



CASTLE OF BEAUREVOIR, NEAR ARRAS,
FRANCE, SUMMER–WINTER 1430



She sits, this odd trophy of war, as neat as an obedient child, on a small stool in the corner of her cell. At her feet are the remains of her dinner on a pewter platter, laid on the straw. I notice that my uncle has sent good slices of meat, and even the white bread from his own table; but she has eaten little. I find I am staring at her, from her boy's riding boots to the man's bonnet crammed on her brown cropped hair, as if she were some exotic animal, trapped for our amusement, as if someone had sent a lion cub all the way from Ethiopia to entertain the great family of Luxembourg, for us to keep in our collection. A lady behind me crosses herself and whispers, 'Is this a witch?'

I don't know. How does one ever know?

'This is ridiculous,' my great-aunt says boldly. 'Who has ordered the poor girl to be chained? Open the door at once.'

There is a confused muttering of men trying to shift the responsibility, and then someone turns the big key in the cell door and my great-aunt stalks in. The girl – she must be about seventeen or eighteen, only a few years older than me – looks up from under her jagged fringe of hair as my great-aunt stands before her, and then slowly she rises to her feet, doffs her cap, and gives an awkward little bow.

'I am the Lady Jehanne, the Demoiselle of Luxembourg,' my





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great-aunt says. 'This is the castle of Lord John of Luxembourg.' She gestures to my aunt: 'This is his wife, the lady of the castle, Jehanne of Bethune, and this is my great-niece Jacquetta.'

The girl looks steadily at all of us and gives a nod of her head to each. As she looks at me I feel a little tap-tap for my attention, as palpable as the brush of a fingertip on the nape of my neck, a whisper of magic. I wonder if standing behind her there are indeed two accompanying angels, as she claims, and it is their presence that I sense.

'Can you speak, Maid?' my great-aunt asks, when the girl says nothing.

'Oh yes, my lady,' the girl replies in the hard accent of the Champagne region. I realise that it is true what they say about her: she is no more than a peasant girl, though she has led an army and crowned a king.

'Will you give me your word not to escape if I have these chains taken off your legs?'

She hesitates, as if she were in any position to choose. 'No, I can't.'

My great-aunt smiles. 'Do you understand the offer of parole? I can release you to live with us here in my nephew's castle; but you have to promise not to run away.'

The girl turns her head, frowning. It is almost as if she is listening for advice, then she shakes her head. 'I know this parole. It is when one knight makes a promise to another. They have rules as if they were jousting. I'm not like that. My words are real, not like a troubadour's poem. And this is no game for me.'

'Maid: parole is not a game!' Aunt Jehanne interrupts.

The girl looks at her. 'Oh, but it is, my lady. The noblemen are not serious about these matters. Not serious like me. They play at war and make up rules. They ride out and lay waste to good people's farms and laugh as the thatched roofs burn. Besides, I cannot make promises. I am promised already.'

'To the one who wrongly calls himself the King of France?'

'To the King of Heaven.'





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My great-aunt pauses for a moment's thought. 'I will tell them to take the chains off you and guard you so that you do not escape; and then you can come and sit with us in my rooms. I think what you have done for your country and for your prince has been very great, Joan, though mistaken. And I will not see you here, under my roof, a captive in chains.'

'Will you tell your nephew to set me free?'

My great-aunt hesitates. 'I cannot order him; but I will do everything I can to send you back to your home. At any event, I won't let him release you to the English.'

At the very word the girl shudders and makes the sign of the cross, thumping her head and her chest in the most ridiculous way, as a peasant might cross himself at the name of Old Hob. I have to choke back a laugh. This draws the girl's dark gaze to me.

'They are only mortal men,' I explain to her. 'The English have no powers beyond that of mortal men. You need not fear them so. You need not cross yourself at their name.'

'I don't fear them. I am not such a fool as to fear that they have powers. It's not that. It's that they know that *I* have powers. That's what makes them such a danger. They are mad with fear of me. They fear me so much that they will destroy me the moment I fall into their hands. I am their terror. I am their fear that walks by night.'

'While I live, they won't have you,' my great-aunt assures her; and at once, unmistakably, Joan looks straight at me, a hard dark gaze as if to see that I too have heard, in this sincere assertion, the ring of an utterly empty promise.



My great-aunt believes that if she can bring Joan into our company, talk with her, cool her religious fervour, perhaps educate her, then the girl will be led, in time, to wear the dress of a young woman, and the fighting youth who was dragged off the white horse at Compiègne will be transformed, like Mass reversed, from





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strong wine into water, and she will become a young woman who can be seated among waiting women, who will answer to a command and not to the ringing church bells, and will then, perhaps, be overlooked by the English, who are demanding that we surrender the hermaphrodite murderous witch to them. If we have nothing to offer them but a remorseful obedient maid in waiting, perhaps they will be satisfied and go on their violent way.

Joan herself is exhausted by recent defeats and by her uneasy sense that the king she has crowned is not worthy of the holy oil, that the enemy she had on the run has recoiled on her, and that the mission given to her by God Himself is falling away from her. Everything that made her the Maid before her adoring troop of soldiers has become uncertain. Under my great-aunt's steady kindness she is becoming once more an awkward country girl: nothing special.

Of course, all the maids in waiting to my great-aunt want to know about the adventure that is ending in this slow creep of defeat, and as Joan spends her days with us, learning to be a girl and not the Maid, they pluck up the courage to ask her.

'How were you so brave?' one demands. 'How did you learn to be so brave? In battle, I mean.'

