

# *The Importance of Sons*

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*Portrait of Eleanor of Toledo with her son Giovanni de' Medici, by Agnolo Bronzino, 1544/1545*

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# Chapter 1

## Fleeing the Scene

A Forest outside Rennes

20 November 1491

“If only I’d been a boy!” Duchess Anne raged. “None of this would have happened if I had been a boy.” She flung an arm out wide, at the drizzle, the forest surrounding them, their armed entourage, and the fallen man who lay crumpled, just off the path, on the frosty forest floor.

The fifteen-year-old Duchess of Brittany and Duke Louis d’Orléans stood over the body of their dead companion. He had been riding beside the duke as they fled Anne’s besieged capital of Rennes when he groaned once and slipped sideways from his sturdy horse. By the time Anne and Duke Louis reined in and circled back, he lay with his eyes wide and sightless, facing the sullen skies. Louis had seen enough death on the battlefield to know his lifelong comrade was dead, but he knelt to feel for a pulse to hide the tears that sprang to his eyes.

Anne dropped from her horse to kneel beside him. “Another of my men sacrificed to this terrible war. Why, Lord? When we have already lost too many.” Her voice shook. Then she tightened her lips. She must not give way.

Waiting until he could control the tremor in his voice, Louis said, “François’s death could have happened at any time, Duchess Anne. His heart was weak, and he was no longer young.” He rose, peering from side to side through the trees, as he considered how to deal with this catastrophe.

Anne did not argue. She had blurted the first words that came to her. It was unlike her. Their problems were much too urgent for girlish tears and childish tantrums. Only cool heads and quick thinking would serve now.

The duke decided. “We must tie him to his mount and bring him with us. We do not know how long our lead is and have no time to waste.” When Anne nodded, he said, “Duchess, wait here. I will go for his groom.” He turned away, looking up at the sky as

he called the captain of the guard. He ordered the company to take a break, stay close to their mounts and make no noise. Then Anne informed them of the tragedy and walked among them to calm their first shocked fears. It was her duty.

Afterwards, she stood beside the fallen body of her stalwart cousin who had ridden with them when they fled secretly from Rennes before dawn broke that morning. She shivered in the chilly wind that rustled the trees, adding another level of discomfort to a long day on horseback. They had started in the dark before Prime<sup>1</sup> and a short time past she had heard, faintly in the distance, church bells ringing for Sext.<sup>2</sup> She calculated. They had been riding for close to eight hours. Louis had told her the journey to Châteaubriant near the border of Brittany would take at least sixteen hours—if nothing went wrong. She hoped this would not become the disaster that disrupted their careful plans.

A wave of guilt washed over her. Dunois, her trusted councillor had just died, and she was blaming him for the inconvenience! What kind of ingrate was she? She added it to the list of sins to confess and said a prayer for his departed soul as she waited with what patience she could muster. Yet they must get to the safe Château that evening before anyone in Rennes except her Privy Councillors knew she had flown. Certainly, before Count de Polhaim, her husband's envoy—she should say her former husband's envoy—discovered she was gone.

She shivered again, this time with fear of the German landsknechts<sup>3</sup> who might even now be on their trail. *When he had been an ally, before they married, her now-ex-husband King Maximilian had sent 3,000 German landsknechts to fight with her army against the French.* She narrowed her eyes, thinking about him. *A promising man, he had proven to be. For he had not sent the money to pay them, although he promised, and promised, and promised. Nor had he ever come himself to save her and Brittany from defeat.*

She forced herself to relive the night two weeks ago that had crystallized every painful decision of the previous four months—to surrender to the hated French, to annul her marriage to Maximilian, and to agree to marry the king of detested France. Maximilian's German troops had broken into the stores of ale meant to last the town for weeks, got themselves totally cupshot, rioted and then run wild through the streets of Rennes. After breaking into all the alehouses, raping any woman unfortunate enough to be out in the

street, they beat and stabbed any townsman who dared to oppose them. They were a wild, vicious lot.

Dunois, captain of her troops in Rennes, had been forced to call up every armed man in the town to regain control and force the rioters back to their barracks. Many lay dead among the townsfolk and her loyal men. Then Count de Polhaim had dared demand reparations for the Germans lost. She had never been so angry. Every part of the bloody event had solidified her determination to annul her marriage and flee.

