too closely.

1562

He is alone.

It started when he woke up one day to find a cluster of angry red welts on one cheek. The next day one of the pocks doubled, as if it had grown a second head. Finally, on the third day a smattering of them sprang up right across his face, like someone had thrown red paint at him. When he touches them, he hisses in pain; the pocks seem to throb like bee stings.

When he slathered himself in lily white face paint that third day he took a critical look, and concluded that no one could see a thing. He didn't look bad at all. Surely no one would be paying such close attention as to see such small marks. His crown and regal manner would draw more attention than anything on his skin. Besides, even if they looked, with makeup it seemed like just a few small moles here and there. He left his chambers confident he looked gorgeous as ever. After all, no one has perfect skin, not even a queen.

But then everyone looked only at him that day, and it did not flatter him at all. Once he was back in his chambers for the night he was practically wrestled into bed by his chambermaids, with Dee and Cecil watching and looking very grim indeed. As he struggled he thought of Edward Seymour, a forty year old man to his fourteen, coming into his bedchamber to tickle him. He thought of Thomas Seymour, his guardian at the time, discovering this--and joining in. He thought of his mother's severed head, which he never saw but can picture quite well, thank you very much. So there came a moment when he started biting at his chambermaids, and Dee and Cecil withdrew grimmer than before.

Days passed, then a week or two, and on until others might have stopped counting. Not him. He counted the days like the prisoners in the Tower of London. After his whole face was overtaken the lesions spread to his arms and legs, and finally he felt like he was more pox than skin. When he ran his hands over his face, he felt bumps; no mouth, no nose, no eyes. All of them, his entire face, the face that ruled Britannia, swelled up in a thousand balloons of red. Red as the blood he gave the spell.

The knife had been oddly heavy, for its size. “Only virgin blood shall seal the spell, Your Highness.” As he held his hand over the candle, precariously floating in its bowl of water, he had a flash of memory back to the previous day when Dudley had come courting to his chambers, when Dudley’s fingers had found their way all by themselves through a jeweled bodice, a heavy velvet skirt, three petticoats, and a set of smallclothes with more fastenings and buckles than most men’s entire outfits. He was still a virgin where God was concerned, and he had supposed that would be enough for the Devil too. But now he lies there with cold cloths over his eyes, his mouth, his nose, if any of those parts of him still exist.

If the spell has backfired, then it must be a matter of a death for a death. In dreams he sees his mother, his aunt Anne, his aunt Catherine, his other aunt Catherine, the one who *married Seymour* after his father died, the one who *knew what he did to him*, who taught him Latin and gave him the books that helped him survive the deaths of parents, sisters, relatives of all stripes, but who *knew what he did, and let him continue*. Now he sees Edward Seymour courting him

years later when he wears a crown; he smells the man's rotting breath. He even sees the visage he glimpsed as a child of Catherine of Aragon. Perhaps this is what he gets for dallying with men. Perhaps the house of Tudor was already cursed, long before the spell.

But one night, as he runs down a hall in his dreams, he turns a corner, runs into a bed-chamber, draws back a heavy velvet curtain, and sees his own face. But it is not his face. It is some pitiful thing asleep in misery, huffing and wheezing through the pain that comes even with breathing. There is no one else in the room. He is alone with the thing. That thing with flaming red hair to go with the flaming red pox.

"No. No, that cannot be me. That is not me. I am the Queen, why won't you *listen to me*," and then it seems he is pushed down into the ravaged face, into its ooze and rawness, twisting away from the gruesome thing until he looks up at his bedchamber ceiling for the first time in months, and understands. He hears a maid declaring that the fever has broken.

1563

He is still alone. He has removed all mirrors from his rooms so that even his reflection is not there to give him company. When he does look into a mirror, he does not recognize his face. He is no longer ill, new boils no longer swell up inside his skin like red verminous eggs, but somehow he still feels like an invalid. He can still feel the ulcerous sores inside his flesh, they still seem to wriggle around at certain times, and when he touches them it still feels like being stabbed. He watches the sores on his hands go from red, to pink and grey, to black, to oozy pink.

He watches shadows creep across the walls when his curtains are open, but more often he just watches them creep across the ceiling when they are shut.

Dudley has come to his chambers, shaken the ladies standing guard, rained blows on the door, finally rushed right in before her royal guard seized him halfway to the curtained bed.

Dee watched the whole thing phlegmatically, before turning back to the situation at hand. “Your Majesty. The Privy Council says the Scots will not leave off. You must meet with your cousin.”

“I obviously cannot.”

“She rejects your letters. You must speak in person.”