Joan smiles at the question. There are four of us, seated on a grass bank beside the moat of the castle, as idle as children. The July sun is beating down and the pasture lands around the castle are shimmering in the haze of heat; even the bees are lazy, buzzing and then falling silent as if drunk on flowers. We have chosen to sit in the deep shadow of the highest tower; behind us, in the glassy water of the moat, we can hear the occasional bubble of a carp coming to the surface.

Joan is sprawled like a boy, one hand dabbling in the water, her cap over her eyes. In the basket beside me are half-sewn shirts that we are supposed to hem for the poor children of nearby Cambrai. But the maids avoid work of any sort, Joan has no skill, and I have my great-aunt's precious pack of playing cards in my hands and I am shuffling and cutting them and idly looking at the pictures.





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‘I knew I was called by God,’ Joan said simply. ‘And that He would protect me, so I had no fear. Not even in the worst of the battles. He warned me that I would be injured but that I would feel no pain, so I knew I could go on fighting. I even warned my men that I would be injured that day. I knew before we went into battle. I just knew.’

‘Do you really hear voices?’ I ask.

‘Do you?’

The question is so shocking that the girls whip round to stare at me and under their joint gaze I find I am blushing as if for something shameful. ‘No! No!’

‘Then what?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘What do you hear?’ she asks, as reasonably as if everyone hears something.

‘Well, not voices exactly,’ I say.

‘What do you hear?’

I glance behind me as if the very fish might rise to eavesdrop. ‘When someone in my family is going to die, then I hear a noise,’ I say. ‘A special noise.’

‘What sort of noise?’ the girl, Elizabeth, asks. ‘I didn’t know this. Could I hear it?’

‘You are not of my house,’ I say irritably. ‘Of course you wouldn’t hear it. You would have to be a descendant of . . . and anyway, you must never speak of this. You shouldn’t really be listening. I shouldn’t be telling you.’

‘What sort of noise?’ Joan repeats.

‘Like singing,’ I say, and see her nod, as if she too has heard singing.

‘They say it is the voice of Melusina, the first lady of the House of Luxembourg,’ I whisper. ‘They say she was a water goddess who came out of the river to marry the first duke but she couldn’t be a mortal woman. She comes back to cry for the loss of her children.’

‘And when have you heard her?’





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‘The night that my baby sister died. I heard something. And I knew at once that it was Melusina.’

‘But how did you know it was her?’ the other maid whispers, afraid of being excluded from the conversation.

I shrug, and Joan smiles in recognition of truths that cannot be explained. ‘I just knew,’ I say. ‘It was as if I recognised her voice. As if I had always known it.’

‘That’s true. You just know,’ Joan nods. ‘But how do you know that it comes from God and not from the Devil?’

I hesitate. Any spiritual questions should be taken to my confessor, or at the very least to my mother or my great-aunt. But the song of Melusina, and the shiver on my spine, and my occasional sight of the unseen – something half-lost, sometimes vanishing around a corner, lighter grey in a grey twilight, a dream that is too clear to be forgotten, a glimpse of foresight but never anything that I can describe – these things are too thin for speech. How can I ask about them when I cannot even put them into words? How can I bear to have someone clumsily name them or, even worse, try to explain them? I might as well try to hold the greenish water of the moat in my cupped hands.

‘I’ve never asked,’ I say. ‘Because it is hardly anything. Like when you go into a room and it is quiet – but you know, you can just tell, that someone is there. You can’t hear them or see them, but you just know. It’s little more than that. I never think of it as a gift coming from God or the Devil. It is just nothing.’

‘My voices come from God,’ Joan says certainly. ‘I know it. If it were not true, I should be utterly lost.’

‘So can you tell fortunes?’ Elizabeth asks me childishly.

My fingers close over my cards. ‘No,’ I say. ‘And these don’t tell fortunes, they are just for playing. They’re just playing cards. I don’t tell fortunes. My great-aunt would not allow me to do it, even if I could.’

‘Oh, do mine!’

‘These are just playing cards,’ I insist. ‘I’m no soothsayer.’

‘Oh, draw a card for me and tell me,’ Elizabeth says. ‘And for



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Joan. What's going to become of her? Surely you want to know what's going to happen to Joan?'

'It means nothing,' I say to Joan. 'And I only brought them so we could play.'

'They are beautiful,' she says. 'They taught me to play at court with cards like these. How bright they are.'

I hand them to her. 'Take care with them, they're very precious,' I say jealously as she spreads them in her calloused hands. 'The Demoiselle showed them to me when I was a little girl and told me the names of the pictures. She lets me borrow them because I love to play. But I promised her I would take care of them.'

Joan passes the pack back to me and though she is careful, and my hands are ready for them, one of the thick cards tumbles between us and falls face down, on the grass.

'Oh! Sorry,' Joan exclaims, and quickly picks it up.

I can feel a whisper, like a cool breath down my spine. The meadow before me and the cows flicking their tails in the shade of the tree seem far away, as if we two are enclosed in a glass, butterflies in a bowl, in another world. 'You had better look at it now,' I hear myself say to her.

Joan looks at the brightly painted picture, her eyes widen slightly, and then she shows it to me. 'What does this mean?'

It is a painting of a man dressed in a livery of blue, hanging upside down from one extended foot, the other leg crooked easily, his toe pointed and placed against his straight leg as if he were dancing, inverted in the air. His hands are clasped behind his back as if he were bowing; we both see the happy fall of his blue hair as he hangs, upside down, smiling.

'"*Le Pendu*,"' Elizabeth reads. 'How horrid. What does it mean? Oh, surely it doesn't mean . . .' She breaks off.

