

GIRL AT ARMS

The Story of Joan of Arc

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For;
Girls everywhere who are brave enough
to change their world
Dedicated to;
My mother, who inspired my love of reading,
and to
Marcy, who told me to do something that
“satisfied my soul”

Precious in the sight
of the Lord,
is the death of His saints
Psalms 116:15

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Chapter One

The Village of Dom-Remy, France



♣ In the Year of Our Lord 1425 ♣



Leafy saplings bent in anger as the beast sped by. Joan's heart raced. Was that a hairy claw behind that bush? She ran through the overlord's forest, trying not to stumble over roots in the dirt as her long skirt twisted around her ankles. She headed for sunlight. Sun rays streamed overhead through thick oak branches. A lazy river passed nearby. She would head toward the water because werewolves couldn't swim.

Joan snuck one last glance at the demented hound chasing her before she plunged into an emerald meadow that edged the river. The Bourlemont's dense forest had not swallowed her up! Again Joan had outrun the dark creatures that lived there. She danced in the grass and laughed. Safe once more!

Stories of wild boars and wicked hounds reenacted around bonfires scared her little sister, but not Joan. Sightings of werewolves, however, were a different matter. But not one of the mad dogs had ever caught her. It had been an exhilarating morning!

Catherine rambled through the meadow, crying as usual. Although she had been away from the child only a short time,



Joan knew that she would not be able to explore the haunted forest any longer with her little sister waiting for her. Then Joan noticed the chilling sight of a wounded soldier limping through the tall grass, hunched like a burdened beast.

Joan hesitated and glanced at Catherine, who had fallen in the dirt, then turned back to watch the soldier. He was holding a bloody arm tight to his body, his clothes were filthy, and he probably stank. How had he made it through the forest alive? Werewolves were enticed by blood. Joan breathed heavily. Which one should she rescue? Did her loyalties lie with her family or her country? She didn't have time to debate. After all, Catherine wasn't seriously hurt. "Sir," Joan waved, "let me help you!"

The soldier didn't respond. Joan held her skirt and ran toward the man, trying to avoid half-earthed rocks. She could still hear Catherine whimpering, but she knew that the child's injury most likely was a skinned knee. Joan desperately hoped her mother would have made the same decision. When she got to the man, she wrapped her arm around his shoulder and held his wounded arm steady with her body. Together they stumbled through the fields toward her village.

The soldier grimaced with every step. Joan had seen men like this before. Every day, more soldiers limped, crawled, or stumbled to her village's gate.

The man was sweaty, and his skin was cold. He made a quiet, gruesome-sounding cry. They would not make it to the village. Joan's heart beat faster. What should she do? This man's last hour would be spent searching for a place in a stony field to die, far from his home. The chapel was only a few paces away; if only they could reach it, then the priest could help her.

The man was not young. The spray of gray hair at his temples told her that. He probably had children and a wife.



He probably had a cow and sheep waiting to be led out to pasture, a horse that needed to be shod, and pigs that needed to be taken to market. But he wouldn't do any of those things. He would not see his children again. His wife would stay up late waiting and watching for his return. She would wait....

Just outside the little chapel called Notre Dame of Bermont, the soldier's legs buckled. He cried out once pitifully and fell to his knees, pulling Joan with him. They landed in a heap. Joan skinned her forearm on pebbly ground, making her yelp at the sharp pain. The soldier was dead. They had not made it to the chapel as she had hoped.

Joan pulled her skirt out from under the fallen soldier and ran into the chapel. She fell before the altar and crossed herself. There, she was surrounded by the warm glow of candles. She wiped dust from her cheeks.

War was happening all around her, and there was nothing she could do about it. She was helpless to stop the burning farm houses and barns set afire by enemies. She was helpless to stop the young men from leaving their families to become soldiers. She was helpless to stop the wailing that rang in the streets from mothers and wives whenever the bells tolled another death.

After a few minutes, with a shaky hand, Joan lit a candle for the soul of the man lying outside in the dirt. She would not leave the soldier unburied. Surely her father would help her; he had buried many soldiers. Suddenly remembering her little sister, Joan ran from the chapel. Her skirt twisted around her legs, and her feet stirred the dirt on the road leading back to the fields.

