

The Queen's Pawn

The Queen's Pawn is told from two points of view: Eleanor of Aquitaine, and Alais, Princess of France. The story is told from these two alternating first person points of view, one chapter for Alais, the next chapter for Eleanor. This mirrors Philippa Gregory's technique in *The Boleyn Inheritance*.

Synopsis

When the novel opens, pious King Louis has only one son and the kingdom of France is surrounded by enemies. The powerful duchy of Burgundy lies to the east and the lands of Henry Plantagenet, King of England and Duke of Normandy, to the west.

A fragile peace is purchased with the life of Princess Alais. At the age of nine, she swears an oath to become the Countess of the Vexin, and is sent with this valuable dowry to wed among her father's enemies. Betrothed to Prince Richard, King Henry's younger son (Later Richard the Lionhearted), Alais travels to England to seal the bargain that will keep the uneasy truce.

Leaving her beloved father and brother, Philippe Auguste, behind in France, Alais comes to England alone. She is taken at once to the court of Eleanor of Aquitaine. When Alais arrives, Eleanor, Queen of England, is estranged from her husband. King Henry took Rosemund de Clifford as a lover a few years before, and their marriage never recovered from that killing blow. The king and queen of England have not shared a bed since the affair began. Eleanor's daughters, all destined for marriage alliances abroad, have not shown the spark of fire that Eleanor values in herself, though she looked for it in each one of them. Eleanor is close with one son, Richard, but the rest of her children are virtual strangers to her.

During this dark time, when Eleanor is separated from Henry in all but name, Alais comes to England, bringing light into Eleanor's life. Expecting to dismiss at once the daughter of her ex-husband and enemy, Louis of France, Eleanor finds a kindred spirit in the little girl. Alais reminds Eleanor of herself; though quiet and reserved, Alais has a strength that Eleanor looked for in all her daughters and never found. Instead of sending Alais away to the nunnery at once, as she and Henry planned, Eleanor keeps Alais with her, becoming the mother that Alais had never known.

After almost a year, King Henry sends word that he wants Alais sent to a nunnery, to be raised away from the court, and away from Eleanor's influence. Eleanor finds a safe haven for Alais among the Sisters of St. Agnes near Bath. Eleanor brings the girl to the sisters herself, promising to return for her as soon as she can. Alais is heart broken to part from Eleanor, and lives for the letters that Eleanor sends twice each year, at Christ's Mass and on her saint's day. Alais keeps these letters tucked inside her convent dress, tied with an emerald ribbon from one of Eleanor's gowns.

Eleanor brings Alais out of the nunnery when the girl is fifteen. Both women rejoice to see each other, and Alais travels with Eleanor back to her court to be presented her son, Richard. Eleanor and Alais enjoy each other's company before Richard comes to meet them.

Eleanor's court is filled with singing and dancing, and Alais is enchanted, having been cut off from the world in the convent. Her father's court was quiet, and Alais enjoys laughing and dancing more than she ever thought possible. Eleanor is elated to bring her adopted daughter into this world, and looks forward to the day when she can introduce Alais to her favorite son.

When Richard arrives, he and Alais are taken with each other from the first. When Alais greets Richard for the first time, Eleanor introduces him as Duke of Aquitaine, acknowledging before her court that Richard will be taking the position of Duke without King Henry's sanction. Alais leaves Richard alone with the queen, and once Eleanor dismisses her ladies, she and Richard discuss the political implications of assuming the duchy in his own right.

Though the Aquitaine was promised to Richard five years before in a mutual agreement between Louis of France, Henry and herself, King Henry has not turned the lands over to Richard as agreed. Now that Alais has been brought out of the nunnery to marry Richard, cementing Richard's alliance with King Louis through her dowry in the Vexin, Eleanor hopes to force Henry's hand in acknowledging Richard as Duke in Aquitaine. Henry does not like to let go of power or direct control over territory, but Eleanor hopes that, at her insistence, Henry will honor the agreement, and allow Richard to assume the position of Duke.

When Marie Helene, Alais' lady in waiting, falls ill, Alais goes to look for herbs to help Marie Helene recover. Alais meets Richard in the rose garden, and he helps her find the herbs she seeks. They are seen alone together, and the court gossips about them, wondering if the treaty has become a love match.

While pleased that her son and Alais are fond of each other, Eleanor begins to feel uneasy. As Eleanor looks on, Richard courts Alais with music, writing songs in her honor and singing to her before the court. Outwardly pleased, Eleanor knows that she can not allow Alais and Richard to form too deep an attachment. Still estranged from King Henry, and out of touch with her other sons, Eleanor needs Richard's unswerving political support in order to maintain her own power in England. King Henry never takes her counsel anymore, as he did before they became estranged, when Eleanor helped him rule in all but name.

