



THIS BOOK BELONGS TO

"Filled with faith, friendship, and a second-chance, slow-burn romance, Scott's writing is witty and heartwarming, perfect for young teens seeking a swoonworthy story full of political intrigue and a hope that never fails."

-Erin Phillips,
award-winning author of *A Bond of Briars* and *A Crown of Chains*

Izabella is a fast-paced, epic novel your teen will not be able to put down!

As a homeschooling mother of six (five graduates and a young teen), I thoroughly enjoyed and appreciated Melissa Scott's intriguing historical fantasy. It's a refreshingly deep dive into a young believer's world that is often treated without any depth or credit to young people's faith and capacity for tough decision making and even leadership. Thank you, Melissa, for writing a novel that young audiences will appreciate and learn from. I

highly recommend Izabella to the young and young at heart.

-Keren Stonebraker,
Pastor's Wife and Mother

"The first book in this new YA series is an epic, powerful story for teen daughters and mothers to share together! With plenty of action and a sweeping love story, Izabella reminds us all that God has a plan for our lives even in the midst of grief and confusion. A fantastic debut from Melissa!"

-Brenna Newman,
book reviewer and bookstagrammer @brennas_book_corner

"Melissa Miyoko Scott has written a wholesome and captivating story for all ages. I love that I can hand this book to my teen daughter with confidence, knowing it will inspire her in both faith and character."

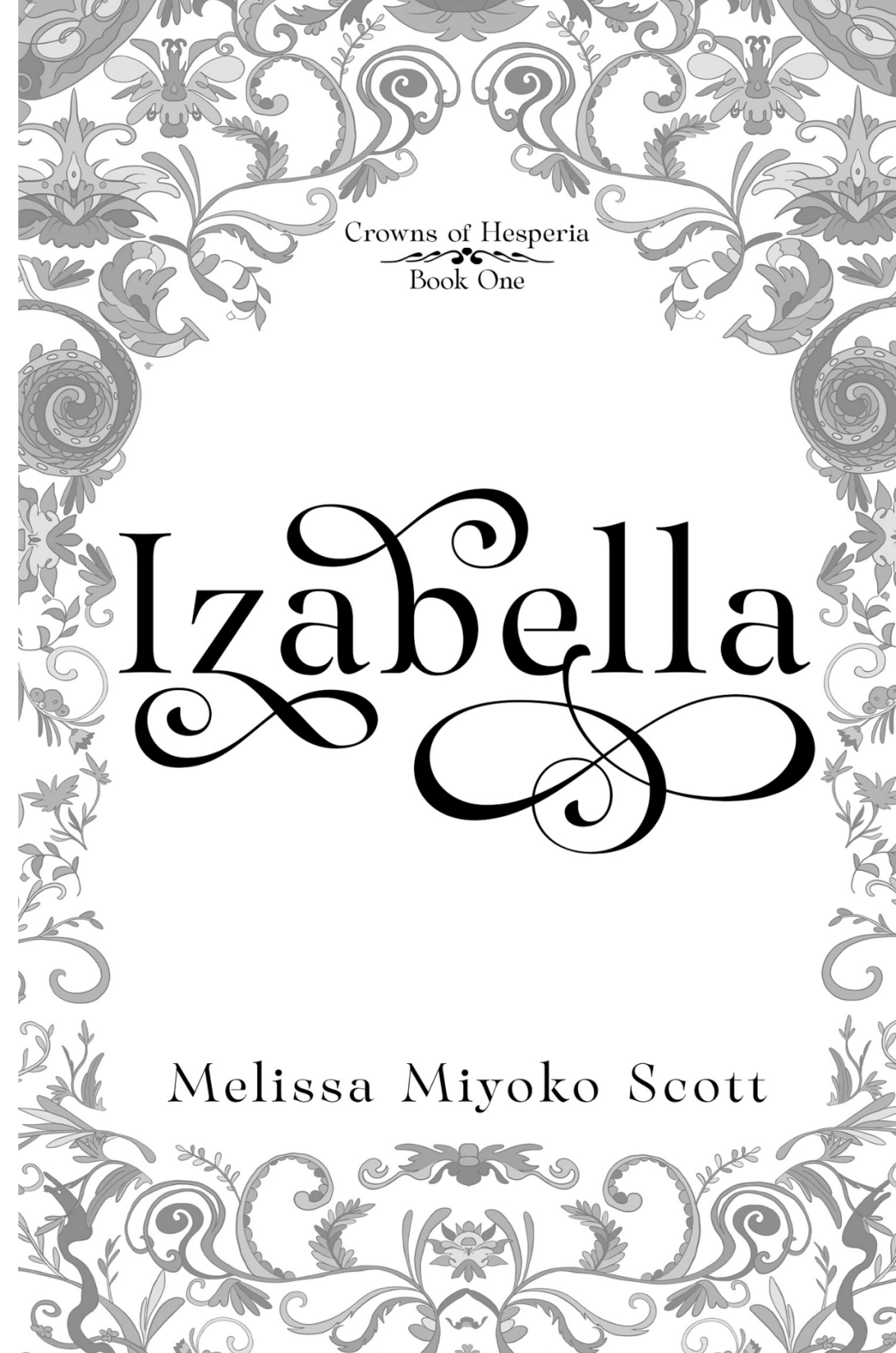
-Susy Lamb,
book reviewer and bookstagrammer @motherlambreads

Crowns of Hesperia

Book One

Izabella

Melissa Miyoko Scott

A decorative border with intricate floral and scrollwork patterns in shades of gray, framing the central text.

Crowns of Hesperia

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First edition 2024.

To my Vanessa.

Without you, this book would have remained a private endeavor. I write for the Lord, but this is for you. Thank you for pushing me to be honest with the dream God gave me.

To my mom.

You have ever been the wind in my sails. I am beyond blessed to have you as my own, and I am thankful for each day with you.

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BOOK ONE





DAWN ARRIVAL

Atop her mare, Izabella unsheathed her most precious possession. With scrolling on the blade and dragon wings unfurled on the cross guard, the pink and green jeweled weapon felt like home in her hands. Izabella relaxed her grip. *Dios help me. There is so much at stake.* She slowly exhaled the butterflies awake in her stomach.

Hooves crunched the gravel next to her. “Are you sure you won’t eat?” Concern lined her maid’s forehead. Hanna grew up in the castle of Loarre alongside Izabella and her sister Camilla, and their friendship bridged rank and title. Hanna’s attention to detail, paired with Izabella’s vision for her country strengthened their bond.

Izabella shook out her waves of hair. “King Martis will have platters piled high.” Her stomach growled in dissent. With her prodding, they had awoken earlier than usual for the last leg of their journey, and she hoped she wouldn’t regret it.

Hanna guided her horse closer. “At least let me take care of this.” Izabella heard the smile in Hanna’s voice as she tugged on Izabella’s wild cascades of auburn. “One day...” Hanna said, with a lilt in her voice. Their joke was that Izabella’s rebellious hair could start a war.

As Hanna re-braided Izabella’s tangled tresses, the jingle of pack animals’ bells signaled the arrival of the caravan of servants and supplies coming up the rocky path behind them. They would all descend into the valley with the sun’s rising.

“Buenos días, Catalan,” Hanna said, breaking into Izabella’s thoughts.

Izabella squinted into the morning brilliance. The country before them was so unlike their home. This valley floor would continue a gentle decline through low hills and arid plains to the sea, where the river Ebro would deposit its resources into a rich delta flanking the Mediterranean. Though the lower altitude was much warmer than the foothills of her beloved Aragon, she heard foreigners were met with a frigidity that rivaled even the icy peaks of the Inglewood Mountains.

The Inglewood Mountains.

Izabella’s heart squeezed. Those snow-covered heights surrounding her home brought painful memories. She filled her lungs with warm air and exhaled.

Below them, the bright red and gold banners of Catalan fluttered in the breeze. Beyond, dots of small white tents speckled the valley representing the full strength of the Catalan army. For all King Martis’ political wiles and heavy-handed management, he had helped her when she needed it most. The neighboring king was an ally, but after her father’s sudden death, Martis became an even stronger advocate.

Hanna laid her hand upon the queen’s. “Dios is with you and so are we.”

Izabella nodded. With a snap of metal, she sheathed her precious dagger, then crossed herself. “If Your Presence does not go with us...”

“...do not send us up from here,” Hanna finished.

Izabella squeezed her maid’s hand and gazed at the white tents. Her marriage to the king’s son would bind her neighbor’s army to her, securing a strong layer of protection for the kingdom her father had entrusted to her. But was it worth the king’s asking price?



The general stood with clenched fists behind the lines of armored men. A warm breeze drifted by, and he cringed. He never could adjust to the summer heat.

“Is she here?” a white-whiskered man asked. Fur-trimmed robes enveloped the aged frame that swayed on unsteady feet. The king’s voice still carried authority, though the effort looked painful.

“Si, Su Majestad, her entourage has been spotted.” The general kept an even tone to his answer, though his heart was less submissive. His gaze penetrated the neat rows of soldiers where a dust cloud traveled from the west. “If you will allow me.” He held out his sun-stained arm and led the king back through his tented doorway.

“James,” King Martis said in a raspy voice, “there is no knowing how this day will end. You have been my faithful right-hand man and my human crutch at the moment.” He chuckled as he patted the general’s tense forearm. “Whatever befalls us this day, let us remain friends.”

King Martis’ balance was lacking these days, but his grip was vice-like. James studied the fading eyes of the king for the challenge he felt directed at him.

“Su Majestad, it has been my honor to serve, and I am grateful for your trust.” James never was one to back down. “But I don’t understand how this meeting will help. It’s been three years since I last saw her. At best, it won’t change things, and at worst...” James’s words trailed as he eyed the king. “I cannot risk being sent back to Aragon. I will not leave my men when we are so close to putting an end to this war.”

“Reina Izabella bears you no ill will regarding her father’s death, so why should she order you back? We have gone over this. Your position here is safe. I know there is no equal to your leadership, even in my son.” The king steeled his gray eyes towards the throne. “He will need you when I am gone, though he will not admit it.”

“Su Majestad—”

The king waved him off. "I can see the truth." He shook his whitened head. "Lawrence's recklessness has stirred many doubts. Even my court counselors trust your judgment more than his. I know the two of you have not always seen eye to eye, but with his upcoming marriage to Izabella of Aragon, I hope he will be ready to take his place."

"Then I will do my best to make peace with the prince."

"And with your past?"

James glanced over his shoulder at the riders approaching and hardened his gaze.



Izabella reigned in her mare. Swords bolted into the air and a deafening "hurrah" echoed from the rows of troops assembled. Izabella was glad she had listened to Hanna and exchanged riding clothes for an elegant dress of velvet burgundy with gold embroidery. She sat confidently astride her Andalusian, the layers of richly adorned fabric draping in ripples around her. Bronze embellishments on bridle, reins, and stirrups completed her regal look. She wore her grandmother's gilt crown with red rubies and pale amber jewels, and they caught the sun's rays, spraying the outstretched swords with a dance of reflected light.

