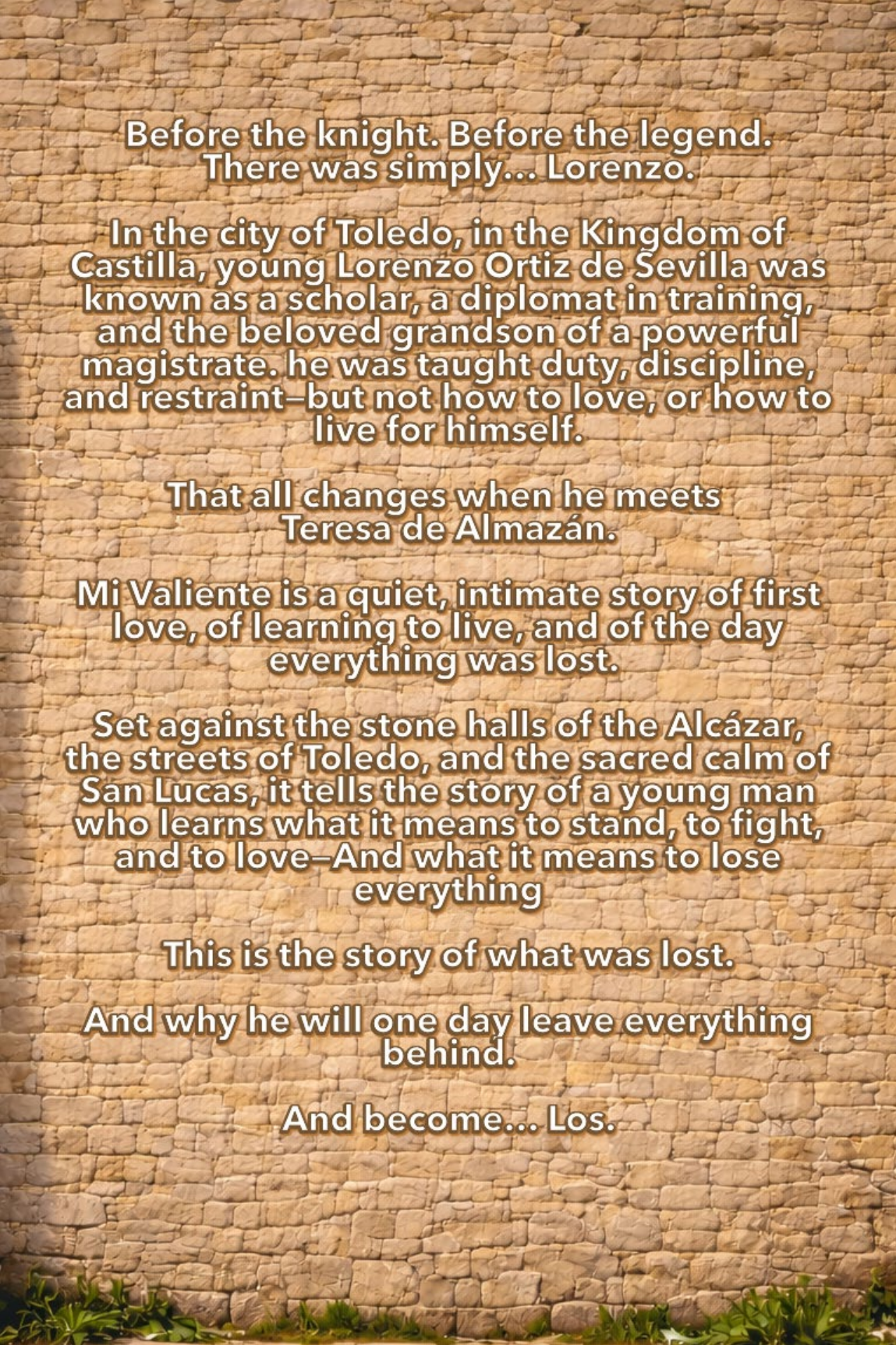




Dark Age of Camelot

A Spaniard in Albion

Novella I - Mi Valiente
By Losnoopy

The background of the entire image is a close-up of a stone wall, likely from a historical building. The stones are irregular in shape and size, with a warm, yellowish-brown hue. The wall is composed of several courses of stones, with some larger, more rectangular stones interspersed among smaller, more irregular ones. The texture is rough and aged. At the bottom of the image, there is a thin strip of green foliage, possibly ivy or a similar climbing plant, growing along the base of the wall.

Before the knight. Before the legend.
There was simply... Lorenzo.

In the city of Toledo, in the Kingdom of Castilla, young Lorenzo Ortiz de Sevilla was known as a scholar, a diplomat in training, and the beloved grandson of a powerful magistrate. he was taught duty, discipline, and restraint—but not how to love, or how to live for himself.

That all changes when he meets
Teresa de Almazán.

Mi Valiente is a quiet, intimate story of first love, of learning to live, and of the day everything was lost.

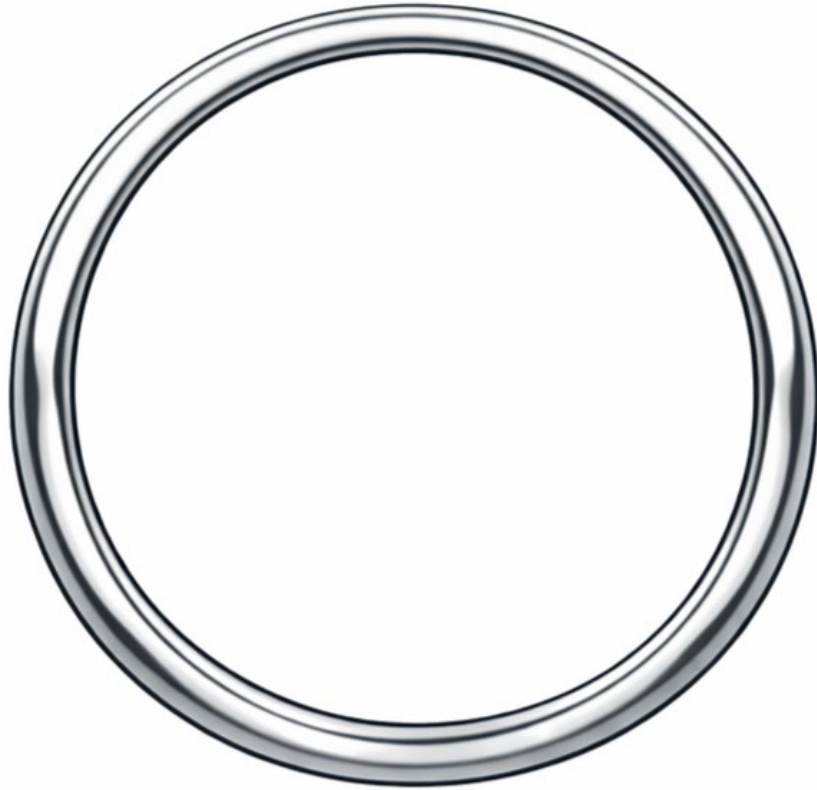
Set against the stone halls of the Alcázar, the streets of Toledo, and the sacred calm of San Lucas, it tells the story of a young man who learns what it means to stand, to fight, and to love—And what it means to lose everything

This is the story of what was lost.

And why he will one day leave everything
behind.

And become... Los.

Dark Age of Camelot: A Spaniard in Albion.



Novella I – Mi Valiente

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Chapter I – Un día en la vida

Study, Practice, Repeat

Toledo, Castile – Morning

Lorenzo woke to the sound of Toledo coming alive.

He lay still for a moment, as was his habit, letting the world announce itself before he joined it. Through the heavy wooden shutters came the first grey fingers of dawn, and with them the city's morning chorus: the distant clatter of a cart over cobblestones, the braying of a mule in the stable yard below, the murmur of servants already about their duties. Somewhere a door slammed. A woman's voice rose in brief admonishment, then fell silent. The smell of woodsmoke drifted up from the kitchens, carrying with it the promise of fresh bread.

He drew a slow breath and let it out again.

Then the bells of San Lucas began to ring, bronze voices rolling across the city. Prime. The first bell of the day.

Only then did Lorenzo move.

He crossed the cold stone floor and pushed open the shutters. The courtyard of the Alcalde's residence spread below him, still pooled in shadow, though the eastern sky had begun to blush pink and gold above the rooftops. The air was crisp, carrying the mineral scent of the Tagus and the green of the hills beyond the city walls. Autumn had come to Castile. The mornings had teeth now.

He dressed with the economy of long practice. A linen shirt, a wool doublet in deep brown, hose and boots suitable for the training yard. No servant assisted him. His grandfather had dismissed the idea years ago.

A man who cannot dress himself cannot govern himself. A man who cannot govern himself will never govern others.

He tied his own laces. He had done so since he was six.

Below, the Zocodover plaza stirred with purpose. Lorenzo moved back to the window overlooking it.

A half-dozen young men had gathered in the square — pages and squires from noble households at court. They wore practice leathers and carried wooden swords. One of them, broad-shouldered with copper hair, said something that drew laughter from the others. Another shoved him playfully. A third produced an apple and tossed it; it was caught with an exaggerated bow, earning more laughter.

Lorenzo's face remained still.

He knew their names. Rodrigo de Mendoza, the copper-haired one. Alonso, squire to a household knight of the King. The others he could name as well — their families, their alliances, their weaknesses. Knowledge was currency. Observation was investment.

None of them looked up.

They never did.

He turned away and finished dressing.

He descended the narrow stair to the small dining chamber where Don Flavio took his morning meal.

His grandfather was already seated. Short, heavy, balding — and yet his bearing alone told any who met him that he commanded respect. His eyes were the color of Toledo's soil after the rain, an honest brown that missed nothing. His thick-fingered hands rested beside a silver cup of watered wine. Bread and cheese lay before him, untouched. Hands that had not held a sword in many years — yet they ruled a city all the same.

"Good morning," Don Flavio said, with the same nod he gave each day. Courtesy, not affection.

"Good morning, Grandfather."

Lorenzo took his seat. He waited. Only when Don Flavio inclined his head did Lorenzo reach for the bread.

"Tell me about last night," Don Flavio said. "The dinner."

Lorenzo had expected this. Every meal was a lesson.

"The King was distracted," he said. "He laughed at Lord Castañeda's jests, but his attention returned often to the door. He awaits news. Likely from the southern frontier. The Moorish raids have increased since the harvest."

Don Flavio nodded once. "Continue."

"Bishop Velasco spoke at length about the works on the Cathedral of Toledo. But his purpose was to measure support for increased Church taxation. He watched the nobles more than the King."

"Good."

"Count García Ordóñez arrived late. He sat far from his customary place. His wife was absent. He drank more than usual. When Navarra was mentioned, he changed the subject."

Don Flavio's eyes sharpened. "And what do you conclude?"

"His petition to expand his holdings has been denied. His influence with the King has waned."

A thin smile crossed the old man's face. "I learned this only this morning from the royal chancery. You deduced it from seating and wine."

Lorenzo inclined his head, acknowledging the lesson. Don Flavio drank first. Only then did Lorenzo lift his own cup.

Through the window behind his grandfather, the plaza was fully awake now. Wooden swords clacked together. A shout of triumph rang out as one youth was neatly disarmed. Laughter followed. A hand clapped a shoulder. Someone called advice that sounded suspiciously like mockery.

Lorenzo felt it again — that tightening, lower this time, beneath the ribs. His breath shortened, barely.

"Your attention wanders," Don Flavio said.

Lorenzo straightened at once. "Forgive me."

"There is nothing to forgive." His grandfather followed Lorenzo's gaze to the window and watched in silence for a long moment. When he spoke again, his voice had softened — though only by a degree. "Do you know why I have never sent you to train with them?"

"So that others do not see me as a servant," Lorenzo replied. The words came easily; he had spoken them many times.

"Yes." Don Flavio turned back to him. "They will be knights. Good men, some of them. Loyal. But they will serve." His eyes held Lorenzo's. "You were not born for service. You were born for office. For councils. For negotiation. For speaking when others listen."

Lorenzo listened, as he always did. The words settled over him, familiar and unyielding.

"Distance is power," Don Flavio continued. "Never let familiarity make you small."

"I understand, Grandfather."

He did. The logic was flawless. His grandfather's life was proof of it.

Outside, the young men finished their bout. Rodrigo clapped Alonso on the shoulder, and they walked off together toward the well, still laughing. The others followed, loose and unguarded.

Lorenzo watched until they passed out of sight.

Then he looked away.

"Finish your meal," Don Flavio said briskly. "Master Valdés will be waiting. Two hours of arms. Then Bishop Guillermo for languages, philosophy, and rhetoric. This afternoon you will observe the municipal court — there is a property dispute that will teach you much about men who mistake emotion for justice. Tonight, we dine with the King again. Wear the blue doublet."

"Yes, Grandfather."

Lorenzo finished his bread, drank his watered wine, and rose to begin another day that would look exactly like the day before, and the day before that.

Training. Study. Observation. Silence.

The Training Yard

The training yard of the Alcalde's grand home was smaller than the main courtyard where visitors gathered. A rack of practice weapons lined one wall—wooden swords of various weights, blunted steel blades, polearms, and quarterstaves. Training dummies stood in rows along another, their padded bodies bearing the scars of ten thousand strikes. The ground was packed earth, well maintained and level, raked smooth each morning by servants who understood that Master Rodrigo Valdés tolerated no imperfection in his domain.

Lorenzo arrived precisely as the bells of San Lucas finished ringing. Master Valdés was already waiting, a lean man of perhaps fifty with a close-cropped grey beard and the economical movements of someone who had spent a lifetime learning which motions mattered and which were waste. A sword scar bisected his left eyebrow, the legacy of a Moorish blade twenty years past. He had served in three campaigns before a leg wound ended his soldiering days and began his teaching ones.

"Don Lorenzo." Master Valdés inclined his head—not a bow, but an acknowledgment between men. This, too, was by Don Flavio's design. Lorenzo's tutors treated him as a young gentleman, not a child. "I have arranged something different for today's session."

Lorenzo noted the three young men standing near the weapons rack. They were his age or perhaps a year older, dressed in practice leathers, their postures a mixture of curiosity and poorly concealed disdain. He recognized them in the way he recognized everyone at court—by family, by connection, by potential use or threat. Diego Fernández, whose father held lands near Segovia. Martín de Soto, second son of a hidalgo with ties to the wool trade. And Íñigo Ruiz, whose family had served the crown for three generations without ever quite rising above their station.

Sons of hidalgos, like himself. Training to be knights, unlike himself.

"You will spar today," Master Valdés continued. "Wooden swords and shields. First to three clean touches, standard rules." He gestured toward the rack. "Equip yourself."

Lorenzo selected his weapons without hurry—a practice sword weighted to match a real blade, a round shield with an iron boss at its center. He tested the sword's balance, adjusted his grip on the shield's straps, and walked to the center of the yard. His face betrayed nothing. Not anticipation, not anxiety, not interest. The morning sun fell across the packed earth, and somewhere beyond the walls a blacksmith's hammer rang out in steady rhythm.

Diego Fernández stepped forward first, rolling his shoulders with the loose confidence of youth. He was broader than Lorenzo, heavier in the arms and chest, and he held his sword with the easy familiarity of someone who had been training since childhood. His smile suggested he expected this to be a brief engagement.

"Don Lorenzo," he said, offering a shallow nod that stopped just short of mockery. "An honor."

Lorenzo returned the nod without the smile. "Don Diego."

Master Valdés raised his hand. "Begin."

Diego attacked immediately, a lunging cut aimed at Lorenzo's shoulder—the kind of opening move that worked against hesitant opponents, that relied on aggression to overwhelm before technique could matter. Lorenzo had seen it a hundred times in his mind, had catalogued the slight drop of Diego's shoulder that telegraphed the strike, the way his weight shifted forward onto his leading foot.

