



THE IMPULSE OF PASSION

Romantic Novel



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Chapter I.- Isabella



Isabella

Granada, Spain, winter 1491

The air was permeated with smoke and ashes, while Álvaro stood firm against the horizon darkened by war. The battle for Granada had been a drain of men and morale, and every blow, every cavalry charge, resounded with the clamor of steel and the cries of the fallen. Alvaro, his skin tanned by the relentless sun and his hands hardened by the constant handling of the sword, was dressed in heavy armor that gave him both protection and unbearable weight.

As commander of a battalion in the Castilian army, Álvaro had perfected combat formation tactics, adapting to the innovative firearms that changed the course of the war. Together with the cavalry, his battalion had been crucial in the capture of strategic fortresses such as Ronda and Malaga, and now, they faced the last assault on Granada. The resistance of the Moorish defenders was crumbling, suffocated by the shortage of supplies and the breakdown of their spirit. In the cold winter air, one could sense the impending change, a mixture of hope and desolation that marked the end of an era.

As he advanced towards the walls of Granada, Álvaro felt the crushing weight of exhaustion and his armor. His heart, in step with the frenetic pace of the fight, came to a screeching halt when an enemy arrow plunged into his right leg. Knocked down immediately, he experienced a scorching heat that quickly morphed into excruciating pain. Lying on the ground, amid smoke and fallen bodies, he crawled with a desperation born of survival instinct. Looking up at the gray sky, plagued by war smoke, Álvaro felt the struggle for every breath; A vertigo enveloped him and he fainted. His comrades, in an act of fraternity, dragged him away from imminent death.

When Alvaro regained consciousness, he found himself in a bleak and desolate scene. The great common room where he lay was austere and cold, scarcely illuminated by the faint flicker of a few candles and torches, the light of which fought vainly against the omnipresent darkness. The smell was overwhelming, a pungent mixture of dried blood, infection, and a foul-smelling

sweetness of death. The air, stale and humid, mixed with candle smoke and the bitter aroma of burnt medicinal herbs, a vain attempt to purify the environment laden with suffering.

Groans of pain, whispered prayers for spiritual comfort, and occasional cries of anguish at the loss of another companion filled the air. Wounded soldiers lay on makeshift beds, some sharing space with the bodies of those who had already succumbed.

The staff, made up of monks and some volunteers, circulated among the patients, offering the basic care that their limited knowledge and resources allowed. Medical efforts focused on rudimentary practices, inherited from ancient theories and the use of herbal remedies, with little hope of effectiveness in the face of complex war wounds.

Álvaro asked in a trembling voice:

-- "Where am I?"

At his side, a volunteer who attended him because of his rank of lieutenant in the army replied:

-- "You are in the 'Hospital de La Luz', in Granada. He had a very serious wound in his right leg, but thank God, he is no longer in mortal danger."

-- "What can you tell me about my brother José? Where is he?"

"I have no information about him, Lieutenant. Let me go and ask. What did you say your brother's name is?"

-- "José De Covadonga."

The volunteer quickly went out to investigate.

As the screams and wails of the wounded filled the air, a figure approached Alvaro's bed. He was the army chaplain, a middle-aged man with a serene face but eyes heavy with sorrow.

The chaplain sat down next to Álvaro, who, his voice choked with pain and anxiety, immediately asked for his brother José. The chaplain took a deep breath, preparing to deliver devastating news.

"Son," the chaplain began softly, "your brother Joseph fought bravely and honorably for our cause. He led his men with courage, facing the enemy with determination."

Álvaro listened, holding the chaplain's gaze, each word sharpening the fear rooted in his heart.

"But," the chaplain continued, his voice now a whisper laden with sadness, "in the chaos of battle, your platoon was ambushed. Despite his courage, Joseph... Joseph fell in combat. I am sorry to tell you that your brother has departed from this world."

The silence that followed was a testament to the pain and disbelief that gripped Alvaro. Tears began to flow freely down her face, not only because of the physical pain of her wounds, but because of the immense void that the loss of Joseph left in her soul. The chaplain extended his hand, resting it on Alvaro's, offering silent comfort in the midst of immense pain.

"Joseph died a hero, standing up for what he believed to be right. His sacrifice will not be forgotten," the chaplain murmured, though he knew those words would be of little comfort in such a heartbreaking moment.

At that moment, when Álvaro learned of the death of José, his twin and confidant, while he lay seriously injured, the world seemed to stop around him. The news fell on him like a cold, heavy slab, plunging him into an abyss of pain and loneliness. The unbreakable connection they shared, forged through a lifetime of shared experiences and mutual understanding, was abruptly broken, leaving him disoriented and deeply alone.

The loss of Joseph was not just the loss of a brother; it was the loss of his mirror, of the one that reflected his most intimate being, understood his silences and completed his thoughts. In the chaos of war, that certainty of companionship and mutual support had been their anchor. Now, with José gone, Álvaro felt that part of his soul had been uprooted.

Lying on his bed of pain, Álvaro's emotions were intertwined: sadness for loss, guilt for surviving, anger at the cruelty of fate, and despair at facing the future without his other self. Every sigh was a reminder of his loneliness, every heartbeat, an echo of the emptiness that Joseph had left.

At that moment, Álvaro understood that the war had taken too high a price. Everything had changed forever.

Grief and loss were intertwined in his being, creating a knot that seemed impossible to untie. But there was also a spark of determination in his eyes, a silent promise to honor Joseph's memory, to continue to fight for what they both believed in, not to give in to the darkness that threatened to consume him.

With the support of the chaplain and the strength he found in his own will, Álvaro began a slow and arduous process of recovery from his physical and emotional wounds. Each day was a battle against pain, sadness and discouragement, but also an opportunity to remember José, to keep his memory alive through his own actions and his struggle for a better future.

Time passed, and with it came spring. The war was over without Álvaro. The negotiations between the Catholic Monarchs and Sultan Boabdil had concluded, the Kings offered generous terms in exchange for the unconditional surrender of Granada, which the sultan accepted, handing over the city to them in January 1492.

Álvaro, limping, but with his head held high, said goodbye to the hospital and to those who had cared for him and accompanied him in his healing process. A long road of grief and recovery awaited him, one in which he should embark on a search for meaning, reflecting on his purpose and place in the world.

Over time he overcame his injury, but not the death of his twin. This strengthened their determination and courage to continue fighting for freedom and justice.

Although Sultan Boabdil had accepted the surrender and was expelled from Spain, there were some groups of rebel Moors who did not want to leave their lands and formed a clandestine 'resistance' network. This resistance was a group of individuals organized to oppose and fight against the Catholic monarchs, which they considered an occupying force, seeking to destabilize and weaken their control, without direct or large-scale confrontations. They would resort to guerrilla tactics, ambushes, sabotage, and surprise attacks on military targets or critical infrastructure.

While walking along the dusty roads of Granada, Álvaro came across a group of Moors from the resistance.

Intrigued by their cause and feeling the fire of passion and revenge burning within him, Alvaro decided to join them, to destabilize the destabilizers, becoming an undercover spy as a member of the resistance.

Days turned into weeks, and weeks into months, and Alvaro emerged as a courageous and determined leader in the ranks of the resistance. His reputation spread through the network of the resistance, and he was soon known as "The Eagle of Granada", a symbol of hope and courage for those fighting against the Catholic Monarchs.

In the midst of danger, Alvaro clung to the promise he had made to himself: he would never forget Joseph, and his brother's sacrifice would be the fuel that would fuel his inner fire, serving his memory as a guide in the darkness.

Thus, while the intrigues and uncertainty of the future surrounded everything, Álvaro remained firm in his purpose, ready to face any challenge that fate threw at him, with the certainty that, as long as his heart beat, the flame of hope would remain alive.

Álvaro was increasingly caught up in a whirlwind of mixed emotions. On the one hand, he felt the satisfaction of fighting for a just cause and the camaraderie of his fellow rebels. On the other hand, the weight of loyalty to the Catholic monarchs weighed on him. Violence and loss overwhelmed him, constantly reminding him of the high price he had to pay in the fight for justice.

Alvaro was discovered and came face to face with Mohammed, the leader of the resistance, a ruthless man whose actions had caused so much suffering and destruction. Mohammed called him a traitor and challenged him, drawing his sword. In that moment of tension and danger, Álvaro remembered José's words, 'Bravery is the ability to face fear, danger and uncertainty with courage and resolution', that is what he had always admired in his brother, and he armed himself with courage and resolution and faced Mohammed.

The fight was fierce, each blow echoing like an echo of the steel he had heard so many times in his practices with Joseph. Alvaro fought with determination, his eyes fixed on his goal, remembering every sacrifice, every loss, every moment of pain that had brought him there. And finally, with one last effort, he managed to defeat Mohammed, ending his reign of terror and oppression.

Alvaro was exhausted, but triumphant, his heart filled with a strange feeling that he could only describe as a deep relief.

At that moment, Álvaro knew that his participation in that task had come to an end, but that the fight for justice and freedom was a battle that never ended.

As the days passed and peace took hold in the region, Álvaro dedicated himself to rebuilding what the war had destroyed. He helped orphans and widows who had lost loved ones in the conflict, worked to restore homes and lands ravaged by violence, and strove to build a more just and prosperous future for all the inhabitants of Castile.

But in his heart, he knew that the battle he had fought was only the beginning of a new chapter in his life. Though the war was over, the memories of those dark days still haunted him, reminding him of the fragility of peace and the constant need to fight for what was just and true.

Álvaro's life, marked by conflict and courage, became a testimony of human strength and the ability to overcome adversity. Their story was told from village to village, inspiring many not to give in to oppression, and to fight for their rights and a dignified future. Every day, his legend grew, and though he was a man of action rather than words, his actions spoke with the clarity of the steel of his sword.

Despite the fact that the wounds of the past were slow to heal, and that the threat of future conflicts was always present, Álvaro did not give up. He knew that the real battle was not fought on the battlefields, but in people's hearts and minds.

Thus, Álvaro had not only become a leader remembered for his courage in battle, but also as an architect of peace and a conqueror.

Some time later, in his native Seville, Álvaro turned 25, and that night his colleagues and friends would celebrate it in a famous tavern. Intrigued by the stories told about him in Seville, many of which he surely did not even know, wearing his white army captain's uniform, with a red velvet cloak fluttering on his back, he walked with a confidence that bordered on arrogance, he was on his way for a walk through the Plaza del Salvador. He enjoyed connecting with people, a good conversationalist. He had a prominent stature, piercing blue eyes, and an infectious laugh. Romantic, although with great experience with women, he had never been in love.

That was a beautiful morning, the square surrounded by buildings of medieval and Renaissance Gothic architecture, had a vibrant atmosphere. It was not only chance that guided him; he had heard rumors of a noble and beautiful lady in the city, whose beauty rivaled that of the flowers that adorned the balconies of the Plaza.

His heart was pounding in anticipation, wondering if she would represent a good challenge to conquer.

Álvaro felt self-conscious about the limp that the war left him, and at the same time he knew he was very attractive to women, an attraction that he used to conquer them, each conquest not only improves his self-esteem, but also helps him to distract attention from his limp and reinforce his identity beyond his disability.

Although his limp was hardly noticeable anymore. Walking through the square, he felt the gazes of the women who turned when they saw him. He enjoyed being the center of attention, but that day, his interest was in finding that lady. As he passed by a group of people, he caught the whisper of a name: Isabella, a young woman of noble birth who was visiting the city with her family and staying at the Real Alcázar of Seville. Excited, he wondered if it could be Isabella he had been told about and headed towards the Alcázar.

As he crossed the Plaza del Salvador, he noticed a young woman sitting on a bench, who was immersed in a book. Her simple but elegant dress, which revealed delicate shoulders and a nape of the neck as if carved in marble. He approached with a playful smile and greeted her:

-- "Good morning, miss." As she looked up from the book, her deep-green slanted eyes met his, they were

beautiful, giving a blinding glow to her face. His mouth was rather large, but of extraordinary attractiveness,

-- "Good morning, sir"

"It's a beautiful day, and I thought it would be even better if I had the pleasure of meeting an equally beautiful lady, if you'll allow me. I see you very focused on your reading. What do you read with so much interest?"

-- "The writings of St. Francis of Assisi. Do you like to read?"

-- "Yes, although I don't have much free time to do it"

-- "What do you read?" At the same time she invited him to sit next to her on the park bench, which he accepted. Álvaro was really impressed with that beautiful woman, besides, she smelled clean, soapy, a neat young woman, but not perfume or powder. He replied:

-- "Works of chivalry, such as "Amadis of Gaul", and some others of poetry", have you already read 'The Chronicle of the Catholic Monarchs'?" He asked.

"No, what about you?"

-- "Yes." The

-- "And what do you think of the book?"

"I would prefer to keep my opinion to myself until you have read it. And then I will have the opportunity to see her again, to compare opinions."

-- "I'm going to read it and we'll comment on it. Since you know about these subjects, I have been told that the works of the 'Italian Renaissance' began to influence

Castile, bringing with them the ideals of humanism.

What do you think of the subject?" she asked.

-- "I know little about the subject, but I am very interested in all humanistic topics. Hopefully one day we will have the opportunity to talk about that issue and specifically about the basic rights of human beings."

-- "Hopefully so and we have the opportunity."

Unlike his previous conquests, she was not seduced by his appearance or arrogance, daring him to go beyond his elegant façade and discover the man hiding beneath. Her determination and charm captivated Álvaro. Her dark, silky hair fell in soft waves around her beautiful face, framing those intense, expressive green eyes. He decided to stay there with her, losing interest in going to meet the noble lady he had heard about.

-- "Since we are touching on the subject of humanism, I would like to ask you a question, if you will allow me."

-- "Yes, of course." She replied

"What do you think of the results obtained by the Spanish Inquisition?"

-- "From the point of view of the kings' goals, it could be considered successful in the sense that it helped consolidate their power, unifying their kingdoms under a single faith and eliminating or reducing groups considered a threat to religious and political stability."

-- "From a humanitarian perspective, the Inquisition is seen as a dark period characterized by intolerance, persecution and the violation of human rights. Even so,

do you consider that it is essential for the political and social stability of Castile?"

-- "The kings think so. I think it contributes to strengthening a more centralized reign and a Spanish national identity around Catholicism."

"You are very intelligent, miss, and you have expressed it very well, although I do not entirely agree."

-- "Thank you sir. I have had a very pleasant time, but I have to return to my family, they are already waiting for me."

-- "I'll accompany you," he told her. They got up from the bench. Álvaro could appreciate her figure, she was slender, elegant, with a natural grace in each of her movements. Her bearing and posture reflected confidence and inner strength, but they also revealed an irresistible delicacy and femininity.

Enjoying the talk and to their surprise, they headed in the direction of the majestic Alcázar of Seville on the banks of the Guadalquivir. That morning the golden stone of the façade glistened in the sun, creating a nice contrast with the blue sky. At the main entrance flanked by the tall square towers, they said goodbye kindly:

-- "I'm Álvaro De Covadonga," he told him.

-- "I am Isabella De Luna"

"Could we see each other tomorrow?" he asked, and she answered with another question.

"Do you already know the Alcázar?"

-- "No,"

-- "Would you like to come and meet him?"

-- "Of course I do."

"Shall we enter?" said Isabella and then continued, "These are the famous palace gardens, it looks like an oasis of greenery and beauty. The gardens are a work of art in themselves, see those ponds surrounded by orange and cypress trees. Don't you think they create an atmosphere of serenity and charm?, -so they continued to walk through the different halls of the Alcázar-.

In addition to her intelligence and culture, Isabella proved to be a magnificent guide, taking you through the palace's famous gardens. They continued walking towards the Ambassadors' Hall, where Isabella explained the importance and decoration of the place.

Alvaro experienced a constant internal struggle between how he sees himself and how he thinks others see him. Although he is aware of his attractiveness and uses it in his conquests, his limp served as a constant reminder of his vulnerability. This duality had led him to doubt the intentions of those around him, wondering if they appreciate him for who he is or if they notice his limp.

The next day, Álvaro went to look for her at the Alcázar. Isabella always went out accompanied by one of her ladies-in-waiting, whom they soon left praying in the first church they met, while they went for a walk through the narrow and cobbled streets of Seville.

That morning a sudden rain fell, the pleasant smell of wet earth gave them a change of plans entering a hostel on that same street.

-- "Do you want us to sit down for a drink?"

"Yes, I would like to, tell me about your family," she asked him.

-- "My father is Baron Roberto De Covadonga and my mother Susana Martínez. We are part of the Spanish nobility... of title but not of wealth".

They sat down in two comfortable armchairs in front of a tea table, soon a waiter came to take their order,

-- "Two hot drinks. -Isabella said and continued saying- The reason why we are in Seville is because my father, who as you already know is Baron Juan De Luna, seeks to have the support of some Sevillian nobles before the court of the Catholic Monarchs, he played an important role as an advisor to King John II of Castile, the queen's father, but today his influence at court has diminished a lot."

"Do you think I can help my father?"

-- "I'll ask mine what you can do to help."

Then, when the rain stopped, they left the inn, the cobblestones were damp and the sky overcast; they calculated that soon another of those spring showers would fall, so they went to the church to pick up the lady-in-waiting and from there they returned to the Alcázar.

That night, when he arrived at his parents' house, Álvaro asked about Baron De Luna. His father informed him

that the Baron had fallen into disrepair because he had mishandled an order from King John II of Castile. He mentioned that he did not know much about it and lacked connections in Granada to be able to help. Alvaro expressed his intention to introduce them to Isabella, to which they agreed.

For his third meeting with Isabella, Alvaro elegantly arranged himself as an army captain. Isabella arrived dressed with grace and modesty, in a traditional cut dress of fine pastel pink fabric, adorned with lace. She looked gorgeous with her hair elegantly pulled back and a light mantilla completing her outfit.

They decided to take a walk through the gardens of the Alcázar. It was a beautiful day of blue skies without clouds. They walked slowly, enjoying the beauty of the place and each other's company, talking about their dreams and desires, Álvaro asked:

"What do you want in your life?"

-- "Even though in our circles marriages are arranged, I desire a partner with whom I share a genuine emotional bond, love, or at least mutual respect. Religious devotion and practice are a fundamental part of my life, and I am inclined to sponsor my pious duties. And while social restrictions are important, I would like some degree of personal freedom to pursue my interests, such as reading and art. And you, Álvaro, what do you want in your life?"

"To serve the king loyally, and if required, to go to battle, achieving honor and glory. Survive and return home safely. To find the love of a woman and make her the companion of my life. To form a family with her, looking for emotional stability and a home to which I would be happy to return. Then, one day, help my father with his chores as Baron in the administration of the family assets."

With their conversations, an atmosphere of intimacy and connection had been created. In a moment of stillness, with the beauty of the Alcázar in the background, Álvaro took Isabella's hand, she looked at him and her eyes revealed surprise and nervousness. Moved by the emotion of the moment and his feelings, Álvaro leaned towards her, and she responded by approaching him. Their lips met in a tender and careful kiss, marking the beginning of a new intimacy between them, and a change in their relationship from formal courtesy, to a deeper and more personal one.

As their relationship developed, Alvaro faced a new challenge: the need to be more than just a gentleman and to find the humility to truly love. Isabella challenged him to explore his inner self and face his fears. Although Alvaro's traumatic experiences had made him more empathetic, Isabella taught him that there is also room for compassion, kindness, and true love.

The next day together, they toured a neighborhood

affected by the war against the Moors, where Isabella asked him about his participation in that war. Álvaro shared that, with his brother José, they had been trained in the arts of war from a young age. They participated in the campaign of the Kingdom of Castile that culminated in the capture of Granada. He recounted the pain of losing his twin brother in that same battle and his own serious leg injury, which required him to relearn to walk. The hardest part was informing his parents of Joseph's death. Months later, he was appointed Captain of the Spanish Army, a title that did not compensate for the loss of his brother.

-- "I can't imagine how hard it must be, especially for a mother. I'm very sorry Álvaro."

-- "Ten years have passed and I still miss it as if it had just happened. I still have nightmares about the horrors of war."

As Alvaro and Isabella shared their experiences, he found that his heart was filled with a different passion. His longing was no longer simply the victory of another amorous conquest, but to conquer her love. Alvaro wanted to be Isabella's hero, to protect her from any danger that might threaten her or their relationship.

The next day, Álvaro went to look for Isabella at the Alcázar. She arrived radiant with beauty and joy. He greeted her enthusiastically:

-- "Good morning, you are beautiful. Would you like to go for a walk on the Guadalquivir? I have arranged a little rowboat ride, the dock is a short distance from here, you will like it."

-- "Yes, let's go. I hope you know how to row."

It was a beautiful sunny morning with a clear blue sky. They headed towards the dock where a boatman known to Álvaro was waiting for them with a small rowboat for their ride. During the walk, Isabella mentioned that at dinner the night before at the Alcázar she had talked about Álvaro with a Sevillian friend of her family named Raúl. Who told him that José, Álvaro's brother, had made history in Seville for a duel to the death with the sultan's son, defending the honor of a woman. Intrigued, she asked him about that duel.

Álvaro explained that, in fact, José and he were skilled swordsmen because they practiced constantly.

-- "If in the spring of 1491 here in Seville. One evening Joseph had intervened to defend the honor of an abused lady, resulting in a challenge to a duel with a Muslim Arab, who was the firstborn of Sultan Boabdil. The young man's name was Abu Abdallah Muhammad XIII and he was accompanied by his brother Ahmed.

The duel was agreed for the next morning at La Puerta Jerez, next to the Guadalquivir. Each combatant would carry an adjutant called 'Segundo' to ensure a fair match. I was Joseph's Second, while Ahmed was Abu Abdallah's Second. The goal of the duel was not

necessarily to kill the opponent, but to inflict a significant wound that would demonstrate the superiority of the victor. The Second had the option of asking for mercy for the defeated or letting the duel continue to its ultimate consequences.