"Presenting, Reina Izabella, Lady of Aragon and Ruler of the Inglewood Mountains!" the herald shouted.

Her trusted captain had arrived a day early, and he greeted her with an encouraging nod and outstretched hand. As he eased the flowing skirts from their perch, a rock thrush began his serenade. Joy at the familiar sound spread into a smile on her face, and the royal lady glided through the sharpened archway with her head held high. King Martis of Catalan stood at the end of the shimmering tunnel and reached his arms out to her.

"¿Cómo eres mi preciosa?" He gripped her hands with his wrinkled ones. "I have missed you."

“Bueno, Majestad, bien. I have missed you too.”

“It has been so long. Have I grown too old and boring to be of use to you anymore?” He tucked her hand into the crook of his arm.

“No, Majestad.”

“You have not been hiding from me? My soon-to-be daughter?” he said.

Isabella’s smile strained. She was sure her eyes would give her away, for there was the knot that had been growing in her stomach for months. If Martis noticed, he did not betray it.

“Your journey was uneventful, I hope? Cook has prepared all your favorites. A fine feast awaits your approval.”

Roasted pine nuts and the earthy sweet smell of browned sugar wafted by. She smiled again and patted the king’s forearm. She would hide her unease, as she had been trained to do, until it was time.

The pair entered a richly adorned tent which served as the king’s personal quarters, dining, and receiving rooms. Warm beams of golden light danced through intricately cut canvas and woven tapestries hung rolled, ready to be released when the cool night air invaded. Officers lined the inside of the tent wall, and she made sure to speak to each one in the receiving line. She recognized several and lingered to talk to a stout man with sturdy build.

“How goes the war, Teniente?”

“It is well in hand, Majestad. The southern border is where the last of the trouble lies, but we will soon rout the enemy.”

“Bien. I’m glad to hear your men have been successful. War is a terrible thing, and I know many of you long for home.”

“And how is your home, Majestad? How is Aragon? Your private guard has successfully protected its homeland for many years without a conscripted army.”

“Indeed. El Guardia Nocturno has protected our family for over thirty years. But our enemies multiply and, I hear, grow more vicious by the day.”

The man leaned forward. “If you ever have the need, Majestad, there are many of us who remember the goodness of your father and the beauty of your land. You need only but ask.”

“Come, my dear,” the king interrupted, “we will have time yet for talk of armies. There is someone I wish for you to meet.”

“Give my love to your familia,” Izabella called back to the lieutenant as Martis led her to the end of the line.

“And now,” King Martis said with a flourish, “two of my most favorite people in the world, finally together. Reina Izabella, may I present the Commanding General of the Catalonian Army and my dear friend, General James Burdinor.”

The apprehension on the king’s face confused Izabella. She had never met the general before but looked forward to the pleasure for years. She had a myriad of questions to ask him regarding army tactics and was happy for a new guest at the dinner table. King Martis slowly moved out of her line of sight, and she felt her heart freeze.

An imposing soldier with a tall build and broad shoulders approached. His dark curls and thick beard did little to hide his brown eyes from penetrating her soul. A loud throbbing in her head choked out his indiscernible words and tears pricked her eyes. *She should have eaten.* The room began to grow dark at the edges and she fought to stand.



THE REUNION

“**R**eina Izabella,” James said as he bowed, “it is good to see you again. May I congratulate you on your upcoming wedding to the crown-prince.” The words were bile in his mouth and his stomach churned.

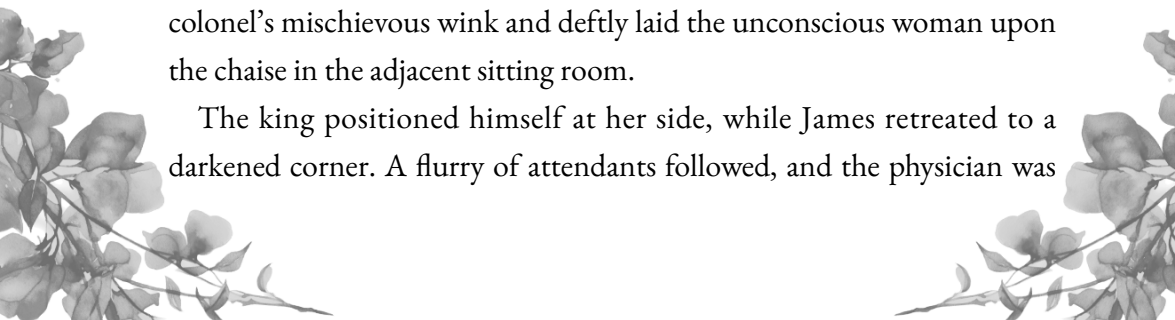
The queen gasped. Her reaction to him was as he had feared. Surprise and anguish fought within her striking features. It had been three long years and now those beautiful green eyes, large and glassy, stared hard into him, searching his face over.

“James?” she asked, in a quivering voice.

At least she recognized him. She tried to take a step forward, but wobbled, mumbling incoherent words. He noticed the color draining from her sun-kissed cheeks. He was accustomed to the signs of soldiers fainting under the morning sun and he crossed the few steps between them quickly. As soon as her knees gave way, he was there to catch her. He pulled her in and lifted her into his arms.

The scene quickly changed from one of festivity to that of concern. James stood like an awkward statue as the room shifted into action. Men parted shoulders as he walked by with his lovely burden. He ignored his colonel’s mischievous wink and deftly laid the unconscious woman upon the chaise in the adjacent sitting room.

The king positioned himself at her side, while James retreated to a darkened corner. A flurry of attendants followed, and the physician was



brought in. Water and light food were to be given once she awoke. Surely it was the strain of the journey and the early morning. Neither James nor King Martis made mention of the shock they had just given her. It was decided breakfast should be eaten by all, and the procession of maids, officers and servants were ushered out.

James watched as King Martis drew Izabella's hair away from her face. Her wild auburn waves had a mind of their own and she was constantly at war with her locks, beautiful as they were. She had turned nineteen this spring—the age he was the last time he had seen her. She had grown up. Would she think him very changed? He took a bold step forward as King Martis spoke.

“She has carried the burden of ruling alone well, but she is weary since last I saw her. She hides it behind her smile.”

It was true. Instead of the carefree girl of sixteen, James now saw a woman bearing the weight of the world on her shoulders. Yet her smile lines gave evidence of a good life.

James felt jealousy simmer to the surface. Izabella's engagement to the king's son had been a harsh blow. She was more striking than ever, and the stories of her kindness confirmed what he had always known to be true. His heart raced. *She had ended up in his arms once again.*

His thoughts were broken as a couple rushed into the room. Hanna appeared, followed by her husband, Nathaniel Bowman, Captain of the Queen's Nightguardsmen. Hanna rushed to her queen's side and quickly felt her forehead. Satisfied with the measures taken, she quietly spoke to the king, then stood and looked around. Nathaniel motioned to the shadows, and Hanna locked eyes with the general. *Trapped.*

Her rosy cheeks flushed, and a well of emotion rose within James. She looked the same, but plumper around the hips and face—married life had been good to her. He regretted not being there for the couple's joyous day. She rushed to him, and he instinctively braced for impact.

She thrust her short arms around his neck.

“Oh, James! Can it really be you?”

It was difficult to find air in her tight embrace, but he didn't care. Nathaniel wrapped them in a giant bear hug. They, at least, did not hate him. The precious seconds passed slowly as years melted away. They released a collective sigh, and whispered prayers of thanks.

“The shock must have been too much for her.” Hanna hurried back to her mistress's side. “Su Majestad, it's all right. It's him—you can wake up now. James, come here where she can hear your voice.”

He held to the defensive position of the corner.

“James, she will want to see you. Why are you skulking about?”

He breathed deep. To disobey would cause a ruckus. He walked over and the king gave way, but James saw reluctance in his face.

“Call to her. There, Majestad. He's here now. It's going to be alright.” Hanna laid a wet cloth upon the sweet forehead and put the limp fingers in his rough hand. “James, this is no time to be shy. Talk to her and she will be awake and eating in no time.”

With a deep sigh, James knelt by the closed eyes and whispered a few words.

“Go on. You might be an impressive general now, but don't forget who bandaged you up after all your escapades.” Hanna looked up at her husband and Nathaniel squeezed her shoulder.

James shifted uncomfortably on his knees.

“It's me, Bella...” The name caught in his throat. Izabella's hand grasped his and memories flooded his mind. *He couldn't do this. He wasn't ready.*

He stood as Izabella's eyelids fluttered open. “Nathaniel, Hanna,” he said, “things are different now.” James glanced at King Martis.

“James?” came the weak voice from the cushions.

James hurried to his feet and hurdled himself towards the doorway. Nathaniel was on his heels and Hanna called him, but James shut out the voices of his past with the steady beat of his feet.



HEART'S DESIRE

Izabella opened her eyes and stared into the crack of light. The curtained doorway fluttered, and she peered into the faces of the king and Hanna. They looked as shocked as she felt. Quiet tears ran onto her dress, and Hanna wrapped her in her arms.

“Forgive me,” Izabella said. “I’m sure I’ve spoiled breakfast.”

“No, it is I who should be apologizing,” Martis said, catching her hand in his. “I should have given you warning, with or without the general’s approval.” His bushy brows furrowed, and a stormy look came into his eyes.

Izabella’s lip quivered. She never did succumb to the idea of James’ death. It was only in the last few months her hope had wavered.

“Why has he been hiding? Why didn’t you send me word?”

The king sighed heavily and leaned back into his chair. “I know you have many questions, but there are no simple answers. Countless times I wanted to tell you, but always, something restrained me.” He shrugged. “Not even the general’s staff knows of his true beginnings.”

A storm of feelings passed in and out of Izabella’s heart, and her mind was in a flurry, adding to a pounding headache. She rubbed her forehead. “Did not your officers wonder who he was and from where he came? How could he have hidden for so long?”

“Si, it is true, many of my advisors would have recognized James from his time serving with your father. Which is why he has never been to the

capital. James has served entirely from the battlefield, his personal choice. Only I, Príncipe Lawrence, and the Burdinor family know the truth.”

“Who?” Izabella’s mind raced. The young James, a rising star in her father’s kingdom, had suspiciously disappeared without a trace the day of her father’s tragic death. Her heart was sick, but her stomach growled.

Hanna gave her a look. “Comida, Su Majestad?”

Izabella nodded with a blush. “And, Hanna, make the tea strong, por favor.” Izabella took a deep breath and rubbed her temples. *Was this really happening?*

Until the age of sixteen, her life had been easy, full of gaiety and laughter. Predictable and secure. Those days were no more, but she could do better than this. She sat straighter among the cushions and dried her eyes. “I’d like to know the whole story. From the beginning. Who are the Burdinors?”

“Of course.” King Martis leaned back in his chair and waved to an attendant for a cushion. Apparently, this story would take some time.