Gazing down on the dead count, who so recently had saved her last remaining stronghold, Anne blinked back tears but there was no time to mourn. Besides, she must not give way before this company, who were risking their lives to help her run for France and another unwelcome marriage. They were a small company, with more armed men than courtiers and servants, and she was one of only four women in the entire one-hundred-strong party. Duke Louis rode up with Dunois's groom and the count's recaptured horse. Its saddle had been removed and a double layer of blankets thrown over its back. Since they had little choice, the duke and groom rolled the late count into a sheet, tossed his body over the back of his mount, and tied his hands to his feet to keep his corpse affixed. Within moments, the count's body was secured, and then the groom guided the edgy steed further back into the party.

Anne scrambled to the back of her own mount without help to keep herself from thinking too hard about this desecration of her cousin's body. She was glad she was wearing boy's clothing. So, too, were her gouvernante, her principal lady-in-waiting, and her maid, for Anne had deemed it safer if all four travelled in male attire. She watched Duke Louis pull his helmet over his tousled brown hair, already streaked with grey, and vault effortlessly into his saddle. His leather cuirass was creased and worn with use. Despite his lack of care about his clothing, he was an attractive man, because of his great interest in the people around him. In a voice accustomed to shouting orders in the heat of battle, he commanded the company to mount up. With Duchess Anne at his side, he urged them to a brisk walk as they continued their journey south-east by the shortest route out of Brittany.

Once the troop had settled into a steady rhythm, Duke Louis glanced sidelong at the young duchess. Dressed as a boy, small and slender for her years, she looked like a child

of ten. But behind those large hazel eyes and flawless complexion lay a mind sharp as a dagger and an iron will. She was as immovable as those giant granite boulders rooted into the rocky soil along the coast of Brittany that had stood there for longer than time itself. It was a long ride for a young and fragile female. Especially one with a hip problem that left her with one short leg and a noticeable limp. “How do you go on, Duchess Anne?” he asked.

She looked surprised. “Well. Why do you ask? About Cousin François, you mean? Do you think I take it as a bad omen? I do, of course. But nothing about this journey into France pleases me, as you know.”

Louis hid the smile that leapt to his lips. He should not be surprised. He had never heard her complain about being tired. She might look fragile, but she was as sturdy as the bedrock that formed the spine of her duchy. He recollected Anne’s anguished outburst in the moment after their cousin’s demise and was curious. “What makes you think things would have been different if you had been a boy?”

Anne’s lips hardened into grim expression. “No one would have tried to bully me into marriage. That’s a start.”

Louis almost interrupted her, but he had learned patience the past three years in his sister-in-law’s prison, so he waited.

“Neither of my *gouverneurs* would have rebelled because I would have been a *proper* heir. Of course, they would have tried to make me a good match, but they would not have thought they could rule *for* me, because I was a *boy*! And they would think I was still *too young* to marry.” The bitterness dripped from her voice, as caustic as lye. She paused long enough that Louis almost answered, but she had not finished. “And since I would not have married, the French—or I should say Madame la Grande—would have had no excuse to make war upon my duchy. So I would not be fleeing secretly from my own lands, risking my soul by disobeying Holy Church to make a marriage I hate, to King Charles. You see, all different.” Her palfrey sidled, agitated by her rider’s intensity, and Anne stopped speaking to pat her mount’s mane and lean over to murmur in her ear. Louis itched to pat Anne’s hand. She looked so young and brave and troubled.

Impulsively, he spoke. “It is not only girls who are forced to marry where they would not, nor have their rights stolen from them by the ruthless rulers of France.”

Anne turned her face to gaze at him and he read contrition in her eyes.

“Shall I tell you?” he asked. “We have a long ride ahead.” When she nodded, he told her about how King Charles’s father, Louis XI, had forced him to marry the king’s crippled, barren daughter, Jeanne, when he was only twelve to make sure that his d’Orléans branch of the Valois line, would become extinct. Why? Because the king wanted the d’Orléans’ lands. King Louis even joked about it. “It will not cost much to raise the children of that union,” he chortled to his cronies. Instead of leaving him as regent, which was his role by right as First Prince of the Blood, the king had named his daughter—his *daughter!*—as regent—

As soon as Louis realized his faux pas, he was stricken with embarrassment. “I- I mean we are speaking of France.” He stumbled over his words. “In France, the Salic Law applies. Women are *not allowed* to rule. Not like in Brittany.”

Anne gave him a sardonic glance. “I understand, Duke.”

“Anyway, Madame la Grande hates me. That is why I ended up fighting for your father in Brittany. And why I ended up in her prison for three years, still married to her ugly, barren sister.” He spat into the oak trees on the side of the path.