A beech tree that stood near the river swung its elegant branches in the breeze. A circle of girls pranced around the trunk singing, intending to charm the fairies who lived in



the trees. The maidens had hung floral wreaths on the tree's leafy branches.

"Come join us, Joan," the girls called to her.

"Don't you believe in fairies, Joan?" one of them asked.

"She doesn't believe in anything!" another said.

"I say she was in the chapel."

"Spending all your time in church, Joan?" one girl mocked.

"She should be getting ready to take care of a house. Her mother told my mother that Joan turned thirteen this last time."

"Thirteen? Are you sure about that?"

"Her godmother, the mayor's wife, confirmed it," the girl stated proudly. "And at thirteen a girl should be getting ready to be married!"

"Joan will never marry."

"Unless it is to one of the statues in the chapel!"

The giggling girls danced around the tree, then returned to their song. Joan wiped her sweaty forehead. She noticed that the breeze was heavy with the fragrance of field lilies, but she didn't have time to enjoy it. She would have liked to join the girls, but she didn't have time to sing to fairies either.

Joan glanced down at her dress. It was stained with the soldier's blood, and the hem was torn from her fall. Her black hair was unruly and never stayed tucked into ribbons or braids. She did not have a sweet singing voice; she was not pretty, and she did not spend any time learning to be a good wife. Who would want to marry her?

She gazed over the lovely fields, looking for the top of Catherine's curly-haired head. Her sister was still sitting in



the same place, but at least she had stopped crying. She was busy playing with a hapless bug, as was her custom.

At the sound of horses, Joan squinted across the field and saw six French knights spurring their steeds through the grass. The horses were draped in fabrics ornately decorated with *fleurs-de-lys* and birds. The powerful mounts were sleek, and their bodies shone with sweat.

As the men came closer, Joan's heart burned, and her skin prickled. The late afternoon sun glinted off their armor-clad chests. Silver and blue capes, fastened by cords at their necks, gave them wings of eagles.

The knights halted near the river and dismounted to water their horses. Immediately, the girls around the tree screamed and dashed toward the village. One of the knights removed his helmet and approached the tree. He touched the flower wreaths.

“Do you enjoy scaring off maidens?” Joan asked.

The surprised knight laughed. “I rather enjoy the fear I create in the hearts of men, but it brings me no satisfaction in bringing fear to peasant girls.”

“Perhaps you owe them an apology.”

The knight raised an eyebrow. “I owe nothing to anyone, save my High Master.”

“And who would that be?” Joan asked.

“I am a member of the Order of the White Stags, and my allegiance belongs to Lord Leonard de LaBlaude. I am his son, Philippe, and you will refer to me as ‘sire.’”

Blushing, Joan said, “I am disappointed, sire.”

“Disappointed?” the knight stepped closer. “What right does a common peasant maid have to be disappointed in anything? And by what right do you beg my attention, peasant girl?”



Joan stood at her full height of five feet and straightened her skirt, swiping at the fabric, but the blood on her bodice and sleeve had dried. “My right to be disappointed belongs to me by birth because I am French. I should hope you would feel allegiance to France, rather than to men who have spent their lives being pampered and catered to!”

The young knight, red-faced after such an insult, shook his head and inspected her appearance, curious about the blood. “How dare you, a mere peasant, make comment on my life! You have no idea how a nobleman spends his days, or the quests of his heart! How, therefore, can you accuse me?”

Joan answered, “You are on your way to an absurd tournament, aren’t you? France is falling while you and your knights are making sport for reward and glory. Are you aware of the doom that surrounds us? Tell me, if you are able, what has been happening to our fellow Frenchmen?”

“You would not understand war!” the knight bellowed. “And I shall not waste another minute with you!” The knight turned and stalked back to his horse.

“I understand that French blood is being spilt,” Joan shouted to the knight’s back. “I am even wearing my countrymen’s blood! I understand that the evil English are stealing our country from us, and I understand that you are too occupied with games to be concerned!”

