
Opening Extract from...

The Lady of the Rivers

Written by Philippa Gregory

Published by Simon & Schuster Ltd

The Cousins' War

THE LADY OF THE RIVERS

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London · New York · Sydney · Toronto · New Delhi

A CBS COMPANY

First published in Great Britain by Simon & Schuster UK Ltd, 2011
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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Simon & Schuster UK Ltd
1st Floor
222 Gray's Inn Road
London
WC1X 8HB

www.simonandschuster.co.uk

Simon & Schuster Australia, Sydney
Simon & Schuster India, New Delhi

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

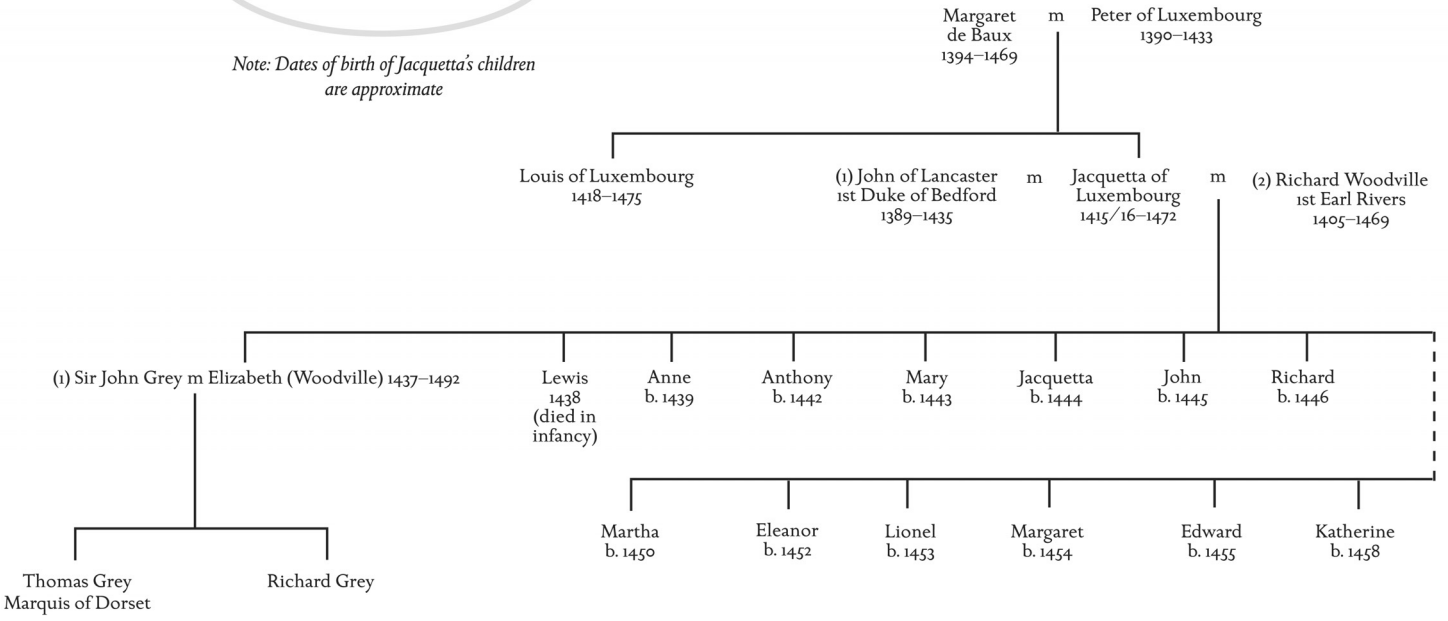
ISBN HB 978-1-84737-459-2
ISBN TPB 978-1-84737-460-8

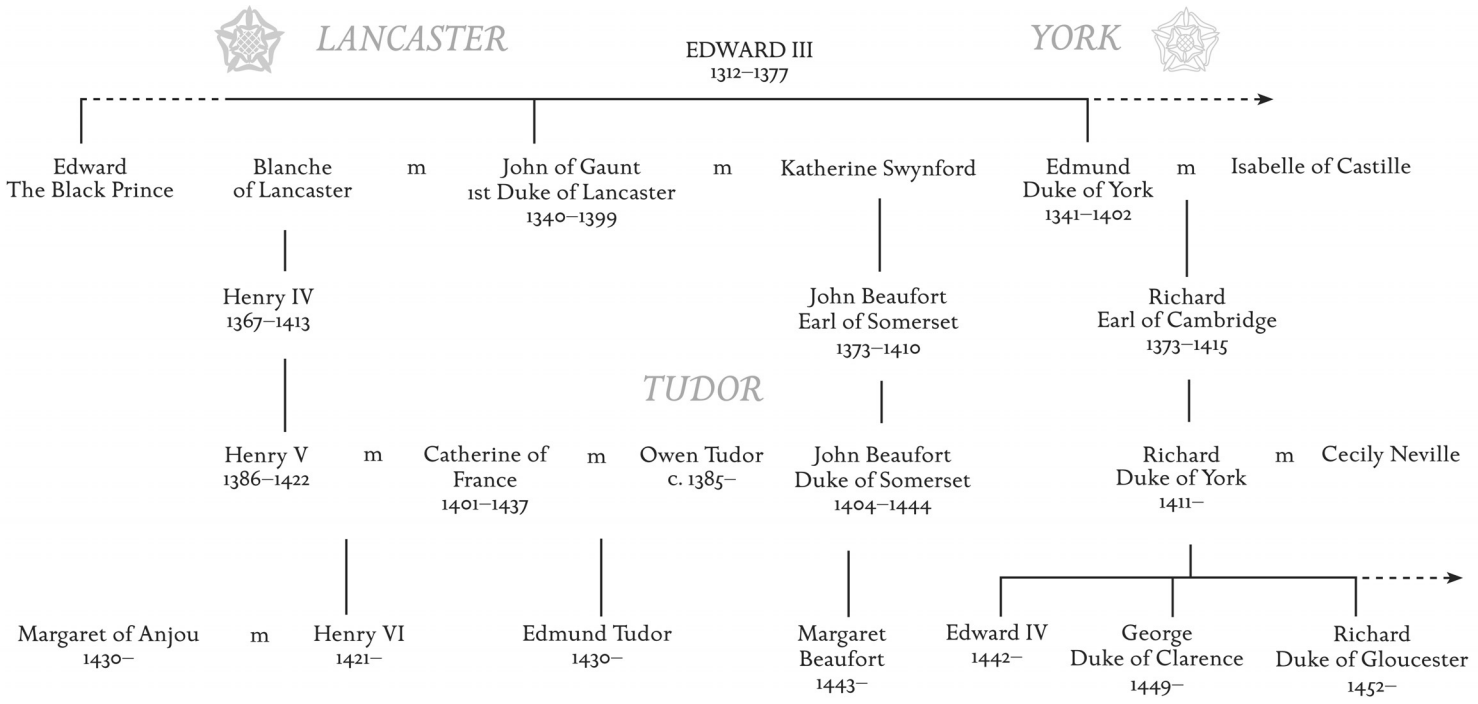
Typeset by M Rules
Printed in the UK by CPI Mackays, Chatham ME5 8TD

For Victoria

JACQUETTA'S FAMILY TREE

Note: Dates of birth of Jacquetta's children are approximate





THE COUSINS AT WAR

The Houses of York, Lancaster & Tudor

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

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.'

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

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.

'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?'

'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

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.

'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 springtime. 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.'

'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.

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.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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,

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.

'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

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.'