Then he added. “There was one thing she could not take from me. Until Charles has a son, I am closest to the throne, so I am dauphin.” He gave a humourless laugh. “Will not Madame la Grande be pleased when you take that position from me!”

The thud of their horses’ hooves, muted by the leaf mould that lay thick along the wide path through the oak trees, to which brown leaves still clung, filled the silence between them.

Finally, Anne replied, her voice flat, “As I said, Cousin Louis. Boys.”

1 Prime—the first hour of daylight, traditionally 6:00 a.m.

2 Sext—noon, traditionally 12:00 p.m.

3 Landsknecht— a member of a class of mercenary soldiers in the German and other continental armies in the 16th and 17th centuries.

## Chapter 2

### A Secret Royal Marriage

Château de Langeais, France

6 December 1491

Close to the entrance into the great hall, Countess Louise d'Angoulême stood beside her husband, Carlo, and his cousin, Duke Louis d'Orléans, conversing as they awaited the appearance of the bride. From under her eyelashes Louise, comparing her finery to the attire of the other ladies in the room, was proud of the results, for hers was the most stylish, although many gowns glittered with finer materials and more jewels. A wave of satisfaction warmed her.

It had taken ingenuity to design her clothing to disguise her growing belly. Since the week previously when Carlo had announced they must make this rushed journey to Langeais, she, her mother-in-law, and her ladies had been busy. Louise had designed her costume while her ladies, cut, sewed, and embroidered taking apart worn gowns and salvaging fine fabric. Her gown's decorative forepart<sup>1</sup> of salvaged cloth of silver embroidered with her swan emblem picked out in pearls and gold thread contrasting with the pale blue brocade of the over gown. The upper sleeves, saved from another cloth of silver gown had matching swan embroidery coupled with long hanging lower sleeves in matching blue trimmed with rabbit fur. To complete her ensemble, a long-sleeved shift of fine linen from a discarded shirt of Charles's peeked out at her wrists.

Aware of her scavenged finery, Louise wondered if her rivals at this wedding could guess that she had pieced its parts together to refresh her gown. She and her mother-in-law had agreed it was essential they hide the family's straitened circumstances from inquisitive eyes. Nor did she want to display her hopes for an heir until she was certain she would not lose the baby. She could not bear people knowing of her failures.

When Carlo said she could bring only one lady-in-waiting to the secret wedding, she had almost refused to attend, she told her mother-in-law, Maman Marguerite. It added another element to Louise's conviction that she and the new Queen Anne would be enemies

before they ever met. First, of course, Anne was a de Montfort, traditional enemies of the de Rohan family. Maman Marguerite, a de Rohan by birth, and sister to the Viscount who was the head of the family, insisted that the ducal coronet of Brittany should sit on her brother's head. The so-called Duchess Anne de Montfort was nothing but a usurper. Taking a swig of the mug of cider that was never far from her side, Maman Marguerite had said, "*Si la fillette*, the girl, she 'ad done as she should and married my nephew, she would 'ave saved herself and all of us this *tragédie*. Look what she 'as done! *La Bretagne*, she should never be part of France. *Petite Folle*."

Louise had many other reasons, and any of them would have been sufficient. At her husband's sudden crack of laughter, Louise glanced at him. He resembled his cousin Louis, with his light brown hair and long Valois nose, and still lithe, athletic body. Unlike Louis, he took pride in dressing well. She wondered if he, too, resented that their penury resulted directly from his loyalty to Anne's father. Because of it, both he and his cousin Louis had fought on the wrong side in the *Guerre Folle*, the Mad War. He had been luckier than Louis for he escaped prison, but Louise and he were *still* paying the fines Madame la Grande had levied against his lands. And what had *she* ever done that Madame la Grande should punish *her* by marrying *her* to a penny-pinched ancient, so that now *she* had to scrimp day-in, day-out to present a proper appearance on a meagre income?

But then, Madame la Grande was heartless. Louise would never forget what it had been like to arrive at Madame la Grande's court as a lonely seven-year-old after her mother had died. The only person who had been unfailingly kind was little Marguerite, *Mme la Petite Dauphine*, as everyone called her. Louise was furious that Madame had tossed Marguerite aside like a worn-out shoe when she found a more *useful* bride for her brother.

Still, it was only at the instant that she saw Duchess Anne in the entryway to the great hall that Louise hated her. The feeling came over her in a molten flood, starting in her heart and burning outward through her veins until she could feel the heat flowing through the soles of her shoes and out the tips of her fingers. She was glad to curtsy so she could lower her head, for her face felt flushed.