At dawn the next day, Joseph and I arrived at the right place for mourning. José was calm, aware of his good preparation. The opponents arrived accompanied by a delegation that included the challenger, his Second, two additional people and a doctor.

The duel began as agreed. Joseph, with great dexterity, evaded all the attacks of his adversary and soon inflicted a significant wound that proved his superiority. Then, he paused, waiting for the intervention of the 'Second', that is, his brother Ahmed. However, the challenger's own brother refused to ask for mercy from the victor and chose not to beg for the life of his defeated brother, showing a clear intention to let him die. Despite his doctor's insistence, Ahmed did not intervene. José had no alternative and ended up with his opponent as agreed.

After the duel, Ahmed vowed to dedicate his life to avenging his brother, threatening José and Álvaro, promising to find and kill them both, even if it was the last thing he did in his life.

-- "What a tragic story, have you had any altercations with Ahmed?"

"No, I imagine that after the victory of the Catholic monarchs, Sultan Boabdil and his family were banished in 1492, nine years ago, surely he has already forgotten."

-- "Thank you Álvaro for sharing the story and also for the pleasant boat ride, I will have to give you recognition as a good rower."

Isabella was amazed by the narration of the duel. At the end of the walk, they returned to the Alcázar, where Isabella's family was waiting for her, since the next day they would travel to Granada, her place of residence.

With the change of seasons, Álvaro was also to join the army, and they agreed to meet in Granada after his return.

In the autumn of that year, Álvaro went to the Alhambra in Granada in search of Isabella. He knew, from her letters, that he attended daily mass in the Holy Church of the Incarnation. There he found her one morning, entering the church for the second mass accompanied by two of her ladies. Álvaro waited a few minutes before entering the church and sneaked up to greet her. Isabella, surprised at first, soon showed a joy that lit up the whole church with her smile. He knelt beside her until the end of Mass. When she left, Isabella

introduced her ladies-in-waiting and asked him to wait for her right there in the church, she had to go to her residence for just a moment.

Álvaro waited, tying his horse 'el Chírolo' to a tree. After a long time, Isabella returned in her carriage pulled by a single horse, one of those so-called "Chaise Type", and invited him to go up to tour the Alhambra. Inside the carriage, they hugged and kissed, reaffirming their love. The conversation revolved around learning more about their lives, complementing what they already knew from their letters.

They headed to 'La Alcazaba', the oldest part of the Alhambra, originally a military fortress. During the tour, Álvaro pointed out to Isabella the place of that battle of 1492.

-- "Look, that's where they wounded me."

-- "Tell me how it was."

He told her about that day without going into the horrible details, both of Joseph's death and of his own wound. Isabella took pity on him, and Alvaro assured her that over time he had physically adapted to his disability and that ordeal helped shape him into the person he had become. Encouraged, he asked Isabella to show him more of the Alhambra.

-- "Poor you, my love, how hard it must have been. Would you rather visit one of those palaces in particular,

or go to a country place I know, where we could enjoy a special meal?

-- "I definitely vote for the second option."

They left the city, and a straight path took them through the Andalusian countryside, with panoramic views of the mountains and rolling landscapes of olive groves and vineyards. They stopped on a hill covered with lush vegetation, almond and orange trees, with a stream of crystal clear waters that flowed meandering. The hill was adorned with a blanket of poppies and daisies, creating a naturally beautiful and scented atmosphere. She found the perfect spot for a picnic in the sun and asked:

-- "How about this place to stop us?"

"Perfect," he replied.

Isabella had been prepared two wicker baskets with delicacies such as homemade cheeses, fresh fruits, freshly baked bread and wine from the region. Then a soft blanket to lie on and some beautiful brightly colored cushions got out of the carriage. Before enjoying the meal, Isabella and Alvaro hugged and kissed passionately, lying on the blanket and exploring their bodies with desire and passion, playing with their tongues, squeezing her to her body so that she would feel his excitement and stop him... or not. They were still desperately caressing each other while he took off his clothes. By that time it would no longer be easy for him to stop, and he thought that she would not want

him to either, so they moved on towards the inevitable.

Exhausted and naked, leaning on the blanket, Isabella commented:

-- "Have you noticed that we are being baptized by the golden light of the Andalusian sun?"

-- "Yes and I love it."

It was certainly a warm environment, where the gentle breeze carried fragrances of flowers and citrus, while the singing of birds would fill the air with their melodies.

Then they shared some of what the wicker baskets brought. They were special moments that sealed their love, creating indelible memories. On the way back Isabella said:

-- "My father knows about you, I confessed our relationship to him, I told him that I loved him. But since that was not in line with his interests, he forbade me to see him again, but don't worry, I will take care of settling that family conflict."

When they arrived where Álvaro had left the Chírolo, Isabella said to him:

-- "Alvaro I love you with all my strength and I want to start a family with you.

-- "I love her too and I want her to be my wife for life. I promise to do whatever it takes to make her happy."

They knew that Álvaro had to return to the army in Seville. They said goodbye with a long kiss full of love

and tenderness. He returned to the army just as the Second War of Naples began, a conflict in which Alvaro as a captain had to participate.

The Spanish army was recognized worldwide for its military power, for a knight like Álvaro, being part of it was a pride, a way to demonstrate courage, obtain fame, prestige and economic opportunities. Despite his skill and courage on the battlefield, Alvaro longed for peace and missed Isabella constantly, feeling the need to be with her.

What Álvaro never imagined was that his love with Isabella would be involved in conspiracies and betrayals at the court of Castile. The letters he received from her reflected his sadness and disappointment towards his family, relatives and friends. Despite his desire to return to his side, Alvaro could not abandon his duties on the battlefield. In this process, he became vulnerable and learned to accept his emotions, to trust in love and to let go of the arrogance that had characterized him. Both in the war and in his heart, he discovered that there was more to him than he had ever imagined, feeling both proud and vulnerable.

One dark night, exhausted but alert on the battlefield, Alvaro briefly took refuge under his tent to review messages and orders for the next day. Among the scrolls, he found a card sealed with the emblem of the De Luna. His heart, accustomed to the rhythm of war,

now beat with hope and fear as he recognized that it was Isabella's.

With trembling hands, he opened the letter. Isabella's words revealed her desperation and determination. She told him that her father had arranged a marriage between her and Diego Mendoza, son of Cardinal Mendoza, without her consent. Despite this troubling news, Isabella urged Alvaro to remain calm and focus on his duties, assuring him of his fidelity and promise.

Álvaro knew Diego Hurtado from his time in the army and knew about his military and diplomatic career. He had also heard that Diego hated him, although he did not know why.

A few days after receiving Isabella's letter, Álvaro received another letter, this time from his mother, informing him that Isabella had been kidnapped in Granada. Desperate to return, Álvaro was fortunate that Captain Núñez de Balboa received orders to return to Castile, which accelerated his return.

Once in Seville, Álvaro was released from his military duties and devoted himself completely to the search and rescue of Isabella. However, in Seville little was known about his kidnapping. Álvaro undertook an intense search to find and rescue her.

Isabella lived with her family in Granada and had been kidnapped there. Álvaro hurried to prepare for his trip, hoping to make the journey that would normally take just over two days, in a day and a half riding Chírolo, known for his strength and speed.

Upon arriving in Granada, he tried to contact Isabella's family without success. Without information from the family, it was difficult for him to find clues about the kidnapping. He visited some nobles known in Granada to try to find some clue to the kidnapping, the first was Juan Pacheco, Marquis of Villena, a Castilian nobleman who knew the intrigues of the court. To his surprise, at the palace of the Marquis of Villena, he met the other nobleman with whom he had planned to speak, as he had been an ally of Pedro De Luna, Isabella's father's brother, and could have some information about the kidnapping.

The Marquis of Villena informed him that he knew nothing about that subject. Álvaro suspected that Pedro De Luna, Isabella's uncle, must have some information, but he denied knowing anything concrete. He then said that the kidnapping could be related to a dispute over land that his brother, Don Juan, Isabella's father, had title and possession of. Álvaro was familiar with conflicts over property titles, knowing that they could be issued, both by the Crown and by other nobles.

With little information, Alvaro made his way to the Holy

Church of the Incarnation, where Isabella had been kidnapped. He asked as many people as he could, from the church's top brass to the faithful. Finally, after a few days, he met an elderly woman, very faithful to the prayers of the rosary who witnessed the kidnapping. She told him the fact:

-- "After the recitation of the rosary I stayed to pray on my own, the church had more aroma of incense than usual, so much so that the light of the flickering candles created shadows in the smoke of the incense and on the stone walls. After a pause he continued, "it was a cold night, I heard whispers like 'treachery', coming from the sacristy; the lady was in the front row, in front of the altar, on one of the carved wooden benches, and I in the last row; She knelt. In the semi-darkness of the sacristy, I saw a group of men watching her stealthily, two men approaching her as she continued her prayers. One of the men with his hand pressed a white cloth over the lady's nose, she struggled to stand upright, but her legs gave way and she fell to the ground. Then I heard a voice coming out of the sacristy "Bring it to me", two of the strong men rushed to carry it, one of the arms and the other of the legs, then I heard them say "ready Diego, let's go". Then they left the chapel in silence, and left in the darkness of the night, that's all I saw."

Álvaro, after investigating among his acquaintances, discovered that Diego Ramírez was the black hand of Don Fernando Guerrero, a sworn enemy of Isabella's

family. Determined to find Diego, he confronted him on a street in La Alcazaba. In the confrontation, Álvaro wounded Diego, who under duress revealed to him that Isabella had been sold to Arabs to be taken out of Castile. Before losing consciousness, Diego mentioned that the Arabs planned to take Isabella along the coast of Motril to Oujda.

Álvaro left Diego to die and left for Seville to prepare for his trip to Motril, hoping to find clues about Isabella. In Seville, he searched for some additional information about the kidnapping without success, only the date and place of the event were known. Convinced that the kidnapping was an act of revenge and that Isabella had been sold to Arabs, Álvaro went to Motril. There, with the help of Al-Sabah, an Arab merchant, he told him that Isabella had been put on a dhow, a traditional Arab ship, which was wrecked by a storm.

In desperation, Álvaro decided to travel to Oujda, in North Africa. Upon arrival, he learned that Sultan Boabdil had died and that Ahmed, his son, was now the new Sultan. The same Ahmed who had sworn to hunt him down to kill him and thus avenge his brother's death. Álvaro ran into someone who recognized him and had to flee. Knowing that he would be picked up in the port of Oujda, he took an alternative route by land to Nador, from where he embarked for Castile.

Back in Seville, Álvaro plunged into deep anguish and

despair. He returned again to Granada to continue looking for answers, but neither the Marquis of Villena nor Pedro De Luna had additional information.

Álvaro returned to Seville with deep sadness, facing the greatest emotional challenge of his life. He secluded himself in his family's home, spending many days without being able to make decisions. Full of doubts and without clear information, he wondered if it had really been Isabella who was taken in the dhow, if Diego Ramírez had lied to him, or if the Diego mentioned by the kidnapping witness was actually Diego Hurtado de Mendoza.

After finishing his obligations in the army, despite the fact that almost a year had passed since Isabella's kidnapping, Álvaro decided to return to Granada in search of answers. He spoke again with the Marquis of Villena and Pedro De Luna, but did not obtain more information. The Marquis took him to see Isabella's father, Baron Juan De Luna, who, although he consented to see him, provided no additional information and seemed to have resigned himself to the idea that his daughter was dead.

Álvaro also tried to search for Diego Hurtado de Mendoza, Isabella's ex-fiancé, but learned that he was out of Castile on a mission from the crown. Back at the Marquis's villa, he suggested that he go to the carnival in Venice, an idea supported by Pedro De Luna, who

praised the event as one of the most beautiful in Italy and the world.

Discouraged and convinced that the attitude of Isabella's family was strange and suspicious, Álvaro returned to Seville. Grieving at Isabella's absence and feeling that his purpose in life had disappeared, he sank into despair. Each day was an eternity of agony and the nights became unbearable, filled with painful memories. The streets of Seville, which he once cherished for their beauty, now reminded him of Isabella around every corner.

It was not until 1507 that he heard from Isabella again. Queen Isabella I of Castile had offered him a position as Courtier at the court of Portugal, reporting directly to his daughter Queen Isabella of Aragon and Castile, married to King Manuel I of Portugal. A year after his participation in the court of Lisbon, the king gave an important reception in honor of the new ambassador of France, at the Sintra palace. The reception was celebrated with a gala ball, where guests danced to the music in an atmosphere of joy and celebration... when, suddenly, he saw a woman who seemed familiar to him walking in his direction...

"Isabella...", she whispered her name like a prayer, almost not daring to believe my eyes. She stopped a few steps away from him, her gaze revealing surprise and excitement. Those eyes through which he had

wept, believing them to be lost forever, now looked at him with intensity.

"Alvaro," Isabella said in a trembling voice, "I thought I'd never see you again." He advanced toward her, his hands trembling as they brushed hers.

"I thought you were dead, Isabella. I was destroyed by the news of your kidnapping." Isabella looked at him sadly, and her eyes filled with tears.

-- "No, Álvaro, I didn't die. I was kidnapped by Diego... My fiancé at the time, remember, he came up with a complex plan to kidnap me, because he knew that I was very much in love with you and that there was no way I would marry him. After a while, here in Lisbon we got married against my will, at first. For years, I was a prisoner of my love for you, unable to escape and without news from you. Now I am calm, I have two sons and a daughter born just 8 months ago."

Álvaro felt a mixture of relief, joy and anger. He had suffered in silence for years, believing that he had lost the woman he loved, while she was suffering even greater torment. Taking his hands firmly, he said: "Isabella, I'll seek revenge if you want to, but most importantly, you're here now." She nodded with gratitude and sadness in her eyes.

-- "Álvaro, my love, you have been the light in my darkness for all these years... I can't change the past, let's leave things as they are, but now I will be able to live the present with peace of mind, knowing that you are fine."

They said goodbye, confused, but calm, like two stars that cross in the sky without colliding. Alvaro couldn't think of anything else for some time.

Chapter II.- 'Caterina'



Caterina

1503 trip to Venice

Álvaro decided to consider the idea of going to the Venice carnival, seeing it as an opportunity to distract himself and get away from Seville for a while. He analyzed the possibility of traveling by boat or on horseback, opting for the latter option because of the attraction of the adventure that the road could offer. Riding Chírolo, his faithful horse, Álvaro undertook the long and dangerous journey to Venice, a journey that he estimated to take approximately five weeks. The first days passed without setbacks, with Chírolo advancing with a firm and sure step. However, as they crossed the border into France, they were faced with more

challenging landscapes, with towering mountains and narrow, winding roads.

One night, while camping in a clearing in the forest, Álvaro was surprised by a group of bandits. Quickly, he was stripped of almost all his belongings, including a precious gold watch given to him by his father. But what he feared most was that they would take Chirolo. Which did not happen because the horse, showing unexpected cunning, kicked one of the bandits and ran into the forest. Taking advantage of the moment of confusion, Álvaro managed to escape and went into the forest following Chirolo. After hours of searching, he found his trusty steed and mate waiting patiently by a stream. In the saddle on the horse, he had hidden the gold coins to start his life in Venice. Although the robbery had left them without provisions, he felt immense gratitude for not having lost Chirolo, so together, they continued their journey to Venice. Álvaro reflected on the volatility of life and the importance of moving forward despite adversity.

He arrived in Venice, an extraordinary city made up of islands connected by bridges and canals, with buildings rising from the waters like a dream. He stayed at the Monastery of San Giorgio Maggiore, leaving Chirolo in a stable in the old city.

In Venice, Alvaro experienced interesting days due to the novelty of the carnival, but melancholy looking for

Isabella in the crowds. The city, with its beauty and social life, slowly contributed to its recovery. Alvaro became acquainted with the Serenissima Republic of Venice and its government, as well as the cultural and artistic life of the city, making friends with some of its most prominent artists and painters.

His self-confidence was resurrected, and his participation in Venetian social life became more recognized. He was invited to an event that took place in an elegant palace overlooking Venice's central canal. The décor was opulent, with rich tapestries, oil paintings adorning the walls, and sculptures in the corners. Large windows and open balconies offered stunning views of the city, while candlelight and torches created an intimate and welcoming atmosphere. The guests wore fine clothes, typical of Venetian nobility, with luxurious fabrics and jewelry.

The conversations revolved around topics of art, literature, philosophy and the latest political and cultural events in Europe. Food and wine were plentiful, with exquisite Venetian dishes and wines from the surrounding regions of Italy. This gathering was characterized by its relaxed yet intellectual atmosphere, with a mix of artists, poets, musicians, philosophers, and art patrons. Poets recited their latest works, while artists discussed techniques and trends in painting and sculpture.

Music played a central role, with performances by various musicians and singers. Álvaro turned his attention to a singer named Caterina Morosini. His eyes fell on her, a young noblewoman from an influential Venetian family. She had slightly tanned white skin, large black eyes, a perfect nose, and full lips that completed her stunning beauty. In addition, she had a voice as beautiful and harmonious as all of her. That night his performance was highly applauded.

Then, a group of people surrounded her, he joined the group, everyone congratulated her and soon the topic changed to political matters of the republic, where Caterina also stood out. She really captivated Alvaro's attention with her astuteness and passionate dedication to politics. At one point their eyes met. She felt something special, and despite the crowd, she approached her and asked for an appointment for the next day. She agreed, though unusually, saying she would go to where he was staying instead of him looking for her.

The monastery of San Giorgio Maggiore was located on the island of the same name, in front of St. Mark's Square. Caterina arrived there very punctual. The monastery had a breakfast room where they sat down to talk. The talk turned out to be a continuation of the previous day's gathering. She soon had to leave, and Alvaro felt that she had only gone to get to know him better. They agreed to meet that same night for dinner

at 'El Arlequín', a restaurant known for its privacy and beautiful view of St. Mark's Square.

Alvaro arrived early, dressed with understated elegance. Caterina arrived soon after, dazzling in a dress that reflected the changing colors of the sky at dusk, her beauty accentuated by simplicity and good taste.

-- "You are very beautiful and elegant."

-- "Thank you, Álvaro, you also dress very elegantly."

-- "I liked last night's gathering, we don't have them like that in Seville."

-- "I understand that the favorite topics there are religious."

-- "Not in my circle of friends, we talk about all kinds of topics, including humanistic ones."

-- "That's one of my favorite subjects," she said.

"Last night I heard her talk about politics and I was very positively surprised. In Castile, there are few women who talk about politics, or who know about the subject."

-- "Here, internal tensions between noble families and the struggle to avoid corruption and the absolute power of the Doge are recurring themes. The political structure of Venice is dominated by an aristocracy around the

Grand Council and the Doge, and continual adaptations are made to maintain stability and control."

As they ate dinner, their conversation flowed freely. They discovered a surprising harmony in their perspectives and a shared pleasure in the exchange of ideas. They both had a good sense of humor, and their laughter could be heard all over the Harlequin. The complicit glances soon intertwined with their dialogue, creating a connection that went beyond the intellectual.

-- "Let me tell you that I am an art restorer. Two weeks ago I received the commission of a lifetime: to restore a collection of paintings in the former Palazzo Malipiero on the Becaire canal. The palace is owned by the enigmatic Silvestro Zemei, who recently inherited it. He wants to renovate it and open a museum in honor of the turbulent family history. While working on the restoration of a painting, I discovered one painting hidden behind another. I carefully removed the painting above, which had no artistic value, and discovered a masterpiece. It is the portrait of a woman identical to me, but dressed in clothes from centuries ago. The painting is signed by V. Foppa. This finding disturbed me and I want to investigate the history of the palace and the mysterious woman in the painting."

-- "How interesting, tell me more, what have you found out?"

-- "Nothing yet. Silvestro was reluctant at first to dig up the family past. I feel that he is attracted to me and has

left his determination to solve the mystery in the background. However, he has shown me old letters that reveal a mysterious secret that the Zemei family has hidden for centuries. In one letter he narrates a story of tragic love and betrayal. The closer I get to the truth, strange incidents begin to occur in the palace, as if a presence does not want its secrets to be discovered."

-- "Caterina, I want to ask you a favor."

-- "With pleasure, Caterina. Does she want to return to discover the last piece of the mystery and want me to accompany her, is that what she is going to ask of me?"

-- "Yes, would you?"

-- "With pleasure, I am already intrigued by that mystery."

-- "I'm not attracted to Silvestro, so I'm reluctant to go back alone."

The next day, Caterina and Alvaro went to the Malipiero palace. Silvestro was not there. Caterina devoted herself to her restoration work while Alvaro read the documents that Silvestro had shown Caterina, among which he found that the Morosini family had owned the Malipiero palace. Álvaro showed the document to Caterina and said:

-- "Look, Caterina, the woman in the picture

It could be his ancestor and that tragic love from the past could be the root of the palace's curse."

-- "It's possible, but I'd rather quit my job and not go back to this palace that's cursed."

Back in the gondola, as they glided through the calm water, surrounded by the magic of Venice, Alvaro said:

-- "I'm so glad we came. I really wanted to spend more time with you."

-- "I had a great time yesterday and I couldn't wait to see him. By the way, he is very handsome today."

-- "Thank you! You look amazing. So, tell me, what made you invite me to join you today?"

-- "From the moment I met him, there was a good, arguably instantaneous connection. I felt very comfortable and at ease in his presence. He's smart, funny, and genuinely kind. I wanted to get to know him better and see how far this could go."

-- "It's very sweet of you to say it, Caterina. I feel the same. There's something about you that makes me feel like I've known you for much longer than just a date. I love how easy it is to converse with you and how we can be ourselves with each other."

-- "It's rare to find someone who really listens and understands. I'm excited to share my thoughts with you," she said.

-- "I couldn't agree more. I feel like we're building something truly meaningful here."

