A NOVEL OF ISABELLA of CASTILE

OTHE Lieen's WOW

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ISABELLA OF CASTILE



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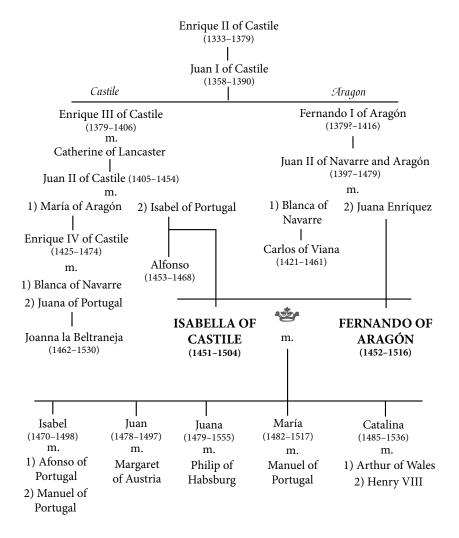
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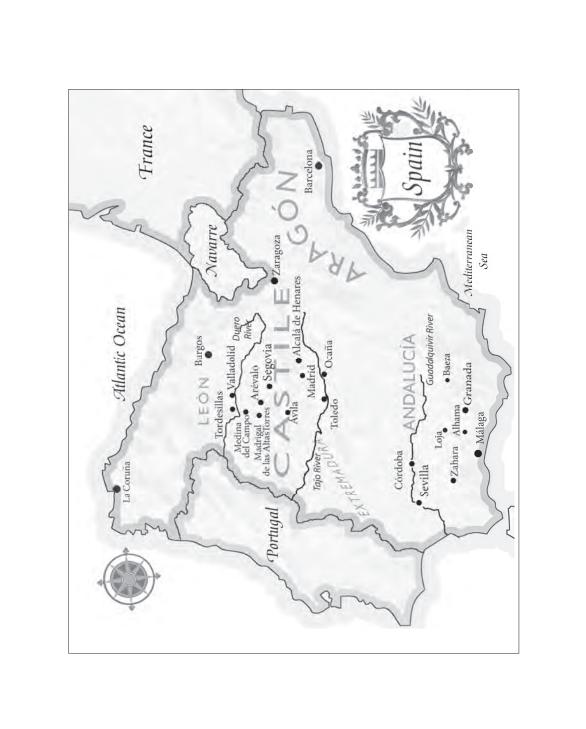
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House of Trastámara







1454

I came into the world in the Castilian township of Madrigal de las Altas Torres, the first child of my father, Juan II's marriage to his second wife, Isabel of Portugal, after whom I was named—an infanta, healthy and unusually quiet, whose arrival was heralded by bells and perfunctory congratulations but no fanfare. My father had already sired an heir by his first marriage, my half brother, Enrique; and when my mother bore my brother, Alfonso, two years after me, shoring up the male Trastámara bloodline, everyone believed I'd be relegated to the cloister and distaff, an advantageous marriage pawn for Castile.

As often happens, God had other plans.

I CAN STILL recall the hour when everything changed.

I was not yet four years old. My father had been ill for weeks with a terrible fever, shut behind the closed doors of his apartments in the alcazar of Valladolid. I did not know him well, this forty-nine-year-old king whom his subjects had dubbed El Inútil, the Useless, for the manner in which he'd ruled. To this day, all I remember is a tall, lean man with sad eyes and a watery smile, who once summoned me to his private rooms and gave me a jeweled comb, enameled in the Moorish style. A short, swarthy lord stood behind my father's throne the entire time I was there, his stubby-fingered hand resting possessively on its back as he watched me with keen eyes.

A few months after that meeting, I overheard women in my mother's household whisper that the short lord had been beheaded and that his death had plunged my father into inconsolable grief.

"Lo mató esa loba portuguesa," the women said. "The Portuguese she-wolf had Constable Luna killed because he was the king's favorite."

Then one of them hissed, "Hush! The child, she's listening!" They froze in unison, like figures woven in a tapestry, seeing me seated in the alcove right next to them, all eyes and ears.

Only days after overhearing the ladies, I was hastily awakened, swathed in a cloak, and trotted through the alcazar's corridors to the royal apartments, only this time I was led into a stifling chamber where braziers burned and the muffled psalms of kneeling monks drifted through the room beneath a wreath of incense smoke. Copper lamps dangled overhead on gilt chains, the oily glow wavering across grimfaced grandees in somber finery.

