

Manoeuvre

Louis felt suffocated, as though he could not move. He was surrounded by people he loved – his queen, his men. Yet, he could not shake the feeling that he was somehow restricted, held back. Edward had been leading campaign after campaign against him, and Louis never backed down, but it always felt like his side was only reacting, like he could never be a step ahead. Spotting commotion ahead, he heard some of his infantrymen call out, “Movement in King Edward’s camp! Soldiers mobilising!”

Louis sighed. His men responded in kind, marching ahead. Louis sighed again. Soldiers were a stubborn bunch. Though they were enthusiastic, they would not be able to keep the pace they start with and would soon slow to a crawl. They thought one way, and could not change, no matter what; everything was either black, or white. Sometimes, Louis wondered if he saw the world the same way as well. There *had* to be more to life than just two colours. He turned to his queen, Elle, and for a minute his worries mattered nothing. He was lost in her beauty. Her ebony skin. She turned to him in turn, and smiled. Louis lived for that smile. And he would die for it, sure as day.

“I know not how we can keep Edward in check, my love, he grows bolder every day.”

“Oh, Louis. I think you should leave that to me. You worry entirely too much.”

“I shall not let you enter hostile terrain alone, Elle, forget it.”

“I am a queen, dearest; your queen. I can do as I please. Furthermore, I shan’t be alone, Father Francis will accompany me.”

Louis snorted. “And then what! Hope Edward finds God?”

“It *will* work this time, you have to trust me.” Without waiting for a reply, Elle slid away with a grace that made Louis sigh. The way she moved...well, no one could quite match her gait.

Louis turned to Francis. “Keep her safe, yes?”

“Of course, your majesty.”

“Do you really think we stand a chance? Will we win this time?”

“We can; I think we can. All we need do is back Edward into a corner he cannot back out of. Humiliate him.”

Louis pondered in silence. Francis left. Activity bustled around him, and Louis tried to not let his anxiety get to him. He worried that danger might befall Elle. If Francis died, well, he had another pastor. But Elle, by God, there was only one of her. He could not afford to lose her.

His thoughts were particularly morbid as an imposing man rode in on a blinding stallion, causing quite a stir in the camp, leaping over the footmen willy-nilly. "Louis! We need to talk!" he proclaimed.

"You will address me 'your highness', *soldier*. And I have no interest in whatever you might have to say. So I suggest you vacate my camp before I set my cavalry upon you."

"Well, if that is how things are to be...I just wish it known that I tried."

"You are but a mindless lackey, scurrying about, dancing to the whims of Edward, who is not only offensive, but is also a mad man."

"Is there a rhyme to this tirade?"

"You are scant better than a mercenary. Do not gallop in here pretending to be a white knight. What exactly is it you wish known that you tried?"

"I tried to warn you that your queen has overstepped herself. And that Edward will not hesitate to put her down."

"You bastards lay so much as a finger on her..."

"Edward is willing to parley. He tires of your ineffectual attempts at rebuffing his advances. He invites you to dine with him at the inn by the river. He wants to proffer you the chance to save your precious Elle. That is, if you will lick his boots. *Your highness*."

Arrows from towers to either side of Louis sent the horseman scampering, veering his swift white horse away from lances and pikes. Consequently, the slighted king's seething went largely unseen. With his jaw set in angry determination, he started forward. And was immediately met with voices cautioning him. They doubted him, his power, his ability, his *utility*.

Unable to take it any longer, he did something kings are usually good at. "I AM YOUR KING," he bellowed. "I can decide what is right. And I can do what I decide." So saying, he started forward again. This time, no one stopped him.

Step after trudging step, he went; one foot at a time. All around him, chaos prevailed, as he traversed the distance to his enemy's war camp, a transient observer. As he got closer, he saw that a rather large portion of Edward's army had been decimated. The few soldiers that remained, Louis sidestepped easily, slipping past their ranks. He found the inn the horseman had spoken of, and entered. Inside, he found that Elle and Francis had arrayed themselves strategically, cutting off any means of escape. Edward had a few soldiers with him, and the horseman, but in essence, had no means of exit.

"Well, well, well. Look who sauntered in. Welcome, Louis. I was just talking to your wife about how she *murdered* mine."