-- "Yes, let's take things at our own pace and enjoy every moment. I want to know much more about you, your passions, your quirks, your favorite hobbies. I have a feeling this could be something really special."

-- "I hope so, I also have that feeling. I feel incredibly lucky to have found him."

-- "Cheers for that, dear Álvaro!"

Álvaro took her hand, she responded to his gesture with a warm smile and a look that said more than a thousand words. At that moment, the world seemed to be reduced to that small space on the gondola, where their souls found an understanding and an undeniable attraction. As the gondola continued its journey, the two knew that this day was only the beginning of something special, extraordinary, a story that was just beginning to be written in the eternal waters of Venice.

The next day, Álvaro and Caterina met again at the Harlequin. Caterina brought two of her friends, Brenda and Lucia. Álvaro felt as if she had kept her incipient romance in a drawer, from which she did not want to take it out that night. The meeting focused on forming a coalition to address Venice's social problems. Álvaro perceived that Caterina was more idealistic and less romantic than he had imagined.

The 'Venice Reformist Coalition' grew rapidly, encompassing a variety of issues and problems. The relationship that had begun as a friendship between two like-minded minds morphed into something bigger, but less meaningful. They became more involved in discussions about the future of the republic and their ideas for changing its course, without encouraging their romance.

Alvaro and Caterina became increasingly immersed in the complex political intrigues of Venice. The friendship and attraction between them remained firm, although unchanged. Often staying to talk about their personal experiences after meetings and nothing else.

Caterina, due to her fondness for singing, was invited to bohemian gatherings, to which Álvaro occasionally accompanied her. In one of these gatherings, organized by Paolo Veronese, a prominent Venetian painter, Caterina dazzled everyone with her talent. Later, Álvaro felt annoyed when Caterina affectionately greeted Mauro Contarini, a friend of his. Later, she informed him that he should go with Mauro to another event, leaving him there, at that event to which she had invited him. He felt surprised, abandoned, and reflecting on his feelings for her, he realized that Caterina occupied his thoughts constantly.

He knew of a famous fortune teller, or sorceress, in the 'Issola delle Tresse' and the next day he went to consult her. When he arrived, he received him inviting him in.

She received her clients courteously, but with an air of mystery, in a modest but cozy interior, full of objects related to the divinatory practices of her profession. The room was lit by candles, creating an intimate and mysterious atmosphere. In the center, a round table covered by a dark cloth, on which were scattered different divination tools: cards, runes, a small crystal sphere and, perhaps, carved bones or ancient coins used for sorcery.

The fortune teller, a middle-aged woman, with a penetrating and serene gaze, dressed in clothes that, although simple, included details or ornaments that distinguished her from the other people of the town, such as embroidery on golden threads or amulets hanging from her neck. Her hair was tied back in a bun, revealing long earrings or a headband that suggested her connection to the spirit world.

The session began with a purification ritual, possibly using incense smoke, to cleanse the space of bad energies and prepare both the fortune teller and the querent for the spiritual connection that was about to be established.

"What are you worried about, young nobleman?"

"I come to see you because a woman occupies my thoughts constantly and I was sure that my feelings were reciprocated, but now I am not."

The sorceress threw some small snails on some cards that she had on the table. She began to speak in sometimes vague terms, such as reading the cards that seemed to have hidden meanings known only to her, and said:

-- "Young man, I'm going to tell you something that, even if you don't believe it now, will make you happy in the future. She deceives him. That woman, the one you think is safe, the one you think will be your wife, already has another man. You must separate yourself from it, because it sucks your energy, it absorbs the best of you. You do not know the quality of the man you are. She is absolutely insecure, fragile and very ambitious, a mercenary who has always been driven by wealth."

Álvaro, with his head down, shook his head. He wrinkled his face, contracted it as if he had just been informed that he had a terminal illness. The sorceress was in control of the situation, but Álvaro did not react. Although his relationship with Caterina had become complicated lately, he did not want to leave her without exhausting every last resort. But what if she actually already had another man? And who would have told the witch that he would be happy without her? His mouth was dry and had an acidic taste. Álvaro decided to end the session, he had nothing more to hear. However, he remained seated for a few more minutes, thinking about what had happened. Where did I go wrong? His mind, as always, became his worst enemy. What had I done to extinguish that attraction that I believed to be

mutual? Why believe that witch? Deep in his reflections, he suddenly calmed down, got up, and walked out.

The next night they were left alone in the Harlequin after the meeting, sitting on the long wooden bench, their eyes met, but this time a mischievous smile lit up their faces. Slowly, they approached each other, their hands intertwined. Nervous sighs filled the air as their lips gently moved closer, closing the distance between the two. The first kiss came almost as a necessity, a natural and perfect seal for the night. It was a soft kiss but full of promise, a prelude to what could be a deeper bond.

-- "Yesterday when I saw him leave with Mauro I realized that I was losing it. I felt short of breath and that I couldn't live without you. I love that it makes me laugh, even if I don't want to. I love that he listens to me instead of talking. I love walking by your side and, above all, I love how I feel when I am with you."

-- "I also feel the same way about you, Álvaro. From that first day I went to pick you up at the monastery, I like your company and, as I have gotten to know you, I am more attracted to the idea of being with you," she said.

His joy was evident. From there they walked to the dock. The sky with sheepish clouds was reflected in the central canal of Venice, creating a serene atmosphere. They took a gondola and Caterina gave the instructions to the gondolier. At the door of her residence, she got

out and, with a last kiss, they agreed to see each other the next day.

In order to be alone with her, Alvaro got a room in the Rue del Pellegrin near the Harlequin, and that same day he left the monastery. In the evening, after the meeting, which he did not remember anything about, he told Caterina that he had moved from the monastery to a place nearby and invited her to meet him. She accepted. They went out holding hands; all his companions already knew about their romance. When they arrived, they climbed the narrow staircase illuminated by a single lantern. Alvaro opened the door and went to light the candles on a chandelier, revealing all the furniture in the room, which was only a bed, a small table and a chair. Standing next to the bed, he began to kiss her passionately. Aware of their physical attraction to each other, the bed was the prelude to what they knew and expected to happen. After the expected happened, that room became his love nest. There, daily, they gave themselves to each other in carnal love.

Venice was the perfect setting for their romance. One day, they decided to take a romantic getaway to the island of Burano. It was a golden afternoon in Venice, with the sky tinged with shades of pink and gold as the sun began to descend. On the calm waters of a narrow Venetian canal, the gondola glided smoothly, propelled by the expert gondolier, dressed in his traditional striped shirt and straw hat. On the gondola, Caterina

and Álvaro, facing each other on a padded red velvet bench.

"Do you want a glass of wine to refresh yourself?" he said, resting his hands on a small table covered with a lace tablecloth, as he took out a bottle of cold Prosecco, which rested in a small cold bucket.

-- "Of course. My love, I never tire of seeing your beautiful eyes that intensify their color with the contrast of the waters of the lagoon."

The sound of water gently lapping the side of the gondola and the occasional murmur of the city in the distance created a perfect soundtrack. The gondolier, with great skill, guided the boat through the canals, sometimes singing an old Italian melody, adding a touch of magic to the atmosphere.

-- "Caterina, don't you feel like we are immersed in a world of our own? That we are the only ones here at this moment?" as the sky darkened and the first stars began to appear.

-- "Look Alvaro, in the distance, at the houses of Burano of so many different colors. They are of singular beauty and their tranquil atmosphere contrasts with the hustle and bustle of the centre of Venice, don't you think?"

-- "Yes, with its varied bright colors, with shades ranging from bright blue, red, yellow to green. It is said that this tradition helped fishermen to recognize their homes from afar, when they returned from fishing."

-- "In addition, Burano offers a distinct culinary experience with its restaurants serving fresh fish and local seafood. I have been recommended the 'risotto al nero de seppia'. Shall we go to the restaurant where they prepare it?"

-- "Yes, let's go. With you, wherever you want."

They arrived at a pier in Burano and walked to the restaurant. Álvaro said:

-- "Walking through these streets of Burano is like walking through a painter's palette, full of cheerful colors."

Caterina and Álvaro did not hide their romance, so their love did not escape the eyes of Venetian society. Caterina's parents, upon learning of her relationship with Álvaro, strongly objected, considering it inappropriate for their daughter due to her Sevillian origin and forbade her to see him again.

However, the couple continued their relationship despite family opposition, social pressure, and expectations from Caterina's family. Álvaro decided to confront his parents and reveal his nobility as a baron in Castile, but they remained immovable in their decision.

Two days later they saw each other again and Caterina, with tears in her eyes, told her that her father confessed to her that, some time ago, he had arranged a marriage engagement between her and Mauro Contarini's parents, to which she would have radically opposed.

However, he had no choice in determining his family, as such a marriage would bring the union of two patrician families with strong advantages for all. Caterina would have to accept that social commitment, period.

Álvaro had known Mauro Contarini since his arrival in Venice. He was part of the group of friends with whom he shared his first social encounters in his new city. Over time, this group separated from Mauro because they considered him a snake charmer, a dangerous character, endowed with a highly developed and sophisticated ability to deceive. The group of friends said that, sometimes, not even the sharp feminine intuition could discover it. His captivating smile and cloying words made him a crafty professional, a resentful man who was born poisoned, one of those who can lull and captivate even the most perverse of mortals. Woe to anyone who meets him on his way!

The problems intensified when the coalition was seen as a threat to the interests of the Venetian aristocracy. The internal power struggles in Venice involved different political factions, including the Doge and patrician families, such as the Morosini.

The 'Venice Reformist Coalition', already headed by Caterina, was still fighting to combat the intolerant and dogmatic ideology of Venice. They undertook a crusade to confront the problems that had been identified. Caterina wanted to go against the corruption of the high command of the Doge's administration, while Alvaro

insisted on the need for the republic to guarantee basic human rights to all Venetians. Their struggle was difficult, trying to convince the people and, above all, the politicians of the coalition's goals. They had little chance of success, but they would not stop fighting.

Some members of the coalition betrayed them, telling Mauro Contarini, their enemy, that 'El Arlequín' was the place of their meetings. Soon the authorities arrived and closed it. Then, the members of the coalition had to meet in secret, conspiring in the shadows and forging secret alliances, to publicly uncover corruption in the upper echelons of power. With so many difficulties and different strategies, Caterina and Álvaro argued frequently, until they stopped seeing each other for several days.

Álvaro missed her. He knew of a special place for her, where she could be, and he went to look for her. There was Caterina facing the sea, on the edge of the cliff of Lido Island. The wind played with his hair, entangling him in a wild dance. In the distance, the sea crashed against the rocks, a mirror of the tumult in his own heart. She had gone there looking for clarity, an escape from the decision that threatened to tear her apart from the inside.

"Do you always come here when you're confused?" Alvaro's voice startled her, his presence unexpected but strangely comforting.

She turned to face him, her eyes meeting his, as stormy as the sea before them.

"It's the only place where I can hear my own thoughts," he admitted, his voice barely a whisper over the roaring waves. Álvaro approached, his gaze never leaving hers.

"And what do your thoughts tell you now, Caterina?" he asked, in a low voice filled with a warmth that echoed in her chest. Caterina hesitated for a moment, her heart pounding.

-- "They tell me I'm at a crossroads," he confessed with his gaze fixed on where the waves broke against the rocks. "Between what I always thought I wanted and ... what I now feel I need."

"And what do you need?" Álvaro took another step, closing the distance between them until Caterina could feel the warmth of her body. She, looking up at him, found an intensity in his eyes that took her breath away.

-- "Maybe... maybe what I need is you, Álvaro. But I'm scared," she whispered, showing vulnerability in every word. Alvaro raised his hand, gently caressing her cheek.

-- "And I'm afraid of losing you too, Caterina. But love is a leap of faith, isn't it? I'm willing to jump, if you jump with me."

At that moment, with the vast sea stretching infinitely before them, Caterina knew she had to seek her own

happiness against all odds. That it was more important to be happy than to try to make others happy at the cost of their happiness and that true love was not finding someone you could live with, but finding someone you couldn't live without. And as Alvaro wrapped her in his arms, she allowed herself to fall, freely and unreservedly, into the love she had been denying for so long. Then, together they returned along the grand canal of Venice to the pier of St. Mark's Square and from there to their love nest in Rue del Pellegrin.

Alvaro and Caterina were in a secluded corner of a garden in Venice, knowing that their love had been forbidden to them by her powerful family. With his heart full of anguish, but determined to fight to continue his love, Álvaro took Caterina's hand tenderly and looked deeply into her eyes, whispering with determination:

-- "I've thought about it, my love. We can leave for France. I heard that there, far from the rigid Venetian rules, we could start over. I have some savings and, although the road will not be easy, together we can face any adversity." Caterina, inspired by Alvaro's bravery, found a glimmer of hope in the midst of her despair.

-- "To leave for an unknown place, far from everything we have ever known... It's terrifying, but to be without you would be like living in perpetual darkness. If you are by my side, I have faith that we will find the light. Let's

talk to Father Rigoberto; I know that he understands the true meaning of love. It will help us escape."

They went to tell Father Rigoberto about their plans, who listened to them attentively and immediately told them that France would be dangerous because Caterina's family, the Morosini, had very good relations at the court of France and would not take long to locate them and return them to Venice. Father Rigoberto promised them to look for some place where they could start a new life with their relationships within the Catholic Church in the Netherlands. He asked them to go on with their lives as if nothing had happened so as not to arouse suspicion.

They both hugged each other tightly, knowing that the road ahead would not be easy, but with the certainty that their love was stronger than any obstacle.

Alvaro got a new meeting place for the members of the coalition, in the monastery of San Giorgio Maggiore, where he stayed as soon as he arrived in Venice. The Benedictine monks would lend them a space in the breakfast room.

At the next meeting, Alvaro presented his views to them, saying:

-- "With the exception of the Republic of Venice, European societies were structured around monarchical and feudal systems, where the rights and freedoms of

individuals depended solely on their social status and their relationship to the monarch, which were seen as the source of justice.

The nobles enjoy many privileges, while the commoners and peasants have no rights. No one has religious freedom in monarchies, the religion of the monarch is the religion of the governed, period.

Here in Venice, being a form of government considered as a 'public thing', or republic. Positions of power are elected by citizens or their representatives and only for a certain time. The Republic of Venice can be a fertile field to achieve what the 'Coalition' seeks.

All those present agreed and Álvaro was authorized to do so. Its title: 'The four basic rights of humans', which they considered fundamental for dignity, freedom and individual development, the rights were: 1. The Right to Life, 2. The Right to Liberty and Personal Security, 3. The Right to Equality before the Law, 4. The Right to Freedom of Thought, Conscience and Religion.

The book was printed and copies were distributed. The enthusiasm on the part of the Venetians towards the book or its contents was very little.

On the other hand, Caterina and the coalition she led presented evidence of corruption in the Doge's administration. It was a decisive moment. The Venetian aristocracy, alerted to corruption, set up a commission of inquiry in the Doge's Palace. However, their efforts

only achieved minimal change, with only two low-ranking corrupt men punished.

The situation became even more complicated when, on leaving the Doge's Palace, after the meeting of the investigating commission, Álvaro was apprehended and imprisoned on charges of conspiracy against the Republic of Venice.

Trials were conducted with a rigorous sense of procedure and formality, especially if they involved threats to the stability of the republic. This case would be brought before ordinary courts, where specific magistrates would hear the evidence and make decisions based on the laws of Venice.

The process began with a formal accusation against Álvaro by the government itself. He was accused of conspiracy against the Republic of Venice for having written the book 'The Four Basic Rights of Humans'. If found guilty, the defendant could face anything from fines to prison, depending on the verdict.

Alvaro successfully conducted his own defense, as the court dismissed the charge against him, because the book itself indicated that the subject was only a suggestion, because in the opinion of the author of the book, it could help create better social harmony.

One afternoon, while Alvaro and Caterina were talking in St. Mark's Square about returning to see Father Rigoberto, an envoy of the Spanish army tracked down

Alvaro to deliver an order to present himself to the Spanish army, summoning him to the city of Brescia in Lombardy. The news left Caterina speechless. Alvaro was faced with an ethical and emotional dilemma: his loyalty and duty to Castile and the army or his love for Caterina and the life they were planning together.

Álvaro weighed several factors: his responsibility as captain, his love for Caterina and his moral code. He knew that his decision would affect not only his life but Caterina's as well. Even though Caterina did not understand his obligation as a soldier and accused him of betraying his fight in Venice, Alvaro explained the importance of his sense of duty and his constant love for her.

-- "My love, I understand your fears and desires. But with my heart in my hand I tell you that my duty as captain and my responsibility to my comrades-in-arms oblige me to leave now to join the army that claims me. I know that you will understand the complexity of my dilemma and the importance that a sense of duty has in my life. If you decide to wait for me and trust in our love, I promise you that I will do my best to return to your side as soon as I finish."

"It does not fit in my head that you take up arms against the Venetians for whom we have been fighting all this time. For me, he can leave now."

-- "After experiencing the brutality of war, I fervently desire peace and stability and avoid conflict in my personal life. But I highly value honor and have a strong sense of duty and loyalty to my comrades and my country. I will always love you, and that is not in competition with my loyalty to Castile. I have nothing against the Venetians. Now our love needs to withstand this ordeal."

Disillusioned, Álvaro left for Brescia, to rejoin the army under the command of Great Captain Gonzalo Fernández de Córdoba. They participated in the Battle of Agnadello, where flanking tactics and numerical superiority allowed Franco-Spanish forces to defeat Venetian troops. After the victory, the Venetian territories in northern Italy were divided among the members of the League of Cambrai, and Alvaro began his return to Seville.

Chapter III.- 'Raquel'



Raquel

Trip to Lisbon 1507

After the battle of Agnadello and three days of rest, the four "Battalion Captains" were summoned to the royal court of Granada. King Ferdinand II of Aragon had decided to award them the "Cross of Collective Military Merit" for their outstanding merits and acts of valor in battle. Álvaro, the first to arrive at the appointment, marveled at the impressive façade of the palace, whose high walls and detailed architecture revealed the skill of the artisans who built it.

The Alhambra palace, with its majesty, stood out as a testimony to the splendour of the Catholic Monarchs. Its central courtyard, the Court of the Lions, was surrounded by white marble columns and horseshoe-shaped arches. The presence of the marble lions in the center created an atmosphere of serenity. As they were guided through the various halls of the palace, every corner revealed rich ornamentation. The ceilings adorned with stucco and carved wood, along with the tile-covered walls, told stories and legends of the past.

The award ceremony was held with solemnity and majesty in the Hall of Ambassadors. King Ferdinand, dressed in his royal robes, personally awarded the medals, thus recognizing the bravery and service of the captains to the kingdom of Aragon.

After the ceremony, Álvaro was approached by a lady of the Queen, who informed him that Queen Elizabeth I wished to speak to him. The conversation with the queen turned out to be an unexpected proposal: a position of 'Courtier' at the court of her daughter Isabella of Portugal. Without hesitation, Alvaro accepted the offer, aware that rejecting a queen was not an option. Prepared for his new life, he headed to Seville, where he reflected on his future and the responsibilities that would come.

Seville presented him with a contrast between the richness of the city's power and the dark presence of the Spanish Inquisition. It was also a city full of Isabella

memories. Despite this, Álvaro found comfort in the memories of his love for Caterina, to whom he wrote a long and beautiful letter expressing his love and his unalterable feelings, a letter that never received a reply.

The news of Álvaro's appointment as a courtier at the Portuguese royal court had come as a ray of light in family life. Queen Isabella I, a woman of great influence and wisdom, had personally chosen him to represent her daughter at the Portuguese royal court. It was an honor and a responsibility that he could not fail. His parents, Roberto and Susana, had been his unconditional support throughout his life. They had always dreamed of seeing him succeed and were proud of him.

In the morning, after Mass, in front of the majestic cathedral of Seville, the gleam of joy in their eyes mixed with a palpable sadness as they embraced.

"My son, this is a great accomplishment for you and for our family," his mother whispered, struggling to hold back tears. A mother's heart always trembles when she is separated from her child. His father, a man of few words, but of undeniable wisdom, placed his hand on his shoulder and looked at him with pride.

-- "Remember, son, that this trip is not only for you, but also to represent our family and our land. Take with you the values we have instilled in you: honesty, humility and courage." The sound of the cathedral bells echoed

in the air, reminding them of the passage of time and the urgency of their departure.

In Granada, with the first light of dawn, they should leave. It was the autumn of 1507. Everything was ready in the palace courtyard: a pretty black carriage, marked with the Royal Seals on the doors, pulled by a pair of beautiful red horses. The Queen's envoy gave instructions to the entire entourage, made up of two ladies-in-waiting from the court of Queen Isabella I who would go to serve the Queen of Portugal on royal instructions. Their names were Francisca Ramos, also from Seville, and Ana María Ramírez from Málaga; in addition to two 'carreros' who drove and took care of the carriage, and finally two soldiers of the cavalry of the royal guard, armed with swords and muskets. They would protect them as far as the border with Portugal.

Once inside the carriage, talking with the two ladies, Álvaro asked them about the role of the 'courtiers' in the court. Francesca, who had a lot of experience and was also a confidant of the queen, said to him:

-- "A courtier, in addition to his responsibilities at court, also participates in social events. It is a very varied work; attend ceremonies and protocol functions, you will have a lot of fun. However, you will be subject to the rules and hierarchies of the court. It is a position that can be very volatile, because it depends on the whims of the monarch."

Francisca and Ana María were very good company during the trip. Little by little they got to know each other and built a beautiful friendship that would support each other at the Portuguese court.

The journey, full of discoveries, took them through the Sierra Morena, which was home to a rich variety of fauna. On the way they saw several species of deer, such as red deer, wild boars, Iberian lynxes, golden eagles and other minor species. The Sierra Morena was also a hunting area for many people, including nobles and kings.

