

WARRIOR GIRL



PAULINE CHANDLER

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CHAPTER I MARIANE

It was my grandmother who saved me. I was making everyone sick with my screams, the wordless noise that said *I want my mother! I want my mother!* They were all pleading with me to stop, but I couldn't help myself. Like a hog driven to slaughter, I bit and kicked and scratched. I stuck my foot in the door of my mother's room as they tried to push me away, dug my nails into the wood of the jambs until the ends of my fingers bled, all the time making animal grunts, my eyes forever fixed on the smudge of blood, that wrongness, at the side of my mother's mouth.

Through the closing gap of the doorway I saw my aunts arranging her body, one of them wiping the blood away, as my grandmother's arms closed on mine. Her arms are as strong as steel and brook no argument. So, as she prised me away, I gave in to her, let her lead me downstairs, let her sit me on her lap as if I were a baby again. And she held me so tight that, in the end, my rage vanished and I clung to her, because I knew she was saving my life.

My mother's murderers would have cut me down too if I'd run after them. And I would have, make no mistake; I would have dashed after them straight into hell itself, to kill or to be killed, but for my grandmother.

Even though I am grown, almost ready to marry and leave home, I submitted to the treatment: for hours she wrapped her shawl around me, and held me tight, rocking my heartache, singing. I think she expected, or, in the end, hoped, that it would bring back my voice.

Grandmère had a repertoire of songs which she sang to me during this time, always in the same order, one after the other, until I was soothed into sleep. My favourite was the first: '*Viens par le pré, ma belle*', 'Come into the meadow, my pretty girl'—as I sing it again, silently in my head, I can feel grandmère's warm breath on my face and hear again the soft sound of her voice as she murmured the words. The song is imprinted on my mind like a map to tell me who I am and where I've come from. One day, I'm going home, that's my plan: when the time's right, I'll go back there, I'll just go. Of course, Uncle Jacques will try to stop me.

I was sent here because it's too dangerous for me in Reims. Well, I shan't tell him: I'll wait until he's away or busy with the harvest or until I think he's forgotten my existence, then I'll grab my bag and I'll go home. I won't let grandmère send me back again.

They say it's a long dangerous road from Domrémy to Reims, but I'll travel at night, using the ditches and tracks that no one else uses. I'll stay off the road: the English are all over it like a rash. Even if I were seen, no one would bother with me. I'm a 'throwback', according to Uncle Jacques, a dimblebat, an idiot, because I can't speak. It makes me angry, but I don't

let on. Underneath I'm stoking my rage, turning it into the energy I need to get back to Reims.

It's hot today, hot September. This field of turnips looks small from the farmhouse, but when you're in it and not even halfway through pulling the crop, it stretches out to infinity. To be honest, I couldn't care less if I never see another turnip in my life. I've been doing this job all week, with my cousin Jehanne. Which means, more or less, by myself, because as soon as Jehanne has filled her quota of baskets, which she does at top speed, she's off into Long Meadow. She lies down in the stubble, prostrate, like a nun in a church, making the sign of the cross with her body on the ground and she lies like that, quite silent, for hours. She says she is attending to God. She says she is listening for His message. This seems devout, but it can't be right, can it?

I hate turnips. They don't even taste nice. These are purple. Last week we pulled the yellow. The leaves are so hairy and rough, turnip-pulling ruins your hands. I wish my hands were like those of Father Cornelius: his hands are as soft as lamb's wool and his eyes are deep, like brown pools on a hot summer's day. I'd like my husband to look like Father Cornelius. He's slim and strong and his face goes quite still when he looks at you, which makes you feel special. The only thing is that sometimes a cold look comes in his eyes, as if he knows all your sins and has got you signed, sealed, judged, and sent to damnation.

He'd better not find out about Jehanne lying down in the fields. He'd probably think she was showing off

and getting above her station; a mere woman trying to listen to God by herself instead of in church at the proper time. He wouldn't like that, I know he wouldn't. But if he asked me about her, I couldn't lie, so he'd better not.

She's getting to her feet. I shade my eyes to get a better view. She always knows when it's time for the bells to ring out the call to prayer and she stands facing the church, listening, as if the bells are ringing just for her.

'Mariane! Mariane!' It's Jehanne's mother, my aunt Isabeau. She's standing by the gate into the farmyard, tying a scarf round her hair. 'Where's Jehanne?'

Something's happened. She never fetches us from the fields, but she's hitched up her skirt and is treading over the ruts in the lane, crossing over to the gate. She stops and shades her eyes.

'Mariane!' I wave to show that I've heard, push floppy strands of damp hair back under my headscarf and rub the sweat from my brow, ready to pay attention. 'Where's Jehanne? I need you both back at the house.'

As if I've not heard the question, I wave again and walk down the field towards her, carrying two baskets of turnips, one in each hand.

'Where's Jehanne?' she says again.

As I get close to her, I stumble and spill my load at her feet. There are small dusty turnips rolling in every direction. Some end up in a stinking puddle, causing a cloud of shiny blue and green flies to explode into the air.