Her eyes followed Anne after she passed. It was not only that the girl, who was obviously younger than she, was as tiny and delicate as a Breton faery. Nor was it simply that her clothing—her costly jewelled headdress, and the cloth-of gold wedding gown lined with sable—was as elegant as Louise’s own, besides being as costly as a Turk’s. Neither was it the beauty of Anne’s enormous hazel eyes, chestnut hair and golden rose skin, for Louise knew that her own tall willowy elegance, fair hair and skin, and large stormy grey eyes drew men like helpless flies. It was none of those things, infuriating as they all were. No. It was her insufferable air of arrogance.

\* \* \*

Stiffening her spine, Anne slid her hands down the skirt of her cloth of gold wedding gown until she clutched the jewelled rosary that hung from her waist. The parting gift from her dying mother, it contained a thorn from the crown of Christ’s martyrdom and was her most precious possession. As she touched it, she sent a silent prayer heavenward. A voice announced, “Anne, Duchess de Bretagne, Countess d’Étampes . . .” and continued to recite her titles. Anne glided forward into the light-filled room before her. Large circular candelabra hung from the high ceiling and marched down the centre of the large chamber, each blazing with wax candles. A fireplace burned bright at the far end. Someone had decorated the white-washed walls with boughs of pine tied with red ribbons and tiny silver bells. Their spicy scent added some warmth to the chill that had invaded Anne as she surveyed the scene. With this touch of the festive, she felt a dash of hope that this marriage might bring more pleasure than she had expected.

She glanced around as the courtiers rose from their obeisances. There were no more than thirty, most of them known to her, and she resented the scanty numbers and paltry display. As Duchess of Brittany, she deserved a grand ceremonial event with all her and her husband’s vassals and teeming crowds outside a great cathedral cheering the future of the bride and groom and diving for largesse. Worse, this was her second meagre wedding within a year.

Her hands tightened around the rosary once more as she glanced toward the makeshift altar set up at the far end of the room in front of the fireplace. The two bishops who awaited her had promised that the dispensations they had signed were sufficient to annul her first marriage to King Maximilian and sanctify this one to King Charles. She slowed

her already funereal pace toward them. It was bad enough that *her* marriage should be dissolved. Although her flesh had touched that of the Count de Polhaim in front of her court when he served as King Maximilian's proxy, she had never met Maximilian himself. He was a grown man who had promised to come to her rescue and had not. He deserved no better.

But Madame la Grande, deciding that Brittany was the greater prize, forced Charles to dissolve his marriage to young Marguerite d'Autriche even though they had been married for eight years. Even though he was king. The Regent herself had brought the little princess—who was King Maximilian's daughter to add insult to his injury—to France when she was only three years old and married her to Charles the day she arrived. She had been treated as the queen all her life. Anne tried to imagine how she would feel in Queen Marguerite's shoes. Probably she would loathe both King Charles and Madame la Grande. And likely she would blame the other woman, too.

*That is me. What an unsettling feeling. I will have to do something to show her how sorry I am for my part in this.*

Anne forced her mind back to her imminent wedding. A gold monstrance shone among the vessels sitting on the embroidered altar cloth that covered the temporary altar. Beside the altar, clad in gold and white copes and stiff mitres, two bishops lent their authority to the ceremony. Young King Charles, whom she had not seen since their brief stolen meeting in a small chapel outside Rennes almost two months previously, waited for her beside them. Anne relaxed a trifle. With proper modesty, she kept her eyes lowered and concentrated on moving gracefully on her uneven shoes, especially designed to conceal her one short leg and awkward limp. She would have no one remember that her body was imperfect. She reached his side without mishap. Although he was not tall, the top of her head came only to his shoulder, even with the lift in her shoe. In the chapel, he had been happy to discover that he was taller than she.

The Cardinal began the short service. The words of the marriage vows as they made them were uncomfortably familiar. "Charles, do you take Anne, here present, for your lawful wife according to the rite of our holy mother, the Church?"

Charles said, "I do."

They were the first words Anne had heard him say since she met him in Rennes. As Charles made his vows, it astonished her once again that words so weighty they bound a couple for life in the eyes of God and Holy Church should take so little time to utter. “Anne, do you take Charles, here present, for your lawful husband according to the rite of our holy mother, the Church?”