'It doesn't mean you will be hanged,' I say quickly to Joan. 'So don't think that. It's just a playing card, it can't mean anything like that.'

'But what does it mean?' the other girl demands though Joan is silent, as if it is not her card, not her fortune that I am refusing to tell.



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‘His gallows is two growing trees,’ I say. I am playing for time under Joan’s serious brown gaze. ‘This means spring and renewal and life – not death. And there are two trees; the man is balanced between them. He is the very centre of resurrection.’

Joan nods.

‘They are bowed down to him, he is happy. And look: he is not hanged by his neck to kill him, but tied by his foot,’ I say. ‘If he wanted, he could stretch up and untie himself. He could set himself free, if he wanted.’

‘But he doesn’t set himself free,’ the girl observes. ‘He is like a tumbler, an acrobat. What does that mean?’

‘It means that he is willingly there, willingly waiting, allowing himself to be held by his foot, hanging in the air.’

‘To be a living sacrifice?’ Joan says slowly, in the words of the Mass.

‘He is not crucified,’ I point out quickly. It is as if every word I say leads us to another form of death. ‘This doesn’t mean anything.’

‘No,’ she says. ‘These are just playing cards, and we are just playing a game with them. It is a pretty card, the Hanged Man. He looks happy. He looks happy to be upside down in spring-time. Shall I teach you a game with counters that we play in Champagne?’

‘Yes,’ I say. I hold out my hand for her card and she looks at it for a moment before she hands it back to me.

‘Honestly, it means nothing,’ I say again to her.

She smiles at me, her clear honest smile. ‘I know well enough what it means,’ she says.

‘Shall we play?’ I start to shuffle the cards and one turns over in my hand.

‘Now that’s a good card,’ Joan remarks. ‘*La Roue de Fortune*.’

I hold it out to show it to her. ‘It is the Wheel of Fortune that can throw you up very high, or bring you down very low. Its message is to be indifferent to victory and defeat, as they both come on the turn of the wheel.’





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‘In my country the farmers make a sign for fortune’s wheel,’ Joan remarks. ‘They draw a circle in the air with their forefinger when something very good or something very bad happens. Someone inherits money, or someone loses a prize cow, they do this.’ She points her finger in the air and draws a circle. ‘And they say something.’

‘A spell?’

‘Not really a spell.’ She smiles mischievously.

‘What then?’

She giggles. ‘They say “*merde*”?’

I am so shocked that I rock back with laughter.

‘What? What?’ the younger maid demands.

‘Nothing, nothing,’ I say. Joan is still giggling. ‘Joan’s countrymen say rightly that everything comes to dust, and all that a man can do about it is to learn indifference.’



Joan’s future hangs in the balance; she is swinging like the Hanged Man. All of my family, my father, Pierre the Count of St Pol, my uncle, Louis of Luxembourg, and my favourite uncle, John of Luxembourg, are allied with the English. My father writes from our home at the chateau at St Pol to his brother John, and commands him, as the head of our family, to hand over Joan to the English. But my great-aunt the Demoiselle insists we keep her safe; and my uncle John hesitates.

The English demand his prisoner and, since the English command nearly all of France and their ally the Duke of Burgundy commands most of the rest, what they say usually happens. Their common soldiers went down on their knees on the battlefield to give thanks, and wept with joy when the Maid was captured. There is no doubt in their mind that without her the French army, their enemy, will collapse into the frightened rabble that they were before she came to them.





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The Duke of Bedford, the English regent who rules the English lands in France, almost all of the north of the country, sends daily letters to my uncle invoking his loyalty to English rule, their long friendship, and promising money. I like to watch for the English messengers who come dressed in the fine livery of the royal duke, on beautiful horses. Everyone says that the duke is a great man and well loved, the greatest man in France, an ill man to cross; but so far, my uncle obeys his aunt, the Demoiselle, and does not hand over our prisoner.

My uncle expects the French court to make a bid for her – they owe their very existence to her after all – but they are oddly silent, even after he writes to them and says that he has the Maid, and that she is ready to return to the court of her king and serve again in his army. With her leading them they could ride out against the English and win. Surely they will send a fortune to get her back?

‘They don’t want her,’ my great-aunt advises him. They are at their private dining table, the great dinner for the whole household has taken place in the hall and the two of them have sat before my uncle’s men, tasted the dishes and sent them round the room as a gift to their special favourites. Now they are comfortable, seated at a little table before the fire in my great-aunt’s private rooms, her personal servants in attendance. I am to stand during the serving of dinner with another lady in waiting. It is my job to watch the servants, summon them forwards as required, clasp my hands modestly before me, and hear nothing. Of course, I listen all the time.

‘Joan made a man out of the boy Prince Charles, he was nothing until she came to him with her vision, then she made that man into a king. She taught him to claim his inheritance. She made an army out of his camp-followers, and made that army victorious. If they had followed her advice as she followed her voices, they would have driven the English out of these lands and back to their foggy islands, and we would be rid of them forever.’



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My uncle smiles. 'Oh, my lady aunt! This is a war that has gone on for nearly a century. Do you really think it will end because some girl from who knows where hears voices? She could never drive the English away. They would never have gone; they will never go. These are their lands by right, by true right of inheritance, and by conquest too. All they have to do is to have the courage and the strength to hold them, and John Duke of Bedford will see to that.' He glances at his wineglass and I snap my fingers to the groom of the servery to pour him some more red wine. I step forwards to hold the glass as the man pours, and then I put it carefully on the table. They are using fine glassware; my uncle is wealthy and my great-aunt never has anything but the very best. 'The English king may be little more than a child, but it makes no difference to the safety of his kingdom, for his uncle Bedford is loyal to him here, and his uncle the Duke of Gloucester is loyal to him in England. Bedford has the courage and the allies to hold the English lands here, and I think they will drive the Dauphin further and further south. They will drive him into the sea. The Maid had her season, and it was a remarkable one; but in the end, the English will win the war and hold the lands that are theirs by right, and all of our lords who are sworn against them now will bow the knee and serve them.'