'Oh God—' she says, batting the flies away from

her face, '—never mind—oh, dear—are you all right, Mariane—oh dear—never mind—' Automatically she helps me re-load the baskets, her mind obviously elsewhere.

'I'll take these,' she says finally, stowing the load under her arms. Then she says sharply, 'Fetch Jehanne. I need you both now.' As she turns away I hear her speaking to herself under her breath, as if organizing the tasks in her mind. 'We can use the dog-cart. One of them can pull it with a shoulder harness. Pray God it doesn't rain,' and then she's gone.

I climb back to where I can see Jehanne standing in the middle of the meadow, as still as a rock. Everything around her is still; the long grass, the poppies, the flax, stand as if in a painting. The insects are still and the birds. The trees look as if they're listening, or waiting, or both.

As I walk towards her I try not to make a sound, because I don't want to break the silence. Jehanne's silence. It's as if she can stop the world. I don't know how she does it, but I can feel it.

As I get close she turns slightly to look at me with that special smile of hers and the silence is broken and all the world moves again. I hear the hum of bees and the swish of the wind through the trees. As Jehanne steps forward to meet me a skylark rises from the ground at her feet. We both stop and tilt our heads, watching it soar high into the wide blue sky.



CHAPTER 2 A MAP

Aunt Isabeau's yard was crowded with men and boys, arming themselves. They were shouting and laughing, as if it were market day, not a day on which they might have to defend Domrémy against the English. Uncle Jacques was tipping a pile of clothes from the back of a cart into the middle of the yard and the lads were busy picking out the best.

They put on two or three tunics for padding, then a stiff leather jerkin on top, secured with a belt, if they could get hold of one. Then they stuck cudgels and knives in the belt, and went to sort through the boots. They pulled them on and stamped around in them, to make them fit, and never mind whether they were a pair or not.

The farmhouse was busy too. A stream of folk ducked under the stone lintel, in and out, to and fro, like frantic bees in a hive under attack. As the noise boiled up around me—chattering voices, clashing harness, clattering hooves—I turned to ask Jehanne what the news was, but we had been separated. Then I spotted her standing in the shade of a tree, on the other side of the yard, talking to one of the boys in charge of the horses. But, as I set off to join her, Aunt Isabeau signalled me into the house, so I grabbed my

skirt in both hands and picked my way through the turmoil. From snatches of conversation I soon found out what all the fuss was about.

'They were a darned sight nearer this time! They fired the crop—all that good wheat gone to waste! Gone, all gone!'

'Old Thierry's vineyard was trampled, left like a midden. And they emptied the vats—yes, all of them, every last one. A river of wine ran down the street, a river, I tell you.

'Bring me a goddam, vile English pig, here, within reach of my dagger's point—I'll whittle him into slices and carve my name on his bones!'

The story, now three days old, was that English raiders had come within fifteen miles of Domrémy. A similar band had once set the village alight, so everyone, except able-bodied men and boys, was to be evacuated immediately to the Chateau d'Île, a stronghold in the middle of the River Meuse, which runs through the town.

The boys sang war songs and chattered like birds, while their leaders discussed their plan to set an ambush on either side of the great north road, and for a few minutes I stood and watched them, frozen by memories of the night my mother was killed. That was the work of English raiders. I longed to shout out to our boys and make them listen, to warn them that these goddams were no farmers playing at war, but cruel and savage killers. But, as always, my tongue was a lump of stone and my throat closed, my voice clamped in a crushing vice.

As the horses were led into position and steadied for mounting, I ached to go with the troop. Why were girls destined to watch and wait while the men went to fight? I could fight, I was skilled with a quarterstaff; my grandmother had insisted that I was taught to defend myself.

And after we had defeated this band of English dogs, I could go home. My way back to Reims was along the northward road. I could go with them now, if I disguised myself. I could grab some of these clothes and put them on. They were within reach: shirts, trousers, leather jerkin. I could wear boots and stuff my hair under a cap, rub dust in my face, walk between two horses, out of sight. Then, after the fight, under cover of darkness, I could slip away and follow the road home in the moonlight.

It was at this point that my courage gave out, because of course I would be missed and pursued. And even if I could slip away in the turmoil of the evacuation, I had no idea how far it was to Reims, only that it had taken several days to get here in Uncle Jacques's cart, and I would be on foot. What about food? Maybe I should be like Jehanne and trust to God to look after me.

But grandmère would say that was foolish: God helps those who help themselves.

I thought again about her and my home. Was she safe? What would I find when I got back? My peaceful home or a smoking ruin? It was the not knowing that hurt me: it pricked me like a thorn at every turn.

As I watched the men mount up, I slowly clenched

my fists, saying over and over to myself that my day would come.

'Jeannot!' Jehanne was suddenly at my elbow, calling to one of the boys, who was washing himself in the horse trough. Jean Lebecq, a neighbour's son. Why was he here? He was scarcely out of his baby skirts.