Each day had its own story; People welcomed them with warm smiles and hospitality. They were able to savor the delicious flavors of the local cuisine, which filled them with energy to continue the journey. They encountered natural hazards, such as streams swollen by recent rains, which sometimes forced the carriage to circle long stretches of land.

On the way to Aracena, heavy rains made the journey difficult and dangerous, along the muddy and slippery roads where the carriage got stuck and one of the wheels broke. Analyzing the problem, the cartmen found a possible solution to unblock the carriage, which would require the four men to carry it while all the horses would pull it out of the quagmire. Fortunately, it was near Atocha, so the two ladies, accompanied by Álvaro, were able to walk to the village, where the next inn was to rest.

That afternoon, the three decided to walk ahead to Atocha before nightfall, while the four men stayed to try to solve the problem. In the forest, halfway through, they encountered a pack of wolves, which created moments of great tension. These predators were common in the region. As the wolves surrounded them, their howls broke the silence of dusk, creating a terrifying symphony. Alvaro firmly gripped the musket lent to him by one of the soldiers, preparing to defend their lives. The wolves, their jaws gaping and teeth flashing in the moonlight, launched their first attacks. Francisca and Ana María screamed violently with each onslaught. At that critical moment, his heart was pounding, mixing fear with a fierce determination to survive this night of terror. He waited for the best moment to fire the only shot the musket could make. He found which of the wolves was the leader and shot him, luckily hitting him right in the head, which caused the rest of the pack to flee from there. Pale with fright and tired with emotion, they arrived at the Atocha inn. Logically, they did not want to taste food and went to rest. After fixing the carriage problem, the soldiers and cart drivers arrived at the inn.

As they approached the border with Portugal, the landscape began to change gradually. Majestic mountains loomed on the horizon, covered with dense forests of oak and chestnut trees. Rivers meandered through the valleys, creating a symphony of soothing sounds that accompanied them along the way.

They arrived in Rosal de la Frontera. As the name implies, it is the border between Spain and Portugal. At the border post of Villa Verde de Ficalho, they left the company of the team of the two soldiers of the cavalry of the royal guard who accompanied them, the carriage and the two cartmen. Very grateful, Francisca, Ana María and Álvaro said goodbye to each of them.

At the border, on the Portuguese side, the envoys of the Queen of Portugal were already waiting for them. There were half a dozen soldiers who would take them in another carriage to Lisbon. The three made themselves available to the Portuguese entourage. Then they crossed the Guadiana River in a wooden boat, as the sun slowly set on the horizon. Álvaro commented that, in his opinion, the Portuguese carriage was better and more comfortable than the Spanish one that took them to the border. The new entourage took them to the capital of Portugal.

In Lisbon, the royal palace was located in the Ribeira, on the banks of the Tagus River. This strategic location offers panoramic views of the river and is easily accessible to all types of boats arriving from distant seas and nearby ports. From the palace, you could see the hustle and bustle of the port and the flow of ships coming and going, reflecting Portugal's importance as a maritime power.

At the palace, it was time for the presentation to the queen, whom they would serve. Álvaro entered alone;

The queen was sitting on her throne waiting for him. The elegant hall was full of people; He bowed as usual. Then, in a solemn act, the queen said to him:

-- "Welcome, young courtier, here is the title of 'Courtier of the Royal Court of Portugal' and 'advisor to Queen Isabella of Portugal'. We expect great things from you and your representation at our court," the queen said in a firm but warm voice.

"Thank you, your majesty. I will do my best and I will do my best to give the best representation in court and that it is to your liking," and he left.

Then, one of the queen's ladies accompanied him to another room, where she explained the following in Spanish:

"His counseling will be solely on military matters, as indicated in the document he was given signed by the king. The king holds public and private audiences to attend to government business, in which he also resolves disputes. You must participate in these hearings to inform the Queen of the aspects related to the interests that she has. Those hearings are opportunities for courtiers to present their petitions and concerns to the king." At the end of the instructions, he was mentioned about the financial compensation he would receive for his services, which was quite generous.

Life at court quickly taught him the intricacies of politics and the importance of loyalty and cunning. His bravery

and skills not only earned him the respect of royalty, but also enmities and challenges that he would face with determination.

It all began when King Manuel I was given the news of a possible secret alliance between the Catholic Monarchs and Pope Julius II, which intended to modify the Treaty of Tordesillas of 1494. That treaty divided the world into two hemispheres of "influence," through an imaginary line drawn about 370 leagues west of the Cape Verde Islands. All the lands discovered or to be discovered east of this line would belong to Portugal, while the lands west of the line would belong to Spain. Although it did not grant ownership of the land.

Fearing a conspiracy, the king turned to André De Prévease, a young man who had become a high-level spy for the king, who trusted in his ability to gather valuable information, to inform him of the Catholic Monarchs' pretensions. André was a shrewd and cultured young man, with connections everywhere, who also spoke several languages. André infiltrated the Vatican court, adopting a false identity as a priest. There, he gained the trust of some key characters, making them believe that he shared their interests. The task proved dangerous and he found himself in compromising situations, but his intelligence and charisma helped him to emerge unscathed.

Back in Lisbon, he informed the King of his findings, with which the King was able to better manage Portugal's position.

André De Prévaise and Álvaro were friends and he told him all this some time later, and he told him:

-- "I'm going to share with you my experiences to serve any king or kingdom. One, betrayals are part of the politics of a kingdom; Don't trust anyone. Two, the treaties are only an initial wall, which the parties will then study how to break. And three, the King only leans on those who are intelligent, cunning, and loyal to him."

One afternoon after the court sessions, they stayed talking about the Arab and Muslim presence in the Iberian Peninsula, and he told him:

-- "It must also be said, during that very long period, the Moors had a significant contribution to culture, science and architecture. The Arab influence on the peninsula also left a lasting legacy in the language, especially in cities such as Cordoba, Granada and Seville". Then he added:

"The last Sultan Boabdil left a large part of his espionage network installed, which still serves him. I learned of the famous duel between his son and your brother José. And by the way, I know they're still looking for you... Be careful because some of its tentacles still work."

Álvaro was stunned by that news and since then he began to suspect everything and everyone. By his

obligation, he had to adapt to his duties, reporting to the queen the events that he thought would be of interest to him. He was under the impression that the queen was satisfied with his work, but he wasn't sure. He thought that his friend Francisca, because of his closeness to the queen, would know if the queen was happy with him or not, so he decided to go find her to ask her. However, the next day Francisca came to look for him. Perfect, he thought, he wouldn't have to go to her anymore, but Francisca went ahead of him and said:

-- "Álvaro, I need your help. There is a small village located in the 'Del Este' forest, called Capuchos, apparently quiet. But no, it hides dark mysteries that no one dares to discover; people disappear in that place. A friend of mine who lives in Capuchos, very worried, asked me for help to know the truth about what is happening there, and I told her about you. Please help us."

-- "So I will do it, tomorrow I will go to see what it is about, to find the truth." Once in Capuchos, the neighbors told him about strange disappearances and supernatural events that occurred in that town. Determined to investigate, he settled in a small inn and began asking more questions of the locals. He soon discovered that the disappearances were related to an old abandoned mansion on the other side of the same forest. According to local legend, the mansion was cursed and inhabited by a vengeful spirit. Intrigued, he decided to explore the mansion at night. He went to the

mansion, but as he entered the gloomy corridors of the place, he felt a strange presence watching him.

Suddenly, he heard a chilling noise like hollowing and found himself face to face with a masked man. With his agility and speed, he managed to escape and leave the mansion. He realized that the masked man, whoever he was, was willing to do anything to silence him, but he was also willing to unmask him.

The next night, he again went to confront the masked man, to clarify what this matter was about and what it had to do with the disappearances. Álvaro imagined that the masked man would be waiting for him, since he sensed that he would return, because he saw him determined to discover what was happening there. Álvaro was counting on the masked man to start chasing him as soon as he entered. Just what he wanted, so it would be easier for him to face him in the narrow corridors of the mansion. No sooner said than done, the masked man was waiting for him and chased him, as he wanted. He cornered him and when he had him on the floor surrendered, with his sword pointed at his neck, he confessed the truth: he was the leader of a secret sect that operated in the town and was willing to do anything to protect the dark secrets of his rituals. They were involved in esoteric-religious practices. He then forced him to show him his secret cells. It was evident that the sect was behind the disappearances. They used the mansion for their nightly witchcraft rituals, for which they sometimes sacrificed human beings.

The Portuguese Inquisition persecuted individuals and groups like that, murderers hidden behind beliefs considered outside of Catholic religious orthodoxy, whom they accused of being heretics. With the confessed leader and with the help of the locals of Capuchos, they arrested the accomplices and took them to the court of the Inquisition installed in the royal palace of Lisbon. The king and queen of Portugal were pleased with Álvaro, which aroused new envy and suspicion at court.

This event would be just one of many challenges and adventures Alvaro would face at court, including his involvement in Lisbon's sailing academy and his growing attraction to Raquel Kracer, a fellow student with whom he shared a deep interest in maritime exploration and an emotional connection that challenged the social and religious norms of the time. That woman with green eyes, blonde hair and a smile that showed her dimples on her cheeks, was somehow going to become something important in her life. Every time he saw her, his body would be alert, as if his soul was escaping him and then, with intense heat, she would return it to him with just a glance.

Although the difficult experiences had made him more suspicious and cautious about his personal relationships and much more careful not to get emotionally involved, it's amazing how she managed to elicit that chemical reaction in him, without even touching him. Álvaro realized that she, in addition to her beauty, had

characteristics that he admired in a woman, such as feeling confident and comfortable in her own skin, tending to radiate her attractiveness, with a proportionate figure and an unsurpassed appearance. Putting aside all his precautions, he soon asked her out. He realized he was really excited when he experienced a sense of happiness when he asked her out; with that fact alone he felt a kind of euphoria and optimism. He was aware of what that might entail, but his courage and determination prompted him to keep going. I knew that illusion is common in the initial stages of a relationship, where everything seems perfect and exciting, where you mainly see the positive aspects of the person, minimizing any flaws. The romantic illusion is a beautiful feeling; He was ready and it would soon be apparent.

They became inseparable in academia, but not out of it, because she was Jewish and he noble, in an era of deep-rooted and deep traditions with social restrictions. Not only did it not look good, but it was forbidden by the Holy Inquisition. Even so, their budding romance would flourish defying all those barriers imposed by that conservative society.

Alvaro was enchanted by Raquel's beauty and free spirit; In addition, he was very attracted to her intelligence. But the fact that this romance was forbidden, on the one hand, became a challenge, an act of bravery, a challenge to the society I wanted to face, and on the other, it was passionate and attractive. Every

day they discovered that they had a lot in common and an obvious mutual attraction. In spite of everything, Raquel and Álvaro were not worried at first, but they soon had to recognize that it was a battle against the current. Their romance made them accomplices, inside and outside academia, both in knowledge and intellectual exploration, by debating avant-garde ideas and questioning beliefs rooted in society, and in mutual support.

One afternoon, leaving the academy, he said to her:

-- "Would you be okay if we spent tomorrow afternoon together?"

"Yes, I'll be very pleased," she replied.

Later, he went to take a room in a hostel not far from the academy.

The next day, he couldn't contain his excitement. She arrived very well dressed, accentuating her beauty. They went out together and walked to the place; he, with a key in hand, invited her in. His whole body was on fire. Nothing lit him up more than Raquel's flirtatious looks. His excitement was very evident, so much so that it could not be ignored. Inside the room, he caressed her face, leaned over, and kissed her passionately.

At that moment, Alvaro, with his tongue in her mouth, vowed to 'do it', whatever that meant.

"I never tire of savoring her," he told her, as he brought her to his lap to continue kissing her. His warmth was so great that, because he was kind, he asked her:

"Can I offer you something to drink?" as he began to unbutton his shirt.

-- "Actually, a little water. Thank you... I think we should slow down a little bit of what we do."

He offered her a smile and stood there.

-- "As you wish. Embarrassed?" she asked.

-- "No, why? Should I?" and laughed.

"Good choice," he replied.

He went to the coffee table where there was a jug of water and two glasses, poured the water and offered her one of the glasses. He continued to take off his shirt and raised the glass to her.

-- "That he takes advantage of it. Cheers."

He swallowed the water as fast as he could, surprised that he didn't choke. But what surprised him most was that the two finished drinking the water at the same time.

He walked towards her.

"Do you want anything else?" he asked, his finger brushing his chest.

"Like what?" she said. He shrugged his shoulders and his gaze was wild.

"May I?" she asked, as she bent down to lift the hem of her skirt.

-- "Mm... of course," she said quietly, as she helped her take off the skirt she was wearing over her underwear. It was fitted at the top and widened downwards, to the floor. He also removed the padded skirt she wore underneath to give volume. She took off her sleeves, which were detachable, leaving only her underwear. Then, slowly, little by little, he took off her underwear, leaving her chest exposed. She realized that she did not wear that garment that serves to fit the waist and shape the torso, of course, she did not need it, she had a sculptural body. He admired her and said:

-- "I love her breasts." He sucked one nipple, while caressing the other. He pulled down his pants, revealing a large erection begging to have sex.

"Are you sure about this, honey?" he asked, in a soft tone of voice.

-- "Yes, I'm sure."

So they spent most of the night making love, sometimes slowly and gently, sometimes wildly. They will never forget that first night.

They continued to see each other almost every afternoon in the same place. As soon as they entered

the room of that hostel, they began with passionate kisses, playing with their tongues, they accelerated their breathing. Then both began caressing their bodies, igniting their passion more. By that time, they already had so many clothes left over and they took them off each other. They could only think of going on consummating their love until nightfall. In one of those sessions, after making love several times, they were left resting on the bed. Álvaro asked him:

-- "What does your family think of our relationship?" to which she replied:

-- "Summarizing their opinion, it does not seem right to them. Jews have always opposed compromise with Catholics. For several reasons, it could attract the attention of the Inquisition, endangering the entire family. For Jews, maintaining their traditions is very important. A marriage to a Catholic could be seen as a threat to the continuity of our religious beliefs and practices and, in addition, could result in social isolation within the Jewish community itself."

"And you, what do you think?" he asked.

-- "I think I love you, regardless of your religion. But tell me about your family."

Álvaro told her about his parents in Seville and about the misfortune of having lost his twin brother in the war. He, now 37, had been truly in love with both Isabella and Caterina, and he knew that, as we mature, love

tends to become more thoughtful, based on respect, emotional connection, and long-term compatibility. At that moment, he felt that his relationship with Raquel was going in that direction.

The days passed; However, their budding romance was not without obstacles. The judging looks and gossip of his classmates and professors in the academy became more and more present.

Portuguese society did not tolerate relations outside the limits imposed on social classes; The 'status quo' came first. The high nobility, supported by the Catholic Church, occupied the highest position in the social hierarchy, then the nobles with titles and great wealth, followed by the "lower nobility", with titles, but without power or wealth, although they enjoyed privileges and a high social status. Álvaro's family belonged to this social class. Further down was the bourgeoisie and so on. The Jews were the lowest in that chain of hierarchies.

The number one rule for social classes was: 'people from different social classes should not mix'. For Raquel and Álvaro, Jewish and noble, there was no hope; Romance was not allowed, period.

Rachel, as a Jewess, had to watch her every move so as not to be discovered. That is why they had to hide their relationship. They met in secret places and communicated through clandestine letters.

Raquel faced a heartbreaking dilemma: continue her affair with Álvaro, a nobleman, and risk him suffering the consequences of their forbidden relationship, or end him to protect him from the persecution of the Inquisition. Rachel decided to send him this letter:

> My most esteemed and noble Mr. Alvaro,

With a trembling hand and a heart burdened with a heaviness that words can scarcely express, I sit down to write you this letter, which carries with it the weight of a decision torn from the depths of my being. In the days we have shared, in the whispers of the night, I have found a refuge, a home for my wandering soul. Yet it is precisely this deep and true love that compels me now to take the most painful path a woman can walk.

I have reflected, my dear Alvaro, on the rising tide of dangers that surrounds us, on the darkness that hangs over those who, like me, have been born under the stigma of a persecuted faith. The Inquisition, with its iron hand and its all-seeing eye, does not distinguish between love and heresy, between passion and sin. To them, our union is but a stain on the fabric of Christendom, a threat that must be eradicated.

It is for this reason, and with a pain that lacerates my soul, that I have decided to end our bond, not for lack of love, but for a love so great that I would rather suffer absence than expose you to the shadow of my

misfortune. I do not wish my legacy to be the ruin of your house, nor for my love to become your undoing. This sacrifice is the purest testimony of my love, a proof of my desire to see him free from the chains that my presence would forge around him.

Please understand that this decision does not arise from doubt or fear, but from the clarity that only true love can provide. I will keep every moment spent by his side as the most precious treasure, and I will carry his name in my heart until the breath leaves me. But I implore you, my noble lord, to continue your life free from the shadows that mine might cast over you. Find the happiness that I cannot bring you, and know that, somewhere, in some corner of this world or the next, my love for you burns with an unquenchable light.

With all the love a woman can give, and all the pain of a decision that tears my soul apart,

Raquel <

For Álvaro, that letter was devastating. I didn't know what to do. I wanted to see her, but not put her or her family at risk. He continued to perform his duties at court and report to the queen as usual. Looking for a solution, a way out that would allow them to be with Raquel without having to hide, he decided to consult his Sevillian friends, who had a lot of experience and wisdom. They met at the tavern 'El Farol' in Seville to

discuss Álvaro's case and recommend what he should do. This was his response:

> Dear Alvaro,

First of all, let us express to you the depth of our surprise and concern as we read your letter. Love, as you well know, knows no titles or lineages, but the world in which we live is less understanding and often cruel in its judgments. It is undeniable that these are complex times. The tension between the nobility and those of Jewish faith is palpable and the Inquisition lurks, turning every corner into a potential danger. Her position as a noblewoman and Rachel's as a Jew is, sadly, an incendiary cocktail in our society.

However, our good friend, love is a powerful force, one that should not be underestimated or sacrificed for the judgment of others. Our advice is twofold:

First, if your love for Rachel is genuine and deep, consider leaving together for kinder, more understanding lands. We have heard that in the northern territories, such as the Netherlands, religious tolerance is more accepted.

Second, if they decide to stay in Portugal or return to Seville, they must be very discreet. Not out of fear, but for safety. Love in the shadows, while painful, can be a temporary solution until times change or find a more permanent way out.

Whatever your choice, Alvaro, keep in mind that true nobility is not measured by blood, but by heart and actions. With sincere affection and solidarity, your true friends,

Diogo López de Sequeira, Sancho Braganza, Rodrigo Quiroz, Ángel Gómez Urquiza <

They were right when they stated that "nobility is not measured by blood, but by heart". With this conviction, Álvaro wanted to continue his relationship with Raquel, clinging to the hope of a miracle that would allow them to be together openly. He wanted to see her again and knew of a place where he could find her, so he went to look for her.

The rain fell incessantly that autumn afternoon, enveloping the city in a veil of melancholy. Rachel was in a tavern near her house, watching the rain fall through the foggy glass of a window. I saw how the drops drew whimsical paths. His cup of mulled wine lay forgotten, the steam no longer rising into the air laden with memories.

Álvaro entered, shaking the water from his clothes, his eyes looking for her in the cozy shelter. At the sight of him, Raquel's heart skipped a beat, a mixture of excitement and fear took hold of her. It had been more than a month since their last meeting, during which time she had tried to convince herself that it was better

that way, that goodbye was the right thing to do. He, determined, addressed her directly:

"Rachel," he said, his voice breaking the constant murmur of the place, charged with an emotion he could not decipher.

"Alvaro," she replied, forcing a smile as she got up. I didn't expect to see him.

He continued toward her, stopping at a safe distance.

"I needed to see her," he admitted. I needed to tell him something that I should have said a long time ago.

Raquel's heart was pounding, fearful, and at the same time eager to hear what Alvaro had to say.

"What is it?" he asked, almost out of breath.

Alvaro took a breath, as if the words he was about to utter weighed heavily on him.

"I love you, Rachel. I have always loved him. After receiving your letter, I walked away because I thought it was the best thing for both of us, but every day without you has been a mistake. I don't know if it's too late, but if there's any chance, any chance that...

He couldn't finish. Rachel interrupted him, closing the distance between them with a determined step and wrapping him in an embrace that contained all the words that could not be spoken. The rain continued to fall, but inside the tavern, time seemed to have stopped,

giving rise to a moment of reunion, revelations and a reborn hope.

Lisbon was full of conspiracies. Some time ago, King Manuel I had decided to form his own spy network to protect his reign and himself. To do this, he turned to the skilled and cunning spy David Moro, who was also one of his closest advisors. David More managed to organize a network of informants and spies throughout the kingdom, infiltrating conspiratorial circles that did not trust the Holy Inquisition and gathering information about their plans and activities. He used undercover agents and secret messengers to transmit the information safely and discreetly.

Álvaro, together with David, based on suspicions and investigations made, organized a plan to discover the Duke of Laganza, whom they suspected of being a traitor to the king. Alvaro would ask the Duke, on behalf of the Queen, for certain confidential information, and if he did not provide it, it would be the confirmation of the conspiracy they suspected. Alvaro, along with David, explained the plan to the Queen, who agreed and authorized Alvaro to request the Duke's information. The Duke deduced that this request was to discover his plan and rushed to cover it up. Alvaro and David assumed that this was what the Duke would do and it was easier for them to uncover the plot, which later became known as the "Mosque Conspiracy". Their goal was to kidnap the King and place him under arrest to force him to abdicate. However, Álvaro and David Moro

managed with this crucial information, to denounce and arrest the Duke, who belonged to one of the most influential noble families in the kingdom. He was then tried and imprisoned, along with his accomplices.