The knight, now mounted, moved his great steed next to Joan. “I will inform you, peasant girl,” he spit, “that I have been in battle against the Anglo-Burgundians. I have seen my countrymen sliced, burned, and cut down mercilessly by a savage new weapon designed by the Devil himself for the Englishmen. So do not accuse that I have not seen war. I have seen all I wish to see, and more.”

With that, he reined his horse around Joan. The horse flicked its tail as if in agreement, and the knight crossed the field in the direction he had come.

“What is such a weapon?” Joan called to the other knights, who followed their leader.

“The longbow,” the last knight yelled back over his shoulder.

Joan watched the knights gallop across the field toward the village. The last knight in line reached down, snatched little Catherine from the swaying grass, and swung her up to sit in front of him on his horse.

Joan opened her mouth but only managed a squeak. The sound of her heart beating in her ears was louder than the chiming of the chapel bells. She ran after the knight, but to no avail. All she could do was watch her sister’s white dress disappearing across the field on the knight’s horse. She knew that the knights would be heading to the village inn for food and drink. She would be expected there, too.

By the time she arrived at the inn, chatter and loud bursts of laughter filled the crowded room. The clanging silverware, wooden bowls, and pewter plates made a crude music that covered the sound of Catherine’s cries. The dashing knight had dropped Catherine off at the busy inn with a big show of attention, claiming he saved a little girl from a charging boar. Gossiping ladies warned Joan that her mother knew, was furious, and was on her way. Joan braced herself for the harsh scolding that she knew would come.



Chapter Two



Joan dreaded the stack of dirty dishes that awaited her in the kitchen. The inn was crowded this evening with bedraggled soldiers; a whole company was encamped close by. “Treasure the experience of hard work,” Joan’s father had told her. But the only thing she treasured about working at the inn was meeting interesting travelers. She listened to their tales and pretended she would visit the far-off towns and cities someday.

Tonight, Joan allowed herself to be engulfed in the aroma of vegetables and meat cooking. She stood in the doorway of the kitchen, breathing in the fragrance of dinner—someone’s dinner anyway. Then she noticed a young soldier with piercing eyes grinning at her. Joan often watched the soldiers from the kitchen doorway. They were thin and tired and scooped the food into their mouths as if someone might take it away from them at any moment. They were poor men who were scantily dressed for battle, with worn boots and thin shirts. They were farmers and shepherds turned soldiers. They ate, drank, and showed each other their wounds.

The young, jovial soldier began telling the story of how he had lost his hand. “Several of us were on a ridge just outside Neufchateau,” he nodded toward the village, “not very far from here. We looked down at a little farmhouse nestled in a vineyard.”

“I know it,” one soldier interrupted with his mouth full.

“Well,” the storyteller continued, “it had been about forty-five days since meat filled my belly.”

The others murmured, “We know the feeling.”

“We saw a man pull up with a cart and enter the house. A few minutes later we smelled cooking meat. I convinced my comrades to follow me into the house. When we entered, we found ourselves surrounded by a room full of Burgundians!”

“Aha, the enemy! Those rotten dregs from Burgundy!” His listeners grew agitated. “What did you do then?”

“Well, we were surrounded. They stared us down, and one of them showed a knife!”

The men sitting around him stopped chewing.

“Since we were outnumbered, I knew a fight would never do. I had coins in my hand that I dropped on the proprietor’s counter. Upon seeing my money, the cook cut me a slab from the spit and waved off the crowd. As I reached out to retrieve my plate, one of the Burgundian dogs drew his sword and held it over my arm!” The storyteller showed his sleeve with a somber look.

“It’s a shame,” the man sitting across from him shook his head, “to lose a hand over a piece of meat! What has it all come to?”

The others dropped their heads and wondered aloud how the poor man could find work now. Suddenly, the storyteller thrust his hand through his sleeve. “Never let it be said that I am not faster than the sword of a Burgundian fool!”

His audience shouted their approval.

Joan smiled and caught eyes with the devilish storyteller. She found herself drawn in by his grin and ease at spinning tales, but she did not have time for stories. Stacks of plates and bowls were waiting for her.



As she turned, she noticed a soldier sitting alone, fingering a woman's handkerchief. The soldier responded to her questioning eyes.