'I don't think so,' my great-aunt says staunchly. 'The English are terrified of her. They say she is unbeatable.'

'Not any more,' my uncle observes. 'For behold! She is a prisoner, and the cell doors don't burst open. They know she is mortal now. They saw her with an arrow in her thigh outside the walls of Paris and her own army marched off and left her. The French themselves taught the English that she could be brought down and abandoned.'

'But you won't give her to the English,' my great-aunt states. 'It would be to dishonour us forever, in the eyes of God and the world.'

My uncle leans forwards to speak confidentially. 'You take it



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so seriously? You really think she is more than a mountebank? You really think she is something more than a peasant girl spouting nonsense? You know I could find half a dozen such as her?’

‘You could find half a dozen who say they are like her,’ she says. ‘But not one like her. I think she is a special girl. Truly I do, nephew. I have a very strong sense of this.’

He pauses, as if her sense of things, though she is only a woman, is something to be considered. ‘You have had a vision of her success? A foretelling?’

For a moment she hesitates, then she quickly shakes her head. ‘Nothing so clear. But nonetheless, I must insist that we protect her.’

He pauses, not wanting to contradict her. She is the Demoiselle of Luxembourg, the head of our family. My father will inherit the title when she dies; but she also owns great lands that are all at her own disposition: she can will them to anyone she chooses. My uncle John is her favourite nephew; he has hopes, and he does not want to offend her.

‘The French will have to pay a good price for her,’ he says. ‘I don’t intend to lose money on her. She is worth a king’s ransom. They know this.’

My great-aunt nods. ‘I will write to the Dauphin Charles and he will ransom her,’ she tells him. ‘Whatever his advisors say, he will still listen to me, though he is blown about like a leaf by his favourites. But I am his godmother. It is a question of honour. He owes all that he is to the Maid.’

‘Very well. But do it at once. The English are very pressing and I won’t offend the Duke of Bedford. He is a powerful man, and a fair one. He is the best ruler of France that we could hope for. If he were a Frenchman he would be wholly loved.’

My great-aunt laughs. ‘Yes, but he is not! He’s the English regent, and he should go back to his own damp island and his little nephew, the poor king, and make what they can of their own kingdom and leave us to rule France.’

‘Us?’ my uncle queries, as if to ask her if she thinks that our family, who already rule half a dozen earldoms and who count





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kinship to the Holy Roman Emperors, should be French kings as well.

She smiles. 'Us,' she says blandly.



Next day I walk with Joan to the little chapel in the castle and kneel beside her on the chancel steps. She prays fervently, her head bowed for an hour, and then the priest comes and serves the Mass and Joan takes the holy bread and wine. I wait for her at the back of the church. Joan is the only person I know who takes the bread and wine every day, as if it were her breakfast. My own mother, who is more observant than most, takes communion only once a month. We walk back to my great-aunt's rooms together, the strewing herbs swishing around our feet. Joan laughs at me, as I have to duck my head to get my tall conical headdress through the narrow doorways.

'It is very beautiful,' she says. 'But I should not like to wear such a thing.'

I pause and twirl before her in the bright sunlight from the arrowslit. The colours of my gown are brilliant: a skirt of dark blue and an underskirt of sharper turquoise, the skirts flaring from the high belt tied tight on my ribcage. The high henin headdress sits like a cone on my head and sprouts a veil of pale blue from the peak that drops down my back, concealing and enhancing my fair hair. I spread my arms to show the big triangular sleeves, trimmed with the most beautiful embroidery in gold thread, and I lift the hem to show my scarlet slippers with the upturned toes.

'But you cannot work, or ride a horse, or even run in such a gown,' she says.

'It's not for riding or working or running,' I reply reasonably. 'It's for showing off. It is to show the world that I am young and beautiful and ready for marriage. It is to show that my father is so wealthy that I can wear gold thread on my sleeves and silk in my





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headdress. It shows that I am so nobly born that I can wear velvet and silk; not wool like a poor girl.'

'I couldn't bear to be showed off in such a thing.'

'You wouldn't be allowed to,' I point out disagreeably. 'You have to dress for your position in life; you would have to obey the law and wear browns and greys. Did you really think you were important enough to wear ermine? Or do you want your gold surcoat back? They say you were as fine as any knight in battle. You dressed like a nobleman then. They say that you loved your beautiful standard and your polished armour, and a fine gold surcoat over all. They say you were guilty of the sin of vanity.'

She flushes. 'I had to be seen,' she says defensively. 'At the front of my army.'

'Gold?'

'I had to honour God.'

'Well anyway, you wouldn't get a headdress like this if you put on women's clothes,' I say. 'You would wear something more modest, like the ladies in waiting, nothing so high or so awkward, just a neat hood to cover your hair. And you could wear your boots under your gown, you could still walk about. Won't you try wearing a gown, Joan? It would mean that they couldn't accuse you of wearing men's clothes. It is a sign of heresy for a woman to dress as a man. Why not put on a dress, and then they can say nothing against you? Something plain?'