On the large bed before me, the curtains were drawn back.

I paused on the threshold, instinctively looking about for the short lord, though I knew he was dead. Then I espied my father's favorite peregrine perched in the alcove, chained to its silver post. Its enlarged pupils swiveled to me, opaque and flame-lit.

I went still. I sensed something awful that I did not want to see.

"My child, go," my *aya*, Doña Clara, urged. "His Majesty your father is asking for you."

I refused to move, turning to cling to her skirts, hiding my face in their dusty folds. I heard heavy footsteps come up behind me; a deep voice said, "Is this our little Infanta Isabella? Come, let me see you, child."

Something in that voice tugged at me, making me look up.

A man loomed over me, large and barrel-chested, dressed in the dark garb of a grandee. His goateed face was plump, his light brown eyes piercing. He was not handsome; he looked like a pampered palace cat, but the slight tilt to his rosy mouth entranced me, for it seemed he smiled only for me, with a single-minded attentiveness that made me feel I was the only person he cared to see.

He held out a surprisingly delicate hand for a man of his size. "I am Archbishop Carrillo of Toledo," he said. "Come with me, Your Highness. There is nothing to fear."

I tentatively took his hand; his fingers were strong and warm. I felt safe as his hand closed over mine and he led me past the monks and dark-clad courtiers, their anonymous eyes seeming to glint with dispassionate interest like those of the falcon in the alcove.

The archbishop hoisted me onto a footstool by the bed, so I could stand near my father. I heard the king's breath making a noisy rasp in his lungs; his skin was pasted on his bones, already a strange waxen hue. His eyes were closed, his thin-fingered hands crossed over his chest as if he were an effigy on one of the elaborate tombs that littered our cathedrals.

I must have made a sound of dismay, for Carrillo murmured in my ear, "You must kiss him, Isabella. Give your father your blessing so he can leave this vale of tears in peace."

Though it was the last thing I wanted to do, I held my breath, bent over, and quickly pecked my father's cheek. I felt the chill of fever on his skin. I recoiled, my gaze lifting to the other side of the bed.

There, I saw a silhouette. For a horrifying moment, I thought it was the ghost of the dead constable, whom my ladies claimed haunted the castle, restless for revenge. But then an errant flicker from the lamps sliced across his face and I recognized my older half brother, Prince Enrique. The sight of him startled me; he usually stayed far from court, preferring his beloved *casa real* in Segovia, where it was said he kept an infidel guard around him and a menagerie of exotic beasts he fed with his own hands. Yet now he was here, in our father's death chamber, enveloped in a black cloak, the scarlet turban on his head hiding his mop of shaggy fair hair and enhancing his odd, flattened nose and small, close-set eyes, which gave him the appearance of an unkempt lion.

The knowing smile he gave me sent a chill down my spine.

The archbishop gathered me in his arms, marching from the room as though there was nothing of any importance left there for us. Over his thick shoulder, I saw the courtiers and grandees converge around the bed; I heard the monks' chants grow louder and saw Enrique incline intently, almost eagerly, over the moribund king.

In that moment, our father, Juan II, breathed his last.

WE DID NOT return to my rooms. Held tight against the archbishop's powerful chest, I watched in a daze as he brusquely motioned to my *aya*, waiting outside the apartment doors, and brought us down the spiral back staircase into the keep. An anemic moon in the night sky barely pierced the veil of cloud and mist.

As we emerged from the castle's protective shadow, the archbishop peered toward the postern gate, a darker square inset in the far curtain wall.

"Where are they?" he said in a taut voice.

"I... I don't know," quavered Doña Clara. "I sent word just as you bade me, telling Her Highness to meet us here. I hope something hasn't happened to—"

He held up a hand. "I think I see them." He stepped forward; I felt him stiffen as the hasty sound of slippers on cobblestones reached us. He let out a sharp exhalation when he saw the figures moving toward us, led by my mother. She was pale, the hood of her cloak bunched about her slim shoulders, sweat-drenched auburn hair escaping her coif. Behind her were her wide-eyed Portuguese ladies and Don Gonzalo Chacón, governor of my one-year-old brother, whom he cradled in his burly arms. I wondered why we were all here, outside in the dead of night. My brother was so young, and it was cold.

"Is he . . . ?" said my mother breathlessly.

