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THE UNICORN HUNTERS

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Part I

I



THE FRENCH ENVOY came to Nantes on the last Sunday of Eastertide, when all the Breton court were still at church, when the hiss of rain and the pealing of bells swallowed the hoofbeats and shouts of his company. The court heard Mass unaware of his coming; they schemed and gossiped and took communion just as always, and no one from the pot-boy to the duchess knew that from that year, Christendom would never be the same.

Rain does not fall in Brittany so much as hover, filling the air with vapor, so that the courtiers emerged from the cathedral and were instantly wrapped in cloud. The bells overhead rang loud enough to shake the raindrops crooked. Arrayed in their Easter best, the court glowed in the gray light, though there were fewer of them than there should have been. Many had died in the war with France, many more were still far away awaiting ransom, like ambulatory notes payable in their conquerors' châteaux.

At the heart of the crowd walked a girl with merry eyes, a floating violet in a sea of cut-velvet and silk hose, cloth-of-silver and the smell of myrrh, concentrating as she held her skirt

clear of puddles. This was Anne, duchess regnant of Brittany, her hair caught back in a diadem and pearl-studded crespine, though she wore no other jewels. They had all been sold to pay her garrisons.

She did not know that a French envoy had come to the castle. Indeed, she was expecting a messenger from quite another direction, and that expectation lit an already animated face. She and her maids-of-honor were playing a game of riddles as they walked.

"I am in all things and through all things," declaimed the prosiest among them. "I am in candles and lamps and water and dice. I am the word of God; I am the blessing of mankind. I am—"

"Divination," answered four brisk voices. All of Anne's maids-of-honor were clever.

Another of them began a different riddle: "Three pears hang, three monks pass, each takes one, yet two remain, how—"

Jean de Rieux had been named Anne's guardian by her father while the latter lay breathing blood on his deathbed, and now he watched the riddle-game with an indulgent, anxious face. He was of far too sober a mind to make up riddles. He said, low, "Highness, have you seen the diviner this day? What news?"

"Of my messenger? None yet," murmured Anne, leaning on his arm to dodge another puddle. Rain filled the air; she breathed it in. "I shall ask when I have dry feet. But knowing where he is will not bring him here the faster."

De Rieux shook his head. "I have warned you against overconfidence, my daughter. This—your—arrangement—" He stumbled on the right word, so great was the secrecy, though

the clamor of bells overhead muffled their voices. "It is a notable victory, but you must not sell the bear's skin before it has been killed."

"Or in this case married. Let us all pity the bear," said Anne, and smiled impishly up at him. Ducal dignity could not quite hide her pleased excitement, and she was not yet twenty. "I have not been hasty."

Before De Rieux could answer, Anne's sister Isabeau darted up to them, dragging her soaking hem straight through the puddles. She was ten years old, restless as a baby duck; her dark hair had already begun the inevitable process of slithering loose of its careful plaits. She skidded across the stones, De Rieux caught her, and Anne said, "Isabeau, unless you intend to man the battlements yourself, I beg you will not bankrupt me keeping you in shoes. We must pay our soldiers."

"Give me a spear and I will guard the wall," retorted Isabeau, swinging an imaginary weapon. She hardly came to De Rieux's shoulder, barely shorter than Anne, though Isabeau gave every promise of overtaking her. The child was all long, awkward limbs, while Anne was small and glossy as a cat in a dairy.

"Will you? I pity the French," said Anne, tweaking her sister's nose.

Isabeau butted against Anne's shoulder and smiled up at De Rieux, who was her guardian too. They were all crossing the drawbridge that divided the city of Nantes from the vast new ducal keep that Bretons called, simply, the Castle of the Dukes of Brittany.

Half-tuned music and laughter trickled from the castle windows and from the wall-top as a bright stream of courtiers

passed beneath the barbican and crossed the courtyard. The rain was falling faster. Isabeau had been dignified all through church, and Anne saw her trying to be stately again now, though she made a small, irrepressible skip before she caught herself.

Anne said, "Isabeau, if you cannot sit still this forenoon, let you put on a good cloak and run about the garden." If Breton children were kept indoors when it rained, they'd never go outside. "Only be sure and bring me a posy when you return."

Isabeau lit up. "Will you come with me and pick the flowers?"