“That good and generous family lives near our shared border. They found James in their fields one night, wounded and near death. They had lost their only son in the war the previous year, and their grief was fresh. They took James in without question. They nursed him back to health, and he worked on their farm, regaining his strength. He eventually told them where he was from, and in turn, they gave him their name to make a new start. I thank Dios he felt he was able to trust me, even then. He relayed a message to me just weeks after the accident with your father—”

“It wasn’t an accident.”

“Ah, si, perdóname. James believes the rockslide that killed your father was treason and has been hunting down the criminals ever since. There were threats to his mother’s life and yours, mi ángel, if ever he was to return to Aragon or make any contact with you. In his mind, by staying away, he was keeping you safe.”

Izabella stared at her hands. She understood, but that didn't mean she had to agree with it. Thankfully, Hanna's impeccable timing gave her a moment to gather herself.

A tray piled with warm rosquilla filled her senses and, for a second, she relaxed. The ring-shaped pastries flecked with sugar and star anise instantly brought back memories of her childhood. She took a bite and sighed into the flavors. With her stomach at bay and her senses piqued, Izabella eyed the king.

James had stayed away by choice. To protect her maybe, but it didn't feel like she had been protected. *And how did she know it had been James' decision and not Rey Martis'?*

"Will I be allowed to see him again?"

"Of course. He is still your subject, bound by your laws, and you are soon to be la reina of this nation, of which he would be your commanding general. You can do what you like with him, the fool! We have no quarrels, he, and I, except on this."

"My lady!" Nathaniel, panting, burst through the tent flaps. "The general has left."

"Left?" The king and queen exchanged glances.

"He received this message as we spoke." Nathaniel handed a note over to King Martis. "But," he turned back to Izabella with earnest eyes, "he assured me, he would be back. He is done running."

Izabella studied Nathaniel's face. "Have a seat, Capitán," she said. "The king was explaining what James has been doing here—why we never received word from him."

Nathaniel pulled up a chair and stared at the pastries. "Ah, si." He shifted, nearly upsetting the table. "I spoke to him about it when I first arrived."

A small gasp from the curtains confirmed Hanna's eavesdropping abilities.

Izabella narrowed her eyes. “Capitán Bowman, you found out about James and didn’t inform tu reina right away?”

“Su Majestad, I would have ridden out to you myself, had I been allowed.”

Izabella looked for his eyes to betray his conviction and she knew Hanna was doing the same. She snapped her attention back to the king. “Majestad, I should have been privy.”

King Martis cleared his throat. “James apparently bypassed my counsel and revealed himself to your guards ahead of time. Certainly, I did not expect it would be such a shock to you, *mija*, else I would have given you warning.” King Martis held the open message in his hand, hiding himself behind its contents. “Of course, we both wanted to tell you, but the schemes of the enemy proved to be well planned, and James did not want to take any chances. Besides, he felt the ultimate blame led to him.”

“Blame?” Izabella said. “You speak of my father’s death?” A flush of feelings swept over her. She raised her finger toward Hanna. She was going to need more tea.

“Su Majestad,” said Nathaniel to the king, “James’ directions up and down the mountain were clearly laid out in his report. He specifically instructed the late King Archer *not* to take that path for fear of a rockslide. I’ve gone over the paperwork myself.”

“I understand.” Martis waved a dismissive hand. “But that is not how he sees it. James grew up on those mountains, so to him, it was his responsibility to keep Rey Archer safe. Naturally, since he left the riding party early, he feels guilty. It is a common symptom—one he has had to give his men counsel on many occasions, yet he cannot see it for himself.”

The king tapped the paper in his hands.

“The raids on our borders have increased as we tighten the noose around our enemy’s neck. There was another attack, and James has gone to investigate, though, I am afraid I already know the outcome.”

“Shall I go after him?” Nathaniel said. “Will he need support? My men are ready.”

The king shook his head. “This is our battle, and your place is here with tu reina. We will send men with supplies to aid the wounded.” The king called for a courier and scribbled a quick note. “Take this to Colonel Xavier.” He turned back to Nathaniel. His large knuckles tightened around the arm of his chair. “Those people will have been through enough grief for a lifetime, and they will not recognize your flags.” The king reached for his walking stick and pushed himself up. “If you will excuse me, I must brief my officers.”

Izabella’s pulse quickened. A furtive glance at Nathaniel confirmed his support.

“Su Majestad, may I accompany you? I should know firsthand what we are facing.”

“Mi ángel, there are unsavory details. It has already proven to be a difficult morning for you.”

“Would you tell my capitán instead?”

“Of course, he is welcome.”

“Then, you can tell me.” Izabella rose with Nathaniel at her side. “You may not think it, but there is strength enough in me.”

King Martis stiffened. “Child, to lead one’s country means doing things we do not wish to do. But it can also mean *not* doing things we desire.”

Izabella grimaced. . He had known about James and not said a word. He was likely under orders by his father, but it didn’t matter. She felt deceived.

Halfway out the door, Martis grumbled and called back. “Do not complain of the nightmares you will have.”

Izabella looked at Nathaniel who gave a knowing nod. Hanna quietly handed her a rosquilla bundled in a handkerchief and Izabella took one last sip of tea. One would never have guessed from the dainty morsels what an extraordinary morning it had been. James Inglewood was alive. He fought for another country and his exile was of his own doing.

Nathaniel led her to the doorway, and she tightened her grip on his arm.
Nightmares. If King Martis only knew.



THE ENEMY

James arrived at the appointed village and dismounted on the outskirts. He picked his way around the dusty paths leading to the grazing lands of the kingdom. Animals grunted and bayed in their stalls, and, though the night fires burned, a heavy darkness crept over the land.

James whispered a prayer his father taught him. He had not practiced shabbat since he fled Aragon, and the familiar Hebrew words brought comfort. It asked for protection from evil doers and for guidance—a prayer highly appropriate for tonight.

James and the Catalanian army were close to finishing the war, but, as a last rain of fire, the attacks from their enemy were no longer against the army only, but against the people. Damaged property was of little concern when village after village was targeted with malicious intent. Rumors of the black rider leading them had circulated, but now the stories trickled in of men, women and children being herded into packs. They were beaten, then forced to watch in horror, as women and girls were dragged away.

As James strode further amongst the stone dwellings, the soul-wrenching sounds came like a tidal wave, hitting him from all directions. Heaving sobs from fresh widows mixed with tormented cries from abused girls. Babies whimpered at distant mothers, while the steady sharpening of metal sliced through the din as fathers and brothers prepared to avenge.

Rage filled James as he held back stinging tears. He reveled in knowing there was a special place in hell reserved for the perpetrators. His chest

burned and his fingers ached. These innocents' blood and pain cried out for justice, and he and his men were ready to answer.



Alex Payne jumped atop a cart full of barrels and watched as his marauders wound themselves into an impassioned craze. He stroked his glossy beard. They had returned to their hidden forest base only hours ago, but the victors were already in a frenzy, the air ripe with the stench of ale and unwashed men.

Payne tightened the knot on the half-mask that covered the left side of his face and unsheathed his sword, jolting it into the air. "That's one more village-full that'll be having nightmares about us, boys!"

The gathering of drunken scoundrels roared with laughter.

He stroked his blade slowly across the audience, stopping at one man. "Most of those country pigs resemble, well, pigs, but every village has their fair maiden. A toast to Bram."

"Here, here," came the shouts and the men jostled each other knowingly.

"The lucky devil to find the diamond in the rough." Payne winked, but his scowl betrayed his jealousy.

The men cheered as they pushed their inebriated comrade to the front.

"Give him a barrel, lads! He needs it to forget his broken heart." Payne laughed ridiculously and the crowd joined him. Bram saluted in thanks and teetered away with a troop of men, eager to lend him aid. Alex Payne let the men revel for a few more minutes before he lifted his hand for silence. He lowered his voice to gain their full attention.

"Lads, you've done well. I'm proud of what we have accomplished." He panned the congested area, then raised his fist. "No one thought we were good enough." He nodded to his officers. "We were cast out!"

"Sil!"

"We were banished!"

“Si!”

“We were the rejects of society, but soon, *they* will come groveling to *us*! We banded together and now threaten a kingdom!” His nostrils flared and his muscles strained.

“Hazzah!” came the wild shouts.

He soaked in their accolades. They adored him when they were drunk and hated him when they were sober. This was his chance to secure their allegiance, once again priming them for the final stage of his plan.

“And now,” he said, pausing for impact, “we are ready to strike the head of the snake. The mighty general of Catalan still hunts us, but where is he?” Payne scowled at the crowd. “The man pours over maps, searching for clues, and we have left them, haven’t we?” A few chuckles were heard. “We are a black thorn in the side of Martis. My spies say el rey is nearing his end. We have worn him down and Catalan will soon be ripe for the taking.”

“When do we strike?” came a shout.

“La majestad! We want la reina!”

The coarse mob roared with laughter, whistling their approval.

Payne clenched his jaw. *If he wasn't careful, Izabella could be killed in the next battle.* He flashed his teeth and tilted his head as if to reveal a dirty little secret.

“Ah, si, la reina. Who can forget her, for it is she who is at the back of all our minds. That last beacon of hope for the eastern lands will soon come to her senses. You have heard tales of her beauty but beware of her sorcery! She will seduce you with one look and no maiden will ever slake your thirst again! Beware of her touch for in her hands she holds the power of death. She has studied the ancient scrolls and will not hesitate to use them against us. Misery and torment are what she brings!”

“This one says he’s seen her!” came a cry from the back.

“I have, I have seen her!” said a youth in response.

“And what of it?” came the rude reply from the grizzled man next to him.

Payne held his breath.

The boy spoke as if in a trance. “She is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. I looked into her eyes, and it was as if she was staring into my soul.”

Payne breathed a small sigh of relief. “That’s it, gentlemen! Spoken from the mouth of babes.”

“She healed my sister!”

Alex cringed.

A second young scrag of a boy pushed himself into the crowd.

“My brother had a fever and...”

“And la reina laid her hand upon her, said some fancy words, and your brother made magically made well?”

A low rumble of laughter curled through the crowd and Alex jumped down from his perch and strode toward the lad.

“Do not allow yourself to be brought into her lies. I’ve seen it myself. A fairer maid there never was, nor a more powerful sorceress, but at what cost, my brothers? What does she ask for in return?”

“No-noth...”

“There is always a price to be had, boy!” Alex grabbed the boy’s collar, his dirty shirt bunched up in Payne’s fist.

“Her god demands a cost! Do you remember what happened to her father? The misguided men of El Guardia Nocturno who accompanied their king on his fateful ride? Or her mother who died of a broken heart?” He dropped the boy back to his feet with a shove. “Of course not, for you are too young. All who come near her are doomed to a terrible fate. And now, we hear, she is at the king’s camp? With any luck, she’ll spread her tormenting disease upon those weak-minded fools.”

The men sounded their approval with hearty groans.

Careful now. The less they know, the better.

“Aragon will be an easy take once we have Catalan in our grip, but la reina is not to be touched. Do you hear? Do not harm her, lest her wrath spill out upon our armies. Bring her to me, for I have studied how to deal with her. As for the rest, we wait for the right time—and then we strike!”