She shakes her head. 'I am promised,' she says simply. 'Promised to God. And when the king calls for me, I must be ready to ride to arms again. I am a soldier in waiting, not a lady in waiting. I will dress like a soldier. And my king will call for me, any day now.'

I glance behind us. A pageboy carrying a jug of hot water is in earshot. I wait till he has nodded a bow and gone past us. 'Hush,' I say quietly. 'You shouldn't even call him king.'

She laughs, as if she fears nothing. 'I took him to his coronation, I stood under my own standard in Reims cathedral when he was anointed with the oil of Clovis. I saw him presented to his



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people in his crown. Of course he is King of France: he is crowned and anointed.'

'The English slit the tongues of anyone who says that,' I remind her. 'That's for the first offence. The second time you say it, they brand your forehead so you are scarred for life. The English king, Henry VI, is to be called King of France, the one you call the French king is to be called the Dauphin, never anything but the Dauphin.'

She laughs with genuine amusement. 'He is not even to be called French,' she exclaims. 'Your great Duke Bedford says that he is to be called Armagnac. But the great Duke Bedford was shaking with fear and running around Rouen for recruits when I came up to the walls of Paris with the French army – yes, I will say it! – the French army to claim our own city for our king, a French king; and we nearly took it, too.'

I put my hands over my ears. 'I won't hear you, and you shouldn't speak like this. I shall be whipped if I listen to you.'

At once she takes my hands, she is penitent. 'Ah, Jacquetta, I won't get you into trouble. Look! I will say nothing. But you must see that I have done far worse than use words against the English. I have used arrows and cannon shot and battering rams and guns against them! The English will hardly trouble themselves over the words I have said and the breeches I wear. I have defeated them and shown everyone that they have no right to France. I led an army against them and defeated them over and over again.'

'I hope they never get hold of you, and never question you. Not about words, nor arrows, nor cannon.'

She goes a little pale at the thought of it. 'Please God, I hope so too. Merciful God, I hope so too.'

'My great-aunt is writing to the Dauphin,' I say very low. 'They were speaking of it at dinner last night. She will write to the Dauphin and invite him to ransom you. And my uncle will release you to the Fr . . . to the Armagnacs.'

She bows her head and her lips move in prayer. 'My king will



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send for me,' she says trustingly. 'Without a doubt he will send for me to come to him, and we can start our battles again.'



It grows even hotter in August, and my great-aunt rests on a daybed in her inner room every afternoon, with the light curtains of silk around the bed soaked in lavender water and the closed shutters throwing barred shadows across the stone floor. She likes me to read to her, as she lies with her eyes closed and her hands folded on the high waistline of her dress, as if she were a sculpted effigy of herself in some shaded tomb. She puts aside the big horned headdress that she always wears and lets her long greying hair spread over the cool embroidered pillows. She gives me books from her own library that tell of great romances and troubadours and ladies in tangled forests, and then one afternoon she puts a book in my hand and says, 'Read this today.'

It is hand-copied in old French and I stumble over the words. It is hard to read: the illustrations in the margins are like briars and flowers threading through the letters, and the clerk who copied each word had an ornate style of writing which I find hard to decipher. But slowly the story emerges. It is the story of a knight riding through a dark forest who has lost his way. He hears the sound of water and goes towards it. In a clearing, in the moonlight, he sees a white basin and a splashing fountain and in the water is a woman of such beauty that her skin is paler than the white marble and her hair is darker than the night skies. He falls in love with her at once, and she with him, and he takes her to the castle and makes her his wife. She has only one condition: that every month he must leave her alone to bathe.

'Do you know this story?' my great-aunt asks me. 'Has your father told you of it?'

'I have heard something like it,' I say cautiously. My great-aunt is



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notoriously quick-tempered with my father and I don't know if I dare say that I think this is the legend of the founding of our house.

'Well, now you are reading the true story,' she says. She closes her eyes again. 'It is time you knew. Go on.'

The young couple are happier than any in the world, and people come from far and wide to visit them. They have children: beautiful girls and strange wild boys.

'Sons,' my great-aunt whispers to herself. 'If only a woman could have sons by wishing, if only they could be as she wishes.'

The wife never loses her beauty though the years go by, and her husband grows more and more curious. One day, he cannot bear the mystery of her secret bathing any longer and he creeps down to her bath-house and spies on her.

My great-aunt raises her hand. 'Do you know what he sees?' she asks me.

I lift my face from the book, my finger under the illustration of the man peering through the slats of the bath-house. In the foreground is the woman in the bath, her beautiful hair snaked around her white shoulders. And gleaming in the water . . . her large scaled tail.

'Is she a fish?' I whisper.

'She is a being not of this world,' my great-aunt says quietly. 'She tried to live like an ordinary woman; but some women cannot live an ordinary life. She tried to walk in the common ways; but some women cannot put their feet to that path. This is a man's world, Jacquetta, and some women cannot march to the beat of a man's drum. Do you understand?'

I don't, of course. I am too young to understand that a man and a woman can love each other so deeply that their hearts beat as if they were one heart, and yet, at the same time, know that they are utterly hopelessly different.

'Anyway, you can read on. It's not long now.'

The husband cannot bear to know that his wife is a strange being. She cannot forgive him for spying on her. She leaves him, taking her beautiful daughters, and he lives alone with the sons,



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heartbroken. But at his death, as at the death of everyone of our house, his wife Melusina, the beautiful woman who was an undine, a water goddess, comes back to him and he hears her crying around the battlements for the children she has lost, for the husband she still loves, and for the world that has no place for her.

