

A woman with her hair in a bun, wearing a long, light-colored, high-collared dress with puffed sleeves, stands in profile in a vineyard. She is looking out over a vast landscape of grapevines under a dramatic, colorful sunset sky with orange, pink, and blue tones. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a strong backlight effect on the woman and the vines.

DEBRA BORCHERT

Her  
Own  
WAR

# HER OWN WAR

Château de Verzat Series

Book Three

By

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# Chapter 1

Geneviève

Loire Valley, France

August 1797

Across the still Loire River dark clouds mushroomed above workers reaping hay. A rainstorm could harm the harvest; hail would ruin it.

Weeks of hot weather had ripened a bountiful grape crop, and all four hundred families who lived on the estate were in the vineyard furiously picking. I reached beneath the leaves, clipped grape clusters, and placed them in a large basket. Removing my straw bonnet, I wiped sweat from my brow and rubbed my lower back. Could this ache be a sign I was with child? There was no time to revel in the thread of hope running through me. Every harvested grape went toward paying taxes the estate owed.

A few feet away, Aurélia clipped a bunch of grapes and smiled at me, her round black eyes offering sympathy. Tall and slim, she moved with the grace of a poplar bending with a breeze. She pulled a fan from her hanging pocket and offered it.

“Thank you.” I waved it, savoring the stirring air. A finely hand-painted scene on delicate silk depicted the Seine. “This is Paris. I hope when we are not at war, we can visit the city together.” I closed it and held it out, but she put up her palm.

Wearing a simple blue day gown and long white apron, she had the regal bearing of a queen. She mouthed, *You need it more than I.*

I understood Aurélia, without her voice, although I hoped she’d regain her ability to speak. I tucked the fan into my belt and smiled at my past foolishness—I had feared I could

never be friends with my former-lover's wife. Aurélia was more than a friend; she was the sister I had always wanted. "Were you able to speak before you were captured and enslaved?"

She grinned and brought her fingers to her thumb, repeatedly, indicating she never stopped talking.

"Do you miss your voice?"

She pretended to hold a baby in her arms and mouthed, *I miss singing.*

Down the hill, a distant spot of color caught my eye. Two officers on horseback trotted along the river road, their red frock coats flaring against the gray clouds.

The last officers conscripted four of our fine men, and they all died on the battlefield. I wiped my sticky hands on my apron. "I'll not let them take any more of our men to waste in their war." I searched the vineyard and spied my husband. "Louis!"

He stopped the team of horses pulling a wagon laden with grapes.

I pointed at the two soldiers.

He handed the reins to a worker and ran, shouting through the fields. Young men darted around vines toward the cave. The officers would die of starvation before they found them in the network of Verzat caves.

The sky darkened. "Aurélia, a storm is coming. Best take the children to the château."

She mouthed, *Rain will be cooling.*

"But it might hail."

*We will be fine.*

I hoped she was right. My four-year-old stepdaughter sat on the dry, cracked earth holding a basket nearly as big as she was and waving her hand. "Tante Gen, why are there so many wasps?"

“They like the sweet juice.” I swiped at a lock of hair stuck to my cheek. Louis and I had been married a year and still Louisa called me *aunt*. I feared I was not a good *maman*, but I didn’t know how to be a better one.

Aurélia’s three-year-old son sat on the ground next to Louisa, holding another basket. As she clipped clusters, Aurélia gently toyed with the vines, making the leaves tickle Charles. He threw back his head and laughed.

A low rumble stopped my picking. The advancing clouds darkened to the color of charcoal. “I pray the clouds empty themselves before they cross the river.” The officers turned their horses and headed east, toward Tours. My shoulders relaxed as I resumed clipping. But a stirring in my stomach nagged me. Should I order everyone to seek shelter now in case of hail? The workers were so loyal, I doubted they would leave their work, but I could at least send the elderly and children inside.

Louisa screeched at a wasp. “I want to go home, now.”

Lightning flickered over the distant hayfield. A louder rumble followed. Everyone continued their work. I dared not leave. I waved my apron over her. “I won’t let them hurt you.”

Charles reached out. “Take my hand, Louisa. I’m not afraid.”

“You are very brave, Charles,” I said.

Louisa grabbed his hand. “I’m brave, too.”

Cold air dropped over us like a curtain. Lightning brightened the sky. Gooseflesh ran up my arms. A sharp odor, like scorched metal, sliced the air. Had lightning struck a wagon? Workers in the hayfield flung their scythes away and threw themselves flat upon the ground, covering their heads with their arms.

“Everyone!” I shouted, “Take shelter!”

The sound of a roaring river charged toward us.

Louisa screamed and covered her ears. I swept her up and brought her to my chest.

Lightning lashed across the sky like a whip. A deafening crash followed.

Torrents of rain poured down like we were standing under a waterfall. I bent over, protecting Louisa, and the force of water pushed the breath from me.

We dared not run for cover. Lightning sought the highest target, and that would be us, should we run.

The rain lessened. Pinging and clacking sounds seized my breath. “Hail,” I shouted.

“Aurélia. Cover Charles with your basket.”

Pebbles of ice the size of pearls popped and bounced on the crusty earth.

“Papa!” Louisa cried. “I want Papa.”

I grabbed her basket and dumped the grapes on the ground. Falling to my knees, I pushed Louisa down.

Aurélia slapped the ground under the vines.

“Good idea.” I pulled Louisa under the vines for shelter. “Curl up on your side, like a puppy.” She whined and fought me as I wrangled her under the basket. “Hush, you will be safe.”

Aurélia brought Charles next to Louisa and put her basket over him. Louisa’s fingers crept out from under the wicker and searched for Charles. His hand gripped hers.

Thunder boomed so loudly my teeth chattered. Hail needled my arms and face.

I screamed at the workers, “Cover your heads!”

With the children between us, Aurélia and I joined arms and pressed ourselves over the baskets. “Keep your head down and your bonnet covering your face.”

Hail broke off chunks of my straw hat. Leaves and vines whirled past. Hailstones floated atop sheets of rainwater that slicked the impenetrable ground, pushing the pellets against the vine roots and piling up the hail like snowbanks. A shard of ice stung my cheek. I wiped the burn, and blood stained my fingers.

Louisa screeched and kicked the basket, knocking it off her. I lunged, pulled it atop her.

“I want Papa!” She kicked a hole in the basket, thrusting out her foot. I pushed it back.

Charles shouted, “Don’t cry, Louisa. I’m here.”

Ice chunks, now as large as plums, crashed over us like a rockslide.

Punishing hailstones pounded my back. A strange clacking noise surrounded us.

Hailstones clattered atop piles of icy pellets. Blood dripped onto my skirts.

I prayed Louis and the pickers had taken cover under the wagon. Please, don’t let it get worse. Please, let no one be injured. Please, don’t destroy everything.

Lightning cracked. I counted to three before thunder boomed again. The storm was moving east of us—away from the vineyard, not deeper into it. I prayed the northern slope was spared. My grip on the basket eased. Please let everyone be safe.

The rumbling and crashing stopped as suddenly as it began. The wind calmed. Rain pattered. Ceased. Hailstones bobbed in rainwater, mixed with the dust, and sluiced around us in chalky streams. A bank of ice surrounded my legs, making me shiver.

Strong sunlight beat upon my back. I straightened, squinting in the brilliant light. Where was Louis?

Broken shoots dangled from vines. Splintered canes stabbed the earth. Battered leaves and smashed grape clusters littered the vineyard. A blackbird lay squawking, fluttering its crippled wing.

We were ruined.

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