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For Now I Die

By Emilie Price

The night was slowly but surely turning to light, dawn just breaking. Pink clouds towered over the silent city; a mellifluous birdsong was all that was heard, and rays of early May sunshine shone into the silent chamber. I spared a thought for dear Elizabeth, who must still be lightly snoring in her cradle, oblivious that her mother's head was to be severed in just a mere three hours. I fervently prayed that she would not remember the final scene upon the scaffold, which is surely the sort of poison that will be fed into her ear as she grows. If only I would be there to prevent it.

My ladies came in then, weak with anguish, and, as they wept, dressed me in heavy black damask, to state my elegance and simplicity, trimmed with fur, and placed a short mantle adorned with ermines about my shoulders which underlined my royal status – I wished to die a true queen, not a sober, forlorn woman, who has given up all worldly hope. I shall prove my innocence till the last second, and I shall hope and pray to be known as the rightful Queen of England in the many years to come. *At least I had gotten rid of Wolsey*, I assured myself. That had been one of my motives since the very day I arose to power.

Underneath, I wore a crimson low-necked kirtle, which symbolized my martyrdom, which is what I was to die in. It must be coincidental that it was the same colour as my blood.

I ordered the gown to be specifically made low-necked as nothing must impede the sword, and I made sure my bun was tight, and that there was no chance of it falling out. I didn't want to suffer any pain; I just wanted to go without feeling, without knowing, dying with the oblivion of the insufferable pain which those who suffered the same fate before me had experienced. I placed a fashionable English gable-hood upon my netted coif and grasped my B necklace tightly for the last time, leaving my fingerprints upon it as my hands were sweating profusely. I hoped no one noticed.

My ladies were in tears, which was much to my astonishment, as I had heard gossip that I was quite strongly disliked by my women for my fiery temper, which downhearted me quite a bit. But now they were drowning in their own tears, hardly able to bear the thought of me losing my head for something I would never do and didn't do. Lady Kingston, Lord Kingston's wife, was dabbing a handkerchief upon her eyes and tear-streaked cheeks.

'Remember, you shall be greeted with your brother in Heaven soon, your Grace,' my friend and young maid Nan Saville reassured, patting my shoulder. I smiled - it all seemed so unreal. It only seemed yesterday that I was awaiting the marriage to Henry, and I was shaking with nerves. Now I am shaking with nerves for my execution.

Lady Kingston suddenly stepped towards Nan Saville, and pulled something from her pocket. It looked like a cloth, and she handed it to Nan, and the maid nodded solemnly, tears brimming in her eyes.

'You know what it is for,' Lady Kingston muttered, and I gulped.

So did I.

I heard Mass at seven o'clock, but all the dark thoughts about what was to come in just two hours caved in on me, tormenting me as though I hadn't been tormented enough. I then received the sacred Sacrament by my almoner, Father Skip, and asked for Lord Kingston to be present as I stated my innocence before God, hoping the Constable was to report back to the King. I tried desperately not to cry, being as brave as I could possibly be, and beseeched God to take care of Elizabeth for me after my premature passing. I had no appetite, and the thought of eating made me want to wretch.

'Madam, the hour of your death approaches, so you should make ready.' Master Kingston poked his head round the door. *I am ready, I am ready, I am ready, I am ready.*

'Acquit yourself of your charge, Sire Kingston, for I have been long prepared,' I replied boldly. I held my head high, standing from my bed, brushing down my skirts and flashing him a brave smile. Kingston nodded sombrely, his face dark and gloomy; although, he looked quite surprised, perhaps at how valiant I was being on the day of my mortal death, and pride washed over me. I fervently hoped that this mindset would remain until my last breath, however, when Kingston told me that we were to depart for Tower Green in one hour, I bit my tongue to stop me from crying out. One hour left to live, I thought to myself. Just one hour. But I shook the horrible thought away, and took in a deep breath, smiling.