The men cheered in unison raising swords high into the air. They were eating out of his hand. Such a wretched bunch, it didn’t take much to sway them.

“Hear me now! Our path of destruction would seem to lead to Organya. The enemy will send a detachment of their finest battle-hardened soldiers to guard it, but we will not be there. No! We have worked hard for this day! We have bided our time and kept our secrets! We will attack from the north and slit their throats while they sleep. We will kill el rey and el príncipe and watch them swirl in derision!”

The roar was thundering as they pounded their approval upon the sad earth. He took leave amid their carousing and smiled at his cleverness. He would be a great king. He would be the one to unite Catalan with the southern Moorish kingdoms. With the strength of those nations, he would have enough force to sweep through the rugged mountain country of Aragon and take it by force. He would tear down the old mountain strongholds, sit on the throne of the king, and make Izabella his bride. He would make sure James stayed alive for at least that long.



THE REALIZATION

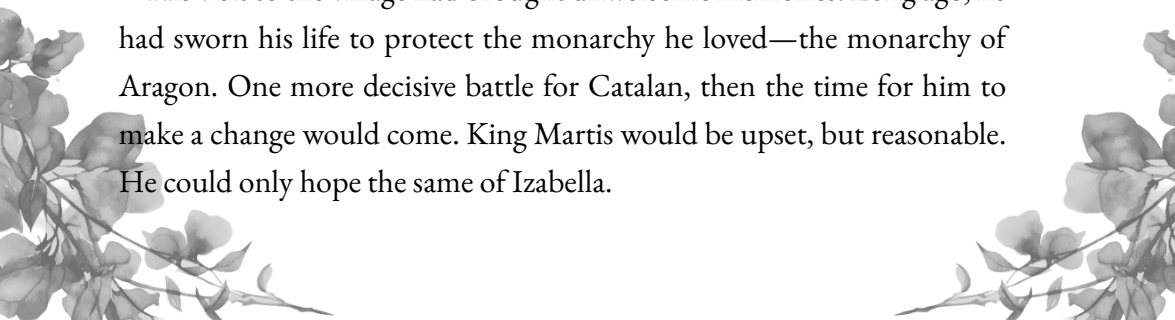
James reached down and patted his horse's side.
"Almost there, boy."

Far to the west, the late afternoon sun hung above the foothills, marking the border between the realms of Aragon and Catalan. Beyond those foothills rested the Inglewood mountains of his birth. James had never allowed himself hope of returning, but he thought of them often. He missed their steep slopes alive in spring with a myriad of wildflowers. Winter brought pelting snow and ice, but also cozy fires and time for stories passed down through generations. It was a hard life, but its simplicity had its rewards. Families were close-knit and the brawn he earned as a young lad served him well on the battlefield.

In contrast, the valley of Aragon, with its fertile patchwork farms and rippling riverbeds, was a child's best friend. Fishing, berry picking, and the friendly faces of the bustling town of Loarre drew many. The two communities relied on one another and had worked together to ensure the safety of their lands.

Safety.

His visit to the village had brought unwelcome memories. Long ago, he had sworn his life to protect the monarchy he loved—the monarchy of Aragon. One more decisive battle for Catalan, then the time for him to make a change would come. King Martis would be upset, but reasonable. He could only hope the same of Izabella.



As the white tents of his army came into view, new recruits fumbled to stand at attention, while his seasoned veterans snapped their salutes. He fought alongside most of them in many battles these past three years, and their bonds of blood ran deep. Their inquisitive looks, however, made him wonder about the gossip regarding his swift departure.

“Welcome home, heartbreaker!”

Xavier’s big smile greeted him and cleared away all doubt. *The rumors were flying.*

James shook his head. “You know, you could try and keep it down? Maybe if you go back to being a private for a while...”

“What? Me? I haven’t done a thing! Besides,” Xavier elbowed James in the ribs and winked, “not too shabby. The señoritas are swooning over you. They can’t stop talking about how you swept la reina into your iron arms, then fled from the betrothed temptress into the horizon.” Xavier slapped him on the shoulder. “You’ll find a wife in no time!”

James growled. “The last thing I need...”

“Si, what you need! This has been my highest priority for the last two years. You’re working yourself to death and taking me right along with you. I need to find you a señorita!”

“I’m in such capable hands.”

“Of course, you are!”

James rolled his eyes. “Having a wife is not the same as having a woman, Xavier.”

“I know this, still women love me.”

“No, you love women. There is a difference.”

“Fine, fine. I see what you mean. It is difficult with us being gone so much. Besides, Señora Xavier Fernandez must first be able to duplicate your mother’s Crema Catalana to perfection and that is no small feat. But she’ll be a beauty, you can be sure about that.”

James handed his horse off to a private and started walking. He had heard this speech before. If there had been trouble, Xavier would have told him.

The man enjoyed ribbing James more than he liked, but Xavier was as loyal a friend as they came.

“So, where we headed? To el rey?”

James kept an even pace and nodded.

“Terrible news about the village.”

James locked his eyes on the large tent ahead.

“Was it as bad as the others?”

“Worse.”

Xavier shook his head with disgust. “El Mascara strikes again.”

“He’s sending a message.”

“Because we’ve almost got him.”

“Almost. I’ll need you to take a detachment of men to Organya,” said James.

“The men will be happy. They’re itching for battle.”

“It will come soon enough.”

“I never was clear on what happened the other morning. Is la reina prone to fainting spells?”

James’s jaw pulsed.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say that wasn’t the first time you had saved a maiden in despair. You’re a natural.”

James gritted his teeth.

“Reina Izabella, she’s something special, eh? Been a breath of fresh air around here. Smart too. Wants to know what it takes to keep an army: food, supplies, weapons, training, the whole thing. Apparently, el rey didn’t take her request seriously, but she’s been out with us every day, peppering our officers with questions. Not that they mind. They’re happy to have her. Better company than their grump of a general.”

James shot him a sideways glare.

“Hey, just making sure you’re still with me. You were drifting.”

“I’ve got a lot on my mind.” James ducked into the king’s entryway. He stopped and looked his second in command straight in the eye. “This might be rough.”

“You think?”

“There are things about my past...things I haven’t told you.”

“Well then, this is my lucky day.”

James shook his head and couldn’t help but smile at his friend’s unrelenting persistence. Xavier’s sense of humor had gotten them through many rough nights. He would have to thank him one day. James nodded, then set his face towards the throne. Humility would be his best ally.

“Su Majestad!” James dropped to one knee in front of the carved throne and Xavier followed suit.

“Good luck,” Xavier whispered.

King Martis pulled himself to his feet.

“So! He decides to return? I see my little talk went straight to your head! Now you suppose you can run off, despite my wishes. Forgetting your duty? Of all the foolhardy things to do, James Inglewood! Did you really need three days to think it over?”

Xavier shot a sideways glance at his friend. “Inglewood?”

“Si, Inglewood! My breath is nearly gone, but my hearing is still sharp! Rise, gentlemen. Coronel Xavier, meet General James Inglewood of the Inglewood Mountains and true citizen of the kingdom of Aragon. The secret is out, so we may as well get through the introductions.”

James dared a nervous peek towards the king, then at his friend.

“You’re from Aragon?” Xavier said.

“It is high time your staff knew. I have put it off too long, far beyond my good conscience.” King Martis looked more tired than usual and slowly lowered himself to his throne. “It is time to start a new chapter in your life, James, though this is not how I thought it would begin.”

“Oh, you’re in it deeper than I imagined!” Xavier stood. “That means you already knew la reina! Wait, wait just a moment.” He held his hand to his head and closed his eyes.

James could tell Xavier’s shrewd mind was working overtime as he held up a finger. He pointed at James.

“Inglewood...that name. The mountain kingdom? The last rey passed away years ago. Wait, that wouldn’t have been your father?” Xavier was wide-eyed now. “I can’t believe it!” He practically jumped for joy. He gave a comical little bow to his friend, then paused. “My sincere condolences at the loss of your father.” An eye twitched and his expression changed. “But if you were born a prince, you would have been eligible to marry...” He laughed with all the glee of a child.

James peeked at the king, trying to gauge his reaction.

“That would be something! Stoic you, engaged to that beam of sunshine!” Xavier laughed again, oblivious to the king’s scowl.

“General Xavier!” The king cut him off. “You have a quick mind. Also, a quick tongue. Silencio!”

Xavier bowed. “Si, Majestad.” He looked sideways at his friend, but James did not rebuff him. He was not angry, rather his thoughts were somewhere else entirely.

The king broke the awkward silence. “General, have you anything to say?” He leaned forward to the edge of his throne.

James knew the king wanted the truth, but how much did he really have to say? James stumbled over his words.

“James,” King Martis was visibly irritated, “I have not asked because I have never had a reason to wonder. Reina Izabella is engaged to my son. Is there anything that would disrupt that? Is there anything I should know that would interfere with their being wed?” King Martis leaned further with every question.

James closed his eyes and sighed. Certainly, the king had every right to be upset. He shot a dirty look at Xavier before turning to face King Martis.

“It’s complicated.”

“Haha! I was right!” Xavier blurted the words before he could catch himself.

“Xavier!” said James.

“James!” said the king.

Xavier halted his celebration.

The king’s forehead wrinkled all the way down to his furry white eyebrows. “Speak now and speak quickly. My patience is wearing thin.”

“Si, señor.”

James shifted his feet and crossed his arms to contain his beating heart.

“It was the day I returned from diplomatic duties. I was gone a year, but in that time, Rey Archer, may he rest in peace, had granted me permission to correspond with the princesa.”

“With Izabella.”

“Si, with Izabella. Up until then, our interactions were kept at a minimum. All those training for El Guardia Nocturno had strict rules regarding their conduct with the royal family. After—a particular incident—the princesa became quite attached to me.”

“A particular incident?”

“I came to her aid during a dangerous situation.”

Xavier couldn’t contain his glee. “You saved her life, didn’t you? Oh, ho, ho! It just keeps getting better!”

“Coronel, would you prefer to be excused?” the king said sternly.

“No, no. Disculpe. Not another peep.” He motioned sealing his lips.

“Bien. No more interruptions. I will allow you because, by mere chance, your insatiable curiosity seems to have pieced together an important detail I have missed. Or perhaps one I have purposely been blinded to.” The king gave James a wary look.

“Muchos gracias, Majestad.” Xavier backed against the curtained wall to listen.

“Now, you were saying, General...”

James continued. "I did save her. Naturally, she became very attached to me, and her father, Rey Archer, thought it best to limit our contact with one another." James thought back to the playful eyes that found their way to his around corners and through bushes. Her cleverness and determination unconsciously made him smile.

King Martis muttered to himself. "This complicates matters, but you still have not answered the question."

"She was young, and I cared for her, but no more than I cared for her hermana Camilla. They were under our protection. That was all, for they were but girls. When I was eighteen, Rey Archer made me Aragon's diplomatic relations officer. He said when I returned, my training would be complete, and we would discuss my future. I wasn't sure what he meant, but I trusted him implicitly."