He stepped offline and let the blow pass, then brought his own blade across in a short, precise arc that caught Diego across the ribs before the larger boy could recover his guard.

"Touch," Master Valdés called. "One to Don Lorenzo."

Diego's smile faltered. He reset his stance, more careful now, and they circled each other. This time he did not rush. He probed with testing cuts, seeking an opening, trying to read Lorenzo's patterns. Lorenzo gave him nothing—no tells, no habits to exploit. He moved only when necessary, conserving energy, waiting.

When Diego finally committed to a real attack—a combination of high cut and low follow-up that he had probably practiced a thousand times—Lorenzo did not retreat. He stepped *into* the attack, catching the high cut on his shield's face and driving forward. The shield's iron boss struck Diego's sword arm just above the elbow, a jarring impact that disrupted the follow-up before it could begin. In the same motion, Lorenzo's blade swept down and tapped Diego's exposed thigh.

"Touch. Two to Don Lorenzo."

Diego's face had gone red. He was not smiling anymore.

"Your shield," Master Valdés said to Lorenzo, his voice carrying the measured tone of instruction. "Good. But you dropped your elbow on the strike. Tighter."

"Yes, Master." Lorenzo adjusted his stance, tucking his elbow closer to his body. He did not acknowledge the correction as criticism or praise—it was simply information, to be absorbed and applied.

The third touch came quickly. Diego, frustrated now, swung too wide. Lorenzo parried with the edge of his shield—not blocking the blow but redirecting it, guiding Diego's sword past him while simultaneously stepping through. His own blade came up and touched Diego's throat, light as a whisper.

"Match. Don Lorenzo, three touches to none."

Diego stepped back, chest heaving, unable to quite meet Lorenzo's eyes. Lorenzo lowered his sword and offered a small bow—correct, courteous, utterly devoid of triumph or mockery. "Thank you for the match, Don Diego."

"Don Martín," Master Valdés called. "You are next."

Martín de Soto approached with more caution than Diego had shown. He had watched the first match carefully, had seen how Lorenzo moved, and his guard was tighter as a result. It made little difference. He lasted longer—long enough

for Master Valdés to correct Lorenzo's footwork on a pivot, to remind him that the crossguard could trap an opponent's blade, that the pommel was a weapon for close work. But the outcome was never in doubt.

Three touches to one. Martín managed a single strike when Lorenzo overextended on an attack—Master Valdés made him repeat the movement three times until his form was correct. But Martín could find no further answer to the cold, methodical precision that dismantled his defenses.

Íñigo Ruiz was the best of the three. He was quick, lighter on his feet than his companions, and he had clearly received good instruction. For a few exchanges, the match was almost even. Íñigo's blade found air where Lorenzo had been, but Lorenzo's found only shield and steel in return. They circled, tested, withdrew.

"Better," Master Valdés murmured from the side. "Watch his wrists, Don Lorenzo. He telegraphs with his wrists."

Lorenzo watched. Saw it. Filed the information away and waited for the pattern to repeat.

When it did, he was ready. His shield caught Íñigo's blade in a parrying deflection, guiding it wide, and his sword's crossguard hooked Íñigo's wrist, controlling the weapon. A sharp twist and step brought him inside Íñigo's guard, and his pommel touched the other boy's chin.

"Touch." Master Valdés nodded approval. "The whole weapon. Good."

The match ended three touches to none. Íñigo, at least, managed a small smile as he stepped back—the smile of someone who had learned something, even in defeat. "You're better than I expected," he admitted.

Lorenzo nodded. "You guard well. Your teacher should be proud." It was not flattery—it was assessment, offered with the same neutral precision as everything else. Íñigo seemed uncertain how to take it.

"Gentlemen," Master Valdés addressed the three young men, "thank you for your assistance today. You may return to your regular duties." He said it graciously, but the message was clear: *you were training aids, not peers*. Diego's jaw tightened. Martín's eyes dropped. Íñigo simply nodded and led the others away.

When they were gone, Master Valdés turned to Lorenzo. "Your technique continues to improve. Your economy of motion is excellent—you waste nothing. But you are still thinking too much."

"Master?"

"In true combat, there is no time for thought. You must *react*. Your body must know what to do without consulting your mind." The old soldier's eyes were not unkind, but they were penetrating. "You fight like a scholar—analyzing, calculating. It serves you well enough against boys like these. Against a man who has killed, who moves on instinct born of blood and survival..." He shrugged. "Keep practicing. The instinct will come."

"Yes, Master."

Lorenzo racked his weapons, wiped the sweat from his face with a cloth, and walked back toward the residence. His muscles ached pleasantly, and his shirt clung to his back. Behind him, Master Valdés began setting the training dummies back in their proper positions, before leaving to meet with his next student.

Three victories. No defeats. No joy, no satisfaction, no anything at all. Just the completion of another task, another step in the endless progression his grandfather had laid out for him.

He would bathe, change into fresh clothes, and take lunch in his room—a light meal, as always, so as not to dull his mind for the afternoon's studies. Then rhetoric with Bishop Guillermo, followed by Latin. Then the municipal court with his grandfather. Then dinner with the King.

The thought of it all stretched before him like a road with no turns, no vistas, no destinations—only more road, endlessly unfurling.

Somewhere in the main courtyard, someone laughed. Lorenzo did not turn to look.

The Scholar's Cell

The study chamber occupied a corner of San Lucas, where the light fell soft and even through tall windows that faced away from the sun's glare. Bookshelves lined two walls, heavy with volumes in Latin, Greek, Arabic, and Hebrew—a library that would have been the envy of many monasteries. A writing desk dominated one corner, its surface orderly with inkwells, quills, and sheets of good parchment. The room smelled of old paper and candle wax and the faint mustiness of learning accumulated over years.

Bishop Guillermo de Alcántara was waiting when Lorenzo arrived, freshly bathed and dressed in a clean doublet of dark green wool. Once a Franciscan friar, now Bishop of San Lucas, he rose from his chair with the careful movements of a man whose joints had begun to protest their decades of service. He was perhaps sixty, with a tonsured crown of white hair and a face that seemed designed for kindness—soft around the eyes, prone to creasing into smiles. His brown robes were worn but clean, and a simple wooden cross hung at his chest.

"Don Lorenzo." Bishop Guillermo's voice was warm, unhurried. "I trust you are well rested after your morning exertions?"

"Yes, Bishop. Thank you."

"Good, good." His tutor gestured to the chair across from his own. "We shall begin with your Greek today, I think. You have been working through Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*—let us see how your translation progresses."

Lorenzo took his seat and opened the text to where he had left off. The Greek letters arranged themselves into meaning as he read, the ancient language flowing through his mind with the ease of long practice. He translated aloud, his voice steady and precise:

"For without friends, no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods. Even rich men and those in possession of office and of dominating power are thought to need friends most of all..."

He paused, aware of Bishop Guillermo's eyes on him, then continued through the passage. When he finished, his tutor nodded slowly.

"Excellent. Your Greek improves with each session. The subjunctive construction in the second clause—you handled it well. Many students stumble there." He made a small note on the parchment before him. "Now. Tell me what Aristotle means."

"He argues that friendship is essential to the good life," Lorenzo said. "That neither wealth nor power can substitute for it. He distinguishes between friendships of utility, friendships of pleasure, and true friendship based on virtue—the latter being the highest form, as it requires both parties to be good and to wish good for the other for the other's own sake."

"A fair summary." Guillermo set down his quill. "And do you agree with him?"

"It is logically coherent," Lorenzo replied. "His categories are well-constructed. The argument proceeds soundly from his premises."

The old Bishop was quiet for a moment. Outside, a bird sang—some small thing perched on the windowsill, oblivious to philosophy.

"That is not what I asked, my son."

Lorenzo looked up, uncertain.

"I asked if you agree. Not whether the logic is sound, but whether it rings true to your own experience." The old man's eyes were gentle, but there was something searching in them. "Do you find friendship essential to a good life, Lorenzo?"

The question hung in the air between them. Lorenzo opened his mouth, then closed it again. His hands, resting on the open book, were very still.

"I..." He stopped. Started again. "I have not given it much thought."

Guillermo nodded, as if this answer confirmed something he had long suspected. He let the silence stretch for a moment, then spoke again, his tone deliberately lighter.

"Your grandfather mentioned that Master Valdés arranged for you to spar with other young men this morning. That must have been a pleasant change from the training dummies."

Lorenzo went quiet.

The silence was different this time. Not thoughtful. Empty. His face remained composed, but there was a stillness to him that went deeper than his usual reserve, as if the question had reached into a room he kept locked and found it bare.

"I sparred with three boys this morning," he said finally. "Sons of hidalgos."

"Did you enjoy your time with them?"

Lorenzo considered the question with the same careful attention he gave to translation, to analysis, to all the intellectual tasks that filled his days. *Enjoy*. The word felt foreign in this context, like a tool designed for a purpose he did not understand.

"They were sufficient sparring partners," he said.

Guillermo's face did something complicated—a flicker of emotion quickly suppressed, a tightening around the eyes that might have been sorrow. He drew a slow breath and looked down at his hands, folded now on the table before him.

"Sufficient," he repeated softly. "Yes. I see."

Lorenzo did not understand why the word seemed to pain the old man. He had answered honestly—the boys had been sufficient. Diego had been too aggressive but provided good practice. Martín had been cautious, useful for working on patience. Íñigo had been skilled enough to test his technique. What more was there to say?

"Shall we continue with the Arabic?" Lorenzo asked.

Bishop Guillermo looked at him for a long moment—looked at this boy of sixteen who could translate Aristotle and analyze philosophy and defeat three opponents in the training yard and who did not know, could not even conceive, what he was missing. Then the old man smiled, and if the smile was sad, Lorenzo did not notice.

"Yes," Guillermo said. "Let us continue."

They moved through Arabic next—Lorenzo’s pronunciation had grown quite good, the guttural sounds no longer catching in his throat. Then Hebrew, which he found more challenging but approached with the same methodical determination he brought to everything. Guillermo tested his vocabulary, corrected his grammar, guided him through a passage from Maimonides that touched on the nature of divine knowledge.

“Your facility with languages is remarkable,” the Bishop said as they finished. “Few scholars twice your age command three tongues with such proficiency. Four, if we count your native Castilian.” He paused. “And soon five. English shall be next. Your grandfather is insisting upon it.”

Lorenzo nodded. “Tonight is a reception for the envoy from Albion.”

“I see. You know most people never master even one language beyond their mother tongue.” Guillermo tilted his head. “You have a gift, my son. A genuine gift. I pray you find worthy use for it.”

Lorenzo accepted this as he accepted all praise—with a small nod and no visible reaction. A gift was simply another tool, another advantage to be employed in service of his grandfather’s plans.

They spent the remaining hour on rhetoric—the construction of arguments, the art of persuasion, the techniques by which a skilled speaker could move an audience to his purpose. Lorenzo dissected speeches by Cicero, identified the structural elements, explained how ethos, pathos, and logos intertwined to create effect. He did it flawlessly, mechanically, like a surgeon describing an operation he had performed a hundred times.

When the bells rang signaling the third hour past noon, Guillermo closed his books and rose stiffly from his chair.

“That will be all for today. You have done well, as always.” He paused at the door, looking back at Lorenzo still seated at the table. “Don Lorenzo... do you know why your grandfather chose a Franciscan to tutor you, rather than one of the court scholars?”

Lorenzo considered. "The Franciscan order has a strong tradition of scholarship. Your knowledge of languages is extensive. And because a friar's loyalties lie with God rather than with any noble faction at court."

"All true." Guillermo's smile was gentle, almost wistful. "But I sometimes think... I sometimes hope... that he also wanted someone who might teach you things that cannot be found in books." He raised a hand in blessing. "Go with God, my son. I will see you tomorrow."

Lorenzo watched him go, puzzled by the comment. What things could not be found in books? Everything important was written down somewhere—history, philosophy, theology, law, the accumulated wisdom of civilizations. If knowledge existed, it could be studied. If it could be studied, it could be mastered.

He gathered his materials and prepared to leave. The municipal court awaited, and his grandfather would expect a full accounting of everything observed there. There was no time for puzzling over a friar's odd remarks.

And yet, as he walked through the corridors of San Lucas toward his next duty, something nagged at him—a splinter of unease lodged somewhere beneath his carefully constructed calm.

Did you enjoy your time with them?

He did not know why the question troubled him. He did not know why he could not stop thinking about it.

He walked on, and the question followed him like a shadow.

The Weight of Justice

The municipal court occupied a grand chamber in the heart of the city, its vaulted ceiling supported by columns of pale stone that had stood since the days of the Visigoths. Afternoon light streamed through high windows, falling in golden shafts across the marble floor and illuminating motes of dust that drifted through the air like tiny pilgrims seeking absolution. At the far end of the chamber, raised

upon a dais of three steps, stood the Alcalde's seat—a heavy chair of carved oak, its back emblazoned with the arms of Castile.

Don Flavio Ortiz ascended to that seat with the unhurried dignity of a man who had occupied it for nearly two decades. His robes of office—deep crimson trimmed with black—settled around him as he sat, and his eyes, the color of Toledo's soil after rain, swept across the assembled petitioners, clerks, and guards with the cool assessment of long practice. To his right, slightly below and behind, Lorenzo took his accustomed place. A half-step back. Always observing.

"Bring forward the first matter," Don Flavio said.

The court clerk, a thin man with ink-stained fingers and a perpetually harried expression, consulted his ledger. "A dispute between the merchant houses of Vega and Coronel, Your Honor. The matter of a shipment of Flemish wool."

Two men approached the dais—one stout and florid, the other lean and sharp-featured. They bowed to the Alcalde with the precise depth that protocol demanded: low enough to show respect, not so low as to appear servile. Lorenzo noted the quality of their clothing, the rings on their fingers, the way each positioned himself to claim more space than the other. Wealth competing with wealth. Pride against pride.

The dispute unfolded in tedious particulars but instructive passions. Don Hernando Vega claimed that Don Pascual Coronel had sold him inferior wool at premium prices, substituting lower-grade fleece for Flemish quality promised. Don Pascual countered that the wool had been precisely as described, and that any degradation must have occurred in Don Hernando's own warehouses through improper storage. Documents were produced. Witnesses called. Voices rose and fell in carefully measured outrage.

Lorenzo watched with detached attention, cataloguing details as his grandfather had taught him. Don Hernando's hands trembled slightly when he spoke of losses—genuine distress or calculated performance? Don Pascual's jaw tightened each time his honor was questioned, yet his eyes remained cool, weighing advantage. The documentation was incomplete. As documentation so often was.

After an hour, Don Flavio raised his hand.

"I have heard enough." His voice carried effortlessly through the chamber. "The wool has been examined by the guild assessors. It is of mixed quality—some fleece meets the Flemish standard, some falls short." He paused. "This suggests neither fraud nor innocence, but carelessness in sorting at the point of sale."

Don Pascual opened his mouth to protest. Don Flavio's raised hand silenced him.

"You will refund one-third of the purchase price. You will bear the cost of assessment. Don Hernando will retain the wool and make no further claim against your house regarding this matter, nor speak of it to your detriment." His gaze moved between them. "This matter is closed. Any appeal may be brought before the King at your own expense. Do you understand?"

Both men bowed—stiffly, dissatisfied. Neither was content, which Lorenzo had come to understand meant the judgment was likely fair.

The afternoon continued. A baker accused of selling underweight loaves. A landlord seeking eviction. A dispute over water rights beyond the city walls. Don Flavio heard each case with measured calm, asked questions that cut to the heart of matters, and rendered judgments that balanced law with practicality.

The final case was different.

A woman was brought forward—young, perhaps twenty-five. Dark hair escaped from beneath a threadbare kerchief. Her eyes held the dull resignation of someone long past hope. Her dress was patched, her hands rough with labor. Two guards flanked her, though she made no move to flee.

"María Espinoza," the clerk announced. "Accused of theft. One silver candlestick from the household of Don Rodrigo de Villena."