Carrillo nodded. A sob cracked my mother's voice, her startling blue-green eyes fixed on me in the archbishop's arms. She held out her hands. "Isabella, *hija mía.*"

Carrillo let me down. Unexpectedly, I did not want to leave him. But I shifted forth, my oversized cloak draping me in a shapeless cocoon. I curtsied as I'd been taught to do whenever I was presented to my beautiful mother, as I'd always done on the rare times I was brought to her before the court. She cast back my hood, her wide-set blue-green eyes meeting mine. Everyone said I had my mother's eyes, only mine were a darker hue.

"My child," she whispered, and I detected a quivering desperation in her tone. "My dearest daughter, all we have now is each other."

"Your Highness must concentrate on what is important," I heard Carrillo say. "Your children must be kept safe. With your husband the king's demise, they are—"

"I know what my children are," interrupted my mother. "What I want to know is how much longer do we have, Carrillo? How much time before we must abandon everything we've known for a forgotten refuge in the middle of nowhere?"

"A few hours at best" was the archbishop's flat reply. "The bells have not yet rung because such an announcement takes time to prepare." He paused. "But it will come soon enough, by the morning at the latest. You must place your trust in me. I promise you, I'll see to it that you and the infantes are kept from harm."

My mother turned her gaze to him, pressed a hand to her mouth as if to stifle her laughter. "How will you do that? Enrique of Trastámara is about to become king. If my eyes haven't deceived me these many years, he'll prove as susceptible to his favorites as Juan ever was. What safety can you possibly provide us, save a company of your guards and sanctuary in a convent? Yes, why not? A nunnery is no doubt best suited for the hated foreign widow and her brood."

"Children cannot be raised in a convent," Carrillo said. "Nor should they be separated at such a tender age from their mother. Your son, Alfonso, is now Enrique's heir by law until his wife bears him a child. I assure you, the Council will not see the infantes' rights impugned. In fact, they've agreed to let you raise the prince and his sister in the castle of Arévalo in Ávila, which shall be given to you as part of your widow's dower."

Silence fell. I stood quiet, observing the glazed look that came over my mother's face as she echoed, "Arévalo," as if she had heard wrong.

Carrillo went on, "His Majesty's testament leaves ample provision for the infantes, with separate towns to be granted to each of them upon their thirteenth year. I promise you shall not want for anything."

My mother's gaze narrowed. "Juan barely saw our children. He never cared about them. He never cared about anyone except that awful man, Constable Luna. Yet now you say he left provision for them. How can you possibly know this?"

"I was his confessor, remember? He heeded my advice because he feared the fires of everlasting Hell if he did not." The sudden intensity in Carrillo's tone made me glance at him. "But I cannot protect you if you do not place your trust in me. In Castile, it is customary for a widowed queen to retire from the court, but she doesn't usually get to keep her children, especially when the new king lacks an heir. That is why you must leave tonight. Take only the infantes and what you can carry. I'll send the rest of your possessions as soon as I'm able. Once you're in

Arévalo and the king's testament is proclaimed, no one will dare touch you, not even Enrique."

"I see. But you and I were never friends, Carrillo. Why risk yourself for my sake?"

"Let us say I offer you a favor," he said, "in exchange for a favor."

This time, my mother couldn't suppress her bitter laughter. "What favor can I grant you, the wealthiest prelate in Castile? I'm a widow on a pension, with two small children and a household to feed."

"You will know when the time comes. Rest assured, it will not be to your disadvantage." With these words, Carrillo turned to instruct her servants, who had overheard everything and stood staring at us with wide, fearful eyes.

I slowly reached up to take my mother's hand. I had never dared touch her before without leave. To me, she'd always been a beautiful but distant figure in glittering gowns, laughter spilling from her lips, surrounded by fawning admirers—a mother to be loved from afar. Now she looked as if she had walked miles across a stony landscape, her expression so anguished it made me wish I was older, bigger; that somehow I could be strong enough to protect her from the cruel fate that had taken my father from her.