As Eleanor watches the affection grow between Richard and Alais, she begins to fear that their marriage would weaken her political position. If Richard shifts his loyalty completely from Eleanor to Alais after he is wed, Eleanor will be politically vulnerable, both in Europe and In England. For the first time in her life, Eleanor stays her hand when politically threatened. She knows that she can squelch the marriage if necessary, but she does not want to hurt her son and Alais if she does not have to. She sends Richard away to the Aquitaine, to become the Duke in her place.

With Richard safely in the Aquitaine, Eleanor is sure that all will be well. Before he left, she watched as Richard offered Alais a rose. Always before, he would have given such a bloom to her. While this pains her, Eleanor still does nothing to part the couple permanently, but only sees Richard off to France, keeping Alais with her.

After Richard leaves to be invested as Duke in Aquitaine, Eleanor brings Alais to the king's court at Windsor. As the court prepares for the king's arrival, Alais listens to the speculation about the consequences of Richard being invested as Duke, when Henry wanted that duchy to go to his eldest son, Henry, the Young King. At Henry's court,

people speak of Becket, who made an enemy of the king as Richard has done. Though Archbishop of Canterbury and a lifelong friend of the king's, Becket was murdered in his own cathedral by Henry's knights. "Henry's enemies do not fare well," one man says. "Nor do his friends," another answers.

Meanwhile, as her work in turning over the Aquitaine to Richard seems to be taking hold, Eleanor also hears from her eldest son, Henry the Younger. Without her husband's knowledge, Eleanor made arrangements to broker an alliance between Henry, the Young King, (Henry II's eldest son) and Louis VII of France. The French king, still in love with Eleanor after all this time, has taken the young man "under his wing." Though this alliance sets Henry the Younger and King Henry at odds, Eleanor also hopes that it will bring her oldest son closer to her politically.

Her spy, who had been serving in Henry the Younger's household, reports that the alliance seems to be taking hold. Eleanor also reads about the alliance in a letter from her son. King Henry discovers the pact between the French king and his son, though not of Eleanor's connection to it, and is furious. When the court hears of the alliance between Louis of France and Henry the Younger, they wonder if the young king will side with Louis in future military actions against his father. Eleanor has no intention of allowing the strife between father and son to go to such extremes. She hopes that a balance can be maintained, shifting power away from Henry in Normandy and Aquitaine, and bringing it firmly into the hands of her sons, and thus, into her own hands.

Eleanor is surprised when she comes to Alais' room and finds her door locked. Though she admires this show of independence, Eleanor squelches it, telling Alais to leave her door open, so that courtiers will not speculate on whether or not she has taken a lover. Eleanor explains that since Alais is favor with the queen, she could draw enemies who might speak ill of her to the king. Alais is shocked at the idea that the court would speak such evil of her. Eleanor reassures her, and reminds Alais that she is there to teach as well as protect her. In order to cheer Alais up, Eleanor tells her that she has arranged a picnic with one of the queen's younger women, then a trip to the stable to see some puppies. Alais enjoys both outings, especially sitting in the sunshine by the river. In the stables, she meets a stable hand who she discovers that evening is actually the King.

Eleanor knows that Henry is in the habit of coming to the stables late in the afternoon to view his new hunting hounds. She sends Alais to meet him, without telling Alais that Henry will be there. Eleanor wants Henry's first meeting with Alais to happen outside the court, not knowing that Henry would fail to introduce himself. Though Henry and Eleanor are estranged, and though Eleanor often challenges him, there is still a bit of their old love between them, memories that they can never escape completely. That night in the great hall, Eleanor greets Henry, and he kisses her hand.

When Alais is presented to King Henry officially, Henry does not speak of their meeting in the stables. Alais is horrified that he did not reveal himself, but Henry is charmed by her. Alais soon feels comfortable with him, though she knows it is foolish to be relaxed in the company of a king. After sharing the king's trencher, Alais leaves the evening meal to pray.

Meanwhile, Richard returns to court after being gone for only one day. He comes to his mother's solar, and explains that he did not want to leave Alais or Eleanor alone to face the wrath of the king. Eleanor knows that Henry will very likely be angrier with Richard at court, but she does not tell Richard so. She is used to Richard's impulsive

ways, and has long ago learned to be flexible in counteracting them. His loyalty to Alais is another red flag for Eleanor, showing her how much Richard cares for the young princess, making her wonder yet again if their betrothal is too dangerous for her politically to be allowed to continue.

Alais leaves for vespers, and Henry surprises Eleanor by asking her to dance. As the royal couple dance together for the first time in ten years, they discuss the princess, not speaking of Richard's new title in Aquitaine. They are both taken back to a better time, when their love for each other was the ruling passion of their lives, second only to the political power they held. Once, their shared power supported their love, underlying it and bulwarking it. For years, their love for each other and their achievements in England and in France defined them both.