Lorenzo straightened slightly. Theft was serious. The penalty could be mutilation. Even death.

Don Rodrigo de Villena stood nearby, a portly man with soft hands and the bored confidence of entitlement.

"How do you answer the charge?" Don Flavio asked.

María lifted her chin. A small defiance. "I took it, Your Honor. I do not deny it."

"For what purpose?"

"To sell. For food." Her voice was flat. "My husband died in the spring. Fever. I have three children. We had not eaten in four days."

Silence settled over the chamber.

"The candlestick has been recovered," the clerk said. "Undamaged."

Don Rodrigo stepped forward. "The law is clear. Theft from a noble household demands punishment. I ask for justice."

Don Flavio regarded him coolly.

"The candlestick is returned. You have suffered no loss. What justice remains unmet?"

"The principle," Don Rodrigo insisted. "If theft goes unpunished, the lower orders forget their place."

Don Flavio's voice softened. Dangerously.

"And if this woman loses her hand, what becomes of her children? Beggars? Thieves? Corpses in the street?" He leaned forward slightly. "Is that justice, Don Rodrigo? Or cruelty wearing its mask?"

Don Rodrigo had no answer.

Don Flavio turned to María.

"You will serve thirty days in the municipal workhouse. During that time, the Church will care for your children. Upon release, you will report to my steward, who will find you honest work." His voice hardened. "If you steal again, the full weight of the law will fall upon you. Do you understand?"

María stared at him. Then bowed, shaking. "Yes, Your Honor. Thank you."

Don Rodrigo left in disgust. Don Flavio watched him go with faint contempt.

"Court is adjourned."

They walked through the corridors of the council hall, their footsteps echoing on stone. Late afternoon light had turned amber. Servants moved along the walls lighting torches.

"Your assessment," Don Flavio said.

Lorenzo had prepared. "The wool dispute discouraged fraud and frivolous accusation. The baker's case established precedent for guild inspection. The landlord matter—"

"The woman," Don Flavio interrupted. "María Espinoza."

"She confessed. Evidence was clear. Under strict law, mutilation or branding." Lorenzo chose his words. "Your judgment addressed the cause of the crime while maintaining authority of the law. It is... efficient."

Don Flavio stopped. Lorenzo halted beside him.

"Efficient," Don Flavio repeated. "Tell me, Lorenzo. When you looked at that woman, what did you see?"

"A thief. A widow. A case requiring judgment."

"And what did you feel?"

Lorenzo searched the memory. Found nothing.

"I assessed factors and anticipated outcomes."

Don Flavio exhaled slowly.

"The law is not a set of scales," he said. "It is not weights to be balanced. The law governs people. Creatures of fear and hope. Of desperation and love." He turned fully to Lorenzo. "When I looked at María Espinoza, I saw a mother driven by hunger, not malice."

He stepped closer.

"You must learn to see the human being behind the case. Otherwise, you will be a clerk, not a magistrate. An accountant, not a judge."

Lorenzo nodded.

"I understand, Grandfather."

But he did not. Not truly.

Lorenzo walked on alone, his mind turning toward the evening ahead. The King's table. Bishop Velasco's maneuvering. The familiar structure of observation and analysis that shaped his life.

Yet beneath it, like stones dropped into still water, the day's questions spread outward.

Did you enjoy your time with them? What did you feel?

He had no answers. He was not certain he understood the questions.

And somewhere deep within him, in a place he did not yet know how to name, something stirred—restless, waiting, hungry for something it could not yet define.

Lorenzo dressed for dinner and went to meet his grandfather.

And the questions followed him.

Chapter II — A primera vista

The Girl on the Bench

The Reception

The great hall of the Alcázar had been transformed for the reception. Tapestries depicting the glories of Castile hung from the walls, their colors rich in the light of a hundred candles. Long tables lined with white linen bore silver platters of roasted meats, fresh bread, and fruits from the southern provinces. Musicians played softly from a gallery above, lutes and viols weaving a gentle backdrop to the murmur of courtly conversation.

Lorenzo stood at his grandfather's side—a half-step behind, as always—and watched the crowd with the careful attention that had become second nature. The occasion was a reception for an envoy from Albion, a kingdom across the northern sea that sought trade with Castile. The envoy himself was a tall, pale man with hair the color of straw and an accent that turned Castilian into something almost comical. He spoke to the King through an interpreter, gesturing broadly in the manner of men uncertain they are understood.

"Albion," Don Flavio murmured for Lorenzo's ears alone. "A cold land, but wealthy in wool and tin. Their steel is inferior to ours, yet they have silver mines and a growing merchant fleet. The King sees opportunity. If this mission bears fruit, there will be need for men who speak their tongue and understand their customs."

Lorenzo nodded, filing the information away. Another language. Another tool.

"I have arranged an English tutor through Bishop Guillermo," Don Flavio continued. "Their grammar is barbarous, I am told. You will begin tomorrow."

"Yes, Grandfather."

The evening unfolded as such evenings always did. Don Flavio circulated among nobles, exchanging pleasantries and gathering information. Lorenzo followed in his wake—observing, cataloguing, learning. The King entertained the Albionese

envoy at the high table, bishops and barons orbiting in practiced constellations, each pursuing quiet designs beneath the veneer of celebration.

During a lull, while Don Flavio conferred with the royal treasurer, Lorenzo's attention drifted across the hall.

Along the far wall, benches had been set for lesser nobles, their families, and court functionaries. Lorenzo's gaze moved across them without interest—until it stopped.

She sat alone.

Hands folded in her lap. Eyes lowered. Waiting.

She was near his age—sixteen or seventeen. Dark hair fell in simple waves past her shoulders. Her dress was modest, well-made but unadorned. No jewels. No embroidery. No practiced courtly smile. Yet in the candlelight, she seemed more real than anyone else in the hall.

Not beautiful in the way poets praised beauty. Something quieter. Truer.

When she lifted her eyes briefly to scan the room, Lorenzo saw they were dark and deep, holding a calm intelligence untouched by performance.

Plain. Unadorned. Perfect.

"Lorenzo."

His grandfather's voice cut through the moment. Lorenzo turned at once, face returning to attentive neutrality.

"The treasurer asks about Cordoba steel," Don Flavio said. "You observed the guild assessments. Speak."

Lorenzo answered without hesitation. "Cordoba steel surpasses northern forges in purity and temper. A blade from our smiths will outlast three northern equivalents under equal use."

The treasurer nodded, satisfied. Don Flavio permitted a small smile of approval.

Lorenzo looked back toward the bench.

She was no longer alone.

Three young men had gathered around her—nobles his own age, dressed in silk and velvet, postures relaxed, confident, encircling. Lorenzo recognized them at once: Gonzalo de Mendoza, Fernando de Lara, Pedro de Guzmán. Sons of great houses. Far above Lorenzo's station.

Their formation cut her off from the room.

The girl's shoulders drew inward. Her hands tightened in her lap. She stared ahead, refusing to look at them. When Gonzalo spoke, she flinched.

They were bullying her.

Lorenzo felt a tightening beneath his ribs. An unease. This was not his concern. She was a stranger. Intervening would draw attention. Might embarrass his grandfather. The rational course was observation only.

It is not my place.

Pedro said something that made the others laugh. The girl's face paled. Her eyes lifted briefly, scanning the crowd—searching for help that would not come.

Her gaze passed over Lorenzo without stopping. She did not see him.

It is not my place.

Gonzalo reached out and touched her hair. A casual, possessive gesture.

She recoiled.

The young men laughed again.

Lorenzo was already moving.

He did not remember crossing the hall. Only that he arrived beside the bench, inserting himself into the circle with calm precision.

"My lords." His voice was steady, perfectly modulated. He inclined his head—polite, inferior, correct. "Forgive the intrusion."

The three turned. Wolves interrupted mid-hunt.

"Ortiz, isn't it," Gonzalo said, smiling thinly. He could not be bothered to remember the first name of someone so unimportant. "What do you want?"

"I could not help noticing," Lorenzo said, "that the lady appears uncomfortable with your attentions. Perhaps you might grant her space to enjoy the evening."

Polite phrasing. Perfect courtesy. An accusation wrapped in silk.

Fernando laughed. "The Almazán girl? A frontier conde's daughter. Barely above a peasant."

"Nevertheless," Lorenzo said. "She appears to desire peace."

Pedro stepped closer. Taller. Confident. "Who do you think you are? The grandson of a hidalgo who forgets his place." His voice dropped. "Go back to your books. Or fetch us wine."

Their eyes told him they understood the moment. No grandfather at his side. No tutor's gaze. No one shielding him. A rare opportunity.

Lorenzo understood exactly what they were doing. Provoking him. Seeking justification.

So he did not react.

"I have said what I came to say," he replied. "If you choose otherwise, I cannot force the matter."

Gonzalo stepped behind him. Fernando to the side. Pedro before him. Lorenzo found himself enclosed.

"You walk these halls as if you belong," Gonzalo murmured. "When the old man dies, you will have nothing. No title. No lands. Nothing. You think one of your uncles will protect you then?"

"You are an orphan," Fernando added. "A jumped-up scholar."

Pedro pressed a finger into Lorenzo's chest. "Why don't you—"

At the high table, Don Flavio turned to pose another question to his grandson.

Only to find Lorenzo was not where he was supposed to be.

His eyes swept the hall and found him — standing near the far wall, enclosed by three young nobles of greater rank. A confrontation. And worse — in full view of the court.

Don Flavio murmured an apology to the treasurer and moved swiftly across the hall. Not running. Running would draw attention. Instead, he advanced with the urgent, controlled stride of a man heading off disaster before it could bloom.

Heads were already beginning to turn. Conversations faltered. A scandal was scenting the air.

"Gentlemen."

Don Flavio's voice arrived like a closing door.

He stepped beside Lorenzo and placed a steady hand upon his shoulder.

"My apologies if my grandson has overstepped."

The three nobles straightened at once.

"No offense taken, Señor Alcalde," Gonzalo said, bowing.

Don Flavio inclined his head.

The other two inclined theirs in return, in respect of his high office and court favor.

They withdrew, murmuring among themselves, bitter that their prey had been rescued so quickly.

Only then did a man step forward—a weathered noble with quiet dignity. He took the girl gently by the arm.

"My daughter," he said. "Come."

As she rose, she looked at Lorenzo.

"Thank you," she said, with a small curtsy.

Two words. Soft. Unadorned.

Then she was gone.

Lorenzo watched her guided toward the high table, protected now by rank. A strange warmth spread in his chest, unfamiliar and unsettling.

"What were you thinking?" Don Flavio asked quietly.

Lorenzo did not answer. His gaze remained fixed on her.

"She is above your station," Don Flavio said, not unkindly. "Do not forget that."

Lorenzo lowered his eyes.

For the first time in his life, he had acted without calculation. Without analysis. Without reason.

He had simply moved.

"Come," his grandfather said after a moment. "You will not leave my side again tonight. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Grandfather."

Lorenzo returned to his place a half-step behind Don Flavio. He remained there the rest of the evening. Silent. Still. Observing as commanded.

He did not look toward the King's table.

He did not need to.

Her face was already burned into memory. Dark eyes. Simple dress. Quiet voice saying thank you as if he had done something extraordinary rather than foolish.

The guests departed. The hall emptied. Lorenzo walked beside his grandfather through the quiet corridors of the Alcázar, their footsteps echoing on stone.

He said nothing.

But deep within him, where something had stirred and would not be still, a single thought turned like a coin in lamplight.

Who was she?

He did not know why he felt different. He did not know what any of it meant.

He only knew that something had changed.

A Father's Dilemma

Conde Almazán's quarters, the Alcázar

The quarters assigned to the Conde de Almazán were modest by the standards of the Alcázar—a small sitting room adjoining two sleeping chambers, furnished comfortably but without extravagance. It was, Don Álvaro reflected, precisely the sort of accommodation one gave to a noble whose title demanded acknowledgment but whose influence did not demand respect.

He stood at the window, looking out over the darkened rooftops of Toledo. The city slept beneath a blanket of stars, quiet now save for the distant bark of dogs and the occasional cry of a night watchman. Behind him, a single candle guttered on the table, casting long shadows across the worn carpet.

Teresa sat in the room's only comfortable chair, her hands folded in her lap in that patient way she had—the same posture he had seen her hold on the bench earlier that night, before those boys had descended upon her like wolves on a lamb. She had not spoken since they left the reception, she had simply walked beside her father with her eyes cast down, and he had not pressed her. Words would come when they were alone.

"Teresa," he said at last, turning from the window. "You need to be nicer to those boys."

"Must I, Father?" Her voice was quiet, carefully neutral.

"Teresa." He said as he crossed the room and lowered himself into the chair across from her, his joints protesting the movement. Forty-seven years of riding the borderlands had left their mark on his body. "You know why we are here."

She looked up at him then, and he saw the intelligence in her dark eyes—the same sharp mind that had been her mother's, God rest her soul. Teresa was no fool. She knew their position as well as he did, understood the precarious ledge on which House Almazán balanced.

"You wish to speak of marriage," she said. It was not a question.

"I wish to speak of survival." Don Álvaro leaned forward, his weathered hands clasped between his knees. "You know our situation. The lands along the Aragonese border yield barely enough to maintain our household. We have no powerful allies, no connections at court beyond the obligations of feudal courtesy. If I do not secure a marriage for you—a *good* marriage, to a house of standing—then when I am gone, you will have nothing."

Teresa's jaw tightened almost imperceptibly. "But must it be one of those boys—"

"Those boys are the sons of houses that could lift us from obscurity." The words tasted like ash in his mouth. "Fernando de Lara. Gonzalo de Mendoza. Pedro de Guzmán. Any one of them would be a match beyond what our family has any right to expect."

"Any one of them would make my life a misery."

Don Álvaro said nothing. What could he say? She was right. He had watched those young men tonight—he had watched them before, at other gatherings, other feasts. He had seen the casual cruelty in their laughter, the way they treated servants and commoners and anyone they deemed beneath them. He knew exactly what kind of husbands they would make.

And he knew he would have to give his daughter to one of them anyway.

"Teresa," he said slowly. "I know this is not easy."

Teresa's voice sharpened. "Father, Gonzalo de Mendoza *touched my hair* as if I were a horse at market. Fernando laughed when I flinched. They spoke of me as if I were not there, as if I were a thing to be appraised and found wanting." Her hands had tightened in her lap, knuckles white. "You would have me smile at such treatment?"

"I would have you *survive*," Don Álvaro said, and his voice cracked on the word. "Teresa, I... I know what I am asking. I know it is unfair. But I have to arrange a marriage that will secure our family's future."

He rose from his chair and turned back to the window, unable to meet her eyes. "What choice do I have?" His voice had grown rough. "I would give anything to spare you this, *mija*. Anything."

The silence stretched between them, filled with all the words neither of them could say. Outside, a church bell tolled the late hour, its bronze voice rolling across the sleeping city.

"What about that boy tonight," Teresa said quietly.

Don Álvaro turned. His daughter's face had changed—the tight anger softening into something else, something he could not quite read.

"The one who intervened," she continued.

"The Alcalde's grandson. Lorenzo?"

"Why not him?"

The question caught Don Álvaro off guard. He had expected tears, perhaps, or continued argument. Not this—not a counter-proposal delivered with such calm.

"The grandson of the Alcalde?" He shook his head. "Teresa, you cannot be serious. He is a hidalgo—barely nobility. His grandfather holds an important office, yes, but offices are not inherited. When Don Flavio dies, the boy will have nothing. No lands, no title, no—"

"No cruelty," Teresa said softly as she looked at her hands.

"You cannot know that. You exchanged perhaps two words with him."

"I know what I saw." She leaned forward in her chair, her dark eyes intent. "Father, I watched him. I watched him cross that hall alone, knowing who those boys were. He did not hesitate. He stood there while they mocked him, while they insulted him, while Pedro de Guzmán put hands on him—and he did not flinch. He did not even raise his voice."

