

## 4

Paris was beautiful in the autumn morning; a low mist lit by the sun clung to the river and the light caught the windows of the great towers of Notre Dame, splitting in shafts of gold and red. People had gathered for miles along the bank to see the flotilla of handsome cogs and hulks that was making its way east on a kind wind. The boats flew the pennants of Philip, King of Navarre, though it was his wife Joan who was coming to the capital in as much pomp as her land could provide.

The country people were flocking out in their church best to gawp at her as she made her way down the river. Not so long ago she had been *their* princess, and a popular one. She was generous and she was pious, it was said. Plenty among them regarded her son as their rightful king, being old fashioned enough to see nothing wrong with inheritance through the female line.

As the boats neared the city, merchants began to appear in the crowd, rattling pots and pans, displaying cloths and shaking tunics in the latest buttoned styles towards the ships. Bareheaded women wearing red and green striped hoods on their backs stroked their hair and called out to the sailors, telling them they must want a bed and someone to warm it after such a long voyage.

On the scaffold-built forecastle of the leading and largest ship on the river stood a woman dressed in finery to rival that of the cathedral. Her dress was cloth of gold, her red cloak trimmed with ermine and the hood that dropped from her shoulders was heavy with pearls and emeralds. Her golden hair was woven with rubies and she wore a fine golden crown flashing with diamonds, topped by a two-coned headdress. Queen Joan of Navarre, the most beautiful of the famously beautiful daughters of old King

Louis, fair skinned and tall, as only a noble lady raised on good food and light work could be.

At her side stood a five-year-old boy, equally impressively dressed in a doublet of red taffeta hung with pearls, the fine blue silk hat on his head bearing on its front the image of a dragon picked out in tiny rubies. In his hand he carried a small dagger with which he was chopping at the rail of the ship. Next to him was his nurse and the queen's ladies-in-waiting – four of them, two carrying fine cages of songbirds, one a posy of flowers and the final one a silver cup of wine, ready should the queen require it. Also on the platform was Count Ramon of Aragon, a young knight, tall and slim with the dark hair and skin of his family. He did not wear mail, instead a fine wide-sleeved coat decorated with the four red bars on a yellow field of his homeland. The queen knew it would do no harm to show off the alliances she was making – her oldest daughter Maria was betrothed to Peter, the future king of Aragon and three territories besides. They were both young – she eight and he twelve, but Joan had hope of a marriage and children to cement the bond as soon as Maria was twelve.

Finally, her own cousin and favourite, the short and squat Ferdinand D'Evreux, stood with his hooded hawk on his arm, his coat a splendid glittering red affair in which the yellow dots on the red square of House Evreux were picked out in yellow sapphires. The castle was so crowded that the servants – eight of them liveried in the yellow on red square of Navarre quartered with the blue fleurs-de-lys of the House of Capet – had to cling to the back of the structure outside of the rail. They were in danger of falling onto the men-at-arms who stood on the decks behind them, sixty strong, all in the same livery.

The fighting men were crammed in among the crates of chickens, the horses, the barrels, the hunting dogs, the falcons, servants and cursing sailors who shared the deck with them. By the ship's rail, three trumpeters fought for space to sound the fanfare. At the centre of the throng was the queen's litter – splendidly canopied in blue silk with embroidered golden fleurs-de-lys. She had brought it with her when she married her husband and had never bothered to refit it in the dual arms of both their houses.

The queen squeezed the boy's hand. 'I can't believe we have to bend the knee to these Valois barbarians.' She spoke as much to the air as to her son.

The trumpets sounded and a heavily armoured man shouted from the deck. 'Bow down before Joan, Queen of Navarre, Princess of France, Countess of Evreux. Bow down before the lady and her son, Charles, Prince of Navarre!'

People sounded cheers on the riverbank and there were shouts of 'God Bless King Louis,' and 'Long prosper the House of Capet!'

The queen waved and smiled, though she still spoke to her son. 'This should all be mine. And if not mine, then yours. I am the daughter of the king and you are my son. Why should not a woman inherit? And if she should not, why not her son? Those Valois bastards – and they are bastards – stripped me of everything in this land, everything when my father died. We lost Brie and we lost Champagne, and what did they give me in compensation? Angoulême. Half way up a mountain with the laziest and most troublesome countrymen to be found outside of England.'

The boy continued hacking at the rail.

'Well,' she went on, 'we still have rights here. They'll have to let you see the angel. That's the least they can do. They get to keep you here – we can't refuse them that – and you get to see the angel. You're owed an audience with it. They'll give you an audience or I'll burn down the Great Hall and the Louvre and see how Philip likes holding his court in the street.'