Henry's longtime mistress, Rosamund de Clifford, died earlier that year. Seeing Henry for the first time in many months, Eleanor feels a quickening of her old love for him, and thinks she sees something of his old love for her in his eyes. In spite of the political moves she has made against him in secret with Henry the Younger and openly with Richard, she begins to believe that she and Henry might be able to reconcile. If they can reconcile personally, they might be able to reconcile politically as well, and once more, she would have the ear of the king.

Eleanor's hopes for reconciliation with Henry are dashed when Richard confronts his father in front of the entire court. Eleanor watches in disbelief, for she had been certain that Richard would do nothing so rash without first consulting her. The pleasant evening, Henry's warm welcome of Alais, Eleanor's acknowledged protégé, and the dancing, had all made her hope that she and Henry might make amends. Eleanor had even begun to hope that Henry might be persuaded to support Richard in his bid for the Aquitaine. Richard's fury and open rebellion ends these hopes.

Henry rails at Richard, telling him that both his eldest living sons have turned against him, Henry the Younger courting the king of France and Richard taking the Aquitaine without permission. Richard is politic enough to assure Henry of his loyalty, and Henry then gives his permission for the investiture in Aquitaine to take place.

This highhanded response angers Richard, who replies that he does not need his father's sanction. Richard reminds Henry, as the court looks on, that the title of Duke of Aquitaine comes to him from his mother, and is blessed by his overlord, King Louis of France. Infuriated, Henry manages to hold his temper as Eleanor clutches his arm. Since Eleanor stands with him in a show of open support, Henry smiles at Richard in spite of his fury, and leaves. Eleanor knows that Henry intends to let Richard take the Aquitaine in order to punish Henry the Younger's disloyalty.

Eleanor draws Richard onto the dance floor, where she cautions him not to beard the lion in his den. As Henry leaves, one man says, "The king smiled at Becket, too." Eleanor hears this warning but knows that Richard will not heed it.

King Henry meets Alais in the chapel after vespers, and she feels a tension between them that she can not explain. The princess goes to see the puppies in the stable again the next day, and runs into the king there as well. He admits to having followed her, and kisses her hand. She feels drawn to him, and frightened both that he desires her and that she responds to him. Henry brings her a gift, a bijon puppy of her own. Alais is moved by the gift, and even more drawn to Henry, his dynamic ways and the power of his personality. She feels guilty about her feelings, and confesses to the queen that the

king kissed her hand. Eleanor reassures her, but the wheels of her mind are set in motion. Eleanor begins to see a potential way to effectively end Richard's betrothal by casting Alais into Henry's path. She does not want to make that move unless she must, but she keeps the idea in the back of her mind, in case of future need.

Though the cold, analytical part of Eleanor's mind acknowledges the possible necessity of throwing Alais into Henry's path in order to take the princess away from Richard, Eleanor feels the old accustomed jealousy welling up in her, the same pain she used to feel when confronted with Henry's relationship with his mistress, Rosamund. She watches Henry and Alais together, and sees that a relationship between them would not be based purely on Henry's lust. There is a fire in Alais that draws Henry to her, though Alais is only partly aware of it herself. It is the same fire that drew Eleanor to take the girl under her wing so many years before. Passion and strength are things that both Henry and Eleanor value, in themselves and in others.

The king takes Alais out for a horseback ride beside the river, where he kisses her, and gives her a wreath of flowers. Alarmed by the king's courtship, and by her own interest in it, Alais writes to her father, asking for her marriage date to be set. Marie Helene delivers this letter to the French ambassador, though both she and Alais know that they are committing treason. Alais confesses her fascination for the king, and is given penance, but she finds she can not stop thinking of him, and of the way he makes her feel, though she knows such feelings are a sin, and a betrayal of both Richard and Eleanor.

Meanwhile, Eleanor's spies intercept the letter that Alais has written to Louis. Though pained at Alais' betrayal, Eleanor is also proud of her, that the young princess would take such a bold step to secure her own future. Eleanor is relieved, and some of her jealousy is assuaged by the letter, for it gives her hope that the attraction she thought she saw between the king and the princess is simply one sided. Henry is known for his many liaisons, but even he would hesitate before taking a princess of the royal blood to his bed. Eleanor does not show the letter to Henry, seeking to protect Alais. But she also does not burn it, because she may have need of it. Information and political ammunition are always useful.

After being invested as Duke in Aquitaine, Richard returns to court, and Marie Helene arranges a meeting between himself and Alais. Alais tells Richard that she wants him to ask his father to set their wedding date, but does not tell him why. Richard swears an oath to protect her for the rest of his life.