"The kerchief is hers," was all he said. A thick silence hung over the sad man.

Joan asked, "Who is she?"

"My wife. My lovely wife. She has long, silky hair and soft eyes." He sniffed the fabric gently. "It used to smell of her, but that has worn off from traveling so long in my vest." He closed his eyes.

"Where is she now?"

"In Chalon, with our three children. We have a farm there. I was working it with my young sons before...well, before."

"I'm sure you're anxious to get home. Chalon is only a few days away."

The man gazed at her with hard eyes. "You think I'm going home?" his voice cracked. "How would I get there? Look at me!" he shouted. A few men at another table looked over at him. "Look under the table at my legs. Go ahead, look!"

Joan was embarrassed, but she looked. He had only one leg! The other was cut off just above the knee. His pant leg was tied at the knee and dangled freely.

With his teeth clenched, the man leaned closer to Joan. "Would you want to be married to half a man?"

Joan could not answer him. She should explain to the soldier that his wife loved him and that she'd rather have half a man than none of him. But just then Joan felt too young and inadequate. She kept silent.

The soldier mumbled into his drink. "Besides, if my wife believes I'm dead, she can find a whole man to marry

and work the farm.” He stared at Joan; his eyes were flooded with tears. “I know what you’re thinking, mademoiselle: that she loves me and it doesn’t matter and all that romantic balderdash. But just how romantic would it be to lose our farm because I can’t do anything? We’d all starve!” He wiped his eyes with his sleeve. “No,” he whispered, “she’ll be much better off thinking I’m dead. They’ll all be better off.”

Joan sat quietly with the man awhile. She needed to get up and finish cleaning, but she simply couldn’t leave the broken man alone. Suddenly, the room fell eerily silent when the door opened and four dashing knights stepped in looking for food and drink. Especially drink.

Everyone stared at the men draped in expensive fabrics and new boots. Gem-encrusted daggers hung at their waists, and jeweled collars shone around their necks. Joan recognized one of the knights. She’d already sparred with Philippe de LaBlaude. The group of knights distanced itself from the poor soldiers hunched over their mugs.

Presently, another knight entered. He wore a surcoat embroidered with pearls on its sleeves, and three shiny golden stags danced across his chest. A heavy, silver collar hung around his neck, and the hungry soldiers eyed it with envy.

Joan fumbled with her cleaning rag. *That necklace would feed everyone in this room for a very long time*, she thought.

The silence was broken by remarks and insults mumbled in lower-toned voices. But the restraints of cooler heads were undone when the mischievous storyteller pointed and accused one of the knights, “You killed my brother!”

The room fell silent. Another man shouted, “Our duty is to be your pawns! You steal us from our families and force us to fight. This is not *our* war! We want to be left in peace!”



Still another soldier stood and bellowed, “You don’t even have the decency to include us in your fight. You simply ride over the top of us on your way to glory!”

“We are tired of dying for you!”

Philippe headed for the table of soldiers while his friends tried to stop him. The furious aristocrat broke through their stronghold and took a swing at the soldier. He connected with the soldier’s jaw and sent him flying to the floor.

The innkeeper’s wife screamed for her husband, who dashed around the room, pushing bystanders toward the door. He did not want to see his inn torn to pieces. The other soldiers jeered and called the knight out.

In a panic, Joan searched for Catherine. She was in the kitchen with the cook. Joan remained in the doorway of the kitchen, trying to stay out of punching range.

A soldier sitting next to the storyteller swung at a tall knight who was pushing soldiers out of the inn. The punch landed squarely in the temple! Without thinking, Joan fetched a crockery pitcher from a nearby table and dowsed the soldier with cold water. “That will surely cool you off!” she shouted.

The soldier shook the water off his body, then headed for Joan with fists ready before he realized that his target was just a young girl, and he turned away in frustration.

Joan knelt next to the unsuspecting knight. Her emotions stirred. *Did you deserve all this? Are the accusations true? Surely such an elegant knight would not be so cruel.* This knight did not look as though he had ever broken out in a sweat, let alone experienced the fear and tremble of battle. She took the cloth from her shoulder and laid it gently on the knight’s forehead.