Both Alvaro and David were rewarded by the kings. With his successes before the kings and being the queen's favored courtier, he enjoyed a growing prestige at court, and earned the nickname 'the young wonder', which also exposed him to the dangers and intrigues that this entailed.

Only her friends Francisca and Ana María, ladies of the queen, were aware of her forbidden love with Raquel. However, Álvaro's trust in Ana María was betrayed when she, moved by her unrequited love for Álvaro, revealed the secret of that relationship to her chaplain, Father Rodrigo, who made it known to the authorities of the Inquisition.

After being confronted by Álvaro, Ana María confessed that she did discuss it with Father Rodrigo, triggering a series of events that endangered Raquel's life and Álvaro's position at court. Aware of the imminent risk, Álvaro and Francisca drew up an escape plan for Raquel, while the tension in the Royal Palace of Lisbon increased. The conversations between Ana María and Father Rodrigo revealed the depth of the conspiracy against Álvaro and Raquel. Ana María, seeking redemption, had agreed to collaborate, via Father Rodrigo, with the Inquisition to capture Raquel, not

realizing that she was being manipulated to serve darker interests.

The next morning, Francisca arrived at Álvaro's ranches with disturbing news. Father Rodrigo had summoned the council of inquisitors to discuss the case of Raquel and Álvaro. It was evident that the news of their relationship had reached the most dangerous ears of the court. Faced with that news, Álvaro said:

"We must get Raquel out of Portugal as soon as possible. I have contacts in the north who could help us. But before that, we need to make sure that Rachel is out of harm's way and that she wants to.

While Francisca and Álvaro were finalizing a rescue plan for Raquel, Ana María, tormented by guilt and remorse, sought comfort in the palace chapel. There, in front of the altar, she met Father Rodrigo, who listened to her with interest. Then he said to him:

"My daughter, repentance is the first step toward redemption. Tell me, and maybe I can help you.

Ana María told him:

"I'm in love with Álvaro, but he doesn't reciprocate my love, and I'm very sorry for having betrayed his trust by revealing his relationship with Raquel.

Father Rodrigo listened to her attentively, and when she finished, he said:

"You have in your hands the power to redeem yourself and save your soul. Help me to capture the Jewess and those who conspire with her, and the Church will absolve you of your sins.

Ana María, desperate to find redemption, accepted, not realizing that she was falling into a bigger trap than the one she had started.

Meanwhile, Francisca and Álvaro, with the help of allies, prepared Raquel's escape. They knew that time was of the essence and that every moment danger loomed closer and closer, and that in reality, the options were limited and dangerous. The urgency of the situation led them to discard plans that put Raquel's life at risk.

Pedro De Castro, an old courtier of the Portuguese court with a lot of experience, was jealous of the successes of the 'young wonder'. Pedro had very good connections throughout Europe and, mainly, in Venice, where he inquired about Álvaro's past. It took time, but one day he received, "anonymously", a copy of the book 'The Four Fundamental Freedoms of the Human Being' written by Álvaro De Covadonga, during his stay in Venice. De Castro went to the Queen, who as always was accompanied by some of her ladies, among whom was Francisca, to present her finding:

"Your majesty, here I bring the proofs that Alvaro De Covadonga has conspired against the Catholic Church," and handing him the book he added: "He wrote this book in Venice, where it was printed, and according to

the Holy Inquisition, that book has been written specifically against the Catholic Church." It promotes, among other things, 'the right to freely express whatever one thinks and the right to profess any religion'. Your majesty, I suggest that you issue your orders for him to be arrested and brought before the Holy Inquisition, who, with the consent of the queen, would try him for heresy, unless your majesty thinks otherwise.

The Queen agreed, adding:

"You are right, you must be tried as a traitor."

Francisca told Álvaro about that conversation, since she was present, and he only said:

"That comment of the queen closes the siege. My presence in Lisbon is over.

In the twilight of a summer afternoon in 1512, Rachel had already said goodbye to her parents. Ready and with nothing to carry with her, she went to look for Álvaro. They met secretly at the agreed point in Lisbon, determined to escape from the reach of the Inquisition. Aware that the arrest warrant had already been issued for him and that he might be searching the streets and the omnipresent threat of the Inquisition, they used their knowledge of the city to enter an ancient system of tunnels and catacombs beneath Lisbon, originally used by the Templars, then by smugglers and criminals to evade the authorities.

At night, with the help of an old comrade-in-arms named Matthew, Raquel and Alvaro descended into these dark tunnels. Moving stealthily and using torches to light the way, they made their way through these labyrinths avoiding the gaze of anyone who might recognize and give them away. Rachel recalled a story her grandmother used to tell her about an ancient secret outlet to the Tagus River, used by Jews to escape by boat to safer places. That was during the previous persecutions against the Jews. With this idea in mind, Mateo and Álvaro looked for signs or marks that indicated such a route. After hours of tense exploration, they found an ancient half-hidden wooden door behind an underground waterfall. With a lot of work they managed to open it, and to their surprise and pleasure, they saw a small jetty with an old half-sunken barge that was still moored to that dock. They managed to remove almost all the water. Knowing that time was of the essence, they quickly boarded the boat and began rowing very carefully down an underground channel that took them directly to the Tagus River, emerging from the dense fog that covered the river that night. Once in coastal waters, they were received by a merchant ship, the "Madre del Sur", which for a small price took them in just five days, due to the good weather and favorable conditions, to the Canary Islands, where they were received in the Port of La Luz. There, they met Manolo Carrete, an old friend from Seville, who helped them prepare for a radical change of life.

With the help of Carrete and the negotiation of a couple of passages on the caravel "Estrella del Océano", Raquel and Álvaro embarked for New Spain, contributing their knowledge and skills learned at the navigation academy in Lisbon.

The dawn sun illuminated the Port of La Luz, where the "Star of the Ocean" rose majestically, ready to set sail for the unknown. Sailors, in their thick woolen clothes and wide-brimmed hats, rushed to load the holds with barrels of water and provisions such as ship's biscuits, salted or smoked meats, dried vegetables, and dried fruits to keep them fed during the long voyage at sea.

This trip would last about six weeks, in good weather. All navigation was highly dependent on weather conditions and favorable winds. The crew was 20 sailors, due to the complexity of the crossing, and they would carry 10 passengers with paid passage, including the two of them, in addition to the cargo of goods for the island of Hispaniola.

That day, the atmosphere was filled with excitement and anticipation, as sailors made their way through the crowded streets of the harbor, loading barrels of fresh water and provisions. The sails of the ship were raised, ready to be unfurled and capture the breeze that would guide them out to sea.

With the sails unfurled and the wind swelling the canvases of the ship, the "Star of the Ocean" slowly moved away from the coast with the flag of Spain flying

proudly overhead. The sailors, led by the experienced captain Hernando Gutiérrez, adjusted the sails and prepared for the long voyage.

As the ship pulled away from shore, Alvaro could feel Raquel's heart beating faster, full of courage and some fear, aware that they were venturing into uncharted territory. The waves hit the wooden hull, rocking the ship from side to side, defying the sailors' resistance. The captain, with his determined gaze and accumulated experience, led the team with a firm hand. Navigators studied the maps, carefully calculating the position of the sun and stars to keep the course correct.

Each day, the sun rose and set, marking the passage of time. The nights on the ocean were mysterious and full of wonder. The darkness revealed a celestial spectacle, with bright stars that seemed to guide the way in the midst of the vast and dark abyss. Stories of mythological sea creatures and fierce storms were whispered among sailors, increasing the sense of intrigue and danger.

That day in the vast ocean, the once-blue sky turned dark with menacing gray clouds. The stars that had previously guided them hid, plunging them into almost absolute darkness, foreshadowing an impending storm. The winds whipped the sails, which, though thick blanket, looked thin with violent winds, making them stir and fill with strength. The giant waves rose and fell furiously, hitting the caravel's wooden hull and sending white foams dispersing into the salty air.

Captain Gutierrez and the crew, with tense and determined faces, struggled to maintain control of the ship amid the chaos. Orders were shouted and carried out quickly, as they attempted to navigate through the storm. The caravel swayed from side to side, defying the laws of gravity, as it faced gusts of wind and giant waves that threatened to topple it.

The deafening roar of thunder and lightning lit up the dark sky, creating an even more intense atmosphere. Rain was pouring down, soaking the crew and making the deck slippery. Despite the adversity, each crew member held on tightly to the sail ropes, making them work in perfect synchrony to keep the ship afloat. Álvaro only asked God to allow him to enjoy Raquel's love a little more.

The "Ocean Star" rose and fell up the foamy ridges. The wooden hull creaked under the pressure of the rough sea, but the sturdy structure held firm. Salt water lashed the deck, wetting everything in its path and defying the crew's resistance. As dawn broke, the storm passed and stopped attacking them. After the tremendous struggle to survive, everything seemed to be back to normal.

So the days passed. Suddenly, the lookout in the crow's nest raised the alarm. On the horizon was another ship, swift and agile, with black sails marked with fearsome symbols.

— ¡Pirate landing at sight!

Captain Hernando Gutiérrez gave orders:

"Sailors, get your defense ready!" Load cannons, sharpen swords, and prepare muskets!

They didn't know it, but the sailors had been trained by the captain to defend the "Ocean Star" in these cases.

Pirate ships were known for their speed and maneuverability and were manned by desperate, lawless men, looking for treasure to plunder. As the pirate ship approached, the tension in the caravel increased. The captain issued orders, trying to maneuver the caravel to better defend itself from the impending attack. The pirates, skilled in the art of boarding and combat at sea, were approaching quickly, ready to attack. The cannons of the "Ocean Star" fired first. Their battle cries and the sound of drums filled the air. Pirates would throw hooks and ropes to board the caravel, intending to loot it. Only a few pirates managed to board the caravel because its captain, realizing that the cannon shots had pierced their hull and his ship was taking on water, shouted the order to retreat.

The match only turned into a short hand-to-hand combat. The sailors, protected by armor and armed with swords and arquebuses, fought against the pirates. The roar of cannons, the clash of metal against metal, and the screams of the fighters filled the atmosphere only for a short time, thank God. It was a dramatic mix of danger, strategy, and bravery on the part of the sailors.

Supplies were beginning to run low and conditions were becoming more challenging. Fear and determination mingled on their faces, but their fearless spirit did not waver.

Finally, one morning the lookout spotted land in the distance.

"Land in sight!" shouted the lookout.

A mixture of relief and joy took hold of everyone. The sails were picked up and the ship slowly approached the unknown shore. Hearts were pounding with excitement at the prospect of stepping on dry land after so long at sea. As they approached the coast, the lush, unfamiliar vegetation revealed itself before their eyes. The sounds of exotic birds and unfamiliar animals filled the air. The captain, who had made this trip before, said:

"It's Hispaniola, though I don't recognize the coast in front of us," he then assured them. Our destination will be coasting to the west, a short distance away, and we have a downwind, we will soon arrive.

At last they arrived in Santo Domingo. Your new home. This island had already experienced a decade of Spanish presence. It was the first permanent city of "The Indies". There were stone buildings, streets laid out and some cobbled, a cathedral under construction, and other infrastructure. When Raquel and Álvaro arrived on the island, they were amazed by its natural beauty, they found a land with lush vegetation and rich in natural

resources. They took down their few belongings, said goodbye to everyone, especially Captain Gutiérrez, to whom Raquel gave a couple of letters asking him to send them on his return to Europe, one was for his mother and the other for Álvaro's parents.

They looked for a place to stay and found a small house that could serve them temporarily and closed the deal. In that little house they began a new stage of their lives. Raquel and Álvaro spent a few very happy months, a simple life full of love, without worries. They got a good-paying job with Captain Balboa, in his business supplying and repairing all kinds of ships. Raquel was in charge of the administrative part and Álvaro of the repair dock.

They slowly adapted to the sounds and creatures of the jungle, quite an adventure for them. Little by little, they got to know parts of the large island that offered a diversity of landscapes, from mountains and hills to extensive plains and beautiful beaches. All covered by lush vegetation, including tropical forests and mangroves in some coastal areas.

Before the arrival of Christopher Columbus it was inhabited by several indigenous groups, with the Taínos being the largest population. They lived in villages scattered throughout the island and engaged in fishing and agriculture, growing crops such as corn, cassava, an edible root called sweet potato, and tobacco.

Diego Columbus, son of Christopher Columbus, was the governor of the Indies. After his father's death in 1506, Diego became the heir to the titles and rights granted to his father by the Catholic Monarchs. These included the titles of: Admiral of the Ocean Sea, Viceroy and Governor of the Indies.

Raquel and Álvaro acquired a 2.1 by 5.6 league plot of land in Hispaniola to build a farm in the near future. From time to time, in front of their small house on the edge of the jungle and if the weather allowed it, they would light a fire to enjoy the night under the stars.

A dark night, interrupted only by bright flashes of stars and the silvery glow of the moon. The sounds of the rainforest echoed with the chirping of crickets and the distant murmur of the ocean waves crashing on the beach. Her fire sizzled, illuminating Raquel's dark hair in a ponytail, which moved with each breeze that blew from the sea, with its intense gaze reflecting the light of the flames. She, gently holding Alvaro's hand, said in a low voice:

"Since we arrived on this island, I knew that something would change in me, you are the catalyst for that change.

Rachel smiled, her lips curving into a smile that lit up her face. He replied:

"These lands, so full of mysteries and beauty, have awakened in me passions that I never knew I had. But

with you... With you I feel as if we have already found our home.

The two, from different worlds, bound together by fate in this faraway land, shared their lives and future dreams as the night wore on. Raquel spoke of her childhood in Lisbon, how she had grown up surrounded by the rich Jewish culture and the profound changes that her life had undergone since she began to share it with Álvaro.

While they were talking, a group of Taino Indians, with their bodies painted and feathered headdresses, began to play drums and flutes in the distance. The hypnotic rhythm and melodic chants filled the air, and without saying a word, they got up and began dancing around the fire. Their bodies moved in perfect harmony with the rhythm of the music, and as they twisted and slid, the world around them disappeared. When the music ended, they were both out of breath, their foreheads glued together as they lost themselves in each other's eyes.

"Raquel, I feel something for you that I can't explain. It's as if our souls are intertwined, destined to meet in this place and time," he murmured.

"My love, I feel the same way. I don't know what the future holds, but I know I want to face it with you.

At that moment, under the glow of the Caribbean moon and the silent witness of the stars, their lips met in a passionate kiss, sealing a love that, they hoped, would withstand all the tests that fate could throw at them.

Some time later, a night with a veil of mystery, interrupted only by the erratic flickering of the stars and the pale glow of the moon. The sounds of the jungle were a mixture of murmurs, where the distant crash of the waves merged with the fluttering of the nocturnal creatures.

Raquel and Álvaro had lit a fire, as they did from time to time. They were sitting around him talking. In a soft tone he said to Rachel:

"Every time I look around, I feel that this island hides secrets that we have not yet discovered.

He took his hand and intertwined his fingers, said:

"I feel the same way. It's as if every corner of this place has a story to tell.

Suddenly, the conversation was abruptly interrupted by a rustling in the undergrowth. Immediately, he stood up, his hand reaching for the hilt of the sword. From the shadows, figures with tribal paint and feather headdresses emerged: Tainos, with defiant looks and weapons in hand.

Rachel, recognizing some of the symbols painted on their bodies, murmured urgently:

"Alvaro, they're not friendly. They have come to rob us.

Before they could react, a Taíno advanced, trying to snatch the bag that Raquel had next to her. He drew his sword, parrying the attack and positioning himself protectively in front of Rachel. The air was charged with tension as the Taínos surrounded them. But Raquel, with surprising courage, stood up and began to speak in the Taíno language, making gestures of peace. At first, the Indians seemed reluctant, but gradually, Rachel's words seemed to calm them down. With a look full of respect, the leader of the group, an imposing-looking man, approached Rachel and handed her a small stone amulet. Then, making a wave of his hand, he ordered his group to retreat.

Once the Taínos disappeared into the thicket, Álvaro, still on guard, looked at Raquel in amazement.

"What did you tell them?" She, with a tired smile, showed the amulet.

"I told them of our peaceful intentions and offered them this amulet as a token of goodwill. It is a symbol of protection in their culture.

He wrapped her in a grateful embrace.

—Today, you have not only earned the respect of the Taino people, but also mine, once again.

And as the flames of the campfire faded, they huddled together, grateful to have overcome one more danger in this land of mysteries.

Some time later, the already completed cathedral of Hispaniola stood imposing under the intense blue of the Caribbean sky. Its architecture, a mix of Spanish influences and local adaptations, shone in the evening light. The bells rang in the air, announcing an event that the community was looking forward to: the union of Álvaro De Covadonga and Raquel Kracer.

The villagers, dressed in their best clothes, had gathered at the entrance, waiting for the arrival of the bride and groom. Women wore brightly colored dresses and men wore white shirts and linen pants. With the first ringing of the bell, Raquel made her appearance, accompanied by her godfather. Her dress, immaculate white, cascaded to the floor, adorned with lace and embroidery that reflected the tradition of the place. Her hair was tied back with wild flowers and she wore a veil that covered her face, revealing a radiant smile.

Álvaro, who was already at the altar, felt a leap in his heart when he saw her. Dressed in a linen shirt and embroidered waistcoat, he waited with nervousness and excitement for the moment when he and Rachel would be united forever before God.

The ceremony began with a slow procession to the altar. As Rachel advanced, those present crossed themselves and murmured prayers. Father Mateo, an elderly priest

who had known them since their arrival on the island, greeted them with a warm smile.

"Welcome to the house of God," he began, his deep, calm voice echoing through the room. Today, we are here to unite in holy matrimony Alvaro and Rachel, two souls who have decided to walk together under the blessing of the Lord.

Their votes were emotional and sincere.

"I, Alvaro," with a broken voice, "promise to protect and love Raquel, in sickness and in health, in wealth and in poverty.

"I, Rachel," with tears in my eyes, "swear to be by your side every step you take, giving you my unconditional love.

Father Mateo added:

"This exchange of rings is loaded with symbolism. These simple gold hoops represent the eternity of your commitment and the infinite circle of your love.

Once declared husband and wife, they headed towards the exit of the cathedral, where they were greeted with a shower of flower petals and the jubilant clamor of the community. The celebration that followed was a party full of music, dances and laughter. The lights of the torches illuminated the night, and the air was impregnated with the scent of the sea and tropical flowers. That night, the couple, surrounded by their

loved ones, began a new life together, under the protective mantle of the church and the blessing of God.

The cool breeze from Hispaniola didn't seem so comforting that morning. The island, usually full of life and color, seemed enveloped in a deafening silence. Nature, as if it understood the pain that Raquel and Álvaro felt, seemed to hold its breath. Rachel lay in her bed, her face pale and the sheets stained with sadness. He was by her side, holding her hand gently, trying to find the right words, but every time she tried to speak, a lump in her throat prevented her from doing so.

The baby they were expecting, the fruit of a love that had overcome countless obstacles, was no longer with them. Rachel had woken up in excruciating pain, and before they could seek help, fate took away their hope. The room was filled with wildflowers that he had picked up, trying to bring some comfort to Rachel. But the flowers, though beautiful, could not fill the emptiness they felt.

—I'm sorry—

Rachel whispered, tears streaming down her cheeks. I dreamed of our son, of his laughter, of his gaze... And now it all seems like a cruel dream, a nightmare.

He brought his face close to hers, letting his tears mingle.

"You don't have to apologize. We both dream of that future. But we must be strong, for ourselves and for the love we feel.

The days turned into weeks, and though the pain persisted, they clung to each other like anchors. The community of Hispaniola, moved by the loss, offered them support and comfort, showing that, even in the darkest moments, love and solidarity can light the way.

Over time, Raquel and Alvaro found ways to honor the memory of their unborn child, planting a tree in his honor and sharing stories about the dreams they had for him. Although the pain never completely disappeared, the love they shared helped them find the strength to move forward and face each new dawn together.

The days in Hispaniola had taken on a gray tone. The glare of the sun no longer seemed so bright, and the murmur of the waves on the shore sounded like a distant wail. The nights, once filled with laughter and singing, had become silent vigils, interrupted only by Rachel's faint breath.

After an innocent mosquito left its mark on Rachel, her health began to decline rapidly. Fever, chills, and delirium became his constant companions, and though he tried desperately to find a cure, malaria proved relentless. In her small house, with the walls decorated with memorabilia of her adventures, Rachel lay on her bed, growing weaker and weaker. He, sitting next to her,

held her hand, stroking her sweaty forehead with a damp cloth. Rachel murmured to him with difficulty, her voice barely a whisper:

"I want you to know that every moment by your side has been a gift. Don't cry for me, please. Celebrate our history, our love. You go on your way and you will find another love... You deserve to be happy.

He, tears rolling down his cheeks, tried to smile.

"You will always be with me, Rachel. In every sunrise, in every sunset, in every breath of the wind.

Rachel smiled faintly, closing her eyes for a moment.

"Remember the laughter, the dances, the dreams. Don't remember me for my end, but for all the beautiful moments we shared.

With one last effort, Rachel raised her hand and placed it over her heart.

"Always here," he whispered.

The silence that followed was profound, only interrupted by Álvaro's restrained crying. Rachel, the woman she had loved more than anything in the world, now rested in peace.

The community gathered the next day to pay tribute to Rachel. Although her body had departed, her spirit and memory would live on in the hearts of all who knew her.

Álvaro stood in front of the crowd, took a deep breath and began with a voice full of emotion:

"Our friends, villagers... We are here today not only to say goodbye to Rachel, but to honor her life and all that she meant to us," she looked up at the sky, as if seeking strength to continue. I met Raquel at a time when fate seemed to be working against us. But I learned that love, when it is true, does not understand barriers or obstacles. Rachel was my light in the darkness, my guide in confusion, and my companion in adventure. His laughter was my favorite melody, and his eyes were the reflection of hope and kindness.