Louis raised a questioning eyebrow.

Elle shrugged. "She was so concerned with what our cuirassiers were doing, she never saw me coming. Quite the foolish move."

Louis strode forward and sat across the table from Edward. "For the affront your messenger thrust upon me, I should strike him down as he stands...well, as he is astride; I cannot fathom a man who refuses to dismount *inside* an inn. But I would much rather that we be civil."

"Civil? Did you not hear me, perhaps? My wife is dead. At the hand of yours."

"Pardon the interruption, but she is in a better place now. In the halls of God," said a voice from the corner.

"Not now, Francis!" both kings echoed in unison.

"If you do not ever have time for the Lord, why do you expect him to have time for you in your hour of need?" the priest grumbled, but fell silent nonetheless.

"I deny you, Louis. I deny your authority. I deny your existence. And not to ruin the surprise for you, but you are not likely to leave this inn alive. Neither is your retinue."

"That sounds as bold a claim as one can make, Edward, especially from a man broken, his forces dominated."

"Your assumptions are your undoing, Louis. Conceit, your downfall. In your haste to believe in victory, you miscount my cunning. You fail to notice ploys a peasant could have discovered; check your words for more fearful threats to make."

"You know, the more I consider it, the more I think your wife *wanted* to die. Who wouldn't? I would, if I had to listen to you yammer all day long."

Edward roared up from his seat, but was quickly blocked off by his own knight, as a soldier from Elle's personal guard rushed in. He nodded briefly to his queen, but made straight for Louis. He whispered in his king's ear.

"Sire, we discovered one of Edward's men past behind our backlines, in the throes of some arcane ritual. He must have sneaked past our units somehow. As our men drew closer to him, they saw his body be *consumed*, to raise Edward's queen from the dead.

"Fortunately, the resurrected queen was in range of one of our towers, and she was shot down again. But here is the most interesting bit. Edward is bereft of coin. He emptied out his treasury to pay the shaman for the ritual. I suspect he is too destitute to even pay for a meal."

"This is wonderful news, soldier. You have done well, bringing this to my attention. Wait nearby, I wish that you bear witness to what is about to happen."

"You humble me, my liege," the soldier withdrew, going to stand next to Francis.

“So, Edward. Tell me. Why will I not leave this inn alive?”

It was at this point that a steward approached, nervous, worried whether weathered monarchs would find his inn’s fare palatable.

“Ah, hello, young man,” Louis slapped the attendant on his back, making him cringe. “Just who I needed to see. I might, after all, be having my last meal.” He let out a bark of laughter at his own quip. He then stared pointedly at Edward.

“Ye–yes sir. We have food.”

“Excellent! Food. Precisely what I wanted. To celebrate his besting of me, I suspect Edward will want to revel. Make merry. He will have your most expensive mead, and the finest meat you have, spiced with the most exotic herbs you can find. Make haste, lad. We would have the food soon.”

The *lad* scuttled away, leaving Edward and Louis to silence. As moments passed, doubt crept into Edward’s face. He grew less sure of himself. The food arrived. The aroma made mouths water all around the inn. Louis gestured for Edward to partake, and he did, growing ever more doubtful.

When Edward was just about finishing up, Louis leaned in close.

“I beg forgiveness for having mocked you. You are having a harder day than most. It must be especially difficult, losing your wife twice in the same day.”

Edward’s eyes widened, riddled with fear.

It was then that Louis knew with certainty that he had won. “Now, now. It simply would not do if you choked to death on such delectable delights. Drink in the mead.”

Edward did.

Louis knew, with justified arrogance, that he had his foe cornered. He twisted the knife even further. “You are soon going to be asked to pay for all that you ate, my friend.

“Are you well? You look ill, particularly so, after I spoke of remunerations owed the inn.”

Edward’s eyes darted around, the fevered glances of a man trapped. He had nowhere to run. If he tried, he would fall right into the hands of Elle or Francis. The guard hovering next to Francis added to his curse. Just as the well-fed king was about to resign himself to defeat, the steward approached them again, nervously expecting the money he was due. Edward looked down in shame.

Louis, looking at and speaking to Edward, motioned for the steward to approach him.

“Worry not. I got the check, mate.”