I close the book, and there is such a long silence that I think my great-aunt has fallen asleep.

‘Some of the women of our family have the gift of foresight,’ my great-aunt remarks quietly. ‘Some of them have inherited powers from Melusina, powers of the other world where she lives. Some of us are her daughters, her heirs.’

I hardly dare to breathe, I am so anxious that she should go on speaking to me.

‘Jacquetta, do you think you might be one of these women?’

‘I might be,’ I whisper. ‘I hope so.’

‘You have to listen,’ she says softly. ‘Listen to silence, watch for nothing. And be on your guard. Melusina is a shape-shifter, like quicksilver, she can flow from one thing to another. You may see her anywhere, she is like water. Or you may see only your own reflection in the surface of a stream though you are straining your eyes to see into the green depths for her.’

‘Will she be my guide?’

‘You must be your own guide, but you might hear her when she speaks to you.’ She pauses. ‘Fetch my jewel box.’ She gestures towards the great chest at the foot of her bed. I open the creaking lid and inside, beside the gowns wrapped in powdered silk, is a large wooden box. I take it out. Inside is a series of drawers, each one filled with my great-aunt’s fortune of jewels. ‘Look in the smallest drawer,’ she says.

I find it. Inside is a small black velvet purse. I untie the tasselled threads, open the mouth, and a heavy golden bracelet falls into my hand, laden with about two hundred little charms, each one a different shape. I see a ship, a horse, a star, a spoon, a whip, a hawk, a spur.





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‘When you want to know something very, very important, you choose two or three of the charms – charms that signify the thing that might be, the choices before you. You tie each one on a string and you put them in a river, the river nearest to your home, the river that you hear at night when everything is silent but the voice of the waters. You leave it until the moon is new. Then you cut all the strings but one, and pull that one out to see your future. The river will give you the answer. The river will tell you what you should do.’

I nod. The bracelet is cold and heavy in my hand, each charm a choice, each charm an opportunity, each charm a mistake in waiting.

‘And when you want something: go out and whisper it to the river – like a prayer. When you curse somebody: write it on a piece of paper, and put the paper into the river, float it like a little paper boat. The river is your ally, your friend, your lady – do you understand?’

I nod, though I don’t understand.

‘When you curse somebody . . .’ She pauses and sighs as if she is very weary. ‘Take care with your words, Jacquetta, especially in cursing. Only say the things you mean, make sure you lay your curse on the right man. For be very sure that when you put such words out in the world they can overshoot – like an arrow, a curse can go beyond your target and harm another. A wise woman curses very sparingly.’

I shiver, though the room is hot.

‘I will teach you more,’ she promises me. ‘It is your inheritance, since you are the oldest girl.’

‘Do boys not know? My brother Louis?’

Her lazy eyes half open and she smiles at me. ‘Men command the world that they know,’ she says. ‘Everything that men know, they make their own. Everything that they learn, they claim for themselves. They are like the alchemists who look for the laws that govern the world, and then want to own them and keep them secret. Everything they discover, they hug to themselves, they





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shape knowledge into their own selfish image. What is left to us women, but the realms of the unknown?’

‘But can women not take a great place in the world? You do, Great-aunt, and Yolande of Aragon is called the Queen of Four Kingdoms. Shall I not command great lands like you and her?’

‘You might. But I warn you that a woman who seeks great power and wealth has to pay a great price. Perhaps you will be a great woman like Melusina, or Yolande, or like me; but you will be like all women: uneasy in the world of men. You will do your best – perhaps you will gain some power if you marry well or inherit well – but you will always find the road is hard beneath your feet. In the other world – well, who knows about the other world? Maybe they will hear you, and perhaps you will hear them.’

‘What will I hear?’

She smiles. ‘You know. You hear it already.’

‘Voices?’ I ask, thinking of Joan.

‘Perhaps.’



Slowly, the intense heat of the summer starts to fade and it grows cooler in September. The trees of the great forest that surround the lake start to turn colour from tired green to sere yellow, and the swallows swirl around the turrets of the castle every evening, as if to say goodbye for another year. They chase each other round and round in a dizzying train, like a veil being whirled in a dance. The rows on rows of vines grow heavy with fruit and every day the peasant women go out with their sleeves rolled up over their big forearms and pick and pick the fruit into big wicker baskets, which the men swing onto carts and take back to the press. The smell of fruit and fermenting wine is heavy in the village, everyone has blue-stained hems to their gowns and purple feet, and they say it will be a good year this year, rich and lush. When the ladies in waiting and I ride through the village





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they call us to taste the new wine and it is light and sharp and fizzy in our mouths, and they laugh at our puckered faces.

My great-aunt does not sit straight-backed in her chair, overseeing her women and beyond them the castle and my uncle's lands, as she did at the start of the summer. As the sun loses its heat she too seems to be growing pale and cold. She lies down from the middle of the morning to the early evening, and only rises from her bed to walk into the great hall beside my uncle and nod her head at the rumble of greeting, as the men look up at their lord and lady and hammer on the wooden tables with their daggers.

Joan prays for her, by name, in her daily attendance at church, but I, childlike, just accept the new rhythm of my great-aunt's day, and sit with her to read in the afternoon, and wait for her to talk to me about the prayers floated like paper ships on the waters of rivers that were flowing to the sea before I was born. She tells me to spread out the cards of her pack and teaches me the name and the quality of each one.

'And now read them for me,' she says one day, and then taps a card with her thin finger. 'What is this one?'

I turn it over for her. The dark hooded shape of Death looks back at us, his face hidden in the shadow of his hood, his scythe over his hunched shoulder.