The boy suddenly turned and looked at her. 'Uncle Philip stole from us?'

'Yes, but it doesn't do to say so. Do not say so here.'

The boy seemed to think for a moment. 'Why didn't you stop him?'

The queen betrayed no signs of emotion other than a slight tightening of her jaw. 'I am a woman. I was alone against the arrayed might of the House of Valois. If I had resisted we would have lost Navarre as well. They'd been sewing up alliances for years and persuading people that it was impossible to inherit by descent from the female side.'

'Why doesn't papa stop him?'

'He doesn't see it the way I do. That's why he scuttles off to

Scotland, fighting the English like a dutiful vassal. He forgets his own claim to the throne. He has a claim too. Not like yours. You are of the fleurs-de-lys on both sides of your family. Doubly royal.' She tousled his hair.

'I will be king one day.' The boy gestured to the bank.

'You will. But again don't say that here.' She rested her hand on his head. 'We made a treaty disallowing that. Or rather *they* made a treaty and I signed it. I had no choice.'

The boy took her hand. 'Mother.'

'Yes.'

'When I am grown I shall not prove so pliable.'

The queen put her hand to her mouth to stifle a laugh. 'Oh my boy, the words you come up with. Where did you get that from? Ladies, ladies, did you hear what he said? "Pliable!"'

The woman all laughed and cooed and the noblemen smiled indulgently.

Joan bent down to her child, drawing him close and whispering into his ear. 'I hope you won't, my Charles,' she said. 'When you are grown you will come here, not with five ships, but with five hundred, and you will make that thief, Philip of Valois, eat the treaty he made me sign. Now smile and be simple as I've told you. As you grow up here, don't let your uncle see what a clever boy you are. His son is a fool. Dim your own light, so it might not overpower his. That would be dangerous for you.'

'Can I see the angel? They say it's very different from ours.'

'Different in that it has taken the field in living memory. Different in that it occasionally makes sense. If your father could only find a way ...' Her voice trailed off.

'Will the angel give me sugar?'

'That's right. Play the fool, boy. You are a fine son, Charles, a very fine son.'

The boy nodded and his mother stood erect as the low bridge that formed part of the city walls approached. The great square castle of the Louvre loomed above them, its pointed turrets rising out of a sloping roof. The queen found herself speculating how easy it would be to burn. Not very, she thought. The river was diverted around it to form a moat and the inner keep was safe enough to store most of the kingdom's treasure. She coughed and

one of her ladies placed the band of a nosegay of violets around her neck, the little basket dropping to her chest. Joan was very glad of their scent. The river was rank, even though it was relatively high from a wet summer. They would disembark here and travel to the Île de la Cité by barge.

The ships came in to dock – the queen’s first. She was helped down the ladder from the castle by the two noblemen, Ferdinand above and Ramon below. Charles needed no such help and slid down the ladder with his feet outside the rungs, as the sailors did. His nurse, helped onto the deck by one of the liveried servants, checked him over and called for a basin of water to clean his now filthy hands. The queen waved her away.

‘He will do like that,’ she said. The nurse bowed, but one of the ladies-in-waiting – a noblewoman used to talking freely to the queen – spoke out.

‘Madam, the court will think the boy an uneducated savage.’

‘Good,’ said the queen, eyeing a group of assembled town dignitaries in their brightly coloured tunics waiting to greet her on the shore. ‘He should fit in here, then. My God, these commoners had better not be my welcoming party.’ She climbed into her litter and beckoned the boy in beside her.

The boat was moored tight to a landing stage and the difficult work of disembarking from the boat began. Eight strong men lifted the litter up so its front poles rested on the quay. Then they shoved it forward and leapt up beside it. An alderman in all the finery the law would allow and a little more – the emerald brooch he wore at his neck should only have been worn by men of noble birth – came forward and bowed deeply to the curtain of the litter.

‘Great majesty, honoured sovereign, Queen of Navarre and favoured vassal of King Philip. It is good to see you again, ma’am, if I may add a personal note.’

A heavily ringed hand came out of the curtains, its palm on the vertical. ‘You may not.’

The man stuttered and bowed, for want of anything else to do.

‘Convey me to the barge,’ said the queen, from behind the curtain, ‘I expect to be greeted and grovelled to by a better class of man than you. The king should have been here himself, or failing him, his idiot son.’

‘Majesty, I ...’

‘The barge.’

‘As you wish.’