Don Álvaro was quiet, remembering. He had watched too, from across the hall, torn between the instinct to protect his daughter and the political calculation that told him intervention would only make things worse. And he had seen the same

thing Teresa described—a boy of sixteen facing down three sons of great houses with nothing but composure and courtesy.

"You would drag him into a world he—" Don Álvaro began, but the words died in his throat.

A world he what? Did not understand? But the boy had understood it perfectly. He had navigated the confrontation with the skill of a man twice his age—never giving offense, never providing justification for violence, maintaining his position with quiet, unshakeable dignity even as they tried to provoke him.

"...into a world he seemed to understand," Don Álvaro finished slowly.

Teresa watched him now, hope carefully contained.

"But he is a hidalgo," her father said. "Well-born, yes. Educated, certainly. But still a hidalgo."

"Yes," Teresa replied. "And if he married me, he would be a Conde."

Don Álvaro turned.

She met his gaze steadily. "He would not raise his voice to me. He would not mock me. He would not enjoy my fear."

Her father studied her for a long moment. Not the girl he had raised, but the woman she was becoming.

"He would treat you well," Don Álvaro said softly.

Teresa nodded.

Silence stretched between them, heavy with risk.

At last, Don Álvaro exhaled, the decision not yet formed but no longer impossible.

"I will speak with Don Flavio tomorrow," he said.

Teresa's breath left her in a quiet rush.

"Do not thank me yet," her father warned gently. "Nothing is decided."

But even as he said it, he knew the truth.

Teresa's smile was small but real—the first genuine smile he had seen from her all evening. She leaned forward and kissed his cheek.

"Thank you, Father."

"Thank me if it works," he said gruffly. "Now go to bed. It is late, and tomorrow will be... complicated."

She left him there by the window, her footsteps soft on the carpet as she retreated to her chamber. Don Álvaro watched her go, then turned back to the darkened city beyond the glass.

Somewhere out there, in another part of the city, a boy named Lorenzo was probably lying awake as well, turning over the evening's events in head. Did the boy know what he had done?

Probably not. The young rarely understood the weight of their choices until the choices had already been made.

Don Álvaro blew out the candle and made his way to bed in the darkness, already composing in his mind the words he would say to Don Flavio Ortiz come morning.

It would not be an easy conversation.

But then, the best things in life rarely were.

The Arrangement

Don Flavio's private study occupied a quiet corner of his grand house, removed from the bustle of petitioners and courtly traffic. Shelves of ledgers and legal texts lined the walls. A heavy desk stood before a modest fireplace, where a small blaze fought the morning chill. The single window overlooked an interior courtyard, admitting light but discouraging distraction.

The Alcalde sat behind his desk, a cup of untouched wine before him, as Don Álvaro de Almazán settled into the chair opposite. The Conde moved with the

careful economy of a man whose body had weathered years in the saddle, though his eyes remained sharp. He had requested the meeting shortly after dawn. Don Flavio had granted it out of caution—and curiosity.

"Don Álvaro," Don Flavio inclined his head. "I confess myself curious. We have had little cause for dealings in the past."

"Few indeed," the Conde replied. "But that may be changing."

"Oh?"

Don Álvaro took a measured sip of wine. "I witnessed last night's reception. The incident involving my daughter and your grandson."

Don Flavio's expression did not change. "Yes. I have already addressed Lorenzo's conduct."

"What did you tell him?"

"That he overstepped. That the daughter of a conde is above his station. And that he should have remained where he was instructed."

Don Álvaro leaned back, studying him. "I watched your grandson cross that hall alone. I watched him stand between my daughter and three sons of greater houses. He did not raise his voice. He did not lose composure. He gave them no excuse to escalate. That was not impulse, Don Flavio. That was courage."

For the first time, Don Flavio did not immediately reply.

"What is it you want, Don Álvaro?" he asked quietly.

"I wish to propose a marriage."

The word settled between them.

"Between your daughter and my grandson."

"Yes."

Don Flavio rose and walked to the window, hands clasped behind his back. "You understand this would be... unconventional."

"I understand precisely what it would be." Don Álvaro's voice was steady. "I have no sons. My lands lie on the Aragonese border, poor in yield, poorer in allies. When I die, my title passes to a distant cousin. Unless my daughter weds a man who will take my name and inherit in her stead."

Don Flavio turned. "You propose Lorenzo become your heir."

"I propose he become my son."

Silence.

A conde. Lands. Title. A permanent elevation Don Flavio had never dared imagine.

"You would bind your house to mine," Don Flavio said slowly. "In exchange, you gain my voice at court, access to the King's ear, and protection from stronger houses."

"I will not pretend that is not part of my purpose," Don Álvaro admitted. "But there is another." His voice roughened. "I want my daughter married to a man who will treat her with respect. I saw how your grandson stood for her when no one else would."

Don Flavio studied him for a long moment. Then he returned to his chair.

"I accept the principle of your proposal," he said. "But not immediate marriage. They are young. Lorenzo is just sixteen, and your daughter.."

"Teresa is seventeen."

"Seventeen," Don Flavio leaned back in his chair, "Let there be a supervised courtship. Two years. If they remain suited, they may wed when Lorenzo reaches eighteen."

Don Álvaro nodded. "A reasonable safeguard."

"Then we proceed properly." Don Flavio extended his hand. "This arrangement will require the King's approval. We will present it together."

The Conde clasped his hand firmly. "Agreed."

When Don Álvaro departed, Don Flavio remained in his study, staring at the closed door.

A conde. His grandson would be a conde.

Everything he had built—every calculation, every lesson, every carefully controlled step—had just leapt forward because of a single moment in a candlelit hall.

Courage, the Conde had called it.

Perhaps he was right.

Don Flavio sat and began composing the words he would use when presenting the proposal to the king.

It did not occur to him to even consider what the boy might want.

He never had.

The King's Pleasure

The King of Castile received petitions in many rooms. This was not the grand hall of state, nor the throne room of ceremony. This chamber was smaller, warmer, hung with hunting tapestries instead of battle scenes. A low fire burned in the hearth. Here, matters of consequence were decided without spectacle.

Don Flavio and Don Álvaro had departed only minutes before. The King stood by the window, looking out over the torch-lit courtyard below.

Don Sebastián, his senior advisor, waited beside the table, the petition still in his hand.

"You intend to approve it," the advisor said.

"I have approved it," the King replied.

"Because the match benefits both houses."

"Yes. But not only for that." The King turned back toward the fire. "I watched the boy cross my hall. I watched him place himself between cruelty and helplessness. He knew exactly what he risked. And he moved anyway."

"That will not please the great houses," Don Sebastián noted.

"Then let them be displeased." The King's smile was thin. "Perhaps they will learn that rank carries duty. And if they do not—then I learn something of them."

He took the petition, signed it, and pressed the royal seal into the wax.

"Summon the boy."

Lorenzo had stood before the King many times.

Never alone.

He walked through the corridors of the Alcázar with measured steps, hands folded behind his back, face composed. Yet his heart beat too fast. He did not know why he had been called. That uncertainty was worse than fear.

The doors opened.

He bowed deeply. "Your Majesty."

"Rise, Lorenzo."

He obeyed, lifting his eyes to meet the King's.

"Do you know why you are here?"

"No, Your Majesty."

"Then listen." The King held the sealed parchment lightly in one hand. "Your grandfather and Don Álvaro de Almazán have proposed a courtship between you and his daughter Teresa. I have granted my blessing. In two years' time, should the match prove sound, you will wed. And in time, you will inherit the title of Conde de Almazán."

For a moment, Lorenzo did not breathe.

Teresa. Was that her name? The girl at the bench. The quiet voice. The two words of thanks.

"I was not aware of such an arrangement," he said at last.

"I see." The King's tone held dry amusement. "Then let me be the first to congratulate you on a fine match."

There was nothing safe to say but gratitude.

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

The King stepped closer.

"Two nights past, you crossed my hall alone and stood between a frightened girl and three young men who believed rank excused cruelty. You did so knowing there was nothing to gain and much to lose by upsetting those of higher standing. Why?"

Lorenzo's voice came quietly, honestly.

"I was not thinking, Your Majesty. It was simply the right thing to do."

The King studied him, then smiled — not as monarch, but as a man who recognized something rare.

"Good. Your grandfather has taught you well. That night, I saw your character." He placed a hand briefly on Lorenzo's shoulder. "Castile needs men both brave and kind."

He turned back toward his chair.

"You will begin supervised courtship at once. Conduct yourself with honor. Be good to the girl. And do not disappoint me."

Lorenzo bowed deeply.

"I will strive to be worthy, Your Majesty."

"Go. Your grandfather waits."

And with that, he dismissed the boy.

Outside, Don Flavio stood ready to speak.

But Lorenzo barely heard him.

Inside, something that had stirred two nights ago now rose like dawn breaking through shutters. Confusion. Shock. Awe. And something else — fragile, unfamiliar, quietly luminous — and threaded through it, panic.

He did not have a name for it.

But for the first time in his life, Lorenzo Ortiz de Sevilla did not know what came next.

And somewhere beneath the confusion, there was something else.

Chapter III – Mi Valiente

Mi Valiente

Lorenzo had faced the King of Castile with more composure than he felt now.

He stood in the sala of his grandfather's residence, dressed in his finest doublet—the deep blue one the King had admired—with his hair carefully combed and his boots polished to a mirror shine. He had prepared for this meeting the way he prepared for everything: methodically, thoroughly, leaving nothing to chance. He had reviewed the protocols for formal courtship. He had studied the appropriate topics of conversation for a young gentleman addressing a young lady. He had even practiced his bow in the mirror until it was flawless.

None of it helped.

His hands would not stop trembling.

The sala was a pleasant room, designed for receiving guests of middling importance—comfortable but not ostentatious, with carved wooden chairs arranged around a low table and tapestries depicting pastoral scenes on the walls. Autumn sunlight streamed through tall windows, warming the air and catching motes of dust that drifted lazily through the beams. It was, Lorenzo thought, a perfectly ordinary room. There was no reason for his heart to be hammering against his ribs as if he were facing an enemy charge.

And yet.

Don Flavio stood near the fireplace, his posture relaxed, his face betraying nothing of whatever he might be thinking. He had told Lorenzo only the bare essentials: that Don Álvaro would be bringing his daughter for a formal introduction, that this was the first step in a courtship that would lead to marriage, that Lorenzo should conduct himself with appropriate dignity. He had not told Lorenzo how to stop his hands from shaking, or what to do with the strange tightness in his chest, or how to form words when his tongue seemed to have forgotten its purpose.

A servant appeared at the door.

"Don Álvaro de Almazán and Doña Teresa de Almazán, my lord."

Lorenzo's breath caught.

They entered together, father and daughter, and Lorenzo's carefully prepared composure crumbled like a sandcastle before a wave. Teresa, she wore a simple gown of deep green that complemented her dark hair and made her skin glow like honey in the afternoon light. She moved with a quiet grace that had nothing to do with courtly training and everything to do with some inner certainty he could not name. And when her eyes found his across the room, when she smiled—

Lorenzo forgot how to breathe. Again.

"Don Álvaro." Don Flavio stepped forward, all warmth and courtesy, clasping the Conde's hand. "Welcome to my home. And Doña Teresa—what a pleasure to meet you properly at last."

Teresa curtsied, perfectly correct. "The pleasure is mine, Señor Alcalde. My father has spoken highly of your hospitality."

"And this," Don Flavio continued, turning toward Lorenzo with a gesture that felt like being pushed off a cliff, "is my grandson, Lorenzo. Lorenzo, allow me to present Doña Teresa de Almazán."

Lorenzo bowed. The bow, at least, was correct—he had practiced it enough. But when he straightened and opened his mouth to deliver the greeting he had rehearsed, nothing came out. His throat had closed around the words, trapping them somewhere between his chest and his tongue.

Teresa's smile did not falter.

"Don Lorenzo," she said, and her voice was warm, unhurried, as if she had all the time in the world. "I am so pleased to meet you. Properly, I mean. Without—" A hint of mischief entered her eyes. "Without interruption."

"I—" Lorenzo swallowed. Tried again. "The pleasure is—I am honored to—" He stopped, acutely aware that he was failing, that his grandfather was watching, that he was making a fool of himself in front of the girl he was supposed to

impress. His eyes darted to Don Flavio, seeking guidance, seeking instruction, seeking the steady hand that had guided him through every other challenge of his life.

Don Flavio merely raised an eyebrow and inclined his head toward Teresa, as if to say: She is the one you should be speaking to, not me.

Lorenzo looked to Don Álvaro instead, desperate now, but the Conde simply smiled—a knowing smile, not unkind—and offered no assistance whatsoever.

“Perhaps,” Don Álvaro said to Don Flavio, his voice carrying an undertone of amusement, “you might show me that document we discussed? The one regarding the border tariffs?”

Don Flavio's eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly—there had been no such document, no such discussion—but he recovered smoothly.

“Ah, yes. Of course. It is in my study. If you will follow me?” He glanced at Lorenzo. “We will return shortly. I trust you can entertain our guest in our absence.”

And then they were gone, the door closing behind them with a soft click, and Lorenzo was alone with Teresa de Almazán.

The silence stretched between them, filled with the distant sounds of the household—servants moving in other rooms, the faint clatter of the kitchen, the cry of a bird somewhere outside. Lorenzo stood frozen, his mind racing through every protocol he had ever learned and finding none of them applicable to this moment. Should he speak first, he never spoke first... Should he wait for her to speak? Should he offer her a seat? What did one say to a girl one was to marry?

Teresa solved the problem by moving to one of the chairs and settling into it with easy grace.

“Will you sit with me?” she asked, patting the chair beside hers.

“Um.” He started to say, “yes of course.”

He crossed the room on legs that felt wooden and lowered himself into the chair she had indicated, perching on its edge as if ready to flee at the first sign of danger.

"Are you ok?" Teresa observed. Her tone was gentle, curious rather than mocking. "Should I get you something?"

"No, I—" Lorenzo stopped, because the honest answer was no, and he did not know how to say that without giving offense. "I have not... I do not... I am ok. Thank you." He drew a breath, trying to steady himself. "I was not trained for this."

"Trained?" She tilted her head, a small furrow appearing between her brows. "What do you mean?"

"I mean prepared..." The words came haltingly, pulled from him against his will. "I am unsure..." His hands were pulled in tight as he sat, unable to articulate what he was trying to say.

Teresa was quiet for a moment, studying him with those dark, intelligent eyes. Then, slowly, she reached out and took his hand.

Lorenzo went absolutely still.

Her fingers were warm against his, small and soft where his were calloused from sword work. The touch was light, barely there, and yet it sent something electric racing up his arm and into his chest, where it collided with his hammering heart and scattered into a thousand unnamed sensations. He stared at their joined hands as if he had never seen such a thing before—as if the simple act of one person touching another were some kind of miracle. He trembled slightly for a moment.

"Lorenzo." Her voice was soft. "Look at me."

He raised his eyes to hers. And there it was again—that warmth, that recognition, that sense of being seen in a way he had never been seen before. Not as the Alcalde's grandson, not as a someone to be shaped. Just... him. Lorenzo.

"There," she said, and smiled. "That is better."

Something shifted in his chest—a loosening, a release of tension he had not known he was carrying. The trembling in his hands began to ease, though his heart still raced.

"I never thanked you properly," Teresa continued, her thumb tracing a small circle against his palm. "For what you did at the reception. Those boys—" A shadow crossed her face, quickly mastered. "No one has ever stood up for me like that. Not even my father, though I know he wanted to. He could not afford to offend their families."

"I did not think about it," Lorenzo heard himself say. "I just... I saw them, and I saw you, and I..." He trailed off, unable to explain something he still did not understand himself.