'Ah well,' she says. 'So are you here at last, my friend? Jacquetta, you had better ask your uncle to come to see me.'



I show him into her room and he kneels at the side of her bed. She puts her hand on his head as if in blessing. Then she pushes him gently away.

'I cannot bear this weather,' she says crossly to my uncle, as if the cooling days are his fault. 'How can you bear to live here? It is as cold as England and the winters last forever. I shall go south, I shall go to Provence.'





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‘Are you sure?’ he asks. ‘I thought you were feeling tired. Should you not rest here?’

She snaps her fingers irritably. ‘I’m too cold,’ she says imperiously. ‘You can order me a guard and I shall have my litter lined with furs. I shall come back in spring.’

‘Surely you would be more comfortable here?’ he suggests.

‘I have a fancy to see the Rhône once more,’ she says. ‘Besides, I have business to do.’

Nobody can ever argue against her – she is the Demoiselle – and within days she has her great litter at the door, furs heaped on the bed, a brass hand-warmer filled with hot coals, the floor of the litter packed with oven-heated bricks to keep her warm, the household lined up to say farewell.

She gives her hand to Joan, and then she kisses my aunt Jehanne, and me. My uncle helps her into the litter and she clutches his arm with her thin hand. ‘Keep the Maid safe,’ she says. ‘Keep her from the English, it is my command.’

He ducks his head. ‘Come back to us soon.’

His wife, whose life is easier when the great lady has moved on, steps forwards to tuck her in and kiss her pale cool cheeks. But it is me that the Demoiselle of Luxembourg calls towards her with one crook of her skinny finger.

‘God bless you, Jacquetta,’ she says to me. ‘You will remember all that I have taught you. And you will go far.’ She smiles at me. ‘Farther than you can imagine.’

‘But I will see you in spring?’

‘I will send you my books,’ she says. ‘And my bracelet.’

‘And you will come to visit my mother and father at St Pol in the spring?’

Her smile tells me that I will not see her again. ‘God bless,’ she repeats and draws the curtains of her litter against the cold morning air as the cavalcade starts out of the gate.





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In November, I am awakened in the darkest of the night, and I sit up in the little bed I share with Elizabeth the maid, and listen. It is as if someone is calling my name in a sweet voice: very high, and very thin. Then I am sure I can hear someone singing. Oddly, the noise is coming from outside our window, though we are high up in the turret of the castle. I pull on my cloak over my nightgown and go to the window and look out through the crack in the wooden shutters. There are no lights showing outside, the fields and the woods around the castle are as black as felted wool, there is nothing but this clear keening noise, not a nightingale but as high and as pure as a nightingale. Not an owl, far too musical and continuous, something like a boy singer in a choir. I turn to the bed and shake Elizabeth awake.

‘Can you hear that?’

She does not even wake. ‘Nothing,’ she says, half-asleep. ‘Stop it, Jacquetta. I’m asleep.’

The stone floor is icy beneath my bare feet. I jump back into bed and put my cold feet in the warm space near Elizabeth. She gives a little bad-tempered grunt and rolls away from me, and then – though I think I will lie in the warm and listen to the voices – I fall asleep.



Six days later they tell me that my great-aunt, Jehanne of Luxembourg, died in her sleep, in the darkest hour of the night, in Avignon, beside the great River Rhône. Then I know whose voice it was I heard, singing around the turrets.



As soon as the English Duke of Bedford learns that Joan has lost her greatest protector, he sends the judge Pierre Cauchon, with a troop of men behind him, to negotiate for her ransom. She is summoned by a Church court on charges of heresy. Enormous





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sums of money change hands: twenty thousand livres for the man who pulled her off her horse, ten thousand francs to be paid to my uncle with the good wishes of the King of England. My uncle does not listen to his wife, who pleads that Joan shall be left with us. I am too unimportant to even have a voice, and so I have to watch in silence as my uncle makes an agreement that Joan shall be released to the Church for questioning. 'I am not handing her over to the English,' he says to his wife. 'As the Demoiselle asked me, and I have not forgotten, I have not handed her over to the English. I have only released her to the Church. This allows her to clear her name of all the charges against her. She will be judged by men of God, if she is innocent they will say so, and she will be released.'

She looks at him as blankly as if he were Death himself, and I wonder if he believes this nonsense, or if he thinks that we, being women, are such fools as to think that a church dependent on the English, with bishops appointed by the English, are going to tell their rulers and paymasters that the girl who raised all of France against them is just an ordinary girl, perhaps a little noisy, perhaps a little naughty, and she should be given three Hail Marys and sent back to her farm, to her mother and her father and her cows.

'My lord, who is going to tell Joan?' is all I dare to ask.

'Oh, she knows already,' he says over his shoulder as he goes out of the hall, to bid farewell to Pierre Cauchon at the great gate. 'I sent a page to tell her to get ready. She is to leave with them now.'

As soon as I hear the words I am filled with a sudden terror, a gale of premonition, and I start running, running as if for my own life. I don't even go to the women's apartments, where the page-boy will have found Joan to tell her that the English are to have her. I don't run towards her old cell, thinking she has gone there to fetch her little knapsack of things: her wooden spoon, her sharp dagger, the prayer-book that my great-aunt gave her. Instead I race up the winding stair to the first floor above the great hall, and then dash across the gallery, through the tiny doorway where the





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archway knocks my headdress off, tearing at the pins in my hair, and then I hammer up the circular stone stair, my feet pounding on the steps, my breath coming shorter and shorter, my gown clutched in my hands, so that I can burst out onto the flat roof at the very top of the tower and see Joan, poised like a bird ready to fly, balanced on the wall of the turret. As she hears the door bang open she looks over her shoulder at me and hears me scream, 'Joan! No!' and she steps out into the void below her.