"How old was the princesa, Izabella?"

"She was fifteen when I left."

"Marrying age. She had many suitors. Archer would have been looking for a match for her." The king paused in thought, "Yet he sent you away?"

"I was not of eligible rank."

"But I thought you were a prince?" Xavier asked.

James looked to the king for approval to answer the question. "I held the title of prince for only the first month of my life. My people were dwindling in number. Rather than face the harsh existence of the mountains, many of the youth chose to live in the valley of Aragon. My father selflessly gave up his right to be called Rey of the Mountain and exchanged it for the resources and protection of Aragon. And a private education for a son born to him in his old age."

"That doesn't sound like a very good deal," said Xavier quietly.

A burning like embers smoldering spread through James's chest. "My father was certain it was the best decision he could have made. He wanted me to have the education and training to carry our people into the future,

no matter my title. My birth was a surprise to him and my mother, yet it gave them hope that our family's legacy would continue."

King Martis cleared his throat. "May we proceed, Xavier? Have you all the facts you need?"

"Si, I believe I'm beginning to understand."

James rolled his eyes and shook his head.

King Martis glared.

"Oh! Perdon!" Xavier slouched back down.

The king took a deep breath, eyeing Xavier closely. For a few seconds James was sure the colonel had gotten himself thrown out, but the king seemed to think better of it.

"We were speaking of your diplomatic trip. Archer sent you away, despite the princess showing interest?"

"I believe that was part of the reason for sending me away. She was visibly upset when I left, but I looked forward to seeing more of the world."

"And you returned one year later?"

"I did."

"But it was you who asked to write?"

"Si. I asked." James could feel his cheeks beginning to flush.

"What changed?" asked the king.

"I missed her." James shrugged. "I missed her laugh when she knew she had caught me off guard. I missed her quietness when she saw I was homesick for the mountains." He shook his head. "We hardly spoke, but when we did, it was always pleasant. Familiar. I knew she sought me out and I realized that I too had begun to look for a chance to see her smile." He stopped, catching his nostalgia too late.

"Go on," said the king firmly.

"When I wrote, it was of my travels, who I met, the sights and foods. Nothing romantic in the least. I knew her letters would be read, and I kept them as innocent as possible. My time abroad soon came to an end, and I received one last letter before I returned. In it she told me of

the preparations for her sixteenth birthday festival. She conveyed she was nervous and not looking forward to the official celebration. She asked if I would be back in time and hinted at my rescuing her as before. It was the first time either of us spoke of any favor shown towards the other.”

Here James stopped again. He had not allowed his thoughts to wander this path for years, and now the consequences of burying his past so deep were beginning to seem a mountain insurmountable. He wiped his brow and fisted his shaking hands. Martis must have noticed.

“How far away is the village that was attacked?”

“Two day’s ride.”

“Each way? Did you even sleep?”

“I rode through the night.”

“Hmph. In both directions apparently.” The king grumbled to himself. “Pull up a seat, James. You look terrible and this will be no short conversation.”

Xavier hurried off to fetch a chair for his friend, and James sank into the wooden back like it was made of feathers.

“I’m not sure how much more suspense your coronel can take,” the king said, looking over at Xavier who was back at the curtain, biting his nails. “I realize you have a had a long journey, but we must see this through. Please continue.”

James raked his fingers through his hair. *What happened next? What had changed?*

“When I arrived home to the castle, my coming was expected. All the royal house was out to greet me and especially the royal family. The princesses were dressed in their new spring dresses and Izabella looked...” His voice trailed off and he chose his words carefully. “She had grown up in my absence. She was no longer a girl, but a woman, and she had eyes only for me.” His stubbled face burned again, but this time, he didn’t try to hide it.

“I did not get a chance to speak with her, for Rey Archer saw our looks and immediately asked to speak with me alone in his chambers. I thought I was done for, that I had pushed the boundaries too far. But rather than a reprimand, I received encouragement. El rey confided there were many suitors coming to the festival that evening, for I made it just in time, and Izabella had made it known to him that she would rather he decide for her. He thought he had given her a great opportunity to choose a husband for herself, but as she was so repelled by the constant flattery and showy behavior of most of the men, she was quite at a loss.”

The king shifted uneasily in his throne.

James and Xavier looked up, and James braced himself. *Lawrence had been one of those suitors.*

“Without using the exact words, he hinted that if I had any inclinations towards the princess, I could proceed with caution. He released me from my vows in El Guardia Nocturno and told me I could mingle with the guests on equal footing. He re-instituted all the rights and privileges my birth had afforded, and said how very proud he was of me—that he would be honored to have a son like me.”

James choked on these last words. The bonds between him and his king had been as strong as those he had with his own father. The pain of losing them both was crippling. He covered his face as the emotion from the last few days caught up with him. It seemed too much for one man to bear.

King Martis prodded. “And that night you proposed?”

James gathered himself and wiped an unfamiliar tear aside. “I do not deny it was a magical night. We danced the Aragonese Jota and laughed till our sides ached. I felt I could conquer the world with her on my arm. More importantly, we were finally able to have a real conversation. We were shy, but the words slowly came, and the hours passed on wings.”

“And then you proposed?” Xavier couldn’t seem to help himself.

James looked up. “No. How could I? I couldn’t propose to a royal on a whim. We were just starting to get to know one another—as adults,

as equals. I wanted to speak to my parents, to ask their blessing before I proceeded. That night, after she refused to dance with anyone else, I kissed her, and we said goodbye till the morrow.”

“And then you proposed?” Xavier strained with expectancy.

“And then the world came crashing down.” James’s voice fell and he looked at King Martis with knowing eyes.

“The next day I led El Rey Archer and a party of his closest advisors on a tour of the mountains. I separated from the group on the way down to visit my parents. My home was ambushed, my father was murdered, and a rockslide killed the entire riding party, including el rey of Aragon. I was blamed for their deaths, a coup was attempted, and I was chased out of the country.”

Xavier sank next to the chair.

“So, in answer to your question, Majestad, no. Izabella and I were never engaged.”



ANGER

James came dragging out of the king's quarters feeling like a beaten rug. A bed was what he wanted, but he knew it would take hours to fall asleep. He needed to settle himself. He needed a distraction.

"This may not be the best timing," Xavier interrupted, "but an old man by the name of Eijin said to tell you he would be in the forest waiting for you when you returned. Odd looking fellow."

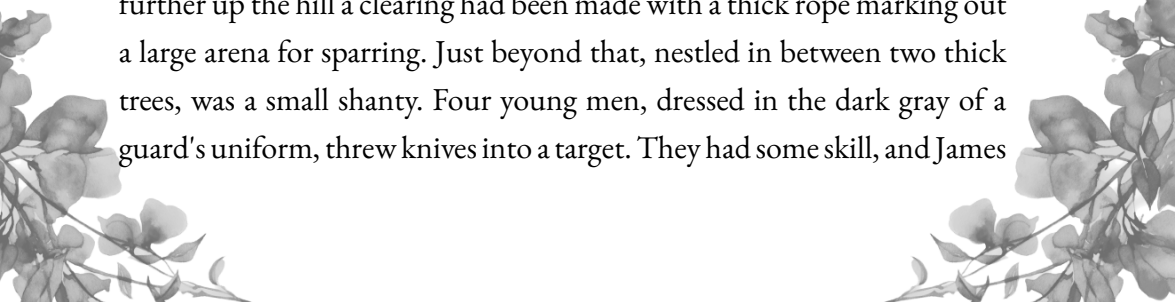
James cracked a tired smile. "How far past the tree line?"

"Don't you want to go collapse somewhere? I'll make sure you're not disturbed."

James shook his head. "I'll need your pity later, but now," he smiled warmly, "I have an appointment to keep."

"You need to sleep sometime!" he heard Xavier call as he began the jaunt to the forest.

Dimly lit and clothed in the towering pine's shadows, this wasn't the usual sort of place to practice combat training—unless you had something to hide. With caution, James crept up to the makeshift training arena set up by the Izabella's men, the elite protectors of El Guardia Nocturno. Targets stuffed with fir branches were strapped to trees on the western side, while further up the hill a clearing had been made with a thick rope marking out a large arena for sparring. Just beyond that, nestled in between two thick trees, was a small shanty. Four young men, dressed in the dark gray of a guard's uniform, threw knives into a target. They had some skill, and James



was deciding whether to show himself when, from out behind the wooden building, came an old man.

He stood apart from the rest with his silver hair rolled tight on top of his head. His white whiskers grew sparse and contrasted handsomely with his brown skin. The indigo dyed tunic he wore was split down the middle and wrapped around his slight frame. A wide swath of fabric neatly folded lengthwise and knotted in the center formed a belt upon which a long silver sword swayed at his side.

James slowly emerged from the thick foliage and skirted the circle, not taking his eyes off his former master.

“James-san,” said the man, “I am pleased with your progress.”

“*Sensei.*” James bowed low but was nearly lifted off his feet by a hearty hug.

Master Eijin laughed. “I have taught you Europas honor through restraint, and you have taught me sincerity through candor.” He patted James on the back. “It is good to see you, my son. My spirit has longed for this day. Come, walk with me.”

James hurried to keep pace with the elder man. Eijin Uyeunten had maintained his vitality and quick eyes by pouring himself into the youth that beckoned at his doorstep. Originally from the Rykyuu Island Kingdom, he left home and sailed to Manchuria, where he met King Archer, Izabella’s father. As a young prince, Archer traveled to the far east and accidentally interrupted an ambush meant for the island warrior. On a barren, dusty road, the prince defended the foreigner valiantly. After fighting side by side, Eijin saw in Archer the man who could fulfill both master and pupil. He vowed to serve the prince for the rest of his life and Archer, in return, gave Eijin his protection and trust

“Your training has served you well.” Master Eijin walked silently through the trees.

“Hai, sensei. I would not have come so far without your and Rey Archer’s instruction.”

“So desu. Archer-san was a great leader, a visionary. He could see a need from afar and prepare when others said he was mad. But then!” He laughed. “Those same men would later beg forgiveness while naming him wiser than Solomon! Then they would repeat it all the next week.” He chuckled. They stopped and listened to a songbird call to its mate.

“You saw tu reina?” Eijin looked with crinkled eyes at James who mumbled about it not going as planned.

“When will you tell her?”

“Tell her?”

“Hai, you must tell her. You are living only half a life. ‘We are no more than candles burning in the wind,’ says the proverb. Before it is too late, James-san.”

James was perplexed. “Sensei?”

“I saw you that morning. The morning you ran from her. Did you find your answer? Men should not run. It is dishonorable. Fortune has given you a second chance. Maybe your Dios sees your sadness. You must take hold. What is it Archer used to say? From the Roman poet?”

“Carpe diem?”

“He loved that one.”

The old samurai and the general came to the edge of the forest and stood facing the arid eastern plains.

“Am I that obvious?” James ran his fingers through his hair.

Master Eijin smiled. “I have watched you your entire life, James-san.”