The door flew open again, and the room was flooded with a dozen more knights. Upon viewing the scene, they began

tossing soldiers against the walls and out the door. The fight ended as quickly as it had begun.

Completely ignoring Joan, two of the knights, seeing their comrad lying on the floor with a cloth over his face, came to his side and helped him up. The noble knight struggled to his feet, and the three left the inn without so much as a nod of thanks to Joan.



Chapter Three



Joan rode her father's horse down the only street of Dom-Remy, grateful that her mother's impending appearance had been a rumor. In the twilight, still feeling the pain of her countrymen who had lost everything—much more than the noblemen—Joan passed abandoned farms and gardens.

The trees that swayed in the mild breeze gave shade to the travesties that happened on the ground. Verdant weeds and yellow dandelions spread across the fields, choking out grapevines. A few thin chickens and geese wandered through the grass searching for food, lost without their keepers. A pig's carcass lay beside the road, the meat eaten by either scavenger animals or ravenous English soldiers. A tear trickled down Joan's cheek. This was a picture of France. Joan felt empty inside.

Joan's horse slowed near an empty farmhouse. Its sagging roof saddened the house's appearance. Under the windows were little flowerbeds surrounded by shapely rocks. Herbs, lilies, lavender, and peonies should have brightened the plots with their colorful petals. Instead, the rocks guarded dry rushes and weeds.

Her horse moved on at a casual pace. "Is this what you wanted to show me?" Joan whispered to the horse. Although she had seen the mutilated countryside many times before,

somehow she felt that tonight she was supposed to see it in a different way.

Another house stood alone next to the road, its roof completely gone. Untamed grasses invaded the garden. Joan's horse waded through the field, allowing her to kick at the tall grass as she passed by. The ground was uneven and rocky, but the horse pressed on until it reached a small gathering of oak trees. There it stopped abruptly. Joan nudged its ribcage, but the horse was unmoved. *Is there something in the oak trees?* she wondered. Joan dismounted and trudged over to the trees. Overhead, the leaves rustled in the breeze. Then the wind picked up, shaking the tree branches and making the loose leaves fall in a whirlwind around her. Joan reached out to touch the tree trunk. Instead she clasped a dangling leg!

She screamed and jerked her hand away. The body swung slightly. Joan knelt and stared up at a priest hanging by a rope from a sturdy branch above. His body was covered with arrows front and back. His fingerless hands were tied in front of his body and hung loosely at his waist. A silver cross hung on a chain around his neck.

Contempt warmed Joan's body. Who had done this?

But she already knew who had tortured the priest. "The English!" she spat. *They know priests are exempt from war! Their soldiers are forbidden to capture clergy. Are they not good Catholics?* Who could she protest to? There was no one to hear her complaint.

Joan did not recognize the priest. That was strange. Her village was small, and she knew all the people at church. He must have been captured elsewhere and dragged to her village. *He had been tormented under these trees. Why? What had he done?*

The priest's open eyes were barren. They stared at nothing mortal. *He will see God now, face to face. God will know his plight. God will hear the priest's complaints, and God will not forget.* Joan took comfort in her beliefs.

It was late now. Animals needed tending to, and food needed to be prepared. Joan mounted her horse, and they trotted toward home, with Joan lost in thought. *Will I ever see flowers bloom again, hear bluebirds sing again? Will I ever be safe again?*

Merchants coming back from the marketplace, shepherds driving animals, children carrying vegetables, and housewives carrying buckets of water passed the horse on either side, calling out greetings, but Joan ignored them. She was deep in thought.

When she got home, Joan's mother demanded to know where she'd been. Joan did not answer. Instead she rummaged through her brother Pierre's belongings in spite of his protests, then passed through the kitchen and headed to the barn.

Once inside the barn, Joan tossed a pair of Pierre's britches on a haybale. Looking at the small knife she had taken from the kitchen, she slowly moved it to her long, dark hair. She hesitated. The sound of giggles and singing from the girls around the fairy tree spun in her head. "Joan will never marry," they sang. "Joan isn't pretty," they taunted. Pieces of dark hair fell on the ground with the hay.