Alais decides to take Eleanor into her confidence, and to ask for the queen's help in pressing Henry to set the date of their wedding. On her way to Eleanor's rooms, Alais sees Richard in an alcove, speaking with a younger man. Richard leans close to the youth, and Alais is taken back by the intimacy of the scene. She has never seen Richard stand so close to anyone but her. Alais is jealous, but uncertain why.

Eleanor catches Alais staring at her son and his old lover, who has recently returned to court. Richard is a man of his word, and would hold to his honor. Unlike his father, when he takes a lover, he stays faithful to him or her for as long as they are together. The queen realizes that as a convent raised girl, Alais would be horrified by the idea of Richard embracing anyone but her, especially another man. While Eleanor is well aware that Richard's taste leads him to both men and women, she decides to play up Richard's taste for men, in an effort to drive a wedge between the young couple. Eleanor hopes that by doing this, she will bring Alais to rely on her more heavily, instead of

putting all her faith in Richard. By putting Richard and Alais at odds, Eleanor hopes to undermine their trust in each other so that she can keep power over both of them, while still allowing their marriage to take place.

Eleanor draws Alais into her rooms, and sends her women away. She explains to Alais gently what Richard's tastes are, and lies, saying that while he occasionally takes women lovers, he generally prefers men. Alais is horrified, struck almost dumb with betrayal. She can not believe that Richard could have a taste for men, and still love her. For the first time, Eleanor is harsh with her, because she can not stand to hear her son criticized. She tells Alais that it matters little who Richard sleeps with, men or women. In her role as his wife, it will be Alais' place to look the other way. "Men are what they are. Even my son. You must learn to live in the world." Alais replies, "Not that world."

Eleanor hoped that by telling Alais of Richard's taste for men, Alais would turn to her in her pain, but Alais does not. Instead Alais turns away, horrified and betrayed, thinking that Richard and Eleanor have made a fool of her. As she goes into the main hall for dinner that night, she sees Richard's lover being greeted warmly. She knows then that she is the only person in the entire court that did not know of Richard's lover.

Alais' fury knows no bounds, but she is mute at first, not knowing what action to take. She sits frozen as, flanked by his two men at arms, Richard storms into the hall and confronts the king, demanding that their wedding date be set and the treaty upheld. Alais is so angry that she almost casts the engagement back in his face then and there, but when she sees Henry's fury, so much greater than her own, she keeps her seat.

Alais' fury begins to turn to fear, as she watches Henry and Richard stare each other down and almost come to blows in front of the entire court. Alais has never seen either man in a rage before, and can see that Eleanor is frightened too. While furious with Richard, Alais does love him, and would never want him hurt by the king.

Henry flies into a rage and orders Richard from his presence. The women set their strife aside, united in their fear for Richard's safety. Eleanor follows the king, instructing Alais to meet her in a few minutes time. When Alais comes into the king's antechamber, Henry is holding the letter she had written to her father. Henry chastises her and leaves with his current mistress, a young girl who looks a lot like the French princess, leaving Alais furious as well as jealous. Eleanor says, "Alais, the next time you send a letter, see to it that the courier is not in my employ."

Eleanor brought out Alais' letter to Louis as a desperate attempt to turn Henry's anger away from her favorite son. She knew that Henry would never hurt Alais, as he is fond of her. She also hoped that by showing Henry evidence of Alais' treason, he would stop being infatuated with the princess. Henry tolerates treachery only in her.

At this point, Alais sees nothing in Eleanor but betrayal. And her love for the queen makes the betrayal that much worse. As she watches Henry leave with his mistress, sick with jealousy and rage, Alais wonders what being good and following the orders all her life has ever gotten her. She wonders if she should not take care of herself.

She goes back to her room, where Marie Helene is waiting for her. She draws off the gown she is wearing, a gown of expensive cloth of gold, its sleeves carefully embroidered with her crest and Richard's. She can not get the gown off fast enough, so she delves into Marie Helene's sewing basket, and draws out the scissors. Without waiting for Marie Helene's help, Alais cuts herself out of the expensive dress, and proceeds to cut it to ribbons while Marie Helene watches, horrified. Alais takes each

ribbon of the gown and burns them in a brazier, making noxious smoke fill the room, so that Marie Helene has to move the brazier beneath the window.

Alais explains that Richard has left court, abandoning her without their marriage date set. She says that he loves another. She tells Marie Helene that the queen has betrayed their letter to the king, and worse, has hidden the knowledge of Richard's proclivities from her. Alais breaks down in tears, but does not cry long. She is resolved to make something for herself out of the ruin of her marriage hopes. She decides to abandon her father's policy and obedience to the desires of others. She knows that if she goes to the king and takes what she wants from him, she can still keep France from war. Henry will forge an alliance with her, and still keep the treaty with her father.