“I am out of my fever dreams, John, but I could swear I just heard you contradict me.”

One night, he sends his ladies for a candle, a knife, a bowl of water, a sprig of chamomile; he has read the *Malleus Maleficarum*, he knows what weeds these bitches use. If the witch can do it, so can he. No woman is more powerful than he, not in affairs of state and surely not in this. He beckons one of his shaking maids forward, hissing like a snake, “*blast it, come here child.*” He probably looks the part of the witch more than Dee’s little charlatan now.

“Give me my face back. Return me to my former glory. Apparently my blood is not virgin enough for you, but it is Tudor blood, and royal blood, and damn you, you will *obey it.*” He waits two weeks, though he knows it took almost a year last time. But when he hears that Dudley is paying court to Mary Queen of Scots, he determines that the spirits have found his blood too

sinful once again. The servants have to clean up the shattered bowl, the smashed candle, and a surprising amount of blood.

1564

He is back in court, but he knows very well what they think. Dudley waits for him by his Privy Council seat with a consort's solicitude, though his grin has been gone for a long time. Elizabeth's joints creak oddly now, his face is weathered like an old woman's, though he is not yet thirty. Dudley ducks his head stiffly and seats himself after Elizabeth, an actor taking a bow and exiting the scene.

After the death of his wife, Dudley waited a gracious period of time before discussing marriage. Elizabeth had to admit, the man was a gentleman in all things. But finally he had to tell poor Dudley that the daughter of Henry VIII did not have an interest in marriage. When he learned his mother was dead, when he learned his aunt Anne was dead, and on and on, he had not simply wept; he had paid attention. Dudley was furious, but he kept giving Elizabeth gifts, and that was all the Queen truly needed.

Dudley had made plenty of proposals since then, though; one shouted through his door during the pox, one by note delivered by his shaking maidservant, and one more when Elizabeth finally appeared in public view, face encrusted with the withered sores.

"Elizabeth. When you were ill, you made me your Lord Protector of the Realm. Will you not make me your lord and husband now that you are well?" But Elizabeth's views on marriage

would not change just because he had not looked in a mirror for two years. It would not even change because the courtiers looked at him all the time out of morbid curiosity now, not out of fear, not in spite of themselves, not whether they liked it or not.

And with that rebuff, Dudley was set in his path. Beside Elizabeth in the council chambers, he reports on his courtship of the Scottish queen like a child reciting a poorly learnt Latin lesson. Elizabeth thinks of giving the candle another go. But instead he just goes back to his chambers that night, takes a regular kitchen knife, and slowly, methodically, prises out a sore from the back of his hand. Then he writes a declaration for the Scot bitch saying that he will never name her his successor, unless she marries Dudley. If Dudley wants her, he can have her, and if she wants the throne, she'll have to have him. Elizabeth has no use for either of them anymore.

1578

In the end, Dudley does not marry the Queen of Scots. But he does marry Lettice. Lettice has dyed her hair bright red in the fashion of Elizabeth's court, and teased up that hair in the same clefted style as the queen. She also happens to have a prominent Aquiline nose, meaning that all together she looks suspiciously like Elizabeth. But without a faceful of pox scars. He still has the nerve to walk beside Elizabeth's horse in the queen's royal processions, the way a consort would, but Elizabeth accepts it when he sees how Lettice twists her mouth at the display. If he should be cuckolded by Dudley, so can she.

She and Dudley married in secret, but the French ambassador tells Elizabeth about it just two months later. When he hears, he considers blood, viciously hacked out rivulets staining the candle's light on the water. He considers having Dee drag the witch back to court to curse Lettice and Dudley both. If he thought it would work he would drag a chambermaid into his rooms and hang her upside down to bleed out like a slaughtered pig. He has taken to prising out the sores quite regularly, though only underneath his sleeves. He finds he prefers this sort of scar.

Meanwhile, he doesn't need a knife or candle to kill the little Scot. Just ink and paper. "You have in various ways and manners attempted to take my life and to bring my kingdom to destruction by bloodshed. These treasons will be proved to you and all made manifest. I therefore require, charge, and command that you make answer." Then he writes a letter sending Dudley to lead the naval battle against the Spanish Armada. He doesn't get to go on his honeymoon, for the fleet sets sail too soon.

1588

He is dead. Not Elizabeth, Dudley. Elizabeth is the greatest military commander in Europe, because the Armada is defeated. But so is Dudley. Funnily enough, not in the Armada: from some kind of cancer, a pox in his stomach. He repeats the name in his head, then starts whispering it to himself whenever he's alone, which is whenever he can manage nowadays: Dudley, Dudley, Dudley. Robert. Dudley. Dudley. The Earl of Leicester, the Baron of Denbigh, the corpse in the coffin to be buried in Beauchamp Chapel.