"I will not." The mist showed every sign of thickening, enough to lay sparkling droplets on her violet bodice. "I am going to sit by a nice fire, embroider my altar-cloth, entertain deputations, and gossip furiously." She gave her sister an innocent look. "You may come in if you like and hem a kerchief."

Isabeau shuddered and slipped away at once, turning back to wave, trailed by her exasperated governess and a tutor with a dripping nose.

It was only after Anne, smiling, had watched her sister go that she noticed something amiss in the courtyard.

A string of unfamiliar horses was being led to stabling; an unfamiliar equerry stood by the horse-troughs. A loud blend of strange voices echoed in the guardhouse. Who had come? A glimpse of banner or shield, tabard or surcoat, might tell her, but rain hovered still, cold and close, blurring the world like a painter's fingertips. Whoever had come, it could not be *her* messenger. Her messenger was riding alone, in secret.

She and Jean de Rieux exchanged wary glances as they passed into the castle proper.

Her bastard half-brother, Henri, Baron of Avaugour, met

Anne in her garderobe, a private chamber above the oratory, where she entertained her intimates and read documents, sewed and gossiped with her maids-of-honor. The light was gray near the windows, rosy near the fire, wavering in places from the interplay of rain and firelight. Rugs and wolfskin and tapestry softened the stone. Every courtier with a reason to wait upon the duchess was already in the room, passing news in low voices. Henri scythed straight through them all, a high, outraged color on his handsome face.

When Anne was crowned, some had whispered that it was a shame the duke's only son could not inherit the duchy. Anything, they said, would have been better than giving the realm to poor Francis's barely grown daughter. Henri just laughed at those people. "Lord," he'd told Anne, "who'd want it? All those papers to read. Treaties and accounts and letters. And old men talking. You like it, you unnatural creature. They think you live only to frolic, but they don't see the look in your eye when you preside over that council."

Anne did like it. Although sometimes she envied Henri, whom God had made tall and broad, a knight and a man. Any or all of those attributes would have made her life much easier.

She crossed the garderobe and planted herself beside the hood of the enormous stone fireplace, nodding at the reverences of a dozen courtiers. "Tell me your news, brother. Who has come? I saw the horses below."

De Rieux followed them to the fireplace, his mouth downturned and worried. Her council was scattered about the room: Clever, jolly Dunois, whose father was the famous Bastard of Orléans. The Comte de Comminges, and Montauban

her chamberlain, catlike and wary and intensely loyal. They all drifted unobtrusively nearer, while her maids-of-honor raised a chorus of chatter to mask their conversation.

"La Trémoille is here with a grand escort and messages from the French court," said Henri, low. "He has had word via diviner and rode from the garrison at Saint-Aubin-du-Cormier. I think he is come to insist upon the French marriage with no further delay."

Anne went very still. Her mind instantly darted back to the day of her coronation. She had been too young and red-eyed, her father newly buried.

"I will not marry the king of France," she had told De Rieux. She knew—everyone knew—that if she were to wed the king of France, there would be no more Brittany. Only France, from the Rhine to the stormy sea. "I promised my father."

"What choice do you have?" De Rieux had rejoined, with some justice. Her father had lost a war over this very question, and died in the aftermath. Brittany was a fair green jewel rich with the wealth of the sea, and France was ten times its size and coveted it. Brittany was also Anne's bridal portion, and would go to her husband when she married. Of course France wanted her.

"I will make myself new choices," she had said then.

And she had. She was sure of it. Her secret messenger from Flanders was carrying Brittany's salvation even now, sewn up hidden in his saddle-skirt.

"They must have found out," whispered De Rieux.

Anne's mind was racing. She said, "Perhaps. Or perhaps not. He would have brought soldiers if he knew, and he has only his escort, hasn't he?"

"But why else would he have come now?" murmured Montauban.

They were all worried, and she did not blame them. If France laid bare her plans too soon, she would be deposed. Or taken away and married forcibly. She was finding it hard to draw a full breath.

"I can think of a few reasons," said Dunois, brows drawn together. "But I like none of them." He took a gasping draught of his spiced wine.

"He has not said why he is here, only asked for audience with the duchess," said Henri.

Her brother had no head for statecraft. He liked jousting and expensive horses and a well-cut doublet. But he was an easy, kindly man, her father's mistress's son.