She knows that if she offers herself to the king, he will take her as his mistress. Nothing would hurt Eleanor and Richard more. Once his father is her lover, Alais knows that Richard would never marry her, nor even touch her hand again. Marie Helene cautions her, telling her to sleep, to think before taking such rash action. Alais reassures her friend, but her mind is set on revenge for the wrongs done her, for constantly being dismissed as weak, for being betrayed by those she loves.

Alais goes to Henry the next day in his antechamber, where she had seen him the night before. She dresses carefully in the red gown he loves. She waits until late in the afternoon, when the work of the kingdom is winding down, but when there is still an hour or more before the evening meal. She is granted an audience, and she kneels to Henry to ask his forgiveness. He asks her what she is playing at, that penitents usually do not dress themselves in red. Alais knows that he wants her, though he is still angry with her. She steps close to him, offering herself to him without speaking.

But Henry, though he wants her, is a cautious man. He reminds her that she is throwing her life away. Alais replies that she would rather have the life she chooses than a life others would choose for her. Her strength and courage make the king want her even more, and they become lovers in the bed of state. When his body servant comes to fetch him to dinner, Alais rises from the bed, a fur drawn around her. She asks for fruit, bread and meat to be brought to the king, for he will not attend the feast that night. Henry watches her, smiling, and does not contradict her. "My wife thought she knew you," he says. "No one knows me," Alais answers. "Only you, my lord king." They make love once more, and spend the night alone, while his servant carries the news of their liaison to the rest of the castle, Eleanor included.

Meanwhile, Eleanor sits alone at the high table in the great hall. Henry's chair is empty, as are Richard's and Alais'. Richard is still half a day's ride away, waiting for word from his mother as to whether or not it is safe to come back to court. So Eleanor sits alone except for courtiers, waiting for the evening meal to begin. As the hour grows later and later, and Henry still does not come, Eleanor begins to hear whispers at the lower tables, and even at the foot of the high table. People look at her strangely, but no one will reveal what the whispers are about. Until the castellan comes to Eleanor, and stands at her elbow, telling her that the king will not be in attendance; he has retired for the night. Eleanor asks if the king is ill, and the castellan tells her no, but will say nothing else.

Marie Helene sits at the lower end of the table, and Eleanor waves her over. "You have served me well in the past, Marie Helene. Tell me now, what do the others speak of? What is so horrible that they will not tell their queen?" Marie Helene tells Eleanor that

there is a rumor that the king and the princess are together. At the look on the queen's face, she says that it is a rumor only.

Sick with the dual betrayal of her adopted daughter and her husband, Eleanor holds her head high. She stands and announces that the king had taken ill, and that the young princess has gone to his bedside to nurse him. She raises her glass, and asks for a toast, to the king's swift recovery. The courtiers see her wry smile, and hear the ironic tone of her voice. They laugh, knowing that she is joking, and that they are invited to laugh at the king's new concubine. Eleanor does this, but does not openly confirm the rumor. She sits and eats, drawing her ladies close to fill the empty chairs at the table, save for Henry's, which still sits empty. Eleanor looks at her husband's chair, jealousy and pain assailing her, all of which she hides beneath her court mask, laughing and dancing into the night. She calls her favorite troubadours to her, and they sing of her beauty. She listens to their empty words, wishing it was Henry who meant them.

The next morning Henry sends Alais away, but has his man take her out down a secret passage, so that she can leave his rooms without being seen. She says, "I am not ashamed of anything between us." He kisses her, and sends her out with his man. "That is as it should be," Henry says. Before she goes, Alais complains that she has to leave him for the entire day, and he reminds her that he has to be about the business of the kingdom but that he will see her at dinner in the great hall. She tells him to save a place for her at his trencher. He laughs and says that he will share it with no one but her.

Alais returns to her room to find Marie Helene sleepless and worried. Alais calls for bath water and fresh food, and the servants bring both quickly, bowing low to her. "What have you done, Your Highness?" Marie Helene asks. Alais answers, "What I chose to do. And I asked no other's leave." Bijou is happy to see her mistress and happy to smell the king on her. Alais bathes then takes Marie Helene down to the river for a picnic, where they spend the day away from the court, watching Bijou play.

When they return late that afternoon, courtiers bow to Alais as they pass, showing her respect for the first time. When Alais comes to her room to dress for the evening meal, she finds a message from Eleanor, requesting her presence.

Alais goes to the queen, and Eleanor tells Alais to deny the rumor that she and the king are lovers. "You are making a fool of me in my own court, Alais, and I will not allow it." Alais refuses, saying she has made her bed and now she will lie in it. Richard steps out from behind an arras and chastises her for her unfaithfulness. Alais tells him that he has no room to speak, as he is a lover of men and unfaithful himself, both to his vow to her and to the vow he made before God in the kitchen garden. "You keep a boy, and sit in judgment on me?" Richard replies, "I have touched no one, neither man nor woman, since we met. Nor would I have. What do you think I am?" Alais hears the truth in his voice, and it stabs her. She doubts herself for a moment, but her anger comes back almost at once. They separate, both angry and hurt.