"I know." Her smile deepened. "That is what made it brave. You did not calculate the costs or the benefits. You did not weigh your position against theirs. You simply saw something wrong and moved to make it right." She squeezed his hand gently. "Mi valiente."

Lorenzo blinked. "My... brave one?"

"It is what I have been calling you in my head, in my heart," Teresa admitted, a faint blush coloring her cheeks. "Since that night. My brave one. The boy who crossed the hall." She laughed softly. "I did not expect him to be so nervous now."

"I am not—" Lorenzo stopped, because he was, obviously, unmistakably nervous, and denying it would be absurd. "This is different," he said instead. "Facing them was... I knew what to do. What to say..." He looked down at their joined hands again, trying desperately to control his breathing. "No one taught me this."

"No one can teach this," Teresa said gently. "This is not something you learn from books or tutors. This is something you learn by doing. By being present with another person and seeing what happens." She tilted her head. "Perhaps we could start simply. Tell me about yourself, Lorenzo. What do you like to do?"

Lorenzo opened his mouth to answer, then closed it again. The question, simple as it was, had knocked something loose inside him. What did he like to do? He tried to formulate a response, reaching for the categories that organized his life: his studies, his training, his duties at court. But those were things he did, not

things he liked. No one had ever asked him what he liked before. The concept itself felt foreign, like a word in a language he did not speak.

"I..." He faltered. "My grandfather believes that a well-rounded education requires proficiency in multiple disciplines. In the mornings I train with Master Valdés—sword, shield, the fundamentals of mounted combat. In the afternoons I study with Bishop Guillermo—languages, philosophy, rhetoric. In the evenings I accompany my grandfather to court or observe his work as magistrate. The schedule is—"

"Lorenzo." Teresa's voice was gentle but firm, cutting through his recitation. "I did not ask what you do. I asked what you like. What brings you joy. What makes you happy."

He stared at her, and something in his expression must have shifted, because her own face changed—the warmth giving way to something more complex, a mixture of surprise and dawning understanding and something that might have been sadness.

"No one has ever asked you that before," she said slowly. "Have they?"

Lorenzo shook his head, not trusting his voice.

Teresa was quiet for a long moment, her thumb still moving in small circles against his palm. When she spoke again, her voice was very soft.

"Then perhaps," she said, "that is where we should begin. Perhaps, mi valiente, we should discover what you like. Together."

A small pause. A breath. A moment in which formality quietly receded.

Teresa smiled, a little shy now herself.

"You know... everyone calls me Doña Teresa. Or Lady Almazán. Or simply the Conde's daughter." She tilted her head, meeting his sapphire eyes. "But my mother called me Risa."

She let the name rest between them for a heartbeat.

"You may call me that. If you like."

Lorenzo—who had never been invited into anyone's private world before—answered softly, "...Risa."

Once. Testing the word. Like a prayer. Like a discovery.

Her smile warmed, open and luminous, and something inside his chest loosened—something he had never known was bound.

He did not know what he liked. He did not know what made him happy. Without the order of education, discipline, and expectation, he was lost.

But looking into Risa's eyes, feeling the warmth of her hand in his, he thought—for the first time in his life—that perhaps he might.

Roses and Mint

Spring arrived slowly, grudgingly, as if winter were reluctant to release its grip on the land. But arrive it did, and with it came the first shoots of green in the Alcázar's gardens, the return of birdsong to the morning air, and the gradual warming of stone walls that had held the cold all through the dark months.

The morning routines of the Ortiz household continued as they always had. Lorenzo rose with the bells of San Lucas, dressed without assistance, and descended to the small dining chamber where his grandfather took breakfast. The same room. The same table. The same silver cups and fresh bread and watered wine that had marked every morning of his life for as long as he could remember.

And yet everything was different.

Don Flavio sat in his accustomed place, documents already spread before him despite the early hour. He looked up as Lorenzo entered, and if he noticed anything changed in his grandson's bearing—a certain lightness in his step, a softness around the eyes that had not been there before—he gave no sign.

"You slept well?" The familiar question, delivered in the familiar tone.

"Yes, Grandfather."

"Good. We have much to discuss." Don Flavio pushed the documents aside and fixed Lorenzo in his gaze. "The King held a private audience yesterday with the Mendoza delegation. I was not present, but my sources tell me the discussion touched upon the disputed territories in Navarra. What do you make of Count García Ordóñez's position in light of this development?"

Lorenzo considered the question as he always did, drawing upon his observations and his understanding of the court's complex web of alliances. "Count García Ordóñez has been attempting to position himself as neutral in the Navarra dispute, but his family's holdings in the region make true neutrality impossible. If the King favors the Mendoza claim, the Count will be forced to choose sides. His behavior at last week's dinner suggests he anticipates this—he spent considerable time in conversation with both Don Sebastián and the Bishop, likely seeking allies who might speak for him should he need."

Don Flavio nodded, the faint approval in his expression as familiar as the sunrise. "Adequate. You might also note that the Count's wife has been visiting with her sister in Aragon—a possible indication that he is preparing alternative options should his position in Castile become untenable."

"I was not aware," Lorenzo admitted.

"Few are. It is why I mention it." Don Flavio reached for his cup, taking a measured sip of wine. "Now. The Bishop's proposal regarding the cathedral taxation—"

"I like the smell of roses."

The words came out of Lorenzo's mouth without warning, interrupting his grandfather mid-sentence. For a moment, he was as surprised as Don Flavio to hear them—they had emerged from somewhere deep inside him, bypassing all the careful filters and controls that normally governed his speech.

Don Flavio stopped. His cup, halfway to his lips, hung suspended in the air. His eyes fixed on Lorenzo with an expression that, for once, was utterly unreadable.

"I..." Lorenzo looked down at the table, at the familiar grain of the wood, at his own hands resting upon it. He could feel heat rising to his face, but he did not

stop. Could not stop, now that the words had begun. "And mint plants. The way they smell when you crush the leaves." He swallowed.

The silence stretched between them, filled with the distant sounds of the household waking—servants moving in the corridors, the clatter of the kitchen, a child playing outside the window. Don Flavio set down his cup with exquisite care, as if it were made of something fragile.

"Roses," he said slowly. "And mint."

"Yes, Grandfather."

Don Flavio was quiet for a long moment. His face had gone very still—not the controlled stillness that Lorenzo knew so well, but something else. Something that looked almost like uncertainty.

"The Almazán girl," he said finally.

"Yes."

Another silence. Don Flavio picked up his cup again, but did not drink from it—simply held it, his fingers wrapped around the silver, his eyes distant.

"I see," he said at last. And then, more quietly, almost to himself: "Your grandmother liked roses as well."

Lorenzo looked up, startled. His grandmother had died before he was born. His grandfather never spoke of her—not her name, not her face, not any detail of the woman she had been. In sixteen years, Lorenzo had learned nothing about her except that she had existed and that her absence had left a space his grandfather never filled.

Don Flavio seemed to realize what he had said. His expression closed, the moment of vulnerability shuttering behind the familiar mask of composure. He set down the cup and picked up the documents again, his movements brisk and businesslike.

"The Bishop's taxation proposal," he said, his voice steady once more. "What are your thoughts?"

Lorenzo recognized the dismissal. The conversation about roses and mint was over, filed away in whatever compartment his grandfather kept things he did not wish to examine. But something had shifted between them nonetheless—something small, almost imperceptible, like a door cracked open just enough to let in a sliver of light.

"The Bishop's proposal would place an undue burden on the merchant classes," Lorenzo said, falling back into the familiar rhythm of analysis. "The nobility would support it because it costs them nothing, but the resulting resentment among the tradespeople could destabilize the economy in ways that ultimately harm everyone..."

He continued, delivering his assessment with the same precision he always had. But part of his mind remained elsewhere—thinking about Teresa, about his grandmother whom he had never known, about the girl who had taught him to notice the world around him.

About the future that stretched before him now, no longer an endless road with no turns, but something else entirely. Something with color and scent and warmth. Something that, for the first time in his life, he was eager to discover.

The breakfast concluded as it always did. Don Flavio departed for his duties, and Lorenzo departed for his training. The city went about its business, and the world continued turning, and nothing had changed that anyone could see.

But Lorenzo carried with him, as he walked through the familiar corridors toward the training yard, a small and precious knowledge that he had not possessed before.

He liked the smell of roses.

And mint plants.

And being with Risa.

Spring

Spring had painted Toledo in colors Lorenzo had never noticed before—the soft green of new leaves, the white and pink of flowering trees, the warm gold of afternoon sunlight on ancient stone. He and Teresa walked together through the narrow streets of the old quarter, their pace unhurried, their conversation easy in the way it had become over the months of their courtship.

They were unescorted, which would have scandalized the court ladies but had become increasingly common for them. Don Flavio had relented on the constant supervision after the winter months proved they could be trusted to behave appropriately. Don Álvaro, for his part, seemed simply pleased that his daughter was happy—happier than he had seen her since her mother's death.

"There," Teresa said, pointing to a small shop tucked between a silversmith and a leather worker. "That is where my mother used to buy ribbons. The old woman who ran it knew her name. She would save the best colors for her."

Lorenzo squeezed her hand. He had learned that sometimes the best response to grief was simple presence.

"We could go in," he offered. "Buy some ribbons."

Teresa's smile deepened. "I would like that, mi valiente. Perhaps a green one. She always said green brought out my—"

She stopped walking. Her hand tightened on his.

Lorenzo followed her gaze and felt something cold settle in his stomach.

Three young men had emerged from a side street ahead of them, their fine clothes and arrogant bearing marking them as nobility even before Lorenzo recognized their faces. Fernando de Lara. Gonzalo de Mendoza. Pedro de Guzmán. The same three who had tormented Teresa at the reception months ago. The same three who had circled Lorenzo like wolves, insulting and threatening, until Don Flavio's arrival had driven them away.

They had seen Lorenzo and Teresa too. Gonzalo's lips curved into a smile that held no warmth.

"Well, well," he called, his voice carrying across the narrow street. "If it is not the Alcalde's grandson and his little frontier flower." He elbowed his companion. "Look—no grandfather this time. No guards, no servants. No one to hide behind."

"Let us go another way," Teresa murmured, tugging gently at Lorenzo's hand. "They are not worth—"

"Going somewhere?" Pedro stepped sideways, blocking the nearest side street. "But we have only just found each other. Surely you would not deny us the pleasure of your company."

The three began to close the distance, spreading out as they walked, their movements carrying the casual confidence of predators who had cornered prey. Lorenzo felt Teresa press closer to his side, felt the slight tremor in her hand. The memory of the reception flashed through his mind—her pale face, her frightened eyes, the way she had pressed herself against the wall while they laughed.

"We want no trouble," Lorenzo said, keeping his voice level. "Let us pass."

"No trouble?" Gonzalo laughed. "You caused us considerable trouble, Ortiz. Made us look foolish in front of the court. Made the King think we were... what was the word? Cruel." His eyes hardened. "We have not forgotten."

"And now here you are," Fernando added, "walking through the streets with Almazán's unwanted little mud flower on your arm, as if either of you were our equal. As if either of you belonged among decent people."

Pedro's mouth curled. "Careful, Fernando. The scholar may answer in Arabic next."

Fernando laughed. "Or pray at us in that Mozárabe fashion his grandfather favors."

Gonzalo's gaze slid to Teresa. "What is wrong, Teresa? Does your little Hebrew grow upset? Or does he think himself Castilian now?"

Lorenzo's jaw tightened.

"Mozárabes are Christian," he said. "And Toledo's soil is Castile."

Gonzalo's eyes returned to Lorenzo. "For now."

Fernando sneered. "Whichever way the wind blows, eh, Ortiz?"

"Lorenzo," Teresa said, quietly pleading. "Ignore them. Please. Let us just—"

Pedro bent and scooped something from the gutter—a handful of mud, dark and wet from the morning's rain.

"Let us see what sort of flower grows from Toledo's soil."

Before Lorenzo could react, Pedro hurled it at Teresa.

It struck her across the bodice of her dress, splattering brown across the pale green fabric. Teresa gasped, stumbling back, her hand flying to her chest as if she had been struck by something more than dirt.

The three nobles laughed.

Something inside Lorenzo went very cold.

He stepped forward, placing himself between Teresa and her tormentors, his hand moving to the hilt of his sword. The motion was automatic, instinctive—the product of years of training drilled into muscle and bone until response required no thought.

The laughter stopped.

Chapter IV – El desafío

The Market

"Oh?" Gonzalo's eyes dropped to Lorenzo's hand, to the sword beneath it. "What is this? Does the scholar think to draw steel on his betters?" He spread his arms wide in mocking invitation. "What will you do, Ortiz? Challenge us? You? A nobody? An orphan? The grandson of a jumped-up clerk who holds office only at the King's pleasure?"

"Lorenzo, no." Teresa's voice was urgent now, frightened. "You must not. Please. They are not worth it."

Lorenzo did not answer. He looked at the three young nobles with an expression that bore nothing of the composed neutrality he had worn at the reception. His eyes moved from one to the next, measuring.

Not politics. Not advantage. Distance. Angles. Timing. Which would move first.

"Go," he said to Teresa, his voice flat and unfamiliar. "Get away from here."

"I will not leave you—"

"Go."

Something in his tone made her obey. She turned and ran, her ruined dress gathered in her fists, her footsteps striking the stones until they faded into the maze of streets.

The three nobles spread out, forming a loose semicircle around him. Their hands settled on their own hilts now, amusement sharpening into anticipation.

"There goes your witness," Pedro observed. "No one to see what happens. No one to tell tales to the King."

"We should teach him a lesson," Fernando said. "A proper one. One he will not forget."

From the shadow of a nearby archway, a man watched.

He wore the plain wool of a city clerk, but nothing about him was ordinary. Ramón de Vivar had served in the King's chancery for twenty years. He knew the faces of every noble house in Castile. He knew Fernando de Lara's temper. Gonzalo de Mendoza's pride. Pedro de Guzmán's taste for cruelty.

He did not know the young man facing them.

But he recognized the situation instantly. Three blades about to be drawn. One boy alone. No witnesses. No guards within sight.

If steel met flesh here, politics would follow. Blood would echo in court.

Ramón did not hesitate. He slipped away soundlessly, moving through side streets with a soldier's speed, heading for the plaza where the city guard kept post.

By the time he reached the corner, he was already planning what he would report — and to whom.

In the street, the nobles continued their slow circle.

"Look at him," Gonzalo said, contempt thick in his voice. "He actually believes he has a chance. Three against one." He drew his sword with a metallic whisper. "Lessons are not experience, Ortiz. You have never drawn blood. We have."

Lorenzo said nothing. His hand remained on his hilt, but he did not draw. His eyes tracked them, noting Fernando's favoring foot, Pedro's too-wide stance.

"Nothing to say?" Fernando drew his blade. "No clever words? No philosophical argument?" He gestured lazily with the steel. "Come then. Show us what your tutors have taught you."

Pedro's sword joined the others. Three naked blades. One still sheathed. A single breath before disaster.

"Halt! In the name of the King!"

Boots struck stone. Four members of the city guard emerged from a side street, weapons ready.

Gonzalo turned, surprise flickering before calculation smoothed his features. He lowered his sword — but did not sheathe it.

"Officers. Thank God. This man accosted us. Drew steel without provocation. We were defending ourselves."

The guard captain's eyes moved from the three drawn swords to Lorenzo's still-sheathed one. He said nothing yet.

"That is not true," Lorenzo replied. His voice was steady, though fury coiled beneath it. "They blocked our path. They insulted my intended. They threw mud upon her. I drew no steel."

"He lies," Fernando snapped. "He threatened us—"

The captain opened his mouth—

"What is the meaning of this?"

Don Flavio's voice cut through the moment. He strode into the street, Teresa beside him, her stained dress bearing silent witness. His weathered eyes took in everything at once.

"Señor Alcalde," the captain said, straightening. "An altercation. These young men claim your grandson initiated—"

"Look at my dress," Teresa said, stepping forward, anger trembling through her voice. "Look at what they did. And they claim Lorenzo did this?"