Joan stared at the small pile of black hair. The back of her hair was a little crooked, she supposed, but she couldn't reach there very well. What would her mother say when she saw her? Joan put that out of her mind. Besides, it was too late. She squirmed into Pierre's britches. Now she was sure she could pass as a boy. She looked and smelled like her brothers.



On the dirt road again, Joan rode toward the village gates. “Boy, lend a wounded warrior a kind hand,” a tired knight begged. He sounded unaccustomed to asking. “To the inn,” he added. Men nearby wore no crests nor carried any banners. Joan supposed they were mercenaries with no allegiances to any country.

Joan motioned the knight forward as she dismounted.

Perspiration gummed the wounded knight’s hair to his forehead. Still in his battered armor, he attempted to mount Joan’s horse but was unable to lift his leg. A hole was torn through his thigh piece. Joan could smell sweat, dirt, and the unmistakable stench of blood.

After hearing him release a pitiful moan, the other knights stepped forward to help the wounded knight onto the horse. His sigh of relief was all the thanks Joan would receive.

“They will take you at the inn,” Joan said, taking the reins and leading her horse down the road. The other knights followed.

Inside the inn, men were gathered around tables, drinking and discussing what the ongoing war was doing to their families and farms. As soon as Joan and the knights stumbled through the doorway carrying the victim, a few of the guests scrambled to help.

“He is French,” one of the knights announced. “He was wounded in battle, fighting for France and the dauphin’s cause.”

“A nationalist? An enemy?” the innkeeper frowned. “Why don’t you take him to the enemies’ inn then? We take care of our own; let them take care of their own.” The keeper went back to the counter and closed his register with a slap. The men at the tables went back to their conversations.

The knights stared at each other with disbelief. One of them said, “Tell us, Keeper, what should we do with him? Where should we take him?”

“Why should I care what you do with the wretch? Am I a traitor?”

The knight writhed in pain. He was perspiring, and if he was not attended to soon, he would die, or at least lose his leg. Joan stepped to the counter. “He is French! He is in the service of our king! Give him a room, and I shall return later with the money.”

“Do I care about a traitor’s money?” the innkeeper bellowed.

Joan’s eyes were full of fire and challenge. Finally the keeper mumbled, “Money is money, after all,” and motioned for them to take the stairs.

Joan followed the men up the staircase and into a small room with a bed and a chair pushed up against the wall. A slender metal cross with the Savior hung on the opposite wall. There were melted candles on a small table. The knights helped the man into bed. “I will fetch some water and a blanket,” one of the knights said and left the room.

Joan knelt next to the bed. “I shall say a prayer for you and then be on my way.”

The knight licked his cracked lips and tried to speak. “You are a very handy boy. I do not believe I would have lived if you had not lent me a ride.”

Before Joan could respond, the other two knights began to unlatch their friend’s armor and pile it on the floor, piece by piece.

“Could you see fit to end this war? That is all the payment I need,” Joan said.



At that moment, one of the men thrust the chestplate into Joan's hands. She held it reverently. A huge dent was spread across the center of it, and several small notches curved the edges. Overall it was dull and scratched. Joan looked at the man lying on the bed in his underclothes. Her mind was too busy to register her embarrassment. She had never seen a grown man in his underclothes, but there was too much at stake to be concerned about that now.

The injured knight was rather short, not much taller than herself. He grimaced at Joan, who was holding the chestplate tightly and stroking the feathers on his helmet.

The knight tried to laugh. "I see what your fee is! Take the armor, boy," he waved. "It is useless to me now. It is beaten and bruised, much like my body. I shall have to acquire a new suit upon my return home. Besides, I shall arrive in Troyes a hero, and a hero must have the best armor!"

Joan grabbed the helmet and headed toward the door before the knight changed his mind. She would not stand by and watch her country be taken by the English. She would lead men into battle, and she could be injured. At the door she stopped. "I shall put the armor to good use," she told the wounded knight. "Do not worry. It shall not be wasted in games and fantasies. It will bring you honor on the battlefield again."

"That is a worthy thing to say to me," the knight breathed. He held onto the bed with both hands. "Run along now, boy. You do not wish to see any more here. Run along to your life."

Joan left holding the pieces of her armor.