With tears in his eyes, he looked down at his grave and said:

"Rachel, my beloved, I want you to know that you will always be a part of me. I promise to honor your memory, living each day with the same love and passion that you taught me.

With those words, he laid a rose on the grave, and in that gesture, all the love, pain and the promise of an eternal reunion were sealed. The crowd, moved, remained silent, understanding the depth of that love that, even in death, was still alive.

From the fateful day of Raquel's departure, Álvaro became a shadow of his former self. Although the island of Hispaniola continued to shine with its tropical colors

and majestic landscapes, for him, everything had lost its radiance.

For him, the nights were the hardest. He went to bed hoping that everything had been a dream and that he would wake up with Raquel by his side, but every dawn the harsh reality screamed at him. In the silence of the night, their sobs echoed in the small house where they had shared so many happy moments. Rachel's pillow, still impregnated with her scent, had become the only consolation for her tears.

During the day, he avoided places that had witnessed his love. The corner of the market where Raquel bought flowers, the beach where they used to walk hand in hand, everything brought back memories that were too painful to bear. The villagers, worried, tried to approach him to offer comfort, but he closed in on himself, like an oyster protecting his precious pearl. He sank into an abyss of pain and melancholy.

The memory of Raquel was everywhere: in the breeze, in the waves that crashed on the beach, in the singing of the birds at dawn. Every detail, every sound, every scent reminded him of her, tearing his soul apart again and again. But something inside him told him that he had to go on, that he had to live, not only for him, but for Rachel and for the love they shared.

Despite his pain, he knew that Rachel would not want to see him like this. Over time, he began to look for a way to honor his memory, to keep his legacy alive. Although

the road to healing would be long and tortuous, he was determined to find light in the darkness, to keep Rachel's memory alive, and to seek a purpose that would give meaning to her existence. The next day he decided to send a letter to Rachel's mother:

> Dear Doña Estela,

With a heavy heart and trembling hands, I sit down to write you these lines that I never imagined I would have to write. I wish with all my being that this letter had no reason to exist, and that Rachel would be by my side to assure me that it is all just a bad dream. But the harsh reality is that our dear Raquel has left us. She was not alone in her last moments. I stood by her side, holding her hand, promising her that I would always remember her and that our love would be eternal.

Rachel told me many times about her love for you and how grateful she was for everything you taught her. In the most difficult moments, the lessons and values that you transmitted to him were his guide and his refuge. I want you to know that your influence on Rachel was palpable, and that the love and respect she felt for you was unwavering.

Mrs. Estela, I understand that no words can alleviate the pain of losing a daughter. Rachel was an exceptional woman, full of life, love, and kindness, and her passing is an immeasurable loss to us all.

With all my love and deep respect,

Álvaro <

Chapter IV- 'Itzel'



Itzel

Trip to Villa de la Vera Cruz 1515

The months passed and Álvaro remained in Hispaniola, reluctant to leave everything that reminded him of his beloved Raquel. His refuge was working with Captain Balboa, who had taught him how to captain a ship in practice. In the fall, the opportunity arose to captain a schooner with Spanish soldiers to the Villa de la Vera Cruz, leave them there and return to Hispaniola with the cargo that would be delivered to them.

Álvaro immediately began to coordinate the tasks to supply the assigned vessel, called "La Golondrina". This schooner, part of the Fleet of the Indies, had two masts, a slender design, and triangular sails called latinas, designed for transatlantic challenges, including storms,

currents, and occasionally, attacks by pirates or European competitors. In addition, they were the main means of transport of people, animals and goods between Spain and its colonies in New Spain. With his experience, Álvaro managed to get the ship quickly provisioned and be in optimal condition for the crossing. Knowing the locals well, he recruited 12 of the best sailors for his crew, including two young Spaniards, Eduardo Perez and Rodrigo Aguilera.

The schooner sailed from Hispaniola carrying 24 soldiers, sailing west parallel to the coasts without mishaps, and then northwest according to the route traced. They arrived in Cuba, an island known for its natural beauty, where they replenished themselves with water and supplies. Even though Christopher Columbus had discovered Cuba in 1492, detailed exploration and colonization by the Spanish was still in its early stages.

After leaving Cuba, a storm caught them at sea, darkening the sky and unleashing violent winds and waves. The stars, which had previously guided them, hid themselves, plunging them into almost absolute darkness. The winds howled like souls lost in hell, and the waves, like gray and foaming mountains, beat against them. The wind blew harder and harder, causing the sails to swell and twist into grotesque shapes. From the bow Álvaro shouted the orders, trying to keep the boat on course.

"Hold those candles! Maneuver to starboard!" But his words were lost in the roar of the wind and the roar of the waves. Beside him, Juan, the navigator, was trying to read the old compass, although his hand trembled.

Everyone was praying that the storm would subside, but it seemed to grow in fury. Soon, the waves carried away pieces of the rigging and then, with a loud crack, the mizzen mast broke and crashed against the stern, among a tangle of ropes and splintered wood until another wave cleared it. The next wave knocked down the mainmast, crushing two more men as it fell and ripping off most of the starboard railing.

Eduardo and Rodrigo, the two Spanish sailors, ran back and forth, securing ropes, adjusting what was left of the sails, and trying to keep the ship as stable as possible. They worked intensely shoring up the chipped beams. Others were busy with bilge pumps, but water was coming in faster than the exhausted crew could pump, and the ship began to sink deeper and deeper.

Then what was left of the masts disappeared altogether and the battered hull filled with water, which entered through the planks that had been broken by the onslaught of the waves.

The salt water hit their faces, blurring their vision and leaving them almost blind. Suddenly, a monstrous wave, much larger than the previous ones, rose on the horizon. The boat, which seemed tiny in front of this aquatic colossus, was lifted by the force of the sea.

Everyone on board held on to what they could, their stomachs churning from the dizzying ascent. And then, with a deafening roar, the wave broke against "La Golondrina", splitting the wood and tearing off all that was left of the sails. They were thrown into the cold, dark sea, each struggling to catch a breath as they were

swept away by the currents. With his last strength, Álvaro managed to hold on to a piece of wood that floated nearby. He searched desperately for his companions among the foam and the waves. Not far away, he saw Rodrigo, who was also holding on to a fragment of the wrecked ship. Together, they were swept away by the current, trying to stay close to each other.

The hours passed, and the storm began to subside. Soon after, the sun slowly began to peek over the horizon, at first shy and then revealing a desolate panorama. Wrecks floated scattered across the vast ocean, and nothing remained of the vessel but debris.

That new day found them exhausted, their skin wrinkled by the salt water and thirsty to death. They took stock of their situation: the other sailors and soldiers were missing, left alone swaying in the clear blue waters with no land to be seen anywhere.

"This can't be," Rodrigo said, looking at the endless expanse of bright blue water. "I feel so strongly that God has a plan for my life, He cannot let me die like this. I am sure that his plan is for him to take his word to these lands."

"God is testing us, he wants us to come out stronger from this, to face the trials that await us," Alvaro replied. "For my part, whatever God wants. If he wants me to die to accompany my Raquel, that's fine."

-- "We have to be optimistic, Álvaro."

Thus he spent the longest day of their lives. Then came the terrible night. They were almost without strength, but very aware of the possible harassment of the sharks, in an exhausted unconsciousness and let the winds carry them at will. They were beyond caring about anything. Through the haze of sleep they finally woke up and in the daylight, in the distance, they spotted what appeared to be land. With a titanic effort, they swam towards it, pushing the remains of the boat that had served as a float. At last they managed to reach the sand on which they fell surrendered. Grateful to be alive.

The unknown beach stretched out before them, beautiful and mysterious. Determined to survive, they scoured for water and food, slowly adapting to their new life and building a shelter. One afternoon, they discovered an old barrel with a letter in Portuguese that spoke of a recent shipwreck and a way to communicate with another Portuguese ship using smoke signals. They followed the instructions, but were not sighted. Until one day, Eduardo and Jorge, also survivors of "La Golondrina", found them thanks to smoke signals.

While they were recovering and planning their next step, they were surprised by an attack by indigenous people, during which Eduardo and Jorge were killed. Álvaro was captured and, along with Rodrigo, taken to the natives, who were fascinated and fearful of his unknown appearance. The indigenous people, identified as Mayans, treated them with respect and took them to their village, Tulum.

In Tulum, Álvaro and Rodrigo were received with a mixture of curiosity and respect. The Maya, with their elaborate loincloths of dyed fabric and intricate feather headdresses, contrasted sharply with the indigenous people Alvaro had encountered on his earlier travels. His physical appearance, his best-designed weapons, and his attitude toward the two castaways revealed an advanced and formidable society.

Upon entering, Álvaro saw buildings that seemed to him to be temples and palaces. The city was well laid out and organized, with streets and squares. Definitely, these Indians were far ahead of the Taínos of Hispaniola.

Many of the inhabitants of Tulum came out to receive them. They were taken to a fenced camp where there were several cages, made of tree trunks and branches. Finally, there they removed the neck and hand ties, then put them inside one of the cages.

In the early morning of the next day, when he opened his eyes, Álvaro saw that under a huge headdress of green feathers, there was a man watching him. He was corpulent and had a brutal appearance. He was more richly dressed than the others, laden with necklaces and bracelets. A wide black stripe painted on his face made him look like the devil's brother. The other Indians treated this figure with a mixture of respect and fear. Small swirls of mist stirred as the figure advanced toward them, intensifying the impression of some otherworldly horror.

The man stopped directly in front of his cage and looked at him impassively. His broad brown face seemed to be made of stone. Obviously he was the boss, because he moved with an air of arrogance and command. A graveyard atmosphere hung over the man, like the morning mist that surrounded them. They looked at him suspiciously in silence, but Alvaro looked him straight in the eye with a look that could perhaps be considered insolent. When she went to him, the brute stared back at her as if he noticed every detail of her face so that he could remember it later. Alvaro felt as if he were looking into the face of death itself. The warriors who accompanied him referred to this man as Muk'nal. Finally, he passed by him and looked at Rodrigo with little interest. With a grunt and a quick gesture he pointed to one of the other imprisoned Indians, and three of his warriors immediately took him out of the cage and carried him away. Despite their terror, they tried to stop them with shouts and protests, but were ignored. The boss paused for a moment, then looked directly at Alvaro once more before leaving. The Indian screamed in despair as he was dragged away, then all was silent once more.

Finally, but with the same curiosity, they were observed by ordinary men and women, who wear a kind of loincloth or cloth that covered from the waist to the knees. Then more Indians continued to come to see them. Like this all day. In the midst of this interesting and at the same time uncomfortable situation, a beautiful young woman from Muk'nal's entourage, looked at Álvaro with one of those captivating looks that hooked him and he could not forget it.

One of the other prisoners who was already in another cage in that place, spoke to us in Portuguese, well, he spoke to Álvaro, because Rodrigo did not speak Portuguese.

-- "I'm Alfonso Ramos, from Portugal, where are you from?"

-- "We from Spain, I speak Portuguese because I lived in Lisbon, how did you get here?"

-- "It's a long story. My ship, the 'Atlantis', during our expedition to the south, at midnight a thick fog enveloped us, and suddenly, 'The Sea Spectre' emerged from the mist. I really don't know what happened. What I am sure of is that it bewitched us, because a strong wind that blew suddenly, smashed us against a rock in the middle of the sea. Roca, which we had not seen and never saw again".

-- "I had already heard of that ghost ship," said Álvaro.

"I saved myself on a piece of wood from the deck of Atlantis, on which I floated for two days and two nights, until I reached the shore. I never saw the other sailors of the Atlantis again. On the coast, I was half dead, the Mayans arrived, caught me and brought me here. This has been going on for a long time, I don't keep count... I think they don't know what to do with me."

"Alfonso, how do you get along with them?" he asked.

-- "I have learned something of their language, enough to make myself understood and understand them. Mayan is a challenge, as it is a language with very

different phonetic characteristics. The meaning of a word can change depending on the tone with which it is pronounced," Alfonso went on to say. "If they want, I can teach them what I know."

-- "Of course, it will be interesting to be able to understand them."

Alfonso was an ally of theirs and a good friend. Over time, Álvaro told him his history and also his Spanish origin, the battles in which he participated, the battle of Naples, the Battle of Agnadello and others. He told him that King Ferdinand II of Aragon awarded him the medal of the 'Cross of Military Merit' for outstanding military merits and acts of courage.

Alfonso then told the other Mayan prisoners that Alvaro was a hero of wars in Europe, with many prizes for valor. This spread by word of mouth to Yaxkin, the chief of the Tulum warriors.

Yaxkin went to see who that hero character was. Surely his personal ego led him to measure himself, as a warrior, against that hero. Yaxkin was a stocky young man of average height by European standards, though tall in terms of the Maya, who were generally short in stature. He took Álvaro out of the slave camp and led him to a nearby plain, where he beckoned him to fight him. He surely intended to dominate it in a hand-to-hand battle, as he would have done many times before. In this case he was wrong with him, because with his martial arts training and his military strategies, practically unknown among the Indians, it was easy for him to evade his attacks, until he tired him out and then

he was able to easily dominate him. Hurt and ashamed, he called his assistants who were hiding with their spears behind some bushes, to return him to the slave camp.

When he arrived, Álvaro told his colleagues Rodrigo and Alfonso what had happened, who told him:

-- "Be very careful, human sacrifices are an integral part of the Mayan religion, it is considered essential to offer blood to the gods to appease them. If you defy the warriors, it will be your blood that they will use to appease them." Life in Tulum offered him a unique perspective on a civilization that had thrived independently of the European, with its own achievements and challenges.

Over time, they became more integrated into the Mayan community. They helped in the training of warriors, participated in ceremonies and, in their own way, contributed to the well-being of the village. The adaptation was not easy, but their willingness to learn and their respect for local customs won them the affection and respect of many.

One hot afternoon on the way to the warrior training ground, he heard laughter and voices in the distance. Intrigued, he followed the sound until he reached a clearing where a group of Mayan women were meeting to celebrate a ceremony. Itzel, the daughter of King Muk'nal, was at the center of the meeting. Her beauty was unmistakable: dark hair like the night, eyes that looked like two deep wells of wisdom, and a smile that lit up her face. She wore a 'huipil', which was a

rectangular garment folded and sewn to the side, leaving openings for the head and arms, very well decorated with brightly colored embroidery. Their clothes indicated their social status and their role in society, they also included embroidery, feathers and jewelry. He watched her as she moved gracefully and confidently, joyfully participating in the group of friends.

It was evident that he had an independent spirit and a confidence that radiated around him. Itzel was not only beautiful, but also intelligent and determined, and that made her even more fascinating. After they started dancing in a ceremony of sorts, he approached Itzel, trying to hide his nervousness. She looked at him curiously, her dark eyes twinkling with intrigue.

-- "Greetings, noble lady. I am Álvaro, a traveler who has arrived in these lands by chance of fate," he told her with an attempt at a smile.

Itzel, with an air of confidence and a touch of humor in her voice, replied in Maya:

-- "Welcome, Álvaro. It seems that the gods have brought an intrepid foreigner to our lands."

He was impressed by her open-mindedness and honesty. Even without speaking, the connection between them was undeniable, as if fate had brought them together at that precise moment.

The sun set on the horizon, but they continued to try to make themselves understood by each other. They both knew that this meeting was the beginning of something extraordinary. It seemed that they were both looking for

someone with whom they could share their joys and sorrows, someone with whom they could be themselves and be accepted unconditionally, despite so many differences.

The days passed, Itzel and Álvaro frequently met in the vicinity of Tulum. Together they explored the ancient cenotes, they did not stop learning from each other, from their ways of being. The relationship between the two grew stronger with each encounter.

Itzel was an exceptional guide, showing you places that few knew about. He taught her about the traditions and history of his people, and he shared his experiences, including telling her about his love for Rachel and her death. He also told him about Europe and Hispaniola.

Despite language barriers, they found a way to communicate, sometimes with words and other times with gestures and looks. Laughter became his primary language. They said goodbye and agreed to see each other again at sunset the next day. They saw each other again and this time Itzel took him to the sacred cenote, taught him that, from the cosmic perspective of the Mayans, they were entrances to an underground aquatic underworld called Xibalbá or "place of terror", which plays a crucial role in the story of creation according to the sacred book of the Maya.

Later they went to the 'control palace'. There he could see some very well made maps where the trade routes were traced. He realized that the organization of these Mayans was as advanced as the Spanish.

He was physically attracted to Itzel from the first moment he saw her. Her beauty and charm captured his attention and he saw her with eyes of romanticism. The clash of cultures and curiosity about the unknown awakened in him an interest in Itzel. The exotic Mayan culture and way of life brought her a fascination, a desire to explore and to learn more through her relationship with Itzel. His unique, charming personality, with qualities of courage, wisdom, and gentleness that he found irresistible. They were developing a special emotional connection, which went beyond cultural differences. They had shared similar values, dreams, and goals, which allowed them to make a deep and meaningful connection.

On the afternoon of the next day, under the golden glow of the setting sun, Itzel and Alvaro found themselves in a quiet corner near the training ground, surrounded by the majestic Mayan structures that stood as silent witnesses of their love. The air was permeated with the sweet fragrance of tropical flowers, and the gentle murmur of the ocean waves on the horizon provided a peaceful murmur in the background. Itzel, her dark hair fluttering softly in the breeze, looked at him with eyes full of tenderness and complicity. Their hands brushed lightly as they spoke, and a spark of electricity ran through their bodies. It was a magical moment, an instant without time. With their hearts pounding, they slowly brought their faces closer. Their gazes met each other, and at that moment, the outside world disappeared. Each could feel the other's heartbeat, their warm and anxious breaths, mingling in the air. The first kiss between them was soft and tender,

a soft touch of lips that contained a promise of union. It was a kiss that sealed their connection, transcended cultural and linguistic differences, and confirmed what their hearts already knew: they were meant to be together. They slowly separated, but their eyes were still intertwined, shining with excitement and passion. Tulum seemed to come alive at that moment, as if the city's history was celebrating this new chapter of love.

Together, Itzel and Alvaro watched the sunset on the horizon, knowing that the love they had found was a valuable gift they would treasure forever. It was a love that defied the barriers of two different worlds, a love that would endure over time.

Álvaro's love for her was a deep and complex feeling that is rarely experienced in life. It was an emotional and affective connection that went beyond physical attraction. That love implied a deep care, respect, and commitment to her, as well as a genuine concern for her well-being and happiness.

One day, Yaxkin, the chief of the warriors went to find Álvaro to tell him that Balam, chief priest of Tulum, would go hunting the next day and ask him to accompany him to protect him from all evil. He promised him to accompany him. The next day, before dawn, she went to look for him where he was told he would be, at the base of the steps of the main temple. The Balam was alone waiting for him, he indicated that he wanted to hunt deer. With that understanding they began the journey. The Balam carried his bow and arrows and Álvaro carried a short and light spear. They went west, shortly after, when it was beginning to dawn

and the chachalacas began to sing, those scandalous birds. They went deeper into the thick jungle, they came to a wide and plentiful river. As is customary in hunts, you walk silently without speaking, so as not to alert any possible prey.

The Balam indicated with signs that he would have to cross the river and entered the water first, Álvaro behind him. Suddenly, the Balam was attacked by an alligator. With the fright he lost his bow and arrows, Álvaro let go of his spear and managed to grab the tail of the alligator, managing to prevent it from biting him.

The Balam soon returned to shore, while Alvaro struggled with the reptile, trying to avoid being grabbed by its fangs and not sinking. The fight lasted a short time, but it seemed eternal to him. He was able to pull out his obsidian knife, the most important thing was to stay calm and act quickly and decisively. He used his arms and legs to protect his neck and abdomen. Alligators also have sensitive areas, their eyes and nose. He looked for an opportunity to aim his knife at these points. That made the alligator retract and Álvaro took the opportunity to get out of the water as soon as possible, diminishing the alligator's advantage. After what happened, the Balam decided to suspend the hunt and return to Tulum. When he arrived at the village, the Balam told Yaxkin what had happened and described Álvaro as the hero who had saved his life. The anecdote spread throughout Tulum. Muk'nal sent for him to tell him that he would hold a ceremony of thanks for saving the Balam's life.

Itzel and Álvaro continued to see each other in secret frequently, taking advantage of every opportunity to do so. They had a system of signals, she left a small red cloth on the stalk of a cactus tree, which was near the training ground. That rag was mistaken for a prickly pear and only he could distinguish it. The signal was the appointment to meet in a secret place by the sea, hidden by some bushes. There they caressed each other, satisfying their desires and increasing their love. Sometimes she would sneak him to beautiful places she knew, where she knew they would be alone.

The night before the thank-you ceremony that would be held in Tulum, she took him to where the turkey meat that would be served in the ceremony was prepared. He showed him how he prepared. They made wells, about a meter deep and half a meter wide, at the bottom they placed round stones the size of a hand. On top, dry branches to set them on fire and make a fire at the bottom of the well. On the other hand, they made a bed of maguey leaves on which they placed the turkey meat, with salt and herbs of aromas, then they wrapped everything and tied it making a large ball that they put into the well, and then cover it with the same earth that they took out to make the well. That was an underground oven that they would uncover the next day, removing the meat at the time of the ceremony.

At sunset the next day the event was held in the ceremonial plaza in Tulum, which was adorned with colorful decorations that reflected their culture, such as banners and sacred symbols, a ritual ceremony. The nobles and priests of the tribe arrived dressed in their

Mayan ceremonial attire, rich in colors and adorned with necklaces, jewels and feathers, symbols of their status. For Álvaro's clothing, they prepared a loincloth decorated with blue colors and a kind of jacket with the same colors, plus some red feathers. In addition, and above all, a large plume of quetzal feathers.