'Thank you, sire. I expect there is not another reprieve?' To my dismay, my death had been postponed forward twice from yesterday, therefore I was forced to live and suffer this great feeling of trepidation even longer than I already had, long after I had finally convinced myself that I was ready to die. However, now it was happening to me, the Queen.

'No, madam; nine o'clock, it's all fixed.'

'Thanks be to God. This intense waiting is doing me no good.' Kingston reached, suddenly, into his pocket and pulled out a purse, giving it to me.

'It contains some money to give in alms before your death, madam.' It was to be my last queenly act. I nodded my thanks and bid him farewell.

I spent another half-an-hour kneeling in deep, fervent prayer, readying myself for what was to come, and then bid my ladies continue to prepare me.

'Are you sure you do not wish to eat anymore? You must be hungry, my lady,' one of my younger ladies asked, concerned, as she washed my face with cold water. I shook my head firmly – I was nauseous, and eating would make me feel much worse.

'No, I am not hungry.'

'How about a plum or a chunk of bread? No harm done.'

'Aye. You must get some nutriment down you, madam; you never know, it could make you feel better,' Aunt Boleyn, my kinswoman, added, tying my kirtle tightly as I had ordered her to. Her voice cracked mid-sentence.

'Alas, my ladies, no. My ordeal looms ever near, therefore I do not feel the desire to eat.' They shared a worried glance but subjected to drying my face with a flannel without another word.

Lord Kingston peered his head round the door and told me it was time to head down to Tower Green. I took a deep breath in. 'Tis time to die, Anne, I thought. Just be brave; as Nan Saville says, you shall be with George in Heaven soon, and needn't be brave much longer. I must think of the reunion between us, and we can forget these awful final years on Earth and spend an eternity in blessedness and Paradise.

Lady Kingston and Aunt Boleyn embraced me warmly, hardly daring to let go. I wasn't surprised to find that my legs were shaking horribly from beneath my skirts, although I strolled out of the room, my head high, saying goodbye to the last resting place I had on the world.

As I gathered my skirts, I could hear the four younger ladies weeping and sobbing behind me, and we descended the winding, dusty stairs, my breaths shallow. I felt horribly sick, and my insides were churning, fear mercilessly tugging at them so I constantly felt the need to wretch, but I kept on reminding myself that I won't feel for much longer, and no pain nor this torrent of torture shall chip away at me. Just peace, finally. I must be the brave woman I always was. I am ready.

I am ready.

We reached the bottom of the stairs, and, taking in a deep, shaky breath, I stepped out into the early-morning light, and everything looked normal, the blue sky dotted with clouds and the intimidating Towers looming before me.

I tried desperately to look like a true Queen, although it was horribly difficult, and my ladies surrounding me held handkerchiefs close to their faces, as tears rolled down their flushed cheeks.

I felt tears beginning to prick in my eyes; *contain yourself, Anne, you are Queen, hold your dignity!*

After what seemed like an age of trudging Tower Green soon emerged into view, and my stomach churned violently. Oh no, oh no, oh no, I thought rapidly. I saw a large sea of heads, about a thousand, I would estimate, and a single tear fell and made its way down my cheek, but I wiped it away hastily, hoping that I hadn't left a gleaming tear-track in the early-morning sun, which was shining behind the clouds in the azure sky.

The heads all turned in unison and stared at me, and I held my chin high, my hands beginning to sweat when I could feel all their eyes follow me. I searched in vain for Father, but he was nowhere to be seen. When I looked before me, my heart plummeted and I choked on my breath.

The scaffold.

A great burden was weighing me down as I hauled myself towards the dark stage of death that was draped in black material. I saw many I recognised, including Henry Fitzroy, Henry's bastard son, and I felt rising anger, but pushed it down with all of my might, and Charles Brandon, Duke of Suffolk, Henry's brother-in-law, within the whispering crowd; I felt myself burning in shame. However, as I imagined spending eternity with my beloved brother, I smiled cheerfully. Thomas Cromwell was also present, watching me intently, and anger bubbled inside of me; he had played a big part of my downfall, and now he was to watch me die as a result of his doing. He must be jubilant.