Elizabeth always looked best in black, though it is hard for him to hold his head up even in his finest these days. He looked in the mirror for the first time in years before the funeral. He saw a haggard woman, cheeks bursting with scars like a field of black roses, sagging skin looking like it was scoured into decay by some toxic substance. He is unsure how much of his pallor, the sagging at the corners of his mouth, the puff around his eyes, comes from grief; he is unsure how long he has been grieving.

Lettice, weeping in the place of honor at the front of the pews. He has not seen her in eighteen years, since he banished her from court. Indeed, almost everyone present at the funeral has not seen Lettice since then. Elizabeth wonders what she has been up to; how well her farm-girl chambermaids in Kenilworth make conversation. But, after a moment, he joins her in her own pew to the shock of the entire chapel, and to their even greater shock he takes her hand. What a pair they must make; red hair, black dresses, white makeup. Lettice's lower lip trembles and she sobs right into Elizabeth's dress. His guards blanche as if they were the ones whose gowns were being ruined by the woman's makeup, their eyes asking if she should be killed for that, but he puts up his hand to dismiss them.

As Lettice bawls into his puffed sleeves, he wonders if the whole thing would have been any different without that night in his bedchamber. He knows his father didn't need a witch to ruin his own life, or the lives of others. Perhaps no one ever has. Perhaps all we need for that is each other.

And then he is shaking for some reason, and then he realizes the reason is because he is crying. He believes the last time he cried was after his mother's funeral. Anne Boleyn, beheaded for bearing the future queen and not a king. Beheaded by the man she married. Till death do us part; your head from your shoulders. As the funeral hymns begin, he thinks of his mother and Dudley lying next to each other in the ground.

1597

He is alone, more so than ever. As the players for the evening take their places, he feels like one of them in his stiff costume, his affected flirtations. The courtiers try not to shrink away from his blackened teeth, but their queen is better at acting than any of them.

The leader of the company presumes to speak to him before the show. "Your Majesty, I am told you have translated the plays of Euripides from the Greek?"

He raises an eyebrow. "Aye, player. One of my translations was performed before the court some years ago."

"Well, while this play was written in Your Majesty's Owne English, we of the Lord Chamberlain's Men do humbly hope to earn as much of your attention with 'The Merry Wives of Windsor' as you gave to 'The Trojan Women.'"

"You are quite ambitious, sir. I would hope you have written a play to match."

The man with the pointed beard gives a small smile. "Madam, of that you shall be the judge."

He is dying. This time, it is certain. He remembers when he had the pox how courtiers and councilors would visit his room and then whisper right outside, as if he had something better to do than listen to them. They're doing it again, and this time Cecil doesn't even mind her dying, because he has an heir to hustle onto the throne—James, the Scot's son. Elizabeth doesn't care. He has developed quite a taste for the theater these days.

After a performance played for him in his bed, Will lags behind his men to converse with him in Latin for a time. He knows it takes the Queen's mind off the dark journey ahead of him to speak in subject-object-verb form for a time, delaying the inevitable action for last. Will can make puns in Latin just as well as in English, as Elizabeth has learned well in recent years. But eventually, on their third or fourth cup of tea, they lapse back into English.

“Your Majesty, I do believe the state of women everywhere has been improved by your reign.” He also flatters in both English and Latin. Perhaps he wants to send her off to Death feeling like her life hasn't all been for nothing.

“That improvement to our state could simply come from your portrayal of women on the stage, sir.”

“With such a queen as you, it is not hard to be so inspired. And in fact, your highness, at times I almost feel as though I am a woman myself—“ He does not finish the last word, but rather swallows it. “Er, I only meant that as a player and a writer, I find myself entering many other

people's minds, even the minds of those who are completely different from myself. Indeed, sometimes when I come back to earth to find only mine own name and life, it seems a limitation. I know not if I make sense."

But he does make sense. "And perhaps you feel more yourself when you pretend to be someone else? Or do you feel you are pretending to be someone else when you are yourself?"

"Indeed both, Your Majesty."

"I more than anyone know that it is not only stages where people deceive, and not only players who perform. Or perhaps it is that men and women are all players in a sense."

"Well put, Your Majesty."

The Queen gives a long wracking cough. "I fear you must leave me, Will. I hate to be late, but I am now tardy for the grave by several months."

He leaves, and the Queen is alone with his scars once again. But not as much so.