Anne's rising heartbeat seemed to shake her whole body; she forced her voice to mildness. "We'll find out soon enough. Give him my utmost respect and say we honor our cousin of France and wait upon his noble general's convenience." She'd given standing orders to treat anyone from the French court with an exasperating degree of servility. She cast a speculative glance at her brother. "Henri, go and put on something more expensive. That vulgar hat with the ostrich plume. I want him to think you have ambitions and have spent all your money."

"What?"

"Now," said Anne. "Quick. He'll probably come in here any moment, when he gets the summons. Hates delays. Don't you remember? And another thing—" She whispered in his ear.

"I don't understand," said her brother dubiously.

"No need," said Anne. She said it cheerfully, but the firelight

kept wanting to go sideways in her vision, to remind her of the stabs of light that roared from besieging cannon. The first time she had seen La Trémoille was from the wall of that very castle. He had been directing the French army that was methodically laying siege to their battlements. Her father had pointed out the three blue eagles of his standard, noted the bombards being drawn into position to fire.

That day was years gone, but the cold fear of it still clung to her.

Henri said, "You should know that my hats are the envy of the court."

"Now."

He went off, muttering something incredulous about how their easy-tempered father could have sired such a baby tyrant. Anne smiled as she watched him go, but her smile faded when she met De Rieux's worried eyes.

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Four years ago, Guillaume de La Trémoille, lieutenant-general of France, had been the architect of the conquest of Brittany, and in his firm opinion, the war had stopped too soon. The Bretons had been defeated, roundly, at Saint-Aubin-du-Cormier, but France ought not to have heard their suit for peace after the battle. They should not have relented, in the face of Duke Francis's death. They ought to have driven on, reduced the château at Nantes, taken Rennes, packed off the girls, the ducal heirs, to be wards of the crown of France, and set a loyal man—himself, for preference—in the seat of the duke of Brittany.

That was the way wars were won.

That was how the old king would have won.

But Charles was young and naïve and desired to emulate Saint Louis, his canonized ancestor, in the matter of virtue. Virtuous kings, Charles opined, did not seize territory on the thinnest possible claim, backed up with a legion of bloody hired swords. Virtuous kings enlarged their holdings by good, lawful Christian marriage, and both of Brittany's heirs were girls.

His court agreed in public, but in private they wondered what Charles's warlike father would have said to his amiable son.

La Trémoille knew very well what the old king would have said and wished with all his might that he could have said it for him.

The only saving grace of it all had been that the new-crowned duchess was a mere slip of a silly child, a puppet on an all-but-bankrupt throne. Charles was young and much given to amorous intrigues; the crown was distracted by wars in Burgundy, and it did not seem so very risky to wait for the girl to grow up a little. She would be less likely to die in childbed.

But now La Trémoille meant to wash his hands of Brittany. He wished never to see another raincloud so long as he lived, wished never again to ride while soaked to his shriveled skin. He wanted to go enjoy his lands and titles, the gifts of a grateful France. Then he meant to raise fresh troops and go and fight a fine plundering war far away in sunny Pavia.

The duchess must marry. She is past old enough, and Charles is crowned king. It must be now, Marguerite had written him. Marguerite of France was the king's elder sister, his regent before he came of age. The cleverest woman in Europe, the most

powerful. Even after Charles's coronation, she kept a knowing hand on the reins of state. She shared entirely La Trémoille's views on the danger of leaving Brittany half-conquered. *You will go to Nantes and set this marriage in motion. You will frighten them if you must.*

With these injunctions echoing in his mind, very grand in a new doublet, Guillaume de La Trémoille went to wait upon the duchess of Brittany, prepared to terrify her and her council if they proved in the least resistant to this imminent and necessary French marriage.

A repast was laid out already on long boards in the duchess's garderobe. She did not receive all her court here; this was a meal for her intimates. She got smartly to her feet when he made his bow and greeted him with touching shyness.

La Trémoille's heart sank at the sight of the food: all sugared fruits and marchpane. A meal for a spoiled child. At least she was pretty. Perhaps Charles of France, also something of a fool, would like her. They could be fools together and leave the business of governing to others.

Breathlessly, the duchess encouraged him to try the delicacies, and when he had choked some of them down, she asked timidly, "Monseigneur, have you messages for me?"

La Trémoille shoved the last of the sweets away. "Madame, I am come on behalf of the crown of France, which greatly desires to settle with all dispatch the alliance between Charles the king and his beloved subject Anne of Brittany. I am empowered to do all that is required to facilitate this longed-for union."