Gonzalo laughed harshly. "Saved again, Ortiz. Running to grandfather every time. Is that how it will always be? The great scholar hiding behind an old man's robes?"

Don Flavio lifted a hand, silencing whatever Lorenzo might have said.

"Captain. I will take responsibility for my grandson. These young men shall be allowed to return home. I apologize for the inconvenience."

Smooth. Diplomatic. The same words as the reception. The same solution.

Not this time.

"No."

The word was quiet — but it stopped everything.

Don Flavio turned slowly.

"They insulted Doña Teresa," Lorenzo said. His voice remained low, but something new lived inside it. Steel. "They soiled her dress. They called her—" He stopped. Some words did not deserve repeating. "They owe her an apology."

"An apology?" Pedro sneered. "To that? We owe nothing to rabble or to a cowardly orphan."

"You will apologize," Lorenzo said, "or you will answer for the insult."

Don Flavio's hand closed on his shoulder, hard. "Lorenzo. Enough. We are leaving."

"Answer for it?" Gonzalo's eyes lit, delighted. "Is that a challenge, Ortiz?"

"Lorenzo, do not—" Don Flavio began.

"Yes." Lorenzo pulled free, his gaze locked to Gonzalo's. "I challenge you. All three of you. For the insult to my Intended and her House."

The world fell into silence.

Then Gonzalo smiled — slow, triumphant.

"Accepted. Our seconds will contact yours." He sheathed his sword with a flourish. "We look forward to it. Truly."

They walked away laughing.

"The King will forbid it," Fernando said.

"And when he does, Ortiz is disgraced," Pedro replied. "Either he fights and dies, or he backs down and loses honor. Either way — we win."

Their voices faded down the street.

Lorenzo remained standing between his grandfather and Teresa, the weight of what he had done settling onto him like armor — heavy, irreversible, and now his to bear.

Consequences

"What have you done?"

Don Flavio's voice was quiet, which somehow made it worse than if he had shouted. They stood in the street, the city guard dismissed, Teresa still at Lorenzo's side with her ruined dress clutched in her hands.

"I defended her honor," Lorenzo said. "As any man should—"

"You challenged three sons of great houses to a duel." Don Flavio's composure was cracking, fury bleeding through the gaps. "You—with no title, no lands, no standing beyond what I have built for you—challenged men whose families have served the crown for generations. Do you have any idea what you have done?"

"They insulted—"

"I do not care what they did!" Don Flavio's voice rose, drawing glances from passersby. He visibly forced himself to calm, lowering his voice to a furious hiss. "The King will hear of this within the hour. He will be forced to respond. And his response will be to forbid the duel—which will make you look like a fool who challenges others to fights he cannot finish—or to permit it, which will result in your death."

"He was protecting me," Teresa said, stepping forward. "If you had seen what they—"

Don Flavio turned on her, and for the first time Lorenzo saw something like genuine anger directed at the girl who had changed his life.

"This is your doing. Before you, he knew his place. Disciplined. Proper. He would never have—"

"Enough."

Lorenzo stepped between them, placing himself in front of Teresa as he had placed himself in front of her at the reception, in front of her in the street. His heart was pounding, his hands shaking, but his voice was steady.

"Do not blame her. The choice was mine. The words were mine. The consequences are mine." He met his grandfather's eyes without flinching. "I knew what I was doing. I know the cost. And I would do it again."

Don Flavio stared at him as if seeing a stranger. Something moved behind those weathered eyes—anger, yes, but something else too. Something that might have been recognition.

"Captain," he said, turning to the guard who had remained nearby. "Escort Doña Teresa to the Almazán quarters. See that she arrives safely."

"Grandfather—" Lorenzo began.

"You will be silent." The words were ice. "You have said quite enough for one day."

Teresa looked at Lorenzo, her eyes bright with unshed tears. "I am sorry," she whispered. "I did not mean for—"

"You have nothing to apologize for." Lorenzo took her hand, pressed it briefly, then his grandfather forced him to let it go. "I will see you soon."

Don Flavio's glare reminded him of the order.

She went with the guard, looking back over her shoulder until the street curved and she was lost from sight. Lorenzo watched her go, then turned to face his grandfather.

"Walk," Don Flavio said. "We are going home. And you will explain to me how a boy I raised to be a diplomat, a scholar, a future conde, somehow became a fool who throws away everything for a moment of wounded pride."

They walked in silence through the streets of Toledo, the spring sunshine mocking them with its warmth. Don Flavio's fury radiated from him in waves, but Lorenzo did not try to defend himself further. What was there to say? He had

done what he had done. The words had been spoken. The challenge had been issued and accepted.

When they reached the residence, Don Flavio led him to the study and closed the door with a controlled violence that made the walls shake.

"Do you understand," he said, turning to face Lorenzo, "what you have done? Do you truly understand?"

"I challenged them—"

"You have given them exactly what they wanted!" Don Flavio slammed his palm against the desk, scattering papers. "They have been waiting for this, Lorenzo. Waiting for you to do something foolish, something that would let them destroy you without consequence. And you handed it to them on a silver platter."

Lorenzo said nothing. His jaw was tight, his hands clenched at his sides, but he let his grandfather's words wash over him.

"If the King forbids the duel—which he should, which any sane monarch would—you will be seen as a coward who hides behind royal authority. Your reputation will be ruined. The Almazán match will become a laughingstock. Everything I have worked for, everything I have built—gone. Destroyed by a single moment of idiocy."

Still Lorenzo held his tongue, though something burned behind his eyes.

"And if he permits it?" Don Flavio's voice cracked. "If he permits it, you will face three trained swordsmen from families that have been fighting wars for generations. You are good, Lorenzo—I have made sure of that. But you are not that good. No one is that good. You will die, and everything dies with you."

Don Flavio stared at him, chest heaving, waiting for a response. When none came, his expression hardened into something cold and final.

"I should call off the engagement," he said. "End this madness before it goes any further. Let the Mendozas and the de Laras have their satisfaction, and salvage what we can from the wreckage. The girl has been nothing but trouble since—"

"No."

The word exploded from Lorenzo with a force that surprised them both. He stepped forward, and for the first time in his life, he saw something flicker in his grandfather's eyes that might have been uncertainty.

"You will not call off the engagement." Lorenzo's voice shook, but not with fear—with something fiercer, something that had been building inside him for months and had finally found its voice. "I will marry her. With your blessing or without it. With the King's approval or without it. I will marry her if I have to fight every noble in Castile to do it."

Don Flavio's face went pale. "You would defy me? After everything I have done for you? Everything I have sacrificed?"

"She is my life, Grandfather. And I choose a life with her or none at all."

The silence that followed was absolute.

Don Flavio stood frozen, staring at his grandson as if seeing him for the first time. The boy he had raised, shaped, molded into a perfect instrument of ambition—that boy was gone. In his place stood someone else. Someone who had learned to feel, and having felt, would not go back.

"Enough." Don Flavio's voice was hoarse. "You will be silent now. You will go to your room. You will speak to no one until I have had time to think."

"Grandfather—"

"Enough." The word cracked like a whip. "I cannot... I cannot look at you right now. Go."

Lorenzo held his ground for one heartbeat. Two. Then he bowed—not the shallow bow of a chastened child, but the deep, formal bow of a man acknowledging another man's authority.

"This will have to go to the King," Don Flavio said as Lorenzo reached the door. His voice had steadied, but something fragile lived beneath it. "I cannot intervene without making it worse—it would look like I was protecting you from the consequences of your own actions. But if the King addresses it, if he finds some

way to satisfy honor without bloodshed..." He shook his head. "I will request an audience tomorrow. Until then, you will remain in this house. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Grandfather."

Alone

Lorenzo left the study and climbed the stairs to his chamber. He closed the door behind him and stood in the gathering dusk without lighting a candle.

His hands were still shaking. His heart was still racing. He had defied his grandfather—truly defied him—for the first time in his life. He had said things that could not be unsaid, drawn lines that could not be erased.

And he did not regret a single word.

Teresa's face swam before him in the shadows—her frightened eyes when the mud struck her dress, her trembling voice as she tried to stop him, her hand in his before they led her away. He thought of her laugh, her warmth, the way she had reached inside him and found something worth saving.

I would die for her, he had said.

And standing there in the darkness, with his grandfather's fury still ringing in his ears and the weight of three challenges pressing down upon him, he knew it was true.

Whatever came next—disgrace or death, the loss of everything he had been raised to achieve—he would not apologize for defending the woman he loved. He would not apologize for choosing her.

He would not apologize for being *her valiente*.

A Father's Fear

Don Álvaro de Almazán was reviewing correspondence when he heard the commotion in the outer chamber—voices raised, the heavy tread of booted feet,

and beneath it all, a sound that made his heart clench: his daughter's voice, strained and unsteady.

He was on his feet before the door opened, moving with the instincts of a man who had spent decades on the borderlands, where trouble announced itself in small sounds and quick movements. When Teresa entered, escorted by a city guardsman whose face carried the careful neutrality of someone who wanted no part of whatever had happened, Don Álvaro's eyes went immediately to the brown stain splattered across the bodice of her dress.

Mud. Someone had thrown mud at his daughter.

"Leave us," he said to the guard, his voice flat and hard.

"My lord, the Alcalde requested that I—"

"I said leave us." Don Álvaro did not raise his voice. He did not need to. Twenty years of commanding men in the field had taught him that true authority required no volume—only certainty.

The guard bowed and withdrew, closing the door behind him. Don Álvaro crossed the room in three strides and took his daughter's hands in his, his weathered fingers gentle despite the tension that coiled through his body.

"Teresa. What happened?"

She looked up at him, and he saw that her eyes were bright with tears she was fighting not to shed. His daughter had always been strong—stronger than anyone gave her credit for—but there were limits to what even the strongest could bear.

"The Mendoza boy," she said, her voice catching. "And the others—Fernando de Lara, Pedro de Guzmán. They found us in the street. Lorenzo and I were walking, and they—" She gestured at her ruined dress, the movement sharp with barely contained fury. "They blocked our path. They said things. And then Pedro threw mud at me like I was a—like I was—"

She stopped, her jaw tightening against the words she could not bring herself to repeat.

Don Álvaro felt something cold settle in his chest. He had known those boys all their lives—had watched them grow from cruel children into crueler young men, had seen the casual contempt they showed to anyone they deemed beneath them. He had hoped, foolishly perhaps, that the King's endorsement of the engagement would offer Teresa some protection. That even the sons of great houses would hesitate to antagonize a family that had royal favor.

He had been wrong.

"And Lorenzo?" he asked, though part of him already knew the answer. "Where is he now?"

Teresa's face crumpled. "He challenged them, Father. All three of them. He—" A sob escaped her, quickly strangled. "He would not let them speak of me that way. He put his hand on his sword and he challenged them, and they accepted, and now—"

Don Álvaro closed his eyes. *Madre de Dios.*

A challenge. A formal challenge, issued by a hidalgo's grandson against three sons of the most powerful families in Castile. The political implications cascaded through his mind with the terrible clarity of a man who had spent his life navigating the treacherous currents of noble society. Lorenzo had challenged up—had dared to demand satisfaction from men whose families could crush House Almazán without breaking stride. And he had done it in defense of Teresa's honor, which meant that House Almazán was now inextricably bound to whatever followed.

"God help us," he breathed.

"Father, you have to stop it." Teresa gripped his hands, her fingers digging in with desperate strength. "You have to do something. Talk to the King, talk to Don Flavio, you must do something. Lorenzo cannot fight them. He is a scholar, not a soldier. They will kill him."

Don Álvaro opened his eyes and looked at his daughter—really looked at her, seeing not the frightened girl before him but the woman she was becoming. She loved this boy. Loved him with the fierce, all-consuming passion of youth, the

kind of love that saw no obstacles and accepted no limitations. The kind of love he had felt for her mother, once upon a time.

"Teresa," he said gently, "I cannot simply make this disappear. A challenge has been issued and accepted. There are protocols, formalities—"

"I do not care about protocols!" Her voice rose, cracking with emotion. "I care about Lorenzo! He did this for me, Father. Because they insulted me. If he dies, it will be my fault. I cannot—" She broke off, pressing a hand to her mouth as if to hold back the flood of words threatening to overwhelm her. "I cannot lose him. Not like this. Not because of me."

Don Álvaro guided her to a chair and pressed her gently into it, then knelt before her as he had when she was a child, when nightmares had driven her from her bed and only her father's presence could chase away the shadows.

"Listen to me," he said, his voice low and steady. "What Lorenzo did—it was foolish. Reckless. It may well have doomed us all." He paused, watching the pain flicker across her face. "But it was also brave. Braver than anything I have seen in years. Those boys have tormented you since you arrived at court, and I..." His jaw tightened. "I have done nothing. I have watched them humiliate you and I have done nothing, because I was afraid. Afraid of their families, their power, what they could do to us if I dared to object."

"Father—"

"Lorenzo did what I should have done." The words came out rough, tinged with something that might have been shame. "He stood up for you when I could not. When I would not. And now he may die for it, and I..." He stopped, swallowing hard. "I do not know whether to curse him or thank him."

Teresa's tears spilled over, tracking silver down her cheeks. "I do not want him to die for me. I do not want anyone to die for me. I don't want him to die—" Her voice broke completely. "I just want to marry him and be happy. Is that so much to ask?"

Don Álvaro had no answer for that.

"There is another fear," he said quietly. "Don Flavio."

Teresa looked up, her tear-stained face going pale. "What about him?"

"He is a practical man. A careful man. He has spent his entire life building something from nothing—raising his family from obscurity, securing positions of influence, preparing Lorenzo for a future that would cement everything he has achieved." Don Álvaro chose his words with care. "If he decides that Lorenzo's actions have made the match untenable... if he concludes that the political cost of association with us outweighs the benefits..."

"He would call off the engagement?" Teresa's voice was hollow. "You think he would take Lorenzo away to protect his own position?"

"It is possible. The Mendozas alone could make life very difficult for the Ortiz family. If all three houses unite against them..." Don Álvaro spread his hands. "Don Flavio might decide that cutting ties with us is the only way to salvage what he has built."

Teresa was silent for a long moment, her eyes fixed on something far away. When she spoke again, her voice had changed—still raw with emotion, but beneath it, something harder.

"Then we must make sure that does not happen."

"Teresa—"

"You said Lorenzo did what you could not." She met her father's eyes. "Then let us do what we can. Let us go to the King ourselves. Let us speak for Lorenzo, for our house, for the match. Let us not sit here and wait for others to decide our fate."

Don Álvaro studied his daughter's face, seeing in it the girl she had been and the woman she was becoming.

"The King may not receive us," he warned. "This matter involves the great houses. He may wish to handle it without our involvement."

"Then we will ask. And if he refuses, we will ask again." Teresa stood, her ruined dress forgotten, her tear-streaked face set with resolve. "Lorenzo taught me something, Father. He taught me that sometimes the brave thing is not the safe

thing. Sometimes you have to act, even when the cost is high." Her voice softened. "We have to, Father."

Don Álvaro rose as well, slowly, his heart heavy with fear and hope in equal measure.

"Very well," he said. "Change your dress. Clean your face. We will go to the King together."

Teresa's smile was watery but real. "Thank you, Father."

"Do not thank me yet." He placed a hand on her shoulder, rough and gentle at once. "We may fail. The King may side with the great houses. Don Flavio may have already made his decision. And Lorenzo may yet face those boys in a duel we cannot prevent."

"I know." She covered his hand with her own. "But at least we will have tried. At least we will not have sat and waited for others to decide."

Don Álvaro nodded slowly.

"Go," he said gruffly, releasing her shoulder. "Make yourself presentable. We have a king to petition and a future to fight for."

Teresa went, and Don Álvaro stood alone in the chamber, staring at the closed door through which she had disappeared.

Mi valiente, she had called the boy. My brave one.