The worst thing of all, the very worst thing, is that she does not leap into nothing, like a frightened deer. I was dreading that she would jump, but she does something far worse than that. She dives. She goes headfirst over the battlement, and as I fling myself to the edge I can see that she goes down like a dancer, an acrobat, her hands clasped behind her, one leg extended like a dancer, the other bent, the toe pointed to her knee, and I see that, for that heart-stopping moment as she falls, she is in the pose of *le Pendu*, the Hanged Man, and she is going headfirst to her death with his calm smile on her serene face.

The thud when she hits the ground at the base of the tower is terrible. It echoes in my ears as if it is my own head that has struck the mud. I want to run down to lift her body, Joan, the Maid, crumpled like a bag of old clothes; but I cannot move. My knees have given way beneath me, I am clinging to the stone battlements, they are as cold as my scraped hands. I am not crying for her, though my breath is still coming in gulping sobs; I am frozen with horror, I am felled by horror. Joan was a young woman who tried to walk her own path in the world of men, just as my great-aunt told me. And it led her to this cold tower, this swan dive, this death.



They pick her up lifeless, and for four days she does not move or stir, but then she comes out of her stupor and gets up slowly from her bed, patting herself all over, as if to make sure that she





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is whole. Amazingly, no bones have been broken in her fall – she has not cracked her skull, nor snapped so much as a finger. It is as if her angels held her up, even when she gave herself into their element. Of course, this will not serve her; they are quick to say that only the Devil could have saved a girl who went head-first like that from such a tall tower. If she had died they would have said God's justice had been done. My uncle, a man of dour common sense, says that the ground is so sodden, after weeks of winter rain, and lapped by the moat, that she was in more danger of drowning than being broken; but now he is determined that she shall leave at once. He doesn't want the responsibility of the Maid in his house, without the Demoiselle to keep everything safe. He sends her first to his house in Arras, the Coeur le Comte, and then we follow, as she is transferred to the English city of Rouen for trial.

We have to attend. A great lord such as my uncle must be there to see justice being done, and his household must stand behind him. My aunt Jehanne takes me to witness the end of the Dauphin's holy guide – the pretend-prophet of the pretend-king. Half of France is trooping to Rouen to see the end of the Maid and we have to be foremost among them.

For someone that they declare is nothing more than a peasant girl run mad, they are taking no chances. She is housed in the Castle Bouvreuil and kept in chains, in a cell with a double-locked door and the window boarded over. They are all in a terror that she will run like a mouse under the door, or fly like a bird through a crack in the window. They ask her to give an undertaking that she will not try to escape and, when she refuses, they chain her to the bed.

'She won't like that,' my aunt Jehanne says sorrowfully.

'No.'

They are waiting for the Duke of Bedford, and in the very last days of December he marches into the town with his guard dressed in the colours of roses, the bright red and white of England. He is a great man on horseback, he wears armour





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polished so brightly that you would take it for silver and beneath his huge helmet his face is grave and stern, his big beak of a nose making him look like a predatory bird: an eagle. He was brother to the great English king Henry V, and he guards the lands that his brother won in France at the great battle of Agincourt. Now the dead king's young son is the new victor of France, and this is his most loyal uncle: seldom out of his armour or out of the saddle, never at peace.

We are all lined up at the great gate of Bouvreuil as he rides in, and his dark gaze rakes us all, looking from one to another as if to sniff out treason. My aunt and I curtsy low and my uncle John doffs his hat and bows. Our house has been in alliance with the English for years; my other uncle, Louis of Luxembourg, is the duke's chancellor and swears that he is the greatest man ever to rule France.

Heavily, he gets off his horse and stands like a fortress himself, as the men line up to greet him, bowing over his hand, some of them almost going down to their knees. A man comes forwards and, as Bedford acknowledges him with a lordly tip of his head, his glance goes over his vassal's head, and sees me. I am staring at him, of course – he is the greatest spectacle on this cold winter day – but now he is looking back at me, and there is a flash in his eyes which I see and cannot recognise. It is something like a sudden hunger, like a fasting man seeing a banquet. I step back. I am neither afraid nor coquettish, but I am only fourteen years of age and there is something about the power of this man and his energy that I don't want turned in my direction. I slide back a little so I am behind my aunt, and I watch the rest of the greetings masked by her headdress and veil.

A great litter comes up, thick curtains tied tight with gold cord against the cold, and Bedford's wife, the Duchess Anne, is helped out. A small cheer greets her from our men: she is of the House of Burgundy, our liege lords and relations, and we all dip in a little bow to her. She is as plain as all the Burgundy family, poor





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things, but her smile is merry and kind, and she greets her husband warmly and then stands with her hand comfortably tucked in the crook of his arm and looks about her with a cheerful face. She waves at my aunt and points inside the castle to say that we must come to her later. 'We'll go at dinnertime,' my aunt says to me in a whisper. 'Nobody in the world eats better than the Dukes of Burgundy.'

Bedford takes off his helmet and bows to the crowd in general, raises a gauntleted hand to the people who are leaning from upper windows and balancing on garden walls to see the great man. Then he turns and leads his wife inside and everyone has a sense that we have seen the cast of players and the opening scene of a travelling show. But whether it is a masque, or a party, funeral rites, or the baiting of a wild animal, that has brought so many of the greatest people in France to Rouen: it is about to begin.