Henry makes an announcement at the evening meal, before all the court, that he and Alais will go away to his hunting lodge, where they can be alone. Eleanor and Richard sit listening to this, silent and humiliated. Alais meets Richard's eyes, and sees his love for her, and feels love for him. She is ashamed of herself, and asks Henry for leave to go and pray. Henry grants it, and watches her leave. Eleanor holds her head high, asking him if he will stay for the dancing that night, hoping that he will once more dance with her. Henry says that he will not. "I have pressing business elsewhere, wife." Eleanor

and Richard stand and dance together, as if they have not been hurt and humiliated before the court. The courtiers admire them both, and speculate that neither Richard nor Eleanor care about the new liaison between the king and the French princess. Eleanor and Richard spend the night together, awake in her sitting room, holding hands. Eleanor is sorry for his pain and her own, but she is grateful to have him all to herself once more.

Henry follows Alais to the chapel, where he chastises her for running away from the court when he has just given her a present. Alais tries to dodge him, angry that he would humiliate Eleanor and Richard so. He laughs in her face, telling her that she should know all about dealing out dishonor, and she tries to strike him. He grabs her hands and drags her into the shadows of the chapel and takes her up against a wall. It is their first fight, but not their last. Henry is pleased, because he likes a woman with fire.

When traveling to the lodge, Alais and Henry speak of building and maintaining the king's peace. Alais has given her life to the treaty which she thinks will keep England and France from war. Henry tells Alais of the devastation that he saw during his childhood, when his mother was at war with Stephen, and England was left a smoking ruin. That civil war lasted for almost 20 years, and tore the country apart. English cities fell to English armies, and no one was able to stop the devastation. The lords would not follow Henry's mother, Maude, because she was a woman, and King Stephen was too weak to hold the lords in check. Henry remembered always the price of a weak king, and how it was the people that paid that price with their lives. He has sworn that he would protect his realm from the devastation that a weak king can unleash. Henry tells Alais how he has given his life to strengthen the crown, so that the people can live in peace and prosperity. This talk draws them closer together, so that it is not just lust that binds them.

Alais sees in Henry a love for his people, the same love she was taught in childhood for the people of France. Alais tells him that they could keep the peace together, if he set Eleanor aside and made her queen. Henry is suspicious at first, saying, "So you have ambition then?" Alais replies, "Only to serve you." She reminds him that she has given over her life to the service of France, and that she will happily dedicate her life to his service, and by extension, to England. She reminds him of how Eleanor sets Richard against his father. Tucked safe in a nunnery, Eleanor could do little meddling in politics. Alais reminds Henry that while she will back him in all things, and will see to it that her father and brother back him as well, she knows her place. As a woman, she would support and succor him, and never advise him without his express permission. Both she and Henry overlook that she is doing precisely that, even as she speaks.

After many years of battling with Eleanor, the idea of peace in his household appeals to Henry. Henry has cared for Alais since he first met her, and has come to love her now that he has seen her inner fire. Strength has always drawn him to women. Strength and beauty are what first drew him to Eleanor, so many years ago.

While Henry and Alais are gone from court, Richard and Eleanor comfort each other over their mutual betrayal. Richard's life is safe once more, and Eleanor is happy to have his undivided loyalty, though the sight of his pain is heart wrenching. Richard and Eleanor meet in the queen's solar. "My God, Mother, I would never have thought them capable of it." Eleanor replies, "Anyone is capable of anything, given time and opportunity."

Eleanor has no intention of letting her vigilance lapse simply because her adopted daughter and her husband have hurt her. Her spy network is still in working order, and

her spy in the king's hunting lodge at Deptford brings a dispatch from the king's courier. The spy brings the queen a letter that is meant for the pope, outlining the plan to set Eleanor aside (she was rumored to have slept with his father, making her marriage to Henry incestuous). Once Eleanor retires to a nunnery, their marriage annulled, Henry would take Alais as his new queen.

Eleanor reseals the letter with Henry's seal (she has a copy that she wears around her neck, beneath her gown) and sends it on to Rome. Richard storms in fury, and Eleanor counsels him to prudence, saying that Henry's wits are addled, that he loves the girl. She knows, though she does not tell Richard, that Henry would never have thought of such a thing on his own. She is certain that the French princess came up with the scheme to take her throne. While this pains her, Eleanor also admires the courage Alais displays in fighting her openly. The queen focuses on her next move in the chess game between herself and her adopted daughter.