The ceremony began with traditional rituals, including prayers and offerings to their gods. Then they took him to the center of the place for purification using copal smoke. While the musicians began playing their instruments, drums, flutes and conch shells, they were then accompanied by some women, all the same in a long white dress, interpreting their songs and ceremonial dances.

Afterwards, Muk'nal, as spiritual leader and chief of the tribe, standing in front of Alvaro and flanked by his daughter Itzel and Yaxkin, warrior chief, gave a speech highlighting the feats of the warriors and the anecdote of the alligator. Later he approached him to give him a ceremonial necklace as a symbol of honor. Then a great feast was served with the turkey meat that had been prepared in the underground oven, very tasty, by the way.

Their love grew in secret, fueled by furtive encounters under the moon, where they shared dreams and hopes for a future together. But reality was unrelenting. Itzel knew that her love for him was like a flower born in the shadow, beautiful but destined to wither. Her duty to her family, her tribe, and the traditions that had guided her people through the centuries, weighed upon her like the yoke of an inescapable destiny.

The night before her engagement ceremony, prepared by her father and the tribal priests, Itzel was alone on the seashore, reflecting on the crossroads of her life. The stars were shining brightly, as if trying to guide her in her decision.

Slowly but decisively, Alvaro approached her, took her hands, and she, with her eyes fixed on her eyes, said:

-- "Álvaro, your image invades my mind. I remember every word you have said to me in Maya. Every moment our skins touched.

On the other hand, there is the image of my fiancé, he is a brave and respected warrior, he represents the security and future of Tulum. He knows nothing of the secrets of my heart for you. But this union with him symbolizes much more than the happiness that you and I could have. I know that, at dawn, I must make a decision. A choice between following the path of love with you, which defies all the norms of my world, or fulfilling the sacred duty that I have been taught to respect since I was born."

As the moon hid behind the horizon, Itzel closed her eyes, searching deep within her being for the answer to her dilemma. In his heart, a battle was raging, as fierce as those in which Alvaro and the warriors had fought together. She knew that her decision would change her life and that of her people forever.

The night breeze whispered through the trees, carrying with it the echoes of ancient Mayan legends, stories of gods and mortals, of sacrifices and forbidden loves.

Itzel, immersed in her thoughts, felt the burden of these stories weighing on her. In the stillness of the night, he remembered the teachings of his father, Muk'nal, who always said that the destiny of a leader was not only to live for himself, but for his people. Could Itzel, daughter of a king, choose her own path, her own love, over the expectations and safety of her people?

As the moon began to set, giving way to the first light of dawn, Itzel said:

-- "Álvaro, I love you passionately, but I am also full of uncertainties. You are a man from another world, could you really understand and share the deep roots of my culture and our beliefs? Could you, accustomed to conquering, live in harmony in a world so different from yours?

On the other hand, there is my fiancé, a man who, although I do not love or awaken the same flames of passion, shares my roots, my traditions, and is deeply committed to the well-being of our peoples. With him, I would not only unite my life, but also strengthen the alliance between the two tribes, ensuring peace and prosperity for our people."

As the sky turned pink and gold, heralding the new day, Itzel understood that her decision was not only about who to give her heart to, but also about who to give her loyalty and her life to. It was a choice between personal desire and sacred duty, between ardent love and the stability of their community. Finally, as the sun rose, illuminating the vast and beautiful landscape of her homeland, Itzel made her decision. He said goodbye to

Álvaro, got up with a new resolution illuminating his face. She had chosen the path she believed was right, not only for her, but for all who depended on her choice.

He couldn't say anything. It reminded him of the decision he made in Venice against Caterina, when he rejoined the Spanish army instead of continuing with her.

The sun shone high in the sky as Itzel, with dignity and grace, stood before her father, her fiancé, and other nobles gathered there, to announce her decision, one that would resound through the pages of her history and into the hearts of those who loved her.

One morning, one of Tulum's spies returned with news that bearded men had arrived in Cozumel. This ignited in Alvaro and Rodrigo the hope of resuming contact with their compatriots and perhaps finding a way back home. However, both knew that the experience lived in Tulum and their coexistence with the Mayans had changed their perception of the world irreversibly.

A few days later, the spies reported that three of those men were coming in the direction of Tulum with their fire sticks. Yaxkin asked him to explain what fire sticks were. Álvaro told him that they were rifles, Yaxkin asked him if he could make one like it and Álvaro commented that he could not. But that he would go to meet the bearded men to talk to them.

He went to look for Rodrigo and Alfonso to ask them to accompany him. Thus the three, escorted by the spies,

went north to meet the bearded men. Not far from the villa they found them. Álvaro addressed them in Spanish:

-- "Who are you?"

-- "We are Spaniards, we come in the name of Captain Hernán Cortés to look for you."

They were surprised, Álvaro more than anyone... inwardly he thought that they might be sent by the Holy Inquisition. Rodrigo was overjoyed, he couldn't be so happy and Alfonso didn't understand the conversation in Spanish.

Back in Tulum in front of Yaxkin, Álvaro explained the letter in which he exhorted them to join his expedition and told him:

"Yaxkin, they are sent by a king who is the most powerful in the world. Its army is the largest and its weapons the most feared. Like their fire sticks, but much larger, they are called cannons. They come to conquer all these lands, including the lands of the Aztecs, whom we fear so much."

Yaxkin and Álvaro went to the palace of Muk'nal. Inside he only thought and hoped to meet Itzel, convinced that the future would be different now that he knew of the arrival of the Spaniards. Yaxkin explained everything that was happening.

"Itzel, my love, the time for change has come and I want to offer you a new life by my side, although in other lands far from here. The men of my world are very

powerful and are already in Cozumel. They have come to look for me, they want me to join them. Soon everything will change, they are coming to conquer all these lands. Also those of the Aztecs. Many Aztec and Mayan kings and rulers will be captured and if they resist, they will be killed by the Spanish. All tribes and kingdoms will be subject to the domination of the Spanish empire. The Maya hierarchical and social structure will be dismantled and the influence, the power of the Maya leaders will be severely diminished. However, you and I can go and talk to them so that they respect Tulum and don't hurt them. That they are allies of the Spaniards and not enemies. What do you think?"

-- "Álvaro, I had already made my decision and I told you. From what you say, everything can change, but my decision cannot. Now he must be firmer, to be able to defend ours. You must go and talk to your people in favor of Tulum." Álvaro knew how difficult it would be for Itzel to consider what he was proposing, and so it was.

Alfonso did not want to go with them because he had fallen in love with Zaasil, his believing princess.

When they arrived in Cozumel dressed as Mayans, they had the opportunity to wash themselves a little before the interview with Captain Cortés. The soldiers provided them with clothes to replace the Indians they were wearing. Álvaro looked at himself in a small mirror and almost fell on his back. The last time he had done so was in Hispaniola three years earlier. He recalled that in Seville he was very vain. Those days had long since been left behind, along with that Álvaro who no longer

existed. In short, he looked for scissors to trim his beard, bathe, clean his hair and dress like a Spanish.

The reception they had from Captain Cortés was very interesting. He had a clear vision of the potential of the lands he was conquering for the Spanish Crown and did not hesitate to act based on that vision, even defying directives from the governor of 'Las Indias', Diego Velázquez de Cuéllar.

Cortés, after welcoming them, Álvaro told him about Tulum and the different tribes of the Mayab. Cortés was not interested in what he was talking about, he was only interested in showing him his plans for the conquest of the Aztecs and so he did. Then he said:

-- "What do you think of my plan to conquer Teno
Do you have any suggestions?" he asked.

-- "Your expedition has great potential, since the Spanish army has a very big advantage in warfare technology. Here they do not know about firearms, or horses, nor do they master the use of the wheel. However, there are many of his warriors willing to die for their beliefs. Is he going to have the freedom to act autonomously?" asked Álvaro.

"I have the authority to lead the expedition," he replied.

"It will not be easy for him with only 500 soldiers, he would have to look for allies from among the Indian tribes of these lands. There are many who are enemies of the Aztecs, most of them, I would say. With the help of Rodrigo, who learned the Mayan language during his

time with the Indians, it will be more possible to seek and establish alliances for his expedition."

"I will entrust you with a very important mission for the successful completion of our expedition: to bring to King Charles I a letter that you must deliver personally."

Cortés adopted Rodrigo and made him an interpreter and counselor, giving him a crucial role in the interactions he would have with indigenous peoples.

-- "Rodrigo, I ask you, when the time comes, to ask Cortés for special treatment for the tribe of Tulum, because of the quality of good people they are."

After having spent some time on the island of Cozumel, Hernán Cortés set sail around the Yucatan Peninsula. Their fleet consisted of 10 ships, about 500 men, 80 sailors, and 16 horses. The eleventh ship, the 'San Sebastián', was assigned to the task that he had entrusted to Álvaro. That ship would take him to Seville, where he would visit his parents and then be transported to where the king was, to personally deliver the letter from Captain Cortés.

Chapter V - 'My Parents'



Seville 1518

"My dear Seville, I'm with you again," Alvaro said on his return, his heart beating with a mixture of nervousness and anticipation. "It's been years since I left you to venture into the New World, and until now I've been able to return."

The afternoon sun bathed the old facades in golden hues, and the air carried the scent of oranges and jasmine. When he reached the door of his parents' house he paused for a moment, his hand trembling

slightly as he lifted the knocker. The sound of the knock echoed in the silence, and almost immediately, the door opened.

Invited in, he crossed the threshold, feeling each step bring him closer to the roots he had left behind. The interior of the house was fresh and inviting, memories of her childhood adorning every corner. There they were, their parents, with faces scarred by the passage of time, but with eyes that shone with unaltered emotion.

"Alvaro, my son!" his mother exclaimed, her eyes filled with tears as she threw herself into his arms. His father, with a wide, serene smile, came over and hugged him tightly, tapping his back in a gesture of masculine affection. Álvaro was overwhelmed by the warmth of that embrace, a refuge he had longed for in his long nights, especially in this one, floating in the sea after the shipwreck.

"Mother, father, how much I have missed you," he murmured, his voice choked with emotion. As they parted ways from the embrace, her mother caressed her face, studying her lines of maturity and the shadows of past adventures.

"Look what a man you've come back, my Alvaro," his mother said with a sigh of admiration and pride. His father nodded, his eyes also shining with pride. "Son,

your return fills this house with joy. Seville has not been the same without you".

As she sat with her parents, she began to share their stories, each word woven with the nostalgia and love of a son who had finally returned home. Tears welled up in her eyes as she let herself be enveloped by the love and warmth of her parents. That moment was the culmination of years of absence, of adventures, and it was as if time had stopped for them.

"It's been so hard to be away from you," he said, his voice choked with emotion. "But every step I took brought me closer to this moment, to this reunion that I longed for so much. During my travels, I always carried with me the memory of his unconditional love and unwavering support."

His mother looked at him tenderly as she wiped away the tears that still ran down her cheeks. "We have prayed for you every day, son. Every night we looked at the stars and asked you to be safe and come home. And now, here you are, before our eyes."

His father nodded with a smile, pride shining in his eyes. "We always knew you had an adventurous spirit, son. But we never stop caring about you. We're so happy to have you back."

The moment became a mixture of laughter and tears, as they shared stories of their journeys and they told her about the changes and events that had occurred in Seville in her absence. Time seemed to fade away as they stepped into that warm family moment.

After a while, they sat together in the living room, reminiscing about past moments and sharing their dreams for the future. His father mentioned that he had received correspondence for him, handing him some letters. He opened them and one of them was an offer for the land that Raquel and he had bought in Hispaniola. He was very pleased because he had been left with nothing, after the shipwreck and his experience in Tulum.

That night, they had dinner together, finally, with a heart full of gratitude and happiness, he snuggled up in his old room, surrounded by his childhood memories. He knew that he had returned to where he belonged, a place where he would always be loved and valued. The meeting with his parents was the beginning of a new chapter in his life. She realized that no matter how many adventures awaited her in the future, she would always have a refuge with unconditional love and support.

However, he could not forget the commission of Hernán Cortés for King Carlos I. Valladolid was chosen as the seat of the central government of the kingdom. But he spent time in other cities, such as Toledo, Madrid,

Granada and Brussels. So it was impossible to determine where Álvaro could meet him, so he requested help from his father so that, with his contacts, he could find a safe place to see him.

In the days that followed, he spent time with his parents, reminiscing about funny anecdotes and enjoying long walks along the Guadalquivir. On a starry night, they sat in the backyard, wrapped in blankets and embraced by the warmth of a campfire. Silence was present, but there was no need for words. Love filled the air and intertwined between them, creating an indestructible bond.

In Seville he was also able to meet his old friends from his youth, Sancho Braganza, Diogo Lopes de Sequeira, Ángel Gómez Urquiza and Rodrigo Quiroz. All of them already married and with children. After catching up on their lives, he invited them to fight together, each in his or her own midst, to bring about changes in the politics of the kingdom, which would grant basic rights to humans. Those rights were: 1. The Right to Life, this is the fundamental right of every human being, the right to exist and to live free from mortal threats. 2. The right to liberty and security of person, which includes freedom of movement, the right not to be detained arbitrarily or without just cause, and personal security from violence or abuse. 3. The Right to Equality before the Law, all human beings have the right to be treated equally by the law and to be protected from

discrimination, and 4. The Right to Freedom of Thought, Conscience and Religion, which encompasses the freedom to hold and express religious opinions, beliefs and practices without persecution or coercion.

His friends undertook to push these principles within their possibilities, although in a monarchy it was going against the current. They also promised to stay in communication. Seville became the symbol of their reunion, a city that kept their laughter, hugs and shared memories.

Those days, everything for Álvaro was love, friendship and well-being. However, inside it, contrary to what he expected, he began to feel disoriented. He thought it might be because of the lack of his dead twin, Joseph. He decided to visit the library in Seville, to seek some solace in the history books he read with his brother as children. While exploring ancient texts, he discovered something amazing: a manuscript that seemed to narrate his own life, but was written several centuries earlier. This chronicle told of a young nobleman, with a striking resemblance to his personal history, who traveled the world facing love and loss. Perplexed and consumed with curiosity, he investigated further and discovered a series of historical coincidences that led him to a shocking revelation:

"I am the reincarnation of that medieval nobleman. Every love lost, every battle, including the shipwreck

and every decision, seems to have been an echo of my past life, destined to repeat itself."

Determined to break that cycle, he set out on the journey he had avoided for years: visiting the tomb of his brother Joseph, located near Granada. There, he met an elderly shaman, who revealed:

"Your brother's soul has been caught in a curse spell, due to an unfulfilled promise in his past life. You have a chance to free his soul, you must find an ancestral object lost on the battlefield, it is a small red stone. You will find it easily because it is an amulet, which once belonged to your past self and symbolizes redemption. This object will be in plain sight, but no one will pay attention to it if they are not looking for it. That amulet will be a clue that will take you back to the past."

He returned to the field where the battle of the taking of Granada took place, this time not as a soldier, but as a man in search of the liberation of the soul of his brother who died there. In the place that the old shaman pointed out, she found the amulet. As he touched it, he had visions of Joseph's life and understood the mistakes his brother made in that battle. He returned to look for the old shaman in the cemetery and found her. She told him:

"Hello, I have a feeling that you are bringing the amulet. You have to leave him on his grave to help him with the

liberation of his soul. Now all that remains is to fulfill the unfulfilled promise."

"And how can he keep his promise if he is already dead?" he asked. She replied, "Only time will tell."

Back in Seville, at his parents' house, he confided to them the secret of Hernán Cortés' commission for King Charles I, asking them at the same time to help him, with his contacts, to find the place where he could meet him. His father told him:

"Son, I had an answer from my contacts at the court of Charles I. They advised me to go and wait for him in Barcelona, where he will pass on his way to his coronation as Emperor, which will be on October 18, 1520. Do you remember my friend Count Bernardo Peralta? You met him here in Seville shortly before you and José left for that fateful war in Granada. He now lives in Palermo, Sicily, although I haven't seen him for a long time, we still correspond frequently. He asks me to accompany him to see the king precisely in Barcelona. I will not be able to go, because of the unfinished business here in Seville. Since you are going to the same city, greet him with great affection from us."

"Yes, with pleasure, I will." Álvaro thought that this trip would take away the feeling of ghost in his own land, which he had had since the visit to his brother's grave. He felt that his life had light only in his family's home.

After visiting his brother's grave, he sometimes felt out of place, confused by all that he had had and lost; Isabella kidnapped, Caterina disillusioned, Raquel dead and Itzel who preferred her habits to her love. He asked himself: Have I been wrong to have given all my love in each case, that I have been left with nothing more to give? I didn't really know what was happening to him. Could it be that his life had been a cycle of love and redemption, repeating itself through the centuries?

Once the commitment to go to Barcelona was confirmed, he prepared the trip that would be by boat from Seville. He said goodbye to his parents with a tight hug and a promise to return soon. Seville had reminded him of the importance of keeping his roots close, of valuing those who had given him so much love and support. And although life always brought changes and new paths to travel, the meeting with his parents in Seville would always remain in his memory as an eternal reminder of unconditional love and the importance of valuing and keeping close to those we care about.

In Seville, he found not only his beloved parents and friends, but also a deeper connection to his own essence and a reminder that, in the love and embrace of those who love us, we will always find our true home.

Chapter VI. – ‘Ana Luisa’



Ana Luisa

The Barcelona Fair in 1519

It was an annual event of great importance, vibrant and essential to the economic and social life of the city. The fair, known as "La Mercè", was held in honour of the patron saint of Barcelona, the Virgen de la Mercè, and usually took place in September.

During the fair, the streets of Barcelona were filled with stalls of merchants and artisans offering a wide variety of products and services. Visitors could find everything from fresh food and agricultural products to textiles,

ceramics, jewelry and other luxury items. Theatre, dance and music shows were held in different squares and streets of the city. There were also carousels, merry-go-rounds, and games of skill. It was a festive and lively event that attracted people from all walks of life and nationalities.

There was Álvaro, dressed in finely made clothes that reflected the dignity and experience of his 46 years, very animated being part of the celebration of the fair. He knew that the Count of Peralta would arrive that same day from Palermo, and that King Charles I would arrive towards the end of the fair, on his way to his coronation in Aachen, Germany.

So it was, the Count of Peralta left him a message saying that he would wait for him at an elegant reception at the palace of Barcelona, which Álvaro attended that night. Upon entering the reception hall, his gaze was immediately drawn to a beautiful lady of Italian appearance who radiated a mature and refined beauty, the pure essence of elegance. He approached her and saw in her large blue eyes a mixture of wisdom and vivacity that captured his attention. Her skin, a light olive tone, complemented her Mediterranean complexion. His smile, warm and welcoming, revealed a kind and confident personality. Despite her physical beauty, what stood out most was her presence; He moved with a natural grace and confidence that suggested a life lived to the fullest. Her style of dress was sophisticated, yet effortless, combining high fashion with a personal touch that reflected her individuality and her connection to Italy's rich cultural heritage.

What was his surprise when he saw that she was talking to the Count of Peralta, whom Álvaro immediately recognized:

"Señor Conde de Peralta, I am Álvaro de Covadonga, son of the Baron of Covadonga."

"I know very well who you are, son. I have heard of you from your father. He wrote to me that you would come seeking to see the King.

"That's right, my lord. I have an important letter that I must deliver to you personally, sent by the conquistador Hernán Cortés.

"Do you remember my daughter Ana Luisa?"

"Of course I have," replied Alvaro, "although we haven't seen each other for many years. She was only ten years old the last time we saw each other in Seville. What a beautiful woman," he added, addressing Ana Luisa. And you, Countess, do you remember me?

"Not much," she replied, "it has been almost three decades since you speak. It's an honor to see you again after so many years," he said with a mixture of respect and familiarity.

Ana Luisa, with a beautiful smile lighting up her face, answered:

"Baron of Covadonga, your presence here is a pleasant surprise. The years have been generous to you," she said in a soft but firm voice, excited to meet a childhood friend again.

As their gazes met, time seemed to return and recognition developed with the memories of their shared childhood in Seville. Soon, his memories lit up their hearts. It was a reunion that seemed dictated by fate. As they talked, remembering the cobbled streets, the shared games and the innocent laughter, they talked about their brother José, whom Ana Luisa already knew had died in the war in Granada. They also talked about their recent lives, with a mixture of nostalgia and mutual admiration.

She mentioned that she had married in 1502 an Italian in Palermo, named Angelo, who unfortunately died in the Cambrai War, and that she had two daughters, Carina aged 17 and Greta aged 16. The whole family lived together with the Count in Palermo.

A spark of mutual attraction, subtle but evident, began to grow between them. There was a deep connection from his childhood, a mixture of childhood friendship and a mutual respect forged by life's experiences. In those moments, in the midst of the bustle of the reception, they both felt that this reunion could be the beginning of a new chapter in their lives, one that promised to continue beyond that night in Barcelona.

Ana Luisa and Álvaro continued the conversation throughout the night. The Count of Peralta had already changed tables to talk with his friends. They concentrated on their talk, leaving the rest of those present behind and immersing themselves in their memories and their future dreams. Amid laughter and knowing looks, they realized that they had not only found an old friendship, but also someone with whom

they shared a deep emotional connection. That night in Barcelona marked the beginning of a new stage in the lives of both.

As the days went by, their friendship transformed into a beautiful romance. They became inseparable, exploring the corners of the fair together, enjoying culinary delights and immersing themselves in the rich Catalan culture. That same day, Ana Luisa and Álvaro decided that they could not let that opportunity slip away. Promising to stay together, face challenges and try to build a future together. From the first time he saw her, Álvaro felt something so strange that he froze. Later, a voice inside him told him: "Álvaro, she is the woman for you, the one you wanted. You won't have to look any further."