I hope that I won't be disgraced for being the first Queen ever to be beheaded in England, as that would be incredibly shameful, for me and for my daughter, whom shall have to live with this for the rest of her precious life. I hope she knows how much her mother loves her.

Sawdust was strewn upon the scaffold, and my heart skipped a beat as I imagined my bloodied head upon it, which brought back the haunting image of George's execution two days prior which I was forced to behold; my own dear brother! And now I was reliving the moment, except now it is me in this agonising position.

As I came closer and closer to the stage of death, I saw a long, wooden chest beside it, and realised that it was an arrow chest, like something you would find in an armoury. *Was I to be buried in there?* I thought to myself. A Queen being buried in an arrow chest? How awfully humiliating! Being beheaded was shameful enough! How appalling that my corpse must be placed in an arrow chest!

I looked at the few men standing upon the scaffold, dressed in regular clothing, and I couldn't spot the executioner. Where was he? Was he running late? Please, God, no! I want this suffering to end; I have waited long enough, and I have finally convinced myself that I am ready! I looked about me, wondering if there would be a reprieve, but saw nothing, so I continued on, relieved.

I was grateful that this moment had finally arrived, for I do not think I could have coped one more hour in my state, so I smiled and imagined myself entering the gates of Heaven with my brother; I have accepted my fate.

Kingston held out his hand as he assisted me up the five steps, my legs shaking violently, grateful that my skirts hid the quivers, and gazed over the crowd for the first time. Some were pale, others weeping silently, some muttering and whispering. My ears began to ring and my heavy head pounded, my eyes weighing a ton as if I could just drop to the floor this second and fall into a deep slumber. But I could not. I stood tall, squeezing my lips tightly together, and tried not to wring my hands, although it was awfully difficult. The sawdust tickled my ankles, and I could feel the men's eyes staring at me intently. My ladies took their places beside me, weeping in deep sorrow.

Kingston stood with me, and I felt reassured to have him in my presence.

‘Sire Kingston, I pray you give me leave to say a little word to those before me? I promise I will not speak unnecessarily.’ I watched him carefully, as my ladies wept on the other side of the scaffold.

‘Yes, I give you my permission, Madam. But please make it brisk.’ I nodded my thanks, gulped and turned slowly to the many shifting heads that stared wildly at me. Oh, I could not bear it! I tried to look into some the eyes of whom I trusted with my life as I stood face-to-face with my untimely death, and when my eyes began to fall to the sawdust below me, I forced them back up to the many staring faces. I had, a few days prior, concluded as I wrote my final speech, that I will say the right words to the thousand people before me, so, considering the safety of my little darling infant Elizabeth, I recalled my well-practiced speech, gave a small cough and began, my voice shaking uncontrollably. I held my head high, making sure everyone would know me as the true Queen that I am. They must not think me a weakling.

‘Good Christian people, I come here to die, according to the law, for by the law I am judged to die, and therefore I will speak nothing against it. I come here only to die, and thus to yield myself humbly to the will of the King, my lord. And if, in my life, I did ever offend the King’s Grace, surely with my death I do now atone. I come here to accuse no man, nor to speak anything of that whereof I am accused, as I know full well that aught I say in my defence does not appertain to you. I pray and beseech you all, good friends, to pray for the life of the King, my sovereign lord, and yours, who is one of the best princes on the face of this Earth, who has always treated me so well that better could not be.’

I paused then, the haunting images of our horrid disputes and our screaming, and his bitterness towards me flashing in my mind, and his flirtations with that sly woman, the Lady Jane; I could not help but feel a pang of jealousy at their clear connection. The way they looked into each other’s eyes longingly... I had never had that with a true husband – I never found my true love, as I was stolen by this monster in my youth.