Eleanor writes to her eldest son, Henry the Young King, asking for his support. Henry the Younger refuses to leave his court in Normandy. He feasts his knights, carousing and staying aloof from the intrigues between France and England. He responds, "Mother, since when have you needed anyone's help? The old man has a new flame. Good luck to him. He wants to put her on the throne? Once he is dead, let us see her try to keep it."

When Henry and Alais come back to court, she finds that Henry has prepared rooms for her next to his own. The rooms were once Eleanor's, over a decade ago. They have now been refurbished for Alais, stocked with new gowns and jewels from the treasury. Eleanor comes to Alais in these rooms, saying that she will not allow Henry to divorce her. She will not go into a nunnery as he has asked. This scene and the months that come after are the low point in Alais and Eleanor's relationship. While they love each other, during this time, they openly face each other as enemies. As she leaves her old rooms to her new rival, Eleanor asks, "Do you really think you can defeat me, little princess? Even now, have you no idea who I am?"

That night in the great hall, Eleanor sets up her own court at the lower end of the high table. A separate court from Henry's, she has jugglers and fire eaters perform while she eats, and calls on troubadours after the meal to sing of her beauty. Alais is furious to see that Eleanor has no intention of backing down; the queen seems to enjoy defying both her and Henry.

Prince John is at court when Henry and Alais return. Eleanor has called her son to her side in her time of need. John, while young, is already well known as a ladies' man, and he tries to charm Alais, asking her to dance, bringing her flowers, and generally wooing her. Alais is put off by his advances, and tells him so. Henry watches, annoyed, while Richard fumes.

Eleanor tells Richard to calm himself, that she is the one who set John on Alais to devil her, and Henry. She tells him that soon Richard would have a visitor from France who will form an alliance with him against his father.

Alais continues to consolidate her hold on the king's affections. When she discovers that she is pregnant, Henry is joyful. As her belly grows, Alais displays it proudly, as one more way in which to needle Eleanor into giving up her throne. She speaks openly of how she can give Henry sons for years to come, while Eleanor's womb

has dried up. The courtiers agree with Alais to her face, but behind her back they speculate that perhaps Henry has too many sons already.

Eleanor is furious at Alais for spreading such vile talk about her “dried up womb” whether true or not. She makes sure that Richard knows of it, and Richard comes to Alais and tells her to stop speaking ill of his mother. Alais is horrified that Richard has heard what she has said, and is ashamed of herself. She apologizes to him, and asks that he apologize to Eleanor in her place. He grudgingly agrees. Richard asks Alais to stop trying to steal his mother’s throne, but she can not agree to that. They do not reconcile, though the rancor between them is gone.

Richard goes to Eleanor and tells her of Alais’ apology, and confesses to Eleanor that he is sad to see Alais brought to such a pass. He is certain that Alais will be left alone with a bastard, with no one to protect her or her child. Eleanor assures him that in the end, when the king casts Alais and her child off, she will take them both under her protection.

Henry and Eleanor spend one evening alone, in front of her fire. He has come to see her, on his way to his rooms. Alais, tired from early pregnancy, is in bed already. It is a moment of truce in the middle of a war. Henry sits with her, and Eleanor asks if he would like some apple butter, made with her own hands. (Alais has taken to bringing Henry trays at odd hours, as if to prove her virtuous womanhood.) Henry laughs, and says, “Dear God, stop it, Eleanor. You are a queen.” They part, grateful for their moment of détente, a moment they both know will not last.

Henry receives word from the Holy See. The Pope is not sure which side to support in this bid for power in England. Eleanor of Aquitaine is a powerful woman who has worn two crowns in a lifetime. While the Pope would usually back a king without question, she has provided Henry with multiple living heirs and is a powerhouse in her own right. Henry is furious with the Pope’s noncommittal response, but does not let his anger leave the room he shares with Alais. He writes to the Pope once more, while also writing to her brother, the Dauphin of France.

Henry invites Alais’ brother, Philippe Auguste, to come to England, ostensibly for a family visit for the Christmas court. Henry knows, as does Eleanor, that King Louis will be swayed by whatever his son says. In the waning days of his reign, Louis has come to lean on Philippe Auguste, making no political move without consulting his son.

Alais and Philippe Auguste, happy to be reunited after so many years apart, sit alone in her new rooms. They loved each other well before she left France, and their affection has not vanished in the years since she has been away. Alais reveals her plan to become queen, and Philippe Auguste assures her that he will ask their father to back her marriage to Henry.

Eleanor also secretly invited Philippe Auguste to the English court. She is aware that Louis hates Henry and would love to thwart him. She hopes that the man who divorced might help her keep her new marriage intact. Louis is still in love with Eleanor. She has written to Louis, telling him that the affair between Henry and Alais is a vicious rumor only, knowing that he will believe her. She sends word to the French king that Richard is still open to a marriage with Alais, which is another lie. Louis has always been one to believe Eleanor, however.