Don Álvaro thought he was beginning to understand why.

Chapter V - La justicia del rey

The Alcázar

The throne room of the Alcázar had never felt so large, nor so cold.

Lorenzo stood at the rear of the chamber, flanked by his grandfather on one side and Don Álvaro on the other. Teresa had been forbidden from attending—by Don Sebastián de Córdoba, the King's Chief Advisor. What was to be decided was a matter for men—and Lorenzo found himself grateful for her absence. Whatever happened here, he did not want her to see it.

The great houses had come in force.

The Marqués de Lara stood near the front, his face carved from granite, eyes fixed upon the throne with the patient certainty of a man accustomed to victory.

Beside him waited the Conde de Mendoza, older, weathered, a veteran of the Reconquista whose name still carried the dust of conquered fortresses.

Completing the triumvirate was the Conde de Guzmán, whose lineage had held the line at Las Navas de Tolosa and never let anyone forget it.

Their sons stood behind them—Fernando, Gonzalo, and Pedro—wearing the quiet satisfaction of hunters who had already sprung the trap.

Whatever judgment the King rendered, they believed the outcome inevitable.

Lorenzo Ortiz de Sevilla would fall. One way or another.

The King entered without ceremony, his advisors trailing in his wake. Don Sebastián took his place at the monarch's right, his falcon gaze sweeping the chamber, betraying nothing. The King settled upon the throne and let the silence stretch until every whisper died.

"We are gathered," he said at last, "to resolve a matter of honor. A challenge has been issued and accepted. The principals stand before us. We will now render judgment."

The Marqués de Lara stepped forward and bowed, precise as a blade stroke.

"Your Majesty. The houses of Lara, Mendoza, and Guzmán thank you for hearing this matter. Our sons were grievously insulted by the grandson of the Alcalde—a

young man of no standing who dared challenge his betters over a trifling incident in the street. We ask only for justice."

"Justice," the King repeated. "And what form would this justice take?"

"The challenge was issued. Honor demands it be answered. Let steel decide the matter, as it has since time immemorial."

"Three against one," the King said.

The room cooled by a degree.

"You propose that three sons of great houses, trained from childhood in war, should face a single opponent. And you call this justice?"

The Marqués hesitated—but only briefly.

"The boy issued the challenge. Surely, he understood the implications."

"He understood," the King said, "that your sons insulted his Intended. He understood they threw mud upon her in a public street. He understood it was his duty to defend her honor. And he did so."

The King descended the steps of the dais. His voice did not rise—but every word carried weight.

"We were present when this feud began. We have seen how your sons comport themselves. We are not deceived."

The Conde de Mendoza stepped forward, voice measured.

"We do not deny there were provocations. But a challenge is a challenge. To forbid it would stain our houses."

"And to permit it as proposed," the King replied, "would be to sanction murder of a young man yet to shave."

The king's words were followed by a moment's silence.

"We will not have blood spilled in our streets for wounded pride and childish cruelty. Yet neither will we void the challenge and declare one side coward and the other aggrieved. There will be a compromise."

The chamber held its breath.

"A torneo," the King said. "A tournament of arms. Blunted steel. Three trials — the tilting at rings, the joust, and combat on foot. Combat until yield or incapacity. Honor satisfied. Lives preserved."

Don Sebastián stepped forward with a scroll.

"One week hence. Upon the Vega Baja, beneath the walls of the city."

The Marqués de Lara's eyes narrowed, calculating.

"A torneo. Then we request it be teams—of three," he said slowly. "That our sons shall stand together."

Don Sebastián looked to the King.

"Teams of three, then," the King said. "The manner of each trial shall rest with the crown, and shall be proclaimed upon the field."

The great lords exchanged glances. The manner hardly mattered. Three trials, teams of three — however the crown dressed it, numbers were numbers.

A nod sealed Lorenzo's fate.

"So be it."

"And young Ortiz?" The Marqués' smile formed, thin as ice. "He may also form a team?"

"He may."

The great lords exchanged glances. Understanding passed between them like a sealed pact.

"We accept," the Marqués said. "Let skill decide the matter."

He turned his gaze toward Lorenzo.

"We trust young Ortiz will find companions willing to stand beside him."

The implication needed no voice.

Lorenzo had no allies. No friends. No one who would risk standing against three of Castile's greatest houses. Not for him.

Don Flavio stiffened beside him. Don Álvaro's jaw clenched. Neither could object. The King's ruling was fair. To protest would be to admit weakness.

"There is one further provision," the King said.

The room stilled again.

"It shall be open to all hidalgos and above, knights not yet spurred. Prizes shall be drawn from the royal treasury—arms, armor, or treasure of suitable worth—for those whom the trials favor."

A murmur rippled through the court. A royal prize meant prestige. Opportunity. Temptation.

Don Sebastián's eyes found Lorenzo.

"Don Lorenzo. Do you accept these terms?"

Lorenzo stepped forward. His mouth was dry. His heart pounded. His voice did not falter.

"I accept, my lord."

"And will you present yourself with a team?"

Lorenzo lifted his chin.

"With a team. Or alone."

Behind him, Gonzalo de Mendoza laughed softly.

The King's expression did not change, but something unreadable flickered in his gaze.

"Then it is settled. One week hence. May God grant victory to the righteous."

The audience dissolved. Nobles swept from the chamber in currents of silk and steel. The great houses departed already planning their triumph.

Lorenzo remained where he stood, the weight of seven coming days settling upon his shoulders.

Seven days to find allies in a court where no one dared oppose his enemies.

Seven days to prepare for a fight he could not win alone.

Don Flavio's hand came to rest upon his shoulder—not in anger, but in weary resolve.

"Come," his grandfather said quietly. "We have much to discuss."

Lorenzo nodded, but his eyes lingered on the doorway through which the three young nobles had vanished.

Three against one.

Or three against whoever he could convince to stand beside him.

He thought of Teresa, waiting, unaware of the terms now laid upon their fate. He imagined the hope that would rise in her eyes—and the fear that would follow.

He had spent his life being shaped for ambition.

He had never been taught how to make a friend.

Seven days to learn.

Or seven days to face them alone.

Either way, he would not withdraw.

He was *mi valiente*.

And he would meet what came.

The Terms

Don Flavio's study had never felt so small.

Lorenzo stood before his grandfather's desk, still wearing the clothes he had worn to the audience. The afternoon light slanted through the high window in long golden shafts, but it brought no warmth to the room. Don Flavio sat with his fingers steepled beneath his chin, his eyes fixed on Lorenzo with an expression that held neither anger nor approval—only assessment.

"Sit," Don Flavio said.

Lorenzo sat.

"You accepted the King's terms," his grandfather continued. "A torneo. Teams of three. One week to prepare." A pause. "Do you understand what you have agreed to?"

"I understand the structure—"

"Then you understand nothing."

Don Flavio's voice did not rise, but it hardened.

"A torneo is not a street quarrel. It is not a lesson in the yard. It is combat. Real combat, with real consequences."

He rose and moved to the window, hands clasped behind his back.

"There will be three trials. Ring tilting. You will ride at speed and take rings upon your lance. Precision and horsemanship. You are... adequate."

He turned.

"Jousting. Mounted combat. Lance against lance. There are rules, yes. But rules do not stop horses from falling. Or ribs from breaking. Men die in jousts, Lorenzo. Men better trained than you."

Lorenzo remained still. His hands rested on his knees. Unmoving.

"And then the *mêlée*. Foot combat. Sword and shield. Blunted steel. Until yield or incapacity." Don Flavio's eyes pinned him. "This is where they will try to destroy you. Three against one, if you cannot find allies. Even with blunted blades, bones break. Joints shatter. Men leave the field and never walk again."

"I understand, Grandfather."

"Do you?"

Don Flavio returned to the desk but did not sit.

"The sons of Lara, Mendoza, and Guzmán have trained for this since childhood. They have squired for knights. They have fought in melees before. They know pain. They know exhaustion. They know how to continue regardless." His voice lowered. "You have sparred against boys who were told not to hurt you."

"Master Valdés has trained me well."

"He has trained you to be competent." Don Flavio exhaled slowly. "Competent is not enough."

Silence settled between them.

Then, quietly, without looking at Lorenzo, Don Flavio said:

"Victoria would have known what to say to you."

The name hung in the air.

His wife. Their sons' mother. Gone these many years.

"She raised your uncles with softness where I gave them structure. Laughter where I gave discipline." His voice remained steady, but something older moved beneath it. "You, I raised alone. Perhaps I..."

He did not say *and perhaps wrongly*. He did not need to.

Lorenzo said nothing. But he heard.

Don Flavio cleared his throat, returning to the present as if nothing had been revealed at all.

"You have one week. Speak to Valdés. He knows which young hidalgos train under which masters. Perhaps he can find some willing to join you."

Lorenzo lifted his eyes. "You think I can find allies?"

"I think you must try." His grandfather's tone carried no hope. Only necessity. "Do not enter the lists alone. Alone, they will humiliate you. Break you before the court. Make you a lesson."

"I will not withdraw."

"If you fail to find allies, it is better if you do."

Don Flavio studied him for a long moment.

Then, simply:

"Find allies. You have seven days."

He turned back to his papers.

Lorenzo understood he was dismissed.

The Futile Search

Master Valdés heard Lorenzo's request in silence, his weathered face as still as carved oak. They stood in the training yard where Lorenzo had spent so many hours, the packed earth marked by the scuffs of that morning's practice.

"You want me to find young men willing to stand with you," the old soldier said at last. "Against the sons of Mendoza, de Lara, and Guzmán."

"Yes, Master."

Valdés studied him with the same pale, assessing gaze he brought to every bout.

"I will ask," he said. "But you should know—the great houses have already moved against you. Word has passed through every yard in Toledo. Any man who joins you makes enemies of three of the most powerful families in Castile." He paused. "That is a high price for a tournament purse."

"I understand."

"If you did, you would find a way to withdraw. To apologize. But that is not how I trained you." Valdés shook his head slowly. "You are skilled, boy. More skilled than most suspect. But skill does not win loyalty. Men follow those they trust. Those who have shared hardship with them." His voice lowered, not unkindly. "You have lived apart from other young men. Now you need them. And they do not know you."

The words struck deeper than any blow.

"I will still ask," Valdés said. "There may be one or two bold enough—or foolish enough—to consider it. But do not place your hope there."

Lorenzo inclined his head. "Thank you, Master."

Before he left the training yard to begin his search, Lorenzo asked the question burning in him.

"Is it true?" he said. "Did my grandfather ask that those who sparred with me not hurt me?"

Valdés paused.

"It is true that he asked."

Lorenzo looked down at the packed earth. "So all this time..."

"All this time, I never asked a single one to hold back," Valdés said. "They did not need to."

Lorenzo looked up.

The old soldier's gaze held his, pale and steady.

"I trained you, Don Lorenzo."

The words settled into him slowly.

Valdés nodded once, as if the matter were decided.

"The rings are precision, and precision you have. The joust—" He gave a slight shake of his head. "The joust you need only survive. It is the *mêlée*, and its numbers, that we must prepare for. So the *mêlée* is what we will train."

With that, he turned and walked back toward the weapons rack.

Lorenzo watched him go, holding to the small, dangerous hope that somewhere in Toledo there might yet be young men willing to stand beside him.

Then he left the yard and began his search.

Diego Fernández received him in the courtyard of his family's townhouse, still sweating from morning practice. His copper hair was dark with moisture, and he held a waterskin in one hand, drinking deeply before acknowledging Lorenzo's presence.

"Ortiz." He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "I heard about the King's ruling. A torneo." His eyes held something that might have been respect, or might have been pity. "Bold of you."

"I need willing men to stand beside me," Lorenzo said directly. "You know my skill. You have faced me in the yard."

Diego's expression shifted. He looked away, toward the stone walls of the courtyard, toward anywhere but Lorenzo's face.

"I cannot."

"Diego—"

"My father has already spoken to me." The words came quickly, as if he wanted them said and done. "The Mendozas have influence in our region. If I stand against Gonzalo, my family suffers. Our lands, our trade agreements, our position at court—" He shook his head. "I am sorry, Ortiz. Truly. But I cannot risk my family's future for a tournament."

Lorenzo felt something tighten in his chest. Not surprise—he had expected this. But hearing the words spoken aloud made them real in a way that expectation could not.

"I understand," he said.

Diego finally met his gaze. There was shame there. They had never been friends. But this still felt like abandonment.

"You were better than me," he said quietly. "In the yard, I mean. That day we sparred—I told myself it was luck, that you caught me off guard. But it wasn't, was it?"

Lorenzo did not answer.

"Maybe that will be enough." Diego's voice held no conviction. "Maybe you will not need anyone else."

He turned and walked back toward the house, and Lorenzo watched him go.

Martín de Soto was more direct.

"No," he said, before Lorenzo had finished speaking. They stood in the shade of San Lucas's bell tower, the midday sun beating down on the plaza beyond. "I am sorry, but no. You understand, surely."

"I am asking for your help."

"And I am telling you I cannot give it." Martín's thin face was apologetic but firm. "My family depends on the wool trade. The Guzmáns control half the merchants in Toledo. If I oppose them publicly, in the King's own tournament—" He spread his hands. "We would be ruined within a year."

"There must be—"

"There is nothing." Martín stepped back, already turning away. "I wish you well, Ortiz. I do. But I have my family to think of. I cannot throw away our future for your quarrel with great houses."

He was gone before Lorenzo could respond.

And he was left standing there all alone.

Íñigo Ruiz was the last.

They met in a tavern near the river, a place where young hidalgos gathered away from the watchful eyes of their families. Íñigo sat in a corner table, a cup of wine untouched before him, his quick dark eyes tracking Lorenzo as he approached.

"I know why you are here," Íñigo said.

Lorenzo remained standing. "Then you know what I am asking."

"I do." Íñigo traced the rim of his cup with one finger. Of the three, he had always been the thoughtful one — the watcher. "And I wish I could say yes."

"But you cannot."

"No. I cannot." The words came slowly, weighted with something like grief. "My family has served the crown for three generations. Loyal. Steady. Obedient. And in all that time, we have never risen above our station. No lands. No titles. No influence. We are what we have always been — useful, reliable, and utterly forgettable."

He lifted his eyes to Lorenzo's.

"If I stand with you and you lose, my family loses what little standing we possess. The great houses will remember. They always remember. And if I stand with you and you win..." A faint shrug. "We remain hidalgos beneath notice — only now with enemies."

Lorenzo searched the table for an argument he did not have.

"I cannot stand with you," Íñigo said softly. "But I will tell you something."

He leaned forward slightly.

"The day we sparred in the yard. You defeated me three times. And I am not easily defeated."

Lorenzo said nothing.

"You were holding back." Not a question. A certainty. "You hid what you could do. Perhaps your grandfather wished you unseen. But I know what I saw."

Íñigo rose, leaving the wine untouched.

"You are better than any of us, Ortiz. Better than Diego. Better than Martín. Perhaps good enough to carry a fight alone."

He stopped at the end of the booth.

"I do not know if it will be enough against three of them. But..."

The word faded. Instead, Íñigo placed a hand on Lorenzo's shoulder — brief, firm, respectful.

"Good luck."

Then he walked away.

Lorenzo remained standing in the tavern long after the door closed.

Alone.

Lost.

The days passed. Lorenzo approached every young hidalgo he could find—young men he had seen at court, young men he had observed in training yards, young men whose names he knew from his grandfather's careful cataloguing of Toledo's noble families. The answer was always the same.

"I cannot."

"My father forbids it."

"You understand, surely."

"I wish you well, but—"

By the fifth day, he had stopped asking. The great houses had closed every door, sealed every alliance, made clear to every family of lesser standing what the cost of opposition would be. Lorenzo Ortiz de Sevilla would face the torneo alone, and everyone knew it.