The barge – a canopied affair in blue silk embroidered with the royal fleurs-de-lys, was moored no more than thirty paces from the front of the cob, its oarsmen at attention with their oars in the air like pikemen on parade. It was accessed by a set of carved wooden stairs. There was a short squabble between the Navarre men-at-arms and the burghers on the dock about who was to carry the litter, which was quickly won by the men-at-arms.

The litter was carried the thirty paces to the barge over a pavement of crushed herbs that gave up their scent of lavender and mint to the air as the men stepped forward. The queen was helped out by Count Ramon. Then Ferdinand nobly leapt down the steps to guide her on to the barge where she was greeted again by a dignitary and a blast of bugles.

The rest of the ladies, nurses and servants made their way on board, arranging the cages of the songbirds, all of a squawk in the presence of the hawk, on the hooked poles that had been provided. Ferdinand took his falcon to the perches at the far end of the barge to avoid it disturbing the more gentle fowl.

‘Great Queen, lady of the ...’

‘Just get this thing moving; the sooner I’m off this sewer of a river the better,’ she said. ‘Don’t bother with the titles. I know who I am.’

The queen did not sit. She wanted the people to see her. The boat cast off and the oarsmen bent their backs to steer it under the low bridge that marked the entrance to the city proper. From the windows of each of its houses people called and waved, and the queen waved back. She might despise commoners individually, but she knew the value of the mob.

The mist was clearing now and the sun was strong, though the queen chose not to go under the canopy. She wanted the people to see her, to dazzle them with her jewels, to have them cheer her and call her name, to let Philip know the affection she commanded. The boy looked up at the ripples of sunlight reflected on the underside of the bridge.

‘They look like little mouths snapping at us,’ he said.

‘You are a Capet and a prince,’ said the queen, ‘it’s you who will do the snapping.’

As the barge emerged from the bridge the queen broke into a smile. All along the shore, the people had turned out to see her. The outskirts had been thronged, but here it was as if the city held a fire and all the people were straining forward to get as near to the water as they could.

She stood up proud and the boy came to join her. She shooed him away. To protect him, she needed to make the Valois think she valued him lightly.

The queen raised a hand in acknowledgement as the city rang with her name.

The barge moved on past the formidable round towers of the Tour de Neslé – a city defence and mansion combined. Joan shivered as she saw it. Her uncle, Philip IV, had discovered his daughters-in-law had conducted certain rites there. The official line was that they had been caught in adultery and sent to monasteries, their lovers flayed and killed. Joan knew better, for her cousin Isabella, Louis’ daughter and mother of King Edward of England, had told her the truth. They had been summoning devils. It was a weakness of the Capetian female line.

She crossed herself. She had been very fond of all those who had suffered.

The barge slid on to the Great Hall, the palace of the Valois king, her palace when she was a little girl. It was beautiful in the morning sun, its roofs a floating blue, its pretty turrets with their tops like pointed caps, and rising above it all, the great square structure of the holy chapel, its huge rose window now in shadow. She knew what it was, though, to stand inside that chapel at sunset, to approach its greatest treasure – Christ’s crown of thorns and feel the presence of the angel in golden light. They called the chapel the Chapel of Light and it was well named. Huge stained glass windows dominated its walls, the stonework reduced simply to traces, but what traces! The stone was adorned with every colour of gem, gold and silver, bright emerald and deep ruby paint. Joan remembered standing, bathed in the light of the dying sun, clothed in jewels that turned her to a creature of light, the whispers of the angel and the song of the stone saints in her ears. Then she had

known that France was God's kingdom, blessed and protected by Him. She swallowed as she recalled the moment she realised they would not let her inherit. Cast out, forced away. She looked out from the barge and waved, smiling hard for the people.

Something flashed from the quayside. It was the king's crown, brilliant in the morning sun. Beneath it his robe too sparkled, cloth of gold smothered in rubies and emeralds.

The ranks of lesser men stood behind him, the prince in a shining blue tunic adorned with fleurs-de-lys in sparkling gold, the ranks of knights gaudy as a meadow and, by the side of the prince, a troupe of minstrels, all in ape masks. Philip VI was finer than she, Joan couldn't deny. But he hadn't the bearing. Philip stooped like a country villein – he didn't stand erect and proud like a king, even if he did have four hundred courtiers and soldiers in their glimmering best clothes at his back.

She smiled deeply and genuinely as the barge approached him. He wanted to deny her a great welcome, she knew, but he could not. The people loved her and he had to be seen to love her too. Their cheers burst over her like the crashing of surf.

The child called from behind her. 'Shall I see the angel, mama?'

She didn't turn to face him but she replied. 'Yes, my Charles, you shall. And it will see you, the true king. Then we'll discover what favours Heaven will bestow. And whom the Lord God will curse.'