When the French Dauphin arrives, Eleanor is surprised to see the easy affection that still exists between the prince and Alais. But when Richard and Philippe Auguste become lovers almost as soon as the French prince arrives, Eleanor hopes that a political alliance between them might yet be possible. At fifteen, Philippe Auguste is already a master politician, raised to intrigue at his father's court.

Eleanor and Alais vie for Philippe Auguste's support. While he has a natural interest in backing Alais in her bid for the throne, the Dauphin has also fallen into an infatuation with Richard. Richard has an unswerving loyalty to his mother, and an interest in keeping her on the throne. Philippe offers support to both sides, while waiting to see which end will come out on top.

Eleanor meets with Richard and Philippe Auguste, hoping to press their alliance, but the Dauphin is not happy to see her. He still thinks of her as the woman who cuckolded his father, and has no interest in allying himself with her, in spite of her invitation to the Christmas court. Richard steps between Philippe Auguste and his mother, and insists that the French prince apologize to her. Philippe Auguste does so, but both Eleanor and he know that he does not mean it. Eleanor sees at once that she must encourage Richard and Philippe Auguste's alliance from a distance, while keeping the French prince in the dark about her knowledge of it.

While Philippe Auguste has no interest in an alliance with Eleanor, he wants to make peace between Richard and Alais. Though they had made strides in forgiving each other already, Philippe Auguste draws them both together, asking them to reconcile. "Do you loathe the sight of me?" a very pregnant Alais asks. "Never on this Earth, nor in Heaven," Richard answers. "What about in Hell?" Philippe Auguste jokes. Richard glares at him, but Alais laughs. They manage to bury the last of their anger at each other.

Eleanor tries to draw her youngest son, Prince John, into the alliance between Richard and Philippe Auguste. Richard refuses to accept John's allegiance, thinking he is untrustworthy and weak. Furious, John goes to Henry with the news of Philippe Auguste's and Richard's alliance and their betrayal, throwing Henry into a towering rage, and placing Richard's life in danger once more.

Alais is in the room when John comes in to tell Henry of Richard's treason. She sends Marie Helene to warn the queen of the king's wrath while she takes a back corridor through a hidden door to warn Richard and her brother. Her fear for Richard and her brother's safety trumps any of her own ambitions, and when she comes to Philippe Auguste's rooms to warn him and Richard, Eleanor meets her there. Eleanor had also come to warn them, and the two women find themselves united again for the first time in months.

Richard and Philippe escape Henry's men at arms, and Henry is furious. Eleanor steps between him and Alais to keep him from striking the princess. Henry leaves in a rage, calling for his men to follow Richard and the French prince. Henry leaves Windsor in pursuit of Richard and Philippe Auguste.

Henry's fury sends Alais into early labor. Marie Helene and Eleanor help Alais back to her room, and they stay with her while she gives birth. The castle is in chaos, and when Alais sends for a midwife, no one comes. The court knows already that Alais is out of favor with the king. Eleanor and Marie Helene help her deliver her child.

The baby is born two months early, and dies within the hour. Eleanor helps Alais bury her daughter, and offers comfort. Henry, hearing that the child is born dead, does not return to Windsor, but continues in his plans to hunt down Richard.

Richard and Philip have already begun to fight in France, attacking Henry's territories in Anjou. Meanwhile, Henry has received word from the Pope that the Holy See will not back his plan to set Eleanor aside.

Henry the Younger, heir to the English throne, dies of a fever, and King Henry knows that he must make peace with Richard, who is now his heir. Henry returns to Windsor, telling Alais that he is sending her back to the nunnery near Bath. He tells Eleanor that he is sending her to Winchester, to be held under guard. They have both betrayed him equally, and for the last time.

Henry leaves Windsor to meet with Richard at Rouen, so that they might seal the peace. Eleanor and Alais have a few days together, before they are sent to their separate prisons. Though they have both lost their political gambles, they have returned wholeheartedly to their love for each other. They spend the warm days in the rose garden, both of their retinues dismissed. Alone, setting aside all past rancor, they savor each others' company, not certain when they will meet again. "You have been one of the great loves of my life," Eleanor says. Alais replies, "You are the only mother I have ever known."

Richard visits Alais in the nunnery, and they remember why they loved each other, as if the anger and betrayal between them had never been. After offering her condolences on the death of her child, Richard leaves Alais sitting in the cloister garden, where she has once more taken up the life of painting and prayer that she loved as a child.

Historical note: Though historically the Dauphin was five years younger than Alais, for the purposes of this novel, I have made him only one year younger. I have also moved up the death of Henry the Younger of England by seven years.