King Charles I of Spain and future Holy Roman Emperor arrived in Barcelona; he was the son of Joanna I of Castile and Philip I of Castile. Juana was the daughter of the Catholic Monarchs whom Álvaro met and served in Lisbon. He immediately asked for an audience to see the King. He was scheduled for the morning of the next day, at the Royal Palace in Barcelona. That morning he arrived early to the appointment, and to his surprise, they passed him immediately, without waiting.

"Your majesty, I must deliver to you in person this letter sent to you by the conquistador Hernán Cortés.

"I heard that you were a prisoner of the Mayans in New Spain. I would like to talk to you about that and some other issues," he said when he received Captain Cortés'

letter. Come with us to the coronation that will take place in Aachen, Germany.

"As you order, your majesty."

Then the King's private secretary said to him:

"Look, the king's journey to his coronation will be a significant undertaking, marked by several challenges and political events along the way. I don't think it is necessary for you to travel all the way to Aachen. I think we can accommodate a meeting with the king on the boat that will take us from Barcelona to Genoa. The king is very interested in talking to you, so I will allocate you an hour with him. Then, once in Genoa, you can return on the same boat to Barcelona, or stay there, as you wish.

Álvaro asked if he could bring his partner and they said yes.

"The king, because of his status, will take a considerable escort of nobles and also a good number of soldiers for his protection. So I won't be able to assign you a cabin today, but until tomorrow. They should be at the 'Príncipe de España' dock at dawn, where the royal ship, the 'Sotavento', will be ready. Please be there on time, as we will set sail on time.

Immediately, he went to find Ana Luisa to talk to her and invite her:

"The king has asked me to travel with him to Genoa to tell him about my experiences in New Spain. I asked if you could come with me and they said yes. So I want to

invite you to come with me on the royal ship, the 'Sotavento', to Genoa and from there we would travel all over Italy to your home in Palermo. What do you think?

"Of course, I'd love to. I just have to see if my father doesn't need me for something. Today I'm going to see him in the afternoon and at night I tell you.

Ana Luisa spoke to the Count and asked him about the invitation. Although it seemed very hasty, he agreed.

On the scheduled day and time, they boarded the 'Sotavento' heading for Genoa. They were assigned a good cabin where they had a very good time. On the second day, the king's private secretary came to find Álvaro to take him to the royal room, and there he placed him in an anteroom. Soon after, the king entered.

"Your majesty, I am at your service.

"Sit down, sir." I am very interested in your comments on the conquest of New Spain that we are carrying out and that is being led by Captain Cortés.

"With all due respect, Your Majesty, in my opinion, the potential of that conquest is enormous. It offers him a significant opportunity to expand his empire in the New World. The riches that can be obtained, especially gold and silver, could help him finance his various campaigns and projects in Europe. All indigenous tribes are polytheistic, with a wide variety of gods they worship. His majesty, as a Catholic monarch, will have the opportunity to convert the indigenous peoples to Catholicism, which, I am sure, is one of his objectives

and would also be a tool of political and cultural control in those lands.

If you will allow me, Your Majesty, though Captain Cortes is ambitious, determined, and a shrewd strategist, it will not be easy for him to succeed with only 500 soldiers. It will require more soldiers and also the freedom to act with autonomy from Governor Velázquez.

The success of Captain Cortés' expeditions would also serve to increase the prestige of His Majesty and Spain on the international stage, demonstrating his capacity and effectiveness in the exploration and colonization of new territories.

"Very well, sir. You are very intelligent and you have told me what I wanted to hear. My secretary told me that you will stay in Genoa. I would like you to accompany us to the coronation.

"As you order, your majesty."

The king withdrew, and soon his secretary entered the room.

"The King wants me to accompany him to the coronation. I will arrange for you to be added to the entourage that will accompany you to Germany.

Álvaro left and went to inform Ana Luisa of the changes in itinerary. At the same time he learned that Charles I appointed a commission, chaired by the chancellor Gattinara, to decide the contest between Cortés and Velázquez, which ruled in favor of Cortés.

Upon arriving in Genoa, they were informed that they would be in that city for four days for the king to attend to important matters for the crown. Which was perfect for the couple to take the opportunity to adapt their clothes, since they were not prepared for the ceremonies related to the coronation. Both noble men and women would dress in garments that were elaborate and made from high-quality materials. Fashion and dress at the court of Charles I were influenced by the trends and styles of the time, being more sophisticated and reflecting the taste for elegance and opulence.

For Ana Luisa, there was a lack of long and voluminous dresses, made of luxurious fabrics such as brocade, silk and velvet. These dresses had long, wide sleeves, and were fitted at the top and waist. The necklines were low and square.

For Álvaro, a tunic made of velvet, white shirts of fine fabrics with high and wide collars, tight knee-length pants, knee-length silk stockings and a hat that matched the tunic were necessary. Fortunately, they got everything in such a short time.

The large caravan departed from Genoa, accompanied by a large entourage made up of nobles, officials and soldiers. The main objective of the trip was for Charles I of Spain to be crowned Emperor Charles V of the Holy Roman Empire, thus consolidating his authority in the territories he ruled. They crossed the Alps and Saint Moritz, entering Strasbourg and passing through cities such as Innsbruck and Regensburg. During the journey, they faced many challenges and obstacles, such as

adverse weather conditions and problems of local protests over political rivalries. However, they managed to overcome them and reach their destination, the city of Aachen, where the coronation was to take place.

The coronation ceremony was a grand and solemn occasion. Charles I arrived in the middle of a large procession and was greeted by the local authorities and the nobility. During the coronation, the Iron Crown of the Holy Roman Empire was placed on the head of Charles V, by Pope Clement VII, confirming his position as one of Christendom's most powerful leaders and symbolizing his authority as emperor. He was also given other imperial symbols, such as the scepter and the globe, which represented his power and dominion. The coronation of Charles V as emperor not only reaffirmed his position of power in Europe, but also symbolized the complex relationship between imperial and papal authority at the time. After the coronation, banquets and festivities were held to commemorate the event.

Ana Luisa and Álvaro returned by the same route to Genoa, where they embarked for Palermo in Sicily so that he could meet Ana Luisa's daughters. The return journey from the city of Aachen to Palermo took 64 days in total.

Love in human beings tends to evolve with age. For young people, love is often more influenced by physical attraction and passion, driven by discovery and novelty. As people mature, love becomes deeper and more reflective, valuing compatibility, respect, and mutual support. The relationship between them was becoming stronger and more mature, and so was their love.

However, their families, initially surprised by this sudden romance, soon realized the depth of their love and gave them their blessing.

His mother, in her last letter, made a comment that continues to resonate in his head. Said:

"Yes, I remember her fondly. He had blue eyes like yours. I remember when they were kids, your brother Jose wanted to marry Ana Luisa." Immediately, Alvaro thought of what the old shaman mentioned about the unfulfilled promise that had Joseph trapped in this world.

They arrived in Palermo. Ana Luisa went ahead to prepare her daughters about her relationship with Álvaro. The next day, with the afternoon sun illuminating the imposing white marble columns and lush gardens that surrounded his property, Álvaro, dressed in his best attire, arrived at the majestic palace of the Count of Peralta, where Ana Luisa and her family lived, along with the Count, who was out of the city attending to the affairs of Emperor Charles V at the time.

His heart was pounding nervously as he approached the main entrance. Upon entering the palace, he was greeted by Ana Luisa, who was waiting for him with a loving smile as always. She took his arm and led him through the halls adorned with tapestries and Renaissance paintings to a private room where her daughters, Carina and Greta, waited nervously. They were dressed in elegant silk and lace garments that highlighted their youth and beauty. Their hair was

adorned with delicate buckles and combs. His eyes shone with curiosity and expectation.

Álvaro stopped at the entrance of the room, his gaze met that of the young women and his heart skipped a beat. The beauty of Carina and Greta was dazzling, and the innocence on their faces reminded him of the same Ana Luisa he met in Seville twenty years earlier. Ana Luisa stepped forward, with a gesture of pride, and formally introduced him to her two daughters.

"They are Carina and Greta. And to you, let me introduce you to Alvaro, my future spouse," she said in a warm, excited tone.

The girls, shy but curious, lowered their heads in respect and greeted him. Carina, with her sweet and melodic voice, was the first to speak.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Alvaro. My mother has told us a lot about you, and we're thrilled to have you in our family," she said with a shy smile.

Greta, with her intense and determined gaze, added:

"It's an honor to have you here, Mr. Alvaro. We look forward to getting to know him better and building a future together," his tone of voice betrayed excitement and determination.

Álvaro was overwhelmed by the warmth and sincerity of Carina and Greta's words. He slowly approached them, feeling the weight of the responsibility he was about to assume. She reached out to Carina and then to Greta,

and the girls accepted them with curiosity and confidence.

"The pleasure is mine, Carina and Greta," he replied in a soft, firm voice. It is an honor to meet Ana Luisa's daughters and have the opportunity to be part of her life. I promise to care for and love your mother, and you, as if you were my own blood.

The young women smiled, feeling relieved and excited by his words. It was the first time someone had spoken to them with such sincerity and affection. Gradually, the barriers faded away and the conversation flowed more naturally. Álvaro shared anecdotes from his childhood in Seville and his dreams for the future, while Carina and Greta shared their own interests and aspirations. The room was filled with laughter, creating a special bond between everyone.

At that moment, Álvaro knew that he had found something more than a fiancée in Ana Luisa. He had found a family in Carina and Greta, and he was determined to protect and love these young women as if they were his own daughters. That afternoon at the palace in Palermo marked the beginning of a new stage in his life, a stage full of love, commitment and the promise of a bright future with Ana Luisa, Carina and Greta.

Sicily was under Spanish rule. This influenced the politics, economy and society of the city, which was a melting pot of cultures, where Christians, Jews and Muslims lived side by side. Their society was stratified, with a dominant nobility, a middle class of merchants

and artisans, and a large population of peasants and poor workers. Social tensions and disputes between the nobility and the Spanish monarchy were common.

One afternoon, Carina, Greta and Álvaro were in the central square, playing with a small pigeon, while their eyes were lost in their innocent games. Suddenly, a young man of prominent stature approached him. His hair was like golden threads and blue eyes like his. His bearing was elegant, although his clothes denoted a long and eventful journey. Alvaro looked up and found a look that was disconcertingly familiar.

"Alvaro?" asked the young man in a voice that carried the softness of the wind.

"Yes, it's me," confused, he asked. Who are you?

"I am Lorenzo," replied the young man, his voice trembling slightly. Son of Caterina Morosini... of Venice. Your son.

His words fell like raindrops into a still pond, creating ripples of surprise and excitement in his heart. Caterina, a love of youth, a passion that she had left behind years ago in that city of canals and dreams.

"Lorenzo?" Alvaro murmured, feeling the past and the present suddenly intertwine. My son?

Lorenzo nodded, seeing his eyes search for something they'd longed for for years. Then he said:

"My mother told me a lot about you, but she didn't want you to know about me. I never knew if it was out of pride or spite. After his passing, I found your letter

and knew I had to find you. She died just over a year ago. After his death, I went to look for you in Seville and there your parents, my grandparents, told me where I could find you. And here I am.

Álvaro approached, observing every feature of her face, finding in it echoes of a lost love and a life that could have been. He stretched out his hands and placed them on Lorenzo's shoulders.

"This is... unexpected," he said in an emotional voice. But you're welcome, Lorenzo. See, we have a lot to talk about, a lot to share.

Together, they began to walk, their footsteps echoing on the ancient cobblestones of the central square, while Ana Luisa's daughters followed them curiously, not fully understanding what had just happened. In the air of Palermo, a new page in its history began to be written. As they entered the narrow streets of Palermo, the sun began to descend, dyeing the sky in shades of pink and orange. Álvaro, still assimilating the reality of having a child, looked sideways at Lorenzo, who walked by his side with nervousness and expectation.

—What was life like in Venice? He asked, wanting to know more about this young man who had emerged from his past.

Lorenzo smiled slightly.

—Beautiful and complicated, as in any city with so much history. But I always felt that something was missing... something that, I think, I have found today.

The air was filled with a pensive silence as they continued walking back to the Peralta palace. Álvaro thought of Caterina, of that youthful love that had marked his life more than he had imagined. And now, in front of him, was the living legacy of that love. In addition, she saw in him her own image at that age; it was her son without a doubt. They arrived at the palace, which was spectacular. Lorenzo looked at him in amazement, then at his father, and finally at the young women who were watching him curiously.

"Thank you, Alvaro. You don't know how much this means to me.

With an affectionate gesture, he invited him in, while saying:

"This is the palace of the family of the Count of Peralta, father of my fiancée Ana Luisa, who is the mother of these two beautiful creatures who are Carina and Greta. We live here.

Once inside, in the reception of the palace, at the foot of the great white marble staircase, was Ana Luisa.

"My love, with great surprise and pleasure, I present to you Lorenzo, who lives in Venice, from where he left after the death of his mother to come and look for me, because I am his father. I know this is a big surprise to you, as it is to me. Let's invite him in.

The sounds of the palace's daily life, the smell of home-cooked food, everything seemed to take on a new meaning. That night, as they shared dinner, the stories of Venice mingled with those of Palermo, and a new

family seemed to be beginning to be forged, united by affection and fate.

Lorenzo was 18 years old, the same age as Carina and one older than Greta. Ana Luisa felt a mixture of surprise and confusion. Looking at Álvaro, Ana Luisa looked for answers in his eyes and said:

"Álvaro, this is complicated. Lorenzo is the same age as my daughters. How do you think they will react to knowing that he will live here with us?"

Álvaro, aware of the delicate situation, solemnly nodded his head.

"I know, Ana Luisa. It's a situation I never imagined. But we must talk to them together, explain honestly and help them understand.

During dinner, Ana Luisa observed the interactions between Lorenzo and his daughters. He noticed how they looked at him with curiosity and caution, as if trying to understand their place in this new family structure. Ana Luisa knew that her daughters might feel insecure or confused, wondering if Lorenzo's appearance would change their relationship with their mother or with Álvaro.

After dinner, Ana Luisa took her daughters aside to talk to them.

"Girls, I know this is unexpected. But I want you to know that our lives will not change.

Ana Luisa spoke to them, and they listened to her, processing the information. There were questions, some

easy and some more difficult, but she answered them patiently and honestly.

That night, Ana Luisa and Álvaro stayed up late, talking about how they would handle this new reality. Ana Luisa expressed her concern for the emotional well-being of her daughters and the need to integrate Lorenzo into the family in a way that was healthy and equitable for all.

"The most important thing now is communication," said Ana Luisa. We have to be open and support each other. This situation is new to all of us, but together, we can make it work.

Thus, facing this unexpected turn of life with maturity and love, Ana Luisa demonstrated, once again, her strength and her commitment to the well-being of the family.

The next day, Álvaro received a letter from his father, who informed him of Lorenzo's visit to Seville. He told him that he was the same as him in everything, even in his way of thinking. He pointed out that they remembered him a lot at that age. Believing that they were doing the right thing, they told him where they could find him in Palermo.

Letter in hand, Álvaro went upstairs to look for Ana Luisa, who was still in the room. He showed it to him and said:

"My love, I have come to a conclusion and I have made a very difficult decision that I hope you will share with me. These are the facts: I know that we love each other

deeply, that Carina and Greta are of marriageable age and that they will surely soon do so, that Lorenzo is my son, that my parents are already old and that they need me by their side in Seville. My decision is that Lorenzo and I go ahead to Seville, to wait for you there and help my parents now that they need me. Besides, although I haven't mentioned this to you before, I don't feel comfortable living under your father's roof, who, although he is never about to attend to the emperor's business, that's not the way of life I learned. You said yesterday, quite rightly, that we have to be open and support each other. What do you think of my approach?

"Each of your words has resounded in my heart with the strength and sweetness that only your voice has for me. Your decision is thoughtful and full of love, both for your family and for us. It's a reflection of the noble and dedicated man you are. I understand the importance of your decision to return to Seville to be with your son and your parents in their golden years. Life takes us down unexpected paths, and yours now leads you back to your roots, to a place where there are duties and affections that claim you. I deeply appreciate your desire for me to join you there, but I also recognize the responsibilities that bind me to Palermo, to my daughters who are about to start their own lives.

Therefore, with a heart full of love and hope, I accept your decision. Get ahead of Seville, take my love and my prayers with you. Build a home for us, a home that I hope to fill soon with the same warmth and love that you offer. Take care of your son Lorenzo and your

parents, and at every moment, remember that my thoughts and my heart are with you.

In the meantime, I will dedicate myself to my daughters, making sure they are well prepared to enter their new homes with all the love and blessing I can offer them. Once I fulfill my duties here, I will meet you in Seville. The wait will not be easy, but I know that our mature and deep love will be the beacon that will guide our days until we are together again.

With the trust and support of Ana Luisa, Álvaro wrote a letter to his parents:

>Palermo, April 1520

Dear Father and Mother,

I hope this letter finds you enjoying good health and joy. From Palermo, I write to you with a mixture of emotions that stir my heart and my pen. It's been a few years since I left our beloved Seville, looking for my destiny in distant lands. Here in Palermo I have found love, challenges and now, a surprise that has changed the course of my life. As you know, Lorenzo recently came into my life, bringing with him news that I never imagined I would receive. He is my son, born of the love of youth with a Venetian lady, Caterina. His arrival has been an unexpected gift, but also a reminder of past and present responsibilities.

Lorenzo, a boy with a noble heart and great intelligence, has illuminated my life. But it has also made me reflect

on my roots and the importance of family. For this reason, and after long hours of meditation, I have made a decision that I hope you understand and support.

I wish to return to Seville, to our home, together with Lorenzo. I want him to meet his family, to soak up our traditions and feel the warmth of the home that has shaped me so much. I know it is an unexpected request, but I beg you to consider it with the love and wisdom you have always shown me.

It has been very difficult for me to leave my dear Ana Luisa and her daughters, Carina and Greta. I sincerely hope that her marriageable daughters will soon marry and that she will later join me in Seville. I am willing to do whatever it takes to facilitate this transition and ensure that our arrival is a cause for joy and not worry.

I look forward to your response and blessing. With all my love and respect,

Álvaro.<

Ana Luisa and Álvaro wrote to each other frequently. Their love proved, with time and distance, to be true, valuing compatibility, respect, and mutual support. Contrary to logic, Greta married first and then Carina. Later, Ana Luisa met with Álvaro in Seville. They shared new experiences together, explored unfamiliar places, and strengthened their bonds even more. On another occasion, they traveled with Lorenzo to Venice. The girls, as Álvaro called Carina and Greta, went to Seville

to visit them, accompanied by their husbands, Javier, Carina's, and Manuel, Greta's.

After his exciting and sometimes turbulent emotional journey, Álvaro has been reflecting on his life. Despite his current happiness with his wife Ana Luisa, his parents, his son Lorenzo and Ana Luisa's daughters, Carina and Greta, he has had to recognize that the memories of his past loves and the lessons learned are still alive in his heart.

His father, the Baron of Covadonga, has some land and properties that provide them with income, mainly through agriculture. These lands are worked through the lease system, where the peasants pay rents or give a part of their crops as taxes. Today, Álvaro dedicates his time to helping his father keep an eye on the family's interests.

What little time she has left is spent writing her memoirs, narrating not only her romances, but also how each relationship taught her something valuable about life, love, and sacrifice. How Isabella taught him the depth of first love and the pain of the emptiness left by loss; how Caterina showed him the importance of being congruent with your principles; how Rachel helped him understand the strength of commitment and the deep pain of his loss. How Itzel taught her to deeply respect and love traditions, her culture and, above all, to bravely face her decisions, even when they differ from her own.

In the process of writing, he has realized that each of these women has left an indelible mark on his soul, molding the man he is today. Grateful for every

experience, no matter how painful, he understood that his emotional journey has been a gift, full of growth.

Álvaro, now older, will spend his days surrounded by his loving family and friends, knowing that his greatest legacy is not only his descendants, but the teachings he may have shared with them in his life and through his writings. His book will be a work in progress, not only as a chronicle of love, but also as a reflection on life in the sixteenth century, offering a unique perspective on human relationships, the social challenges of that time and the first steps to achieve, based on love of neighbor, the recognition of the basic rights of all human beings.



Epilogue: The Impulse of Passion

As we conclude this narrative, it is essential to reflect on the title, 'The Impulse of Passion'. Passion is a subjective concept, as its definition can vary significantly from person to person. Broadly speaking, passion can be understood as an intense and deep feeling of enthusiasm or desire for something. It is a powerful emotion that drives people to pursue interests, goals, or activities with great energy and dedication.

Passion involves a strong emotional connection to an activity, cause, or idea. It is something that provokes deep and persistent feelings. Passionate people are often highly motivated and committed to what they are passionate about, which can translate into consistent effort and meaningful dedication. Engaging in exciting activities often brings a sense of fulfillment and personal satisfaction, generating a deep sense of well-being and fulfillment.

In addition, passionate people tend to be persistent and resilient, overcoming obstacles and challenges to continue to pursue their passion. Passion can be a source of inspiration and creativity, driving people to innovate, explore new ideas, and push their capabilities to the limit.

Álvaro, our protagonist, fought driven by his passion at every stage of his life. With enthusiasm, commitment, and a strong emotional connection, she stood up for her true love and gave herself to greater causes. Among these, he highlighted his struggle for the basic rights of the human being: the Right to Life, the Right to Liberty and Personal Security, the Right to Equality before the Law and the Right to Freedom of Thought, Conscience and Religion. These principles, fundamental to human dignity, led him to be persecuted by the Holy Inquisition, which considered his ideas contrary to the doctrine of the Catholic Church.

Álvaro is an example of how passion can drive and guide a person to face adversity and remain firm in their convictions. His life teaches us that while the road may be full of challenges, passion is a driving force that drives us to strive for what we believe in and find fulfillment in our actions. His legacy reminds us of the importance of following our deepest desires with dedication and courage, even in the face of adversity.



Lorenzo