“But she is engaged.”

“And? So, the prince proposed. Did I miss the wedding? Nothing is decided.” Eijin smacked him on the back. “You, James, you must have courage! You are a warrior, fearless! You must fight for her!” He paused. “You must fight.”



Izabella flung back the curtains of her tent and threw her riding gloves across the room. *What was she doing here?* She had purposefully arrived a full week ahead of Lawrence, so she could have time with his father alone, time for questions and conversations. Uniting two countries under one banner was no small feat, and there were many details Lawrence cared nothing about that were missing. Instead, the king was preoccupied, she was flustered, and the great general of Catalan turned out to be James! She had been stunned to see him alive, happy, overjoyed even. But now, after several days of thinking it over, her feelings were not so rose-colored.

Tell el rey and la reina I'm sorry and I'll be back. After three years of hiding, that was the message? She paced feverishly. "Hanna! Any word from the woods?"

"Si." The bustling maid poked her head around a curtained wall. "Nathaniel rode by a few hours ago saying it was ready."

"And the king's men, do they know?"

"I believe they know enough."

"Bien. Please tell the others I am going straightaway."

"Si, Majestad." Hanna paused with her broom in the air. "He hasn't returned yet?"

"It is better for him that way. I might put a sword to his neck with how I'm feeling right now."

"He's got to come back some time, hasn't he?"

"He cannot hide forever, not anymore."

Izabella retrieved her gloves and flew out the door, her skirt and hair whipping the wind. With all the preparations for her trip, it had been a week since she trained with her men. The frustration from the last three days would be put to good use. If she was lucky, Master Eijin would allow her to spar with him or Nathaniel.

Nathaniel was younger than James, but he had soon risen to a position of leadership. He always spoke of her father in the kindest regard, as he was a little boy when he first began his apprenticeship. Her father would have

been so proud of the steadfast young men that had come up through the ranks of El Guardia.

The memories of her father's gallantry lightened her mood as she rode across the valley. Her mother had found them sparring once and shrieked with horror at the sight of her dainty daughter bedecked in leather armor, wielding a wooden sword. Izabella smiled at the memory. From then on, father and daughter practiced in the cellar and forged a special bond over their secret.

After her father's death, Eijin had agreed to continue her training, under the condition that the rest of the guard be let in on the family secret. Izabella was thankful for the brotherhood the company afforded her. She was second only to Nathaniel in marksmanship and enjoyed the friendly competition.

"Buenos días, Majestad!" called a young voice as she rode into the ring.

"Ola, Caleb. I really need this today. Is Sensei Eijin here?"

"Lo siento. He went to check the perimeter. Everything is ready for you, though. I tested it out this morning." He gave her a toothy grin.

"You are too kind," she said rolling her eyes. She made her way to the small hut set up for her against the mountainside where she exchanged her dress for a pair of men's pants and tunic. Her father had insisted all precautions be taken for her safety and had made her a thin mesh mask and a pair of specially lined gloves. With the amount of time she spent training, injuries were expected, but most were easily hidden under her flowing sleeves and gowns. Callused hands, however, would have betrayed her in an instant. Thanks to her father's foresight and ingenuity, her hands remained buttery smooth, and her hidden life safe.

She adjusted her bracer and whispered her customary prayer:

Dios, ever-living,

Protect these soldiers.

Be their constant companion,

And their strength in battle

*Help us to overcome war and violence
And to establish your laws of love and justice.
Grant this through Cristo our Lord.*

Her warm-ups were meditative, and she could have done them blindfolded. The workout was therapeutic and with every motion, her mind drifted further away to the first day at camp.

The king had taken her hand near the end of the greeting line. *Had he been trying to steady her for what would come?* In her mind's eye, she could see a tall figure approaching. She couldn't deny the exhilaration. *How many nights had she dreamed of leaning her head into James' chest once more? What had his eyes spoken as he said her name?* She jolted her thoughts to the present.

Guilt swept over her. She was engaged to Lawrence. Izabella focused her mind, zeroing in on the bullseye. As she slowed her breath, she determined she would not dwell in the past. *Thud!* Perfect shot. Besides, it was too late—he had left her long ago. *Thud!* Not a bullseye, but still close. Her eyes narrowed and her blood pulsed. He had hidden his life from her, and she had suffered in sorrow. *Thud!* She missed completely that time.

She blew the hair out of her eyes and laid aside her arrows. Unsheathing her sword, she took a few swings before striking her target. With her long sword in hand, she always felt closer to her father. Hers was a replica of his with a modified blade, half of her in length and slightly thinner than average. Made of Toledo steel, it was light, yet it rivaled Master Eijin's katana in strength. Timing her footwork, her weapon collided with straw and wood. *Better.*

She spun and sliced through the air. James had left them when they needed him most. Her sword lunged. *What kind of man does that?* Not an honorable one. *Not a friend.* Wood cracked under her force. Hot tears blurred her vision. Rage frothed up and she set her jaw. *Whack!*

She pried her sword out of the split wood. Spin and strike. Dodge and stab. She leveled all her past hopes and dreams upon the pathetic forms before her. They would die here. She would be freed from her past once and for all. Her sword gored the fresh oak. Swing after swing, spin after spin, the fiery warrior splintered wood and sent hay flying. Izabella took one more turn and buried the side of her sword in the last post, sounding a loud crack. She loosened her grip and exhaled hot breath into her sweaty mask. She smiled at herself, satisfied with the destruction left behind. She turned to look for congratulations from any onlookers.

“Caleb! Did you see that last one?” she asked. Her words trailed off as guards rushed at her.

“Shhh! Sensei comes with a stranger!”

“What? Who?” she said as she staggered backwards.

“I don’t know.”

Andrew appeared from the side. “It is the general, Su Majestad.”

“What?!” she hissed, prying her sword loose.

“Shhh! He’ll hear you! If you want to keep your secret safe, you must be quiet.”

“I need to leave!”

“It’s too late! He will see you!”

“No, I must!” Izabella began backing away. If she could make it to the tree line, she could circle back to the tent where her clothes were.

“My sons,” Master Eijin spoke loudly as he approached, “come forward.”

That was her cue. With one last heave, she freed her sword and ran for the dense forest.

Master Eijin waved, beckoning the men to gather. “Kiite kudasai, there is someone I wish for you to meet. Men, your long-lost hermano, General James Inglewood.” Master Eijin turned to face his companion. “James-san, okaerinasai. Welcome home.”

Izabella threaded her way through the trees. She couldn't deny the sanctity of the moment. James had either trained or trained with most of the older men. The younger ones had heard stories of his accomplishments, and he still held titles for many of their records. She recognized his voice and crouched behind a boulder to listen.

"Mi hermanos, I humbly offer my apology. I left you so long ago, under terrible conditions. I am sorry for abandoning you in the thick of trouble."

She couldn't see his face, but she could hear the emotion in his voice.

"I am sure you all know the tragic circumstances that parted us. I have missed this familia dearly, and I am sorry for not being able to reveal myself sooner. If there is any way you could forgive me, and if there is ever any aid I can give to you, I would be forever grateful."

Izabella heard the reassurances of the men and, within minutes, the slapping of backs and laughter as they welcomed their long-lost brother back into the fold. By now they all knew the real story of what had happened that day, and they had forgiven him long ago. She should have been happy for them, for their joyful reunion, but jealously burned their words in her ears. Their apology should have been hers. *What about her? What about the questions and pain he left her with?* She knew her disgust and bitter feelings were not wholly justified, but just this once, she didn't want to be the one to choose the higher path. She rose from her hiding spot. She was less than a hundred feet from the hut, but a commotion made her pause.

"Where is the man who did this?" the general asked, motioning towards the battered bags and wooden posts. "Sensei Eijin, you have not changed your training methods, I see? Always pushing, pushing." The general smiled fondly. "I wish to meet him! Which one of you is it?"

Uncomfortable silence was the only answer.

"He wore a mask. I know it was one of you here, for I saw him when we approached."

No one dared a word, for what would they say? *He had seen her.*

“Come, come, don’t be shy. This handiwork here,” James beckoned. “Quite the exercise! Looks like he needs a new challenge. Maybe we could clash swords a bit? I have missed training with El Guardia.” He began taking off his robe.

“Uh, he is gone, señor. He left as you walked over,” said a voice.

Izabella winced.

“What is your name, lad?”

“Caleb, señor.”

“Well, Caleb, though we have just met, I know all about you.”

“You do?”

“Si, Caleb, I do.” The general placed a large hand on the young man’s shoulder. “I know that no Guardia would dare leave his place when his sensei approaches. I know that you take special care with your weapons after each use, and they are specifically arranged when finished. And I know that wherever you are, all immediately come when Sensei Eijin beckons.”

He looked steadily into the men’s eyes. “So, I know that whoever that masked fighter is, he is still here.” James let go of Caleb, then slowly pointed at the weapons stand. “And you are missing a sword.”

His eyes panned across the group. “Why the secrecy? There is nothing to hide.”

“No, no. No hiding, my son,” spoke Eijin finally. He forced a smile and patted his former student on the shoulder. “Just not ready to reveal my star pupil yet.”

The general turned to his master. “Oh, your star pupil? Well then, I must meet him!”

“He is a bit shy, you might say. Very quiet. Keeps to himself.”

“Shyness did all this?! Let’s see him! Come on now, I’ll take it easy!” James picked up his sword and rolled his huge shoulders forward, motioning for the men to give him some room.

From the bushes, Izabella cringed. She was less than fifty feet away from her goal, but the general’s questions were legitimate. He knew their

protocols better than most. He was right to know the combatant was still there. If she kept quiet, Eijin would eventually have to tell him, for she knew he would not lie. But if she emerged from the bushes on her own, she would have to fight James, a situation she was more inclined to at the moment. Her choice was clear.

She strode out into the open to the surprise of all.



THE FIGHT

“Finally!” James said, swinging his sword over his head. “Let’s see how Sensei Eijin’s star student compares.”

Izabella’s palms were clammy. *What had she been thinking? She couldn’t fight James!*

“General, it would be an honor to spar with you.” Caleb stepped up to James.

“I’m sure you’re a fine soldier, but I don’t think you’re ready.”

“I’ll take you on, James,” chimed in Andrew. “It’s been a few years since you whipped me last. I’ve improved since then.”

“Qué? Si, all in good time,” James said fanning them back. He stepped into the center of the rope and waited for the masked warrior to approach. He laid aside his robe and emblems signifying him as commanding general. His summer tunic bared his sinewed arms and the other men looked questioningly toward their master.

Izabella’s heart warmed with her men’s attempts to put an end to this madness, but she saw no other choice. Not if she wished for her secret to remain safe. She looked to Master Eijin one last time. His somber face showed no hesitation. *Did he think she had a chance?*

She eyed the coiled surujin in the weapon’s stash. With metal studs on both ends of a long rope, she had worked hard to master the eastern weapon. Her sword was ready, but she would start with her favorite.

James stood with his hands on his hips, staring at her. "You're small for a member of El Guardia, aren't you?"