"Oh," she said, looking tentatively down the table, as though expecting someone to chide her. "I suppose—it's only—I fear . . ." She trailed off, biting her lips.

La Trémoille followed her gaze, suddenly alert. He and Marguerite had discussed the likelihood that someone in the Breton court, holding particular sway with the duchess, would delay the French marriage in hopes of a bribe. Was there such a person?

"But not so fast, sister," said a ringing voice a few places down the table. "You have forgot the unicorn."

This man, perhaps. A great handsome knight by his clothes, brawny arms crossed over a straining doublet and wearing upon his head the most vulgar heap of dyed ostrich feathers La Trémoille had ever seen.

"Oh—Henri," said the duchess, looking uneasy. "The general does not care about unicorns."

This must be the Breton bastard, the eldest child, knighted by the duke and created Baron of Avaugour. Rumor said Francis had got the boy on the old French king's castoff mistress. A bastard must always be chewing at the doors of power, and a royal bastard doubly so. What would he want for a bribe? La Trémoille almost forgot the duchess, staring at this upstart. "What unicorn?" He was expecting the commission of some tapestry or other nonsense thing.

"Oh," said the duchess confidently. "It is only that we have had word that a unicorn has been sighted. In Brocéliande."

All around the table, voices seemed to drop; the name *Brocéliande* itself breathed out dark mystery. Men told wild tales of that ancient forest. That the fair-folk, the korriganed, had lived long in its shadows. That an unwary traveler might stray into the Lost Lands, only to vanish forever, or return a century hence, still young while his whole world had spun out from under his feet. And they also did say, with more force

than mere rumor, that Brocéliande was one of the last, best places for men to hunt unicorns.

A unicorn was the noblest and rarest prey in Christendom. The fire-drakes, if ever they had lived, had not been seen in living memory, and one could not hunt sea-drakes. Sea-drakes hunted men. At least, that's what seamen said when their ships did not come back. But now and again, one heard credible tales of a unicorn. Like his master the king, La Trémoille loved to hunt. "A unicorn, you say?"

The duchess threw a diffident glance at her brother. "We had a message from Trécesson. A lymerer with his dog, seeking stags for his master, came upon the beast in Brocéliande. Four days ago—or was it five? I thought—I mean, we thought—that perhaps we should try to hunt it. While I am—" She stumbled over the words, going modestly pink.

La Trémoille knew what she was trying to say. To hunt a unicorn required two things. The first was a virgin of high birth and unimpeachable virtue, for bait. And the other was a hunt so extravagant that the mere dazzle of it would tempt the vain beast near.

What better bait for a unicorn than this beautiful, high-born fool? And what nobler quarry for a man than a unicorn? La Trémoille hesitated, remembering his orders. Then he said, "It would be a fine thing, to hunt a unicorn."

In a hectoring voice, Henri of Avaugour answered, drinking his wine, "Then why do we speak of marriage? Even the breath of coming unchastity might ruin all—it is said that unicorns know these things, Monseigneur."

The duchess was blushing even more furiously, biting her lips.

La Trémoille considered. Just the chance of it fired his blood. A living unicorn, at bay . . . "A small delay before negotiations begin might be possible," he said at last.

A small, odd smile came to Henri of Avaugour's lips. "I knew you were wise, Monseigneur."

The bastard was probably still holding out for a bribe, thought La Trémoille. Well, an estate in France could be found for him. But let it be a wretched estate.

The duchess, still scarlet, said, "I shall make of the unicorn's horn a wedding present to the king of France. You shall take the hide, God willing, for all the world to marvel at, Monseigneur."

Her look was soft, earnest. And when she put out her hand to be kissed, he did so with less than his usual coldness.

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They got rid of La Trémoille at last. The general had unbent considerably at the thought of hunting a unicorn, though he stared daggers all the while at poor Henri. He even ate some marchpane, though he grimaced, and drank his cup of wine—Anne had made sure it was the sweet kind that gave you a headache—and then took his leave. The servants came in his wake to draw the cloth and clear away the boards and trestles. Soon there would be proper feasting in the great hall.

Anne finally gave in to the fit of laughter that had been trying to burst out of her all that while. When she looked up, wiping her eyes, Henri was grinning too, still wearing that ridiculous hat, and that started her off again. She said, "Let us hope the feast tonight contains a few bearable dishes; one cannot subsist on marchpane."