Jeannot lifted his head, dripping, and grinned from ear to ear when he saw Jehanne, then pushed folk aside to get to her. As he gave her a great hug, I laughed at the sight: he, thin and weedy; she, big-boned and strong as an ox. She almost buried him.

'Jeannot! Jeannot! What on earth are you doing here?' she said.

'I'm going off with the soldiers. Don't look at me like that: père said I could. And don't call me Jeannot. I'm a man now.'

'But, Jeannot, little one, my baby cousin—' She ducked as Jeannot swung his fist at her head, then laughed a great belly laugh, saying, 'But, Jeannot, I'm so much taller than you!' And she seized the dagger from his belt, stood against the door jamb and measured her height, nicking the timber in the place where the top of her head rested. 'See?'

Good-naturedly Jeannot allowed himself to be measured in the same way. 'See? You're this much shorter,' she said, measuring the span of her hand. Jeannot wouldn't look, only snatched her wrist and took back his dagger, but when she ruffled his hair, he couldn't stop himself smiling. 'Shouldn't I go to fight the English and let you stay here?' said Jehanne.

In answer, Jeannot drew himself up to his full height and his proud stance brought tears to my eyes.

'You're big, Jehanne, but you're a girl,' he said. 'Girls don't fight. It's the men's job to fight. You just leave it to us.' Jehanne laughed and hugged him again, then let him go.

As she turned into the house, I saw the smile fade from her face. I could guess her thoughts: she's as strong as any man. I've seen her tackle a cow with one of its horns stuck in the side of the stall. Had Jean Lebecq been a little older, she might have challenged him to a bout of armwrestling and made him swallow his words.

If these were her thoughts, she didn't show any resentment, but waited calmly inside the house for her mother's instructions.

Jehanne is always so patient. If she knew how I ache for revenge, I know what she would say: that vengeance is for God to deliver, and we must wait. Oh, but it's hard.

As I joined Jehanne at the table, Aunt Isabeau came from the byre into the kitchen, clutching a pile of grain sacks.

'Jehanne, we must fill these. Quickly now. There's bread and cheese. Use up the apples too. There's some on the rafters, take those first, then get the rest from the barrel. Mariane, fill some flagons with wine. Use the cask under the window in the buttery. Hurry.'

We had barely started our tasks before the bright rectangle of the doorway was darkened by the squat figure of my uncle Jacques. He went to stand behind Jehanne who was reaching down a tray of apples from the

rafters. Slowly she put back the tray and turned to face him.

'What do you call this, girl?' he said, showing her the padded shirt that he wears under his breastplate. Furious, he thrust it under her nose.

'Tu paresseuse! Lazy baggage! You should attend to your duties here, instead of always on your knees at the church. God can wait—I can't!'

'Jacques!' Aunt Isabeau gasped and clutched the silver crucifix that hung at her neck, but Jehanne simply bowed her head, then raised it to look him straight in the eye as he fisted open a long gash in the padded fabric. A thick tuft of tow poked out of it.

Jehanne sat at the table and opened the lid of her thread box. 'I'll mend it now, père,' she said. 'It can be done in five minutes.'

With an explosive sound of disgust he pushed the shirt against her chest. 'The English could be here in five minutes,' he said, then stalked out of the house.

Dieu au ciel! I would have scrunched the shirt up into a ball and thrown it to the floor, or at least kicked my chair over, but Jehanne, patient as ever, threaded a needle and began the repair.

Uncle Jacques is always finding an excuse to quarrel with her. There's been trouble between them ever since Jehanne refused to marry the man he picked out for her. I wonder if she made the right decision? She would have had her own farm by now and left her bullying father behind. So why did she refuse? Perhaps the man was old and ugly, in which case I shouldn't blame her.

I was in the buttery filling the last of the flagons when I heard Jehanne's brother Pierre come into the house. He was in charge of the evacuation. Had he come for us? Was everyone else ready? I put a stopper in the last flagon, then picked them all up in a basket and walked to the kitchen door. I was about to go through when I heard Pierre say, 'Uncle Durand is ready: you only have to say the word!' I put down my wine and listened, but no one spoke, so I peeped through a crack in the door.

Finishing the repair to her father's shirt, Jehanne bit off the thread and stood up, presumably to take the shirt outside to her father. But Aunt Isabeau appeared and said, 'I'll take that, Jehanne. You get on with the rations.'

As Aunt Isabeau left, I saw Jehanne and Pierre exchange a very strange look, as if they were conspirators. I pressed my eye to the crack and watched as Pierre stealthily unrolled a map made of fine leather and spread it out on the table.

'Where are they now?' whispered Jehanne, poring over it, standing next to him so that the map was hidden from anyone coming in through the front door.

'There are English troops here and here,' said Pierre, tapping his finger on the map.

'Main forces or scouting parties?'

'Reconnaissance, we think, but Reims could be the next target.' Pierre laid his hands flat on either side of the map. 'You won't leave until we get back from Chateau d'fle, will you? I'll join you as soon as possible but I've promised père that I'll see everyone safely there and back.'

'I've had no message about leaving, but it must be