She strode past him and over to where the weapons were neatly laid.

"You going to fight with your mask on?"

She fingered a short, curved dagger and ignored him.

"Well then, at least allow me the pleasure of knowing my opponent's name?"

Still no answer.

"No? Have it your way. But after I beat you, you're going to learn some manners." He plowed forward.

With the fresh sting of his words, Izabella whipped out the surujin at James's hands. The rope flung itself around the hilt of his sword, and she stripped the weapon out of the dumbfounded general's hands.

"Hurrah!" the men cheered.

James silenced them with a look.

Master Eijin smiled. "My son, though you may have size on your side, do not underestimate my star pupil."

Izabella picked up the fallen sword and held it out to James. She was thankful no one could see her grin. James reached out, then yanked his sword back, throwing her off balance and sending her stumbling forward. As she passed, she swiped with her dagger, forcing him to jump backwards. Out of close range, she whipped the surujin, this time aiming for his feet. But he was too smart. He jerked his foot back as soon as it was caught. Izabella was ready and let the rope slacken to make up for his force. She quickly wrapped a coil on her shoulder and flung the other end at his neck. With his foot still caught, James calmly placed his sword two feet from his neck and let the rope circle. Before she could pull, he sliced it in two and charged.

Izabella's heart pounded as she raced to cross the distance, rolled, and sliced upwards. She cut through his sleeve, and James spun around to return the blow, the clash of metal zinging through the forest. The cheers

and excitement from the onlookers turned to silence. Izabella knew she couldn't keep pace with him for long and ran to the protection of the straw bags and wooden dummies.

There, she felt the momentum shift in her favor. James looked to be breathing heavily and his eyes were red. She scurried under wooden arms and legs taking full advantage of the gangly assailants that stood in her attacker's way. A swat with the flat side of her sword let him know she was having a good time.

He growled, beads of sweat rolling down his forehead. "That's it! You've had your fun with me. Now it's my turn. I've had a long day and I'd like to go home and get some sleep."

He broke through the straw dummies with bare hands and a ferocity that made her heart quiver. His sword came at her from all directions, but she met his blade with a resounding crash of her own. How dare he call this foreign land his home! She would fight him off till the end. Holding onto her sword with both hands, she blocked him over and over. *Oh no!* She felt a tree root beneath her feet.

James careened towards her and shoved her back till she hit a tree.

"Give up?"

"Never," she said in a low voice.

"Have it your way." Pinning her fists against her chest, he slammed her into the tree again. Her sword fell from her hands as she tightened her lips in a moan.

"James!" Eijin yelled. "Stop! Enough!"

Izabella gathered her strength and shoved back at him with all her might. He laughed. With the weight of his upper torso, he thrust his elbow into her chest and held her.

Izabella yelped, then shouted. "Get off me!"

James staggered back and dropped his sword. Master Eijin ran forward, and Caleb and Andrew grabbed James by the shoulders.

Izabella turned her back to them and leaned her forehead against the tree, clutching her chest. She groaned with the pain, her heavy breathing stifled within the mesh shield.

He already knows I'm not a man. With a staggered breath, she pulled her mask off. She rubbed her chest, smoothed her wild hair, and turned to face her bewildered opponent.

The look on James's face was worth it.

"Izabella? Como? I swear I didn't know! Su Majestad, lo siento de verdad." He dropped to his knees.

"Let him go."

Caleb and Andrew dropped their hold, but James didn't dare raise his head.

Master Eijin growled disapprovingly. "James-san, did you not hear my call? Always listening, you are always to be listening!"

"Si, sensei, lo siento, ah, gomenasai."

"You had your enemy pinned, yet you could not take the time to listen? Hmph!" Eijin walked between the two combatants and stood over James.

"You made it personal."

James shook his head in disbelief. Still looking at the ground, he said, "She fought well. I knew something was different, but I did not suspect till the end."

Eijin's face relaxed. He turned to Izabella. "Did you hear that? He said you fought well."

Izabella stood immovable. Her arms were crossed. Her face was red. She was furious. Her chest ached, and James refused to make eye contact.

"The rest of you are dismissed!" Eijin shouted to the others. "And are you angry also?" Eijin tapped James with his sword.

James looked up in surprise, "Me? No. I am embarrassed, but also," he peeked up at the queen, "impressed."

Izabella fixated her glare on an offending pine tree.

Eijin smiled. “Hai, so am I. She has done well. Rise, General. Arigatou gozaimashita. Gracias. La reina has always wanted to have her skills put to the test, but no one was ever willing. You have solved two problems for us today.”

“Two?” James asked.

“Hai, two.” Eijin turned to Izabella. “The first, that you have a fair fight against a worthy opponent. You did not win, Majestad, but you made him work. He is a strong man with real-life battle experience and one of my best students. I think yours is an accomplishment of which to be proud. The second, that the two of you would have to face each other and begin to talk again as you should.”

Izabella could feel James’s eyes on her, but she only shook her head in disapproval. “No,” she said, tears stinging. “It’s not that easy. I don’t know who he is anymore.” She met James’s eyes. “You never came back! You left me when I needed you most and when I finally see you are alive, you leave again. I can’t trust you!” Her body shook with emotion. “I let hope in...” There was so much more to say, but tears burned down her cheeks and choked her in their fury.

James stepped forward, “Izabella, I am truly, deeply sorry for ever leaving you.”

Izabella shook her head. “Lo siento, Sensei. Gracias for the lesson, but I must go.” She ran to the tent against the mountain where her ladies were waiting. As she flung open the door, the familiar scent of lavender and steam met her, but her anger, mixed with the thrill of being near James made her feel sick. As she sank into the hot bath, waves of guilt and euphoria tossed her heart in the open sea of confusion. *Would she never be free?*

She was spent. Her muscles twitched and her body ached. As her ladies tended to her, she closed her eyes. She had done it. She had crossed swords with a man and lived. She couldn’t deny the exhilaration. But did it have to be James? *Don’t forget, he left you without a word.*

She slid down the side of the tin tub till the tip of her chin broke the surface of the water. Surely if he had cared for her, he would have found a way. Did he not have the courage to face her, to have the conversation that was inevitable? She thought of the shock on James's face when she had revealed herself. *Would he take his revenge on her and leak her secret?* Surely Eijin would make him promise not to say a word. He was a man of integrity, after all. *Or was he?* Izabella felt sick again. *He could be like Lawrence.*

Izabella knew the gossip circulating the prince. Ever since she could remember, Lawrence made himself the center of attention. He coyly danced with ladies and laughed raucously with the men, emboldened by the frequent drink in his hand. She empathized with the grim looks his father gave him, so when Lawrence had begun romantic advances in their youth, she had brushed him off. She knew his character well enough to know he was trouble. Then the rumors of war began.

The prince had taken his place with his countrymen, leading a company into battle. The sudden jolt into the real world had made an impact. In quieter conversations, the young queen began to wonder if her feelings could change. The years were growing darker, and she longed for a companion to aid in her rule. Aragon needed protection and Lawrence's reasons were compelling. She consented with trembling hand.

As Lawrence showered her with gifts, her heart began to feel complete again. But little by little, the excitement passed, leaving her fears open and unchecked. His womanizing had ended, but with their tumultuous engagement, would he dare start again? Anger and frustration pervaded her soul. She felt betrayed, but she had only herself to blame.

She leaned her head against the tub. So many worries with the men in her life. Was it always like this? Did it have to be so hard? *Dios, I give you my heart's desires again. Please give me wisdom.* As she dressed, she resolved to do one thing before the day ended. She couldn't control all her

relationships, but there was one she could do something about. She had to talk to the king.



COMMON GROUND

Nathaniel opened his eyes and arched his back in a good stretch. He could sleep anywhere, but he got the best night's sleep at his wife's side. He rolled over and stroked her back. They had met when they were children, both being accepted into service for the royal family—he with El Guardia and she with the maids. From poor families, they were proud of the way they had worked their way up.

He reached over Hanna's side and cradled her rounded middle. They hadn't told anyone the good news. It was still their secret to share. Hanna barely stirred. She had been up late with the queen and had awakened Nathaniel to tell him of the night's events.

James and Izabella had run into each other after the duel, and things were still a mess. Hanna surmised all their tension was pent-up grief and a stirring in their hearts neither wanted to admit. Izabella had taken her dinner in her room and the couple heard her stifled sobs late into the night.

Nathaniel was scheduled to take the morning shift, but he decided he wanted to have a word with James first. He gently kissed his bride.

It was a lazy Sunday morning. The sun, feeling more energetic than most, rose earlier as the days grew warmer. The typical hustle and bustle was subdued, and he enjoyed meeting the eyes of the men as they poked at their morning fires. Though Martis's men were given a few hours leave for religious services, it didn't look like many were taking advantage. A sadness crept over him, but he shook it off.

“Comandante Gonsalus?” Nathaniel addressed a stocky man with a large mustache as he approached the officer’s tents.

“Buenos días. Can I help you?”

“Si, I am looking for General Ingle--ah, Burdinor.”

“Lo siento, señor, but the general...”

“Is not awake yet,” came the loud voice of Colonel Xavier. “Nor will he be for some time, I hope.” Xavier stepped out of the tent. He was as tall as James, but leaner with fair skin and a black goatee trimmed in the latest style. He exuded confidence and Nathaniel noticed the frequent trips many of the female servants made to walk by his tent.

Xavier arched his back into a stretch. “The general fancies pushing the bounds of what natural man can do, but every once in a while, his mortality catches up with him. Tell me, Nathaniel, do you ever sleep?”

“Only when my wife tells me to.”

“Well then, you are further ahead in the game than the rest of us! Gonsalus...”

“Señor?”

“From now on, let’s give our friend the respect he deserves. El capitán is in charge of la reina’s armed guard. Therefore, you should treat him as you would your own general. Am I clear?”

“Si, Coronel. My sincere apologies, Capitán. Lo siento mucho.”

Nathaniel smiled. “Gracias, no problema.”

Xavier nodded. “Very well then, Comandante, be sure to spread the word. And tell the men I will be at inspections this afternoon. We leave for Organya tomorrow.”

“Si, señor!” and the major hurried off.

“Gracias, Xavier. I appreciate it,” Nathaniel said.

“Of course. I don’t want the younger men getting the wrong idea. Your position of Capitán of Aragon puts your rank closer to Jame’s than mine. Not all of them are familiar with the rigor of your training. I, myself, grew

up wishing to be a member of El Guardia Nocturno until I realized it was only an Aragonese tradition.”

He regarded Nathaniel’s questioning look. “My father was a tradesman, and he would bring home the best stories.”

“Ah, I see. And all of them true, I assume?”

“Of course! Every one!” Xavier let out a hearty laugh. “Now to business. Is there anything I can do for you while the general is indisposed?”

“I’m afraid not. I didn’t even think to check James’s tent because he’s usually such an early riser. I’m sorry to disturb you. I thought he would be down here. There is a personal matter I was hoping to inquire about. However, I would also like to offer the services of my men while the detachment is away. We are not many in number, but perhaps you know the value of them from previous experience?”