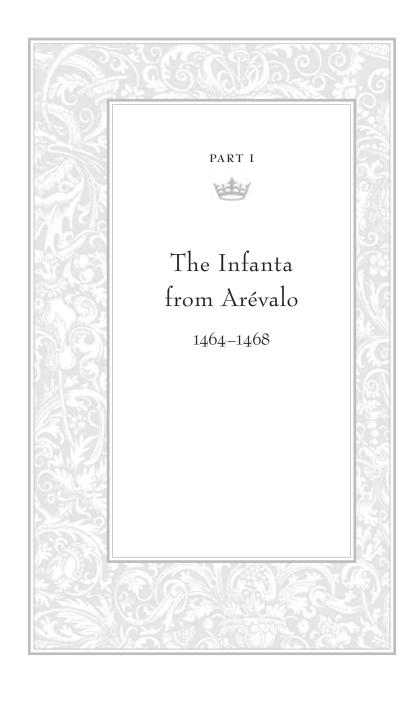
"It's not your fault, Mama," I said. "Papa went to Heaven. That's why we must leave."

She nodded, tears filling her eyes as she gazed into some unseen distance.

"And we're going to Ávila," I added. "It's not far, is it, Mama?"

"No," she said softly, "not far, hija mía; not far at all. . . . "

But I could tell that for her, it was already a lifetime away.





Hold the reins firmly, Isabella. Don't let him sense your fear. If he does, he'll think he's in control and he'll try to throw you."

Perched atop the elegant black stallion, I nodded, gripping the reins. I could feel the taut leather through the weather-worn tips of my gloves. Belatedly I thought I should have let Beatriz's father, Don Pedro de Bobadilla, buy me the new gloves he had offered for my recent thirteenth birthday. Instead, pride—a sin I tried hard, but usually failed, to overcome—had refused to let me admit our penury by accepting the gift, though he lived with us and surely knew quite well how impoverished we were. Just as pride hadn't let me refuse my brother's challenge that it was time I learned to ride a proper horse.

So, here I sat, with old leather gloves that felt thin as silk to protect my hands, atop a magnificent animal. Though it was not a large horse it was still frightening; the creature shifted and pawed the ground as though it were ready to bolt at any moment, regardless of whether I could stay on or not.

Alfonso shook his head, leaning from his roan to pry my fingers further apart, so that the reins draped through them.

"Like that," he said. "Firm, but not so firm that you'll injure his mouth. And remember to sit straight when you canter and lean forward at a gallop. Canela isn't one of those stupid mules you and Beatriz ride. He's a purebred Arabian jennet, worthy of a caliph. He needs to know his rider is in charge at all times."

I straightened my spine, settling my buttocks on the embossed saddle. I felt light as a thistle. Though I was of an age when most girls begin to develop, I remained so flat and thin that my friend and lady-in-waiting Beatriz, Don Bobadilla's daughter, was constantly cajoling me to eat more. She eyed me now with concern, her significantly more

curvaceous figure so gracefully erect upon her dappled gelding that it seemed she'd been riding one her entire life, her thick black hair coiled above her aquiline features under a fillet and veil.

She said to Alfonso, "I assume Your Highness has ensured this princely jennet of yours is properly broken. We wouldn't want anything untoward to happen to your sister."

"Of course he's broken. Don Chacón and I broke him ourselves. Isabella will be fine. Won't you, *hermana*?"

Even as I nodded, near-paralyzing doubt overcame me. How could I possibly be expected to show this beast that *I* was in charge? As if he sensed my thoughts, Canela pranced sideways. I let out a gasp, yanking at the reins. He came to a snorting halt, ears flattened, clearly displeased at the effort I'd exerted on his bit.

Alfonso winked at me. "See? She can handle him." He looked at Beatriz. "Do you need any assistance, my lady?" he asked, in a jocular tone that hinted at his years of verbal sparring with our castle custodian's headstrong only daughter.

"I can manage fine, thank you," said Beatriz tartly. "Indeed, Her Highness and I will both be fine as soon as we get a feel for these Moorish steeds of yours. Lest you forget, we have ridden before, even if our mounts were, as you say, only stupid mules."

Alfonso chuckled, pivoting on his roan with practiced ease for his mere ten years. His brilliant blue eyes glistened; his thick fair hair, shorn bluntly at his shoulders, enhanced his full, handsome face. "And lest you forget," he said, "I've been riding every day since I was five. It is experience that makes for good horsemanship."

"True," rumbled Alfonso's governor, Don Chacón, from his own massive horse. "The Infante Alfonso is already an accomplished equestrian. Riding is second nature to him."

"We don't doubt it," I interjected before Beatriz could respond. I forced out a smile. "I believe we're ready, brother. But, pray, not too fast."

Alfonso nudged his roan forward, leading the way out of Arévalo's enclosed inner courtyard, under the portcullis and through the main gates.