‘Therefore, I submit myself to death with good will, humbly asking pardon of all the world. And if any person will meddle of my cause, I require them to judge the best. Thus, I take my leave of the world and of you all, and I heartily desire you all to pray for me. O Lord, have mercy on me, to God I commend my soul!’ I placed my hand upon my racing heart and breathed in the cool air, not taking it for granted this time. ‘Dear God, into thy hands I commend my spirit! Receive my soul!’

My ladies stepped forth, distressed and faces tear-stained, and carefully aided me undress myself, taking off the white ermine to show the crowd of people my low-necked gown of black damask with my crimson kirtle beneath it; some in the crowd of gawking people gasped and murmured.

‘She thinks herself a martyr,’ a courtier whispered at the front, their voice laced with abhorrence. My smile fell; however, I kept my chin up, knowing that I shall depart from this cruel world soon enough.

A man dressed in black, who must have surely been the executioner, suddenly knelt on one knee and lowered his head respectfully. ‘Madam, I crave your Majesty’s pardon, for I am ordered to do this duty.’

‘I give it willingly,’ I said, smiling, knowing that the end was very near now. *I am coming, dear George! You needn’t wait for me much longer!* I thought in my head, as the headsman continued.

‘I will ask you to kneel and say your prayers.’ I took in a deep breath and knelt upon the sawdust, flattening my skirts about me and checking that my coif was tied correctly. I kept my back straight and clasped my clammy hands together in prayer, my head pounding more than ever.

‘Everyone, let us kneel and pray for the passing of a soul.’ The sea of heads all knelt, apart from Henry Fitzroy and Charles Brandon, who remained standing. The burning spite for them which I had held since the very day I rose to power was evident, and I was not afraid to show it to all. Amidst the deafening silence, I could only hear the beating of my racing heart, the squawking of the crows that watched me fixedly, and my shaky breaths. I squeezed my eyes tightly shut, although I could not focus on my prayers as I was paranoid that the executioner would strike when I was not ready, and therefore turning my head repeatedly to clarify that he was not prepared to do so.

‘Do not fear, madam, I will wait till you tell me,’ the executioner said. But my worry didn’t cease, and I was fearful that my coif would impede the sword, so my hand remained on it, my whole body shaking. Nan Saville suddenly stepped forth, tears rolling down her flushed face, and reached into her pocket, pulling out the white cloth.

The blindfold.

I choked on my breath as I took one more look upon the world of which I have been deprived. I quickly took in all the sights I could, like the imposing, menacing Towers which surrounded us and the cloudy sky and the people...

And then the darkness fell, and I could feel the cloth against my skin. Nan's hands shook as she tied it, and I tucked my loose strands of hair that I could feel tickling my sweaty face behind my ear.

'Dear God, I commend me unto you; Lord Jesu, receive my guiltless soul!'

My hands remained clasped together tightly, my whole body aching, as I breathed shallow breaths shakily and kept my eyes shut. Oh, what a horrible end this was! I have tried to make a difference, tried to make a point to the world; I have aided reform in England, however it has finished with me losing my head. I desperately hoped it would be quick and easy, and will be instantaneous, as Lord Kingston had previously told me the night before.

I suddenly heard the Cathedral bells toll nine of the clock somewhere in the distance, and my stomach churned violently; I thought I would be violently sick for a second. *This was it*, I thought. *Nine of the clock, the time I was set to die.*

'Pass me the sword,' a startling voice said from somewhere around me, and I blindly turned my head to the direction I thought the voice came from, perhaps expecting the blow to descend from there. I heard some steps back, the weeps of my ladies fading slightly, and then a few movements. As silence fell once again, my heartbeat racing, I prepared myself for the dreaded pain I feared coming, which was then shortly followed by the swoosh of the sword.

I'm almost here, George, I'm almost here.