“Only by word of mouth, but if anything I’ve heard is true, your help would be more than welcome.”

“We could keep the perimeter. We would be doing that anyway.”

“Well, I suppose it’s needless for us to be doubling our duties. It will take some coordination, but very well, I’ll leave you in charge of the borders while I am gone.”

“Bien. To whom should we report?”

“General Burdinor, ah, disculpe. General Inglewood, I mean, will be here. You can report either directly to him or Teniente Coronel Petrus if anything comes up.”

“The secret is out?”

“Rey Martis made the announcement last night.”

“That was fast.” Nathaniel paused in thought. “Did you say the general is not going with you?”

“He will stay here and be ready to make plans when the scouts return.” Xavier leaned in close. “We are hoping to finally find the enemies’ base. Thus far, they’ve eluded us, but we have narrowed it down to somewhere in the forest to the northeast.”

“How far away?”

“We don’t know for sure, but not closer than five days’ hard ride.”

Nathaniel shifted uneasily. “That is much closer than I expected.”

“It is the primary reason for choosing this location. It’s close enough we could launch an attack, but far enough to see them coming.”

“But the forests to the north?”

“Are well-guarded. And there is no way for them to reach the forest to the south without crossing the plain or going across the Aragonian Gap. Don’t worry, Nathaniel!” Xavier slapped his shoulder. “We would not have brought el rey with us if we didn’t think it was safe.” He put his hands on his hips. “Now, what’s this personal matter you mentioned? It wouldn’t have anything to do with a lovely maiden, would it?”

Nathaniel hid his surprise. “Looking for a suitable wife?”

“For me? Always! But my mind is on the general these days. Do you have any suggestions?” Xavier leaned in with a knowing look.

“Perhaps. Mind heading to the other side with me? I start my shift soon.”

“Not at all.” Xavier flagged down a passing sergeant. “General Inglewood is not to be disturbed. He is finally getting some sleep, so let’s keep it that way. All questions are to be directed to me. Is that clear?”

“Si, señor. Will you oversee exercises this morning?”

“No, Teniente Coronel Petrus will, but I will be watching from the hill. We are setting up a temporary center of operations there.”

“Si, señor.”

Xavier turned to Nathaniel. “Now, let’s walk.”

Nathaniel waited till they were out of earshot. “How much has the general told you?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Nothing. My information comes from my acute sense of observation and having been in the right place at the right time.”

“I see.”

“He is a closed book, that one. Up until yesterday, I assumed he was Catalanian, but now I find he is not.” Xavier turned to see Nathaniel’s reaction.

Nathaniel stared dead ahead. “No, he is not.”

“We’ve been best friends since he appeared out of nowhere.”

Nathaniel winced.

“And he never told me. May I ask, how old you are, Nathaniel?”

“I am twenty.”

“Really?”

“You pictured older or younger?” asked Nathaniel.

“Older. Definitely. Not because you look it, but I suppose, since you are married, I figured you to be at least the same age as James.”

“No, he is older by two years. It seems nothing now, but when we were training with El Guardia, it was different.”

Xavier slowed his pace. “But you knew him back then?”

Nathaniel wondered how much he could say without betraying his friend. Xavier obviously knew more than he was letting on. “We kind of grew up together.”

“Kind of?” Xavier asked sarcastically.

Nathaniel shook his head and smiled. There was no getting anything past Xavier. His outlandish personality didn’t agree with Nathaniel’s quieter temperament, but he seemed like a decent fellow. More importantly, he truly cared about James. Honesty would be the best policy.

“I was his shadow and followed him everywhere.”

“So, he was a big hermano to you?”

“He was.”

Xavier nodded his head thoughtfully. “So, between you and I?”

“We make up the two halves of his life.”

They walked up the side of the hilly outcrop that overlooked the armies’ tents and training field. At the top of the hill lay James’s tent and map room, the king’s opulent meeting tent, his personal quarters, and lastly

Izabella's tent, all in a row stretching up the valley and away from the noise down below.

"Do you have time for breakfast?" Xavier asked. "I have a busy day ahead, but I think we should get to know one another better."

Nathaniel peered down the line of tents. No one seemed to be stirring.

"I think I can spare a half hour."

"You don't need to stand guard in a corner somewhere?" Xavier teased.

"No," smiled Nathaniel, "thankfully those days are behind me. I'm with la reina today, but she seems to be sleeping in."

They seated themselves at a table situated just behind the crest of the small hill and Xavier waved to the attending servant.

"Sleeping in seems to be the pattern this morning. We missed out on a late-night rendezvous, perhaps?"

"No, we didn't," Nathaniel said firmly.

"I was only joking!" Xavier said, hands turned up in surrender.

"There is no joking about la reina's honor," said Nathaniel. Perhaps he misjudged Xavier after all.

"Of course, it was a thoughtless comment. I sincerely apologize." He took a careful sip of the hot drink set before him. "You really care for her, don't you? Everyone I meet adores her. It's like she puts people under her spell, a love-spell, like an enchantress from another world...she...what?"

Nathaniel was standing. "Maybe I should leave."

"No, lo siento, Nathaniel. Sit. Look, here comes the food. Don't worry, I'm very practical. Don't believe in magic or spells or any of that. But you have to remember, I love a good story, just like my father. And it doesn't help that I'm a romantic at heart."

"You?"

"Don't look so shocked. Which brings us back to why we started this walk in the first place."

"James?"

"James."

Nathaniel eased himself back into his chair.

“He needs a wife. I joke about it and tease him, but I’m serious. He’s a grump in the morning, never sleeps well, is always moody, and acts unattached to everyone and everything. He’s a gentleman, don’t get me wrong. I never saw a more gracious decline to a dance than from his lips. But he’s lonely, ever so lonely. You know, I find the more a person runs from something, the louder they are really drawing attention to it. Take James for instance. He never brings up his past—growing up, family, friends. No girls, no women for that matter. Never shown an interest. You know what that tells me?” Xavier leaned in. “That shows me pain. Sorrow. Lost love. No man goes through life without having loved somebody. So that somebody must have a rather good reason for getting buried down so deep. You know?”

“Mhmm.” Nathaniel nodded. He was becoming more thankful he stayed by the second.

“And then, word comes that la reina is coming for a visit. Well! You never saw such a change in a man. He trimmed his beard. He trimmed his beard! I’ve been begging him to do it for months. I have an idea Rey Martis was even about to say something. And do you know, it’s as hard as stealing honey from a bear to try and get a woman interested in a man with hair all over his face. Now, it’s not the beard they mind. I had a fine one myself two winters ago and had flocks of women after me. No, no, it’s the hair all over. All ragged and wiry. He was starting to look like a wild woodsman! And while the rest of the camp was abuzz with the excitement of getting to see la reina up close, he never said a word. Didn’t even address it in a briefing. No instructions on ‘this is how you speak’ or ‘make sure you don’t do such and such.’ It was laughable how he tried to avoid it.” Xavier waited for the servants to finish at the table, then leaned in closer. “And he started sleeping better.” He leaned back in his chair as if that was the end-all answer.

Nathaniel waited for more. “How do you know?”

“Because he wasn’t a grouch in the morning, that’s how! Try being the buffer between him and the world! I don’t know how his housekeeper does it because I get my feelings hurt every morning. The younger officers don’t know the trouble I go through to make sure they have a pleasant commander.”

Nathaniel smiled a little. Xavier was, at the very least, an amusing man to talk to. But he was also an acute observer and knew James’s habits well.

“He was always a morning person,” Nathaniel said.

“Not anymore! That is, until recently. I never saw a bigger change in a man, though, I suppose they would seem like small changes to the general passerby. But I know James as he is now. He is methodical, practical to a fault. No fluff, no fanfare, just the facts. It took three of us high-ranking officers to convince him to let the men have their annual Christmas gala. ‘Nonsense’ he called it.”

“We were always the ones standing guard at the castle parties, but I did see James dance once. He was quite good.”

Xavier’s mouth dropped open. “What I would give to see that man dance. Just out of the blue decided to? Someone must’ve taught him.”

“His mother, I guess.”

“Is his mother still alive?”

“She lives with Reina Izabella and Princesa Camilla at Loarre.”

“Has she always lived at the castle?”

“No. Izabella invited her a year after James disappeared. The princesses were orphans by then and Duchesse Marguerite had no family left to speak of. It seemed fitting for them to band together.”

“Sounds like a hard life these two have had.”

“Hm, si. Which two are we talking about?”

“James and Izabella.”

Nathaniel paused and looked Xavier in the eye. “It has been a hard road. For them both.”

“And here they are together again.”

Nathaniel waited.

“Fortuitous.”

“Perhaps.”

Xavier looked around, then leaned his elbows onto the table. “I think we have the same goals, you and me. We’re support men. I stand behind James and you behind tu reina. We want to see them happy, don’t we?”

“Of course.” Nathaniel was unsure what Xavier’s end game was, but this conversation seemed headed for dangerous waters.

“In a few months’ time, tu reina will become mi reina, and the war will be over. Príncipe Lawrence, Reina Izabella, and our general shall all be one big, happy family in Requesens!”

“Requesens?”

“The Catalonian palace near the sea. Have you ever been there?”

“I have not had the honor of traveling that far east.”

Xavier lifted an eyebrow. “You haven’t thought that far ahead, have you? Do you think they’ve thought about it?”

Nathaniel didn’t like being caught off guard. “I honestly don’t know.”

“Well, I have. I’m a planner. I like to know what’s going to happen. And this,” he laid his hands out, “will not make anyone happy.”

Nathaniel and Xavier locked eyes. They knew what was at stake. For once, they understood one another perfectly.

Nathaniel leaned back and noticed Hanna poke her head out of their tent.

“Perdona, Xavier. I just saw my wife, which means la reina may be awake.”

They stood and shook hands.

“We should talk more often,” Nathaniel said.

“Very profitable. Keep an eye on him for me while I’m gone.”

“I will, I definitely will.”

Nathaniel left Xavier to handle the barrage of requests that would soon be upon him and found himself wishing for more time with the wily fellow.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



When she's not writing, Melissa enjoys hanging out with her family. Though she is a collector of hobbies, the best times are those spent in tickle fights, piling into the hammock, or traversing the muddy trails near her home, all in the company of her five kids and loving husband.

Melissa is an avid traveler. Thankful for her adventures across Europe and Asia, they have provided a wealth of experiences and backdrops for her novels. She believes living alongside and in different cultures has broadened her perspective and enriched her storytelling.

In her slivers of downtime, Melissa loves to dig in the dirt with her chickens by her side. Chocolate is her soul food and peanut butter a food group. Find her on rainy days sipping tea, pinky up, cozied on the couch with her next favorite read. Or check her out in her own fairytale land of bookstagram where book talk is only a click away! @melissamiyokoscott

Or visit her website at melissamiyokoscott.com and subscribe for her once a month Tuning Hearts newsletter. You'll get insider stories, personal updates, and her favorite monthly reads.

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