Anne replied, “I do,” her voice no louder than a whisper, so reluctant was she to remarry without the papal dispensations. Until the documents blessing their marriage arrived from Rome, she feared they were both legally wed to others. But she had spoken the vows now. Was she committing adultery? Would she burn in hell? Only her years of training kept her from wringing her hands. She wanted to turn and run from the room.

Before she could give way to panic, the Cardinal joined their right hands and married them, saying, “*Ego conjungo vos in matrimonium. In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti. Amen.*”<sup>2</sup>

After he pronounced them man and wife, Anne raised her eyes to the king’s. Charles smiled down at her, the corners of his dark eyes crinkling, as he held her freezing hand in his. It was warm and she felt reassured. He was not handsome, for his nose was long and fleshy above his large, loose lips. But his eyes were large and fringed with thick, dark lashes and his hair looked as soft as her favourite puppy’s ears. She felt a sudden longing to cuddle Fanchon, who was waiting for her in a room upstairs.

She accepted her new husband’s arm and moved with him to the small nearby table where everything lay in readiness to sign the marriage contract, pleased that their cloth of gold wedding outfits with their sable-lined sleeves matched, as was traditional in France. It made their marriage feel less hasty. He had promised her he would see it done after she accepted his suit. When he made his proposal in the small candle-lit chapel, he had gone down on one knee. And when she agreed, he said she had made him the happiest man on earth. They both knew neither of them had a choice, but it was chivalrous of him to treat her as if she were his heart’s desire. She had warmed to him then. It was a relief to feel the ice within her melting again.

As the contract signing dragged on, the courtiers’ voices buzzed in her ears like the drone of lazy bees. Although the guests were few, each had an interest in the marriage. Madame la Grande and her husband were ensuring that none of the highest nobility in France and

Brittany could deny their part so she insisted each must sign the marriage contract to demonstrate they had accepted its terms.

A flurry of activity caught Anne's attention at the far end of the great hall. A quartet of servants in the king's livery emerged carrying boards, trestles, and benches. They placed one table across the width of the hall and two more perpendicular to it. Anne watched the movements of soft-shoed butlers and pages from the corner of her eye while she conversed with the guests who had completed signing clustering near the fireplace.

Pages covered the tables with white linens that fell to the floor and placed a gilded salt boat on each table. Behind the centre table, two wooden armchairs raised higher than the benches on either side of them occupied the central position. A cloth of estate<sup>3</sup> embroidered with the combined devices of Brittany and France hung above them. The position and prominence of the cloth of estate sent the message that her capitulation, and the attachment of her duchy to France, was the sole significance of her wedding. The king and Madame la Grande were boasting that they had gained what they wanted—her duchy of Brittany—by flaunting her under that emblem. They were presenting her like a prize won at a tournament, not a ruler of an independent state.

She tightened her lips to keep herself from glaring when the thin, sharp-nosed Regent approached them with her husband and sketched a curtsy. She wore a gown that rivalled Anne's in magnificence. A jewelled black and white headdress hid her hair but could not disguise her prominent forehead, washed-out brown eyes, pale lashes and eyebrows, and thin nose. Her honour insulted by the table decorations, Anne comforted herself that her magnificence outdid her enemy's as noticeably a peacock outshone a peahen.

"Madame la Grande," she said, "you have been busy. That is an elaborate cloth of estate you have prepared." A hint of scorn sounded in her voice

"As befits the King and Queen of France and Duke and Duchess of Brittany." Madame la Grande's eyes snapped, but her voice was smooth. "And may I present to you my husband, Duke Pierre de Bourbon. I do not believe you have yet met him. He is your new brother-in-law.

"How rapidly my family grows." It was a true statement, Anne thought, and inoffensive. That Madame la Grande was now her sister grated like chalk on slate. Anne had adored

her own sister, now an angel in Heaven. That she should be replaced by this- this- viper was just another painful sting of fate.

Well, the Regent had held the position of first lady in France for far too long. She would soon discover that France had a queen now and she would have to accept she was no longer the first lady in the country.

1 Forepart–Placket and matching forepart—a separate piece of expensive and highly decorated material inserted into the opening of the overdress to cover the kirtle, often with matching lower sleeves.

2 *Ego conjúngo vos in matrimónium. In nómine Patris, et Fílii, et Spíritus Sancti. Amen.*—the traditional Latin marriage vow, translated as —By the authority of the Church I ratify and bless the bond of marriage you have contracted. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

3 Cloth of estate—a canopy-like arrangement of precious fabric above and behind a throne or dais.

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