I shot a disapproving look at Beatriz.

Of course, this was all her doing. Bored by our daily regimen of lessons, prayer, and needlework, she had announced this morning that we must get some exercise, or we would turn into crones before our time. We'd been cooped up indoors too long, she said, which was true enough, winter having been particularly harsh this year. And when she asked our governess, Doña Clara, for permission, my *aya* had agreed because riding for us invariably consisted of taking the castle's elderly mules on a leisurely jaunt around the curtain wall surrounding the castle and its adjoining township for an hour before supper.

But after I changed into my riding clothes and went with Beatriz into the courtyard, I found Alfonso standing there with Don Chacón and two impressive stallions—gifts sent by our half brother, King Enrique. The black horse was for me, Alfonso said. His name was Canela.

I had suppressed my alarm as I mounted the stallion with the aid of a footstool. I was even more alarmed, however, when it became clear I was expected to ride astride, *a la jineta*, the way the Moors did, perched on the narrow leather saddle with the stirrups drawn up high—an unfamiliar and unsettling sensation.

"An odd name for a horse," I'd remarked, to disguise my apprehension. "Cinnamon is a light color, while this creature is black as night."

Canela tossed his mane and swiveled his exquisitely shaped head about to nip my leg. I did not think it a good augury for the afternoon.

"Beatriz," I now hissed as we rode out onto the plain, "why didn't you tell me? You know I dislike surprises."

"That's exactly why I didn't tell you," she hissed back. "If I had, you wouldn't have come. You'd have said we should read or sew or recite novenas. Say what you will, we have to have fun sometime."

"I hardly see how being thrown from a horse can be deemed fun."

"Bah. Just think of him as an overgrown dog. He's big, yes, but quite harmless."

"And how, pray, would you know?"

"Because Alfonso would never have let you ride Canela otherwise," said Beatriz, with a truculent toss of her head that revealed the immutable self-confidence that had made her my closest companion and confidante—though, as ever, I found myself caught between amusement and discomfort when confronted with her irreverent character.

We were three years apart, and antithetical in temperament. Beatriz acted as though the realm outside our gates was a vast unexplored place filled with potential adventure. Doña Clara said her reckless attitude was due to the fact that Beatriz's mother had died shortly after her birth; her father had raised her alone in Arévalo, without feminine supervision. Dark as I was fair, voluptuous as I was angular, Beatriz was also rebellious, unpredictable, and too outspoken for her own good. She even challenged the nuns at the Convento de las Agustinas where we went to take our lessons, driving poor Sor María to distraction with her endless questions. She was a loyal friend, and amusing as well, always quick to find mirth in what others did not; but she was also a constant headache for her elders and for Doña Clara, who'd tried in vain to teach Beatriz that well-bred ladies did not give in to random impulse whenever the urge overcame them.

"We should have told Doña Clara the truth," I said, glancing at my hands. I was clenching the reins again and forced myself to loosen my grip. "I hardly think she'll find our gallivanting about on horses appropriate."

Beatriz pointed ahead. "Who cares about appropriate? Look around you!"

I did as she instructed, reluctantly.

The sun dipped toward the horizon, shedding a vibrant saffron glow over the bleached-bone sky. To our left Arévalo sat on its low hill, a dun-colored citadel with six towers and a crenellated keep, abutting the provincial market town bearing the same name. To our right wound the main road that led to Madrid, while all around us, stretching as far as my eyes could see, lay the open expanse of Castile—an endless land dotted with fields of barley and wheat, vegetable patches, and clusters of wind-twisted pine. The air was still, heady with the fragrance of resin and a whiff of melting snow that I always associated with the advent of spring.

"Isn't it spectacular?" breathed Beatriz, her eyes shining. I nodded, gazing upon the countryside that had been my home for almost as long as I could remember. I'd seen it many times before, of course, from Arévalo's keep and during our annual trips with Doña Clara to the neighboring town of Medina del Campo, where the biggest animal fair

in Castile was held. But for a reason I could not have explained, today it looked different, like when one suddenly notices that time has transformed an oft-looked-at painting, darkening the colors to a new luster and deepening the contrast between light and shadow.

My practical nature assured me this was because I was seeing the land from higher up, perched on the back of Canela rather than on the mule I was used to. Still, tears pricked my eyes and, without warning, I had a sudden memory of an imposing *sala* filled with people in velvets and silks. The image faded as soon as it came, a phantom from the past, and when Alfonso waved to me from where he rode ahead with Don Chacón, I promptly forgot I sat upon an unfamiliar, potentially treacherous animal and jabbed my heels into its ribs.

Canela leapt forth, throwing me forward against his arched neck. I instinctively grabbed hold of his mane, lifting myself off the saddle and tensing my thighs. Canela responded with a satisfied snort. He quickened his pace, galloping past Alfonso, raising a whirlwind of ochre dust.

"Dios mío!" I heard Alfonso gasp as I tore past him. From the corner of my eye I saw Beatriz fast behind me, shouting to my brother and an astonished Don Chacón: "Years of experience, eh?"

I burst into laughter.

IT FELT MARVELOUS, just what I imagined flying must be: to leave behind the cares of the classroom and studies, the chill flagstone of the castle and baskets of endless darning, the constant muttered worry over money and my mother's erratic health; to be free and revel in the sensation of the horse moving beneath me and the landscape of Castile.

When I came to a panting halt on a ridge overlooking the plain, my riding hood hung on its ribbons down my back, my light auburn hair tumbling loose from its braids. Sliding off Canela, I patted his lathered neck. He nuzzled my palm before he set himself to munching on brittle thornbushes sprouting between the rocks. I settled on a nearby pile of stones and watched Beatriz come plunging up the ridge. As she came to a stop, flushed from her exertions, I remarked, "You were right, after all. We did need the exercise."

"Exercise!" she gasped, slipping off her horse. "Are you aware that we just left His Highness and Chacón behind in a cloud of dust?"

I smiled. "Beatriz de Bobadilla, must everything be a contest with you?"

She put her hands on her hips. "When it comes to proving our worthiness, yes. If we don't take it upon ourselves, who will?"

"So it's our strength you wish to prove," I said. "Hmm. Explain this to me." Beatriz flopped beside me, gazing toward the ebbing sun. The sun fell slowly at this time of year in Castile, affording us a breathtaking vision of gold-rimmed clouds and violet-and-scarlet skies. The incipient evening wind caught at Beatriz's tangled black hair; her expressive eyes, so quick to show her every thought, turned wistful. "I want to prove we're as accomplished as any man and should therefore enjoy the same privileges."

I frowned. "Why would we ever want to do that?"

"So we can live as we see fit and not have to apologize for it, just as His Highness does."

"Alfonso doesn't live as he sees fit." I righted my hood, tucking its ribbons into my bodice. "In fact, he has considerably less freedom than you think. Save for today, I hardly see him anymore, so busy is he with his rounds of swordplay, archery, and jousting, not to mention his studies. He is a prince. He has many demands on his time."

She scowled. "Yes, important demands, not just learning to sew and churn butter and corral the sheep. If we could live as men, then we'd be free to roam the world undertaking noble quests, like a knight errant or the Maid of Orléans."

I concealed the unbidden excitement her words roused in me. I'd schooled myself to hide my feelings ever since my mother, Alfonso, and I had fled Valladolid that terrible night ten years earlier, for since then I had come to understand far better what had occurred. We were not so isolated in Arévalo that I failed to glean the occasional news that filtered over the *meseta* from the royal residences in Madrid, Segovia, and Valladolid; the subjects were gossiped about by our servants, easy to hear if one seemed not to listen. I knew that with Enrique's accession, the court had become a dangerous place for us, ruled by his favorites and his avaricious queen. I had never forgotten the palpable fear I'd felt that night of my father's death; the long ride across dark fields and forests, avoiding the main roads in case Enrique sent guards in our pursuit. The

memory was branded in me, an indelible lesson that life's changes would occur whether or not we were prepared for them, and we must do our best to adapt, with a minimum of fuss.

"The Maid of Orléans was burned at the stake," I finally said. "Is that the grand end you'd have us aspire to, my friend?"

Beatriz sighed. "Of course not, it's a horrible death. But I'd like to think that, given the chance, we could lead armies in defense of our country as she did. As it stands, we're doomed before we've ever lived." She flung her arms wide. "It's the same thing day after day, week after week, month after dreary month! Is this how all gentlewomen are raised, I wonder? Are we so unintelligent our sole pleasures must be to entertain guests and please our future husbands, to learn how to smile between dinner courses without ever expressing an opinion? If so, we might as well forgo the marriage and childbearing parts altogether and proceed directly to old age and sainthood."

I regarded her. Beatriz always asked questions for which there were no easy answers, seeking to change that which had been ordained before we were born. It disconcerted me that lately I too had found myself asking similar questions, plagued by a similar restlessness, though I would never admit to it. I didn't like the impatience that overcame me when I looked to the future, because I knew that even I, a princess of Castile, must one day wed where I was told and settle for whatever life my husband saw fit to give me.

"It is neither tedious nor demeaning to marry, and care for a husband and children," I said. "Such has been a woman's lot since time began."

"You only recite what you've been told," she retorted. "'Women breed and men provide.' What I ask is: Why? Why must we have only one path? Who said a woman can't take up the sword and cross, and march on Granada to vanquish the Moors? Who said we can't make our own decisions or manage our own affairs as well as any man?"

"It is not a question of who said it. It simply is."

She rolled her eyes. "Well, the Maid of Orléans didn't marry. She didn't scrub and sew and plan dowries. She donned a suit of armor and went to war for her dauphin."

"Who betrayed her to the English," I reminded her and paused.

"Beatriz, the Maid was called upon to perform God's work. You cannot compare her destiny to ours. She was a holy vessel; she sacrificed herself for her country."

Beatriz made a rude snorting sound but I knew I'd scored an inarguable point in this argument we'd been engaged in since childhood. I remained outwardly unperturbed, as I invariably did when Beatriz pontificated, but as I imagined my vivacious friend clad in rusty armor, urging a company of lords to war for *la patria*, a sudden giggle escaped me.

"Now you laugh at me!" she cried.

"No, no." I choked back my mirth as best I could. "I was not. I was only thinking that had the Maid come your way, you'd have joined her without a moment's hesitation."

"Indeed, I would have." She leapt to her feet. "I'd have thrown my books and embroidery out the window and jumped on the first horse available. How wonderful it must be to do as you please, to fight for your country, to live with only the sky as your roof and the earth as your bed."

"You exaggerate, Beatriz. Crusades involve more hardship than history tells us."

"Perhaps, but at least we'd be doing something!"

I looked at her hands, clasped as if she were brandishing a weapon. "You could certainly wield a sword with those big paws of yours," I teased.

She stuck out her chin. "You're the princess, not me. You would wield the sword."

As if day had slipped without warning into night, cold overcame me. I shivered. "I don't think I could ever lead an army," I said, in a low voice. "It must be terrible to watch your countrymen cut down by your foes and to know your own death can happen at any moment. Nor"—I held up my hand, preempting Beatriz's protest—"do I think you should exalt the Maid of Orléans as an example for us to emulate. She fought for her prince only to suffer a cruel death. I'd not wish such a fate on anyone. Certainly, I do not wish it for myself. Boring as it may be to you, I'd rather wed and bear children, as is my duty."

Beatriz gave me a penetrating look. "Duty is for weaklings. Don't

tell me you haven't questioned as well. You devoured that tale of the crusader kings in our library as if it were marzipan."

I forced out a laugh. "You truly are incorrigible."

At that moment, Alfonso and Don Chacón rode up, the governor looking most chagrined. "Your Highness, my lady de Bobadilla, you shouldn't have galloped off like that. You could have been hurt, or worse. Who knows what lies in wait on these lands at dusk?"

I heard the fear in his voice. Though King Enrique had seen fit to leave us be in Arévalo, isolated from court, his shadow was never far from our lives. The threat of abduction was a peril I'd long grown accustomed to, had in fact come to ignore. But Chacón was devoted to our protection and viewed any possibility of a threat as a serious matter.

"Forgive me," I told him. "I am at fault. I don't know what came over me."

"Whatever it was, I'm impressed," said Alfonso. "Who would have thought you'd be such an Amazon, sweet sister?"

"I, an Amazon? Surely not. I merely tested Canela's prowess. He did well, don't you think? He's much faster than his size would indicate."

Alfonso grinned. "He is. And yes, you did very well, indeed."

"And now we must be getting back," said Chacón. "Night is almost upon us. Come, we'll take the main road. And no galloping ahead this time, do I make myself clear?"

Back on our horses, Beatriz and I followed my brother and Chacón into the twilight. Beatriz opted not to act up, I noted with relief, riding demurely at my side. Yet as we neared Arévalo, streaks of coral inking the sky, I couldn't help but recall our conversation, and wonder, despite all efforts to the contrary, what it must feel like to be a man.