He trained with Master Valdés in the mornings, drilling the techniques for fighting multiple opponents—footwork patterns, angles of engagement, how to use one enemy as a shield against another. The old soldier said little, but his eyes held something that might have been approval.

"You cannot win," Valdés said on the sixth day, as Lorenzo stood breathing hard after an exhausting series of exercises. "The numbers are against you. But you can make them work for it."

"Is that meant to encourage me?"

"It is meant to prepare you." Valdés handed him a waterskin. "Hope is for poets and fools. A soldier knows what he faces and prepares accordingly." He paused. "You have prepared well. Whatever happens tomorrow, remember that."

"Whatever happens," Lorenzo repeated.

The old soldier's face softened, just slightly.

"The world is full of surprises, boy. I have seen battles turn on a single moment, a single choice, a single man who refused to fall when every rational calculation said he should." He gripped Lorenzo's shoulder briefly. "Be that man. And perhaps the world will surprise you."

The Garden

Teresa came to him on the evening of the sixth day.

The garden of the Ortiz residence was quiet at this hour, the last light of sunset painting the roses in shades of gold and amber. Lorenzo sat on the stone bench where they had spent so many afternoons together, his hands folded in his lap, his eyes fixed on nothing.

He heard her footsteps on the gravel path and looked up.

She wore a simple dress of pale green—her mother's color—and her dark hair fell loose around her shoulders. Her eyes were red-rimmed, as if she had been weeping, but her face was composed now, set with a determination that made her look older than her seventeen years.

"Risa." He rose to meet her. "You should not be here. If someone sees us—"

"I do not care." She crossed the remaining distance and took his hands in hers.

"Lorenzo, I had to see you. Before tomorrow."

Her voice caught. She steadied herself.

"I know you have found no one to stand with you. My father told me." She squeezed his hands. "And I know you will not withdraw. I know you too well to ask."

"I cannot withdraw. Not after what they did to you."

"I know." Tears welled in her eyes, but she did not let them fall. "And I love you for it, mi valiente. I love you for standing when no one else would. But I am afraid."

She searched his face, as though still hoping there might be one path left unexplored.

"Do you have no cousins?" she asked suddenly. "Some distant relative who might stand with you? Surely someone of your blood—"

Lorenzo's expression did not change, but something quiet passed behind his eyes.

"Six of my cousins are too old," he said. "They have already earned their spurs. They cannot enter a youth torneo." A pause. "And the seven others are too young to enter."

Teresa stared at him, the truth settling between them.

Alone.

Not abandoned. Not unloved. But alone, all the same.

She exhaled shakily, then pulled herself back together.

"I have something for you," she said.

She reached into her sleeve and drew out a length of ribbon—pale green silk, the color of spring leaves, the color of her mother's memory.

"My mother gave this to me," she said softly. "She told me to save it for someone worthy. Someone brave." She looked up at him, her eyes bright with tears and fierce with love. "I want you to wear it tomorrow. So, I am with you, whatever happens."

Lorenzo took the ribbon. The silk was soft against his calloused fingers, light as breath, precious beyond measure.

"Risa—"

"Tie it around your arm." She took it back from him and wound it around his left forearm, just above the wrist. "Here. Where everyone can see." Her fingers worked quickly, surely, binding the ribbon in place. "There. Now you carry me with you."

He looked at the green silk against his skin. Such a small thing. Such an enormous weight.

"What do you want, Lorenzo?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper. "If you could have anything—what would you wish for?"

He remembered the first time she had asked him that question, in the sala with their fathers nearby and his tongue frozen with uncertainty. He had not known how to answer then. He had not known what he wanted, what made him happy.

He knew now.

"To come back to you," he said. "That is all I want. To survive tomorrow and come back to you."

Teresa's hand found his cheek, her palm warm against his skin.

"Then do that," she said. "Fight well. Fight bravely. And come back to me."

She rose on her toes and pressed her lips to his cheek—not his mouth, not quite, but close enough that he felt her breath on his skin, felt the warmth of her, felt everything he had to lose.

"I will be watching," she whispered. "Every moment. I will be there."

Then she was gone, her footsteps fading down the gravel path, and Lorenzo stood alone in the garden with a green ribbon on his arm and the weight of tomorrow pressing down upon him.

The Night Before

Lorenzo did not sleep.

He lay in his chamber in the darkness, staring at the ceiling, listening to the sounds of the city settling into silence. The bells of San Lucas rang the hours—compline, then matins, then lauds—and still he lay awake, his mind turning over everything that would come with the dawn.

Three against one.

He had trained for this. Master Valdés had drilled him relentlessly in the techniques of fighting multiple opponents—never stand still, never let them

surround you, use their numbers against them. Force them to get in each other's way. Make them work for every strike.

But training was not combat. The yard was not the field. And three sons of great houses, raised for war, hardened by years of preparation, were not the same as practice dummies or reluctant sparring partners.

He could still withdraw.

The thought came unbidden, unwelcome, persistent. He could claim illness. He could accept dishonor. He could live.

Lorenzo sat up in the darkness. Moonlight fell through the window, silver and cold, illuminating the green ribbon still tied around his arm. He touched it with his fingertips, feeling the silk, remembering her face.

They had called her frontier rabble. They had thrown mud at her dress. They had laughed at her fear, mocked her distress, treated her as less than human because her family lacked the power to stop them.

And when he had stood up for her, when he had demanded they answer for their cruelty, they had smiled. They had welcomed the challenge. Because they believed they would destroy him, and in destroying him, prove that standing against them was folly. That the weak should accept their place. That people like Teresa—good people, kind people, people whose only crime was lacking ancient names and vast estates—deserved whatever the powerful chose to inflict upon them.

Lorenzo rose from his bed and moved to the window.

Toledo spread out below him, silver-washed and sleeping. Somewhere out there, Gonzalo de Mendoza was sleeping too, confident of tomorrow's victory.

Fernando de Lara was dreaming of glory. Pedro de Guzmán was anticipating the pleasure of breaking the Alcalde's grandson in front of the assembled court.

They were wrong.

He might lose. He probably would lose. The mathematics were against him, the experience, the numbers, everything that could be calculated and measured and weighed.

But some things could not be calculated.

He thought of Teresa's face when she tied the ribbon around his arm. The fierce love in her eyes. The way she had said *mi valiente*—my brave one—as if the words were a prayer and a promise and a truth all at once.

She was worth fighting for, worth dying for.

And if he was going to die, he would die standing. He would die fighting. He would die as the man she believed him to be, not the hollow instrument his grandfather had tried to create.

Lorenzo touched the ribbon one more time. Then he returned to his bed and closed his eyes.

The morning of the tournament arrived grey and cool, clouds hanging low over Toledo like a held breath. Lorenzo dressed in the half-light, pulling on the padded gambeson he would wear beneath his armor, checking each strap and buckle with the methodical care Master Valdés had taught him.

The green ribbon remained on his arm, visible even through the layers of padding.

He descended to the main hall to find his grandfather waiting.

Don Flavio stood by the window, dressed in his finest court clothes, his face unreadable. He turned as Lorenzo entered, and for a long moment neither of them spoke.

"You found no one," Don Flavio said at last. It was not a question.

"No, Grandfather."

"And you will not withdraw."

"No."

Don Flavio nodded slowly. Whatever he felt—anger, resignation, pride, fear—he kept it locked behind the mask he had worn for so many years.

"Then you go with my blessing," he said. "Such as it is."

Lorenzo bowed. "Thank you, Grandfather."

He turned to leave.

"Lorenzo."

He stopped.

"Whatever happens today—" Don Flavio's voice caught, just slightly, before steadying again. "Whatever happens, you are an Ortiz. Do not forget that."

Lorenzo looked back at his grandfather—this man who had raised him, shaped him, made him into everything he was. For the first time in his memory, Don Flavio looked old. Old and tired and afraid.

"I will not forget," Lorenzo said.

He walked out into the grey morning, toward the Alcázar, toward the field of the torneo, toward whatever fate awaited him.

The green ribbon fluttered slightly against his arm.

He was *mi valiente*.

And for her, he would meet whatever came.

Chapter VI – El Torneo

The Torneo

The royal lists had been raised on the Vega Baja, on the open plain below and west of Toledo, where the land widened beside the Tagus. The city rose behind it like a crown of stone.

Wooden stands rose on three sides of the field, draped in the colors of Castile—crimson and gold catching the morning light like banners of flame. The fourth side held the royal pavilion, elevated above the rest, where the King would preside over the day's events. To his right, seats had been prepared for the noble families whose sons would compete—the Marqués de Lara, the Conde de Mendoza, and the Conde de Guzmán, and their retinues, all dressed in their house colors, all wearing expressions of confident anticipation. To his left, a smaller section had been set aside for the Alcalde's household.

Don Flavio Ortiz sat in the center of that section, his eyes fixed on the empty field below. He was not alone. Flanking him on either side sat his six sons—Lorenzo's uncles—men of varying ages and temperaments who had traveled from across Castile when word reached them of what their nephew had done.

Gilberto, the eldest, sat nearest his father. Beside him sat Flavio the younger, named for his father. Then Ramón, Esteban, Guillermo, and Ernesto, the youngest of the brothers.

They had come for their father. Whatever their private opinions of the boy—their deceased brother's son—he had somehow become the center of a scandal that threatened the entire family. An Ortiz faced judgment today. And the family would show solidarity, even if that solidarity was reserved for Don Flavio rather than for Lorenzo himself.

Teresa sat at the far end of the Ortiz section, her father Don Álvaro beside her. Her hands were clasped tightly in her lap to hide their trembling. She had not slept the night before. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw Lorenzo's face—the quiet determination in his sapphire eyes when he had promised to come back

to her, the green ribbon she had tied around his arm, the way he had pressed his lips to her cheek as if sealing a sacred vow.

The stands were filled to overflowing. Word had spread throughout Toledo that the tournament would be a spectacle worth watching—not merely for skilled combat, but for the drama that had birthed it. Everyone knew the tale by now: the Alcalde's grandson, the insult, the challenge, the impossible odds. They had come to see blood, or humiliation, or perhaps both.

Among the common folk pressed against the barriers stood a man who watched with different eyes than most. Ramón de Vivar had witnessed the street confrontation a week ago, fetched the city guard, and watched the boy stand alone against three sons of great houses. Now he observed again, his face betraying nothing, his keen eyes missing nothing.

Nearby, stood Master Rodrigo Valdés with three young men at his side—Diego Fernández, Martín de Soto, and Íñigo Ruiz. The old soldier had taken them as students after the day in the training yard when Lorenzo had defeated them so thoroughly. Their fathers had approached him separately, each hoping their son might learn whatever it was he had taught the Alcalde's grandson. It had been a shrewd decision on Valdés's part—more students, more coin.

"He will be slaughtered," Diego muttered, his copper hair bright in the morning sun. "Three against one in the mêlée. It cannot be done."

Master Valdés said nothing. His eyes remained fixed on the field.

A trumpet sounded, crisp and bright in the morning air, and the crowd fell silent.

"Lords and ladies of Castile," the herald announced, his voice carrying across the field, "His Majesty the King welcomes you to this tournament of arms. Today, young men of noble blood will test their skill in three trials: the tilting at rings, the joust, and combat on foot. They compete for glory, for honor, and for a prize from His Majesty's own treasury."

The crowd murmured in appreciation.

"Let the competitors present themselves!"

One by one, the teams rode onto the field—six groups of three, their armor gleaming, their horses prancing with barely contained energy. They were the sons of great houses, all of them—families that had shaped Castile for generations, whose names were written into the very stones of the kingdom. They rode past the royal pavilion and saluted the King, then took their positions along the edge of the field.

Fernando de Lara, Gonzalo de Mendoza, and Pedro de Guzmán rode together, their armor bearing the colors of their respective houses. They sat upon their horses with the easy confidence of young men who had been raised in the saddle, who had trained for war since they could hold a sword. When they passed the section where Teresa sat, Gonzalo smiled—a cold, predatory expression that made her stomach clench.

The last position remained empty.

The crowd began to murmur. Whispers rippled through the stands like wind through wheat. Where was the Alcalde's grandson?

In the noble families' section, the Marqués de Lara leaned back in his seat with an expression of satisfied contempt. "It seems young Ortiz has come to his senses," he murmured to the Conde de Mendoza. "A wise decision, if a cowardly one."

In the Ortiz section, Gilberto glanced at his father. Don Flavio's face remained stone, but his hands had tightened on the arms of his chair.

Teresa's heart clenched. No. He would not withdraw. He had promised—

The trumpet sounded again.

And Don Lorenzo rode onto the field.

He came alone, as they had known he would—a single figure on a grey horse, his armor plain and unadorned. He bore no house colors; the yellow lion of Ortiz, rampant upon its blue field and bordered in white and red, was absent, lest defeat shame his grandfather's house. He sat straight in the saddle, his visor raised, his face visible to all who watched. Around his left arm, clearly visible against the dull metal of his armor, a ribbon of pale green silk caught the morning light.

He did not look at the noble families. He did not look at the other competitors. His sapphire eyes found the small section where Teresa sat, and he held her gaze for a long moment before inclining his head—a gesture that was both a greeting and a promise.

Then he turned to face the King and bowed low over his horse's neck.

The crowd had gone utterly silent. Whatever they had expected—withdrawal, perhaps, or grim determination—this quiet dignity had not been it. He had come alone to face three-to-one odds, and he had come without fear, without bravado, without anything but the simple resolve of a young man who had made his choice and would see it through.

“Lorenzo Ortiz de Sevilla presents himself for the tournament,” the herald announced, and if there was surprise in his voice, he concealed it well. “Competing alone.”

A murmur rolled through the stands.

In the Ortiz section, Ernesto leaned toward his brother Esteban. “He actually came,” he whispered. “I thought Father would talk him out of it.”

“He is in love. There is no talking him out of anything,” Esteban replied quietly. “Not anymore.”

Don Flavio said nothing. His eyes never left his grandson.

The King’s expression did not change, but something flickered in his gaze — respect, perhaps. Or recognition. He had seen this boy stand against cruelty once already. Now he saw him again, standing where no one expected him to stand.

The herald unrolled the royal proclamation, and his voice carried across the Vega Baja.

“By command of His Majesty the King: the manner of the trials shall be thus. For each trial — the tilting at rings, the joust, and combat on foot — every team shall put forward one champion, and one champion only. No man shall stand in more than one trial. In every contest upon this field, one man shall face one man.”

For a heartbeat, silence.

Then the noble pavilion stirred like a kicked hive.

The Marqués de Lara was half out of his seat before he mastered himself. On the field, Gonzalo turned sharply to Fernando, and whatever passed between them was not confidence. Teams of three, they had demanded. The King had granted it — granted it precisely — and then, with a single provision read into the open air, had taken from their numbers everything the numbers had been meant to do.

The herald was not finished.

"Where a team stands with fewer men than trials, its champion shall serve in each."

Every eye on the Vega Baja moved to the lone rider in plain armor.

One team on that field had fewer men than trials.

The Marqués found his voice. "Your Majesty." Careful. Measured. "The terms agreed—"

"The terms," the King said, without rising, "were a torneo of three trials, between teams of three, for prizes from our treasury. Those terms stand. The manner of the trials was reserved to the crown, and the crown has spoken." He let his gaze travel the length of the noble pavilion. "Unless my lords wish to argue that honor requires three blades against one boy. I invite them to say so. Here. Before all of Castile."

No one said so.

"Further," the herald read, "seven teams stand entered upon the combat on foot, and the brackets seat but six in the opening round. By His Majesty's word, the bye falls to the team of one."

It was favoritism, and every soul on the plain knew it, and it was wrapped so tightly in fairness that no man could lay a finger upon it. The champion who fought every trial would be granted one round of rest. Who could stand and argue that he deserved less?

In the Ortiz section, Don Flavio allowed himself nothing. But his hands, for the first time that morning, unclenched.

On the field, Lorenzo sat very still upon the grey horse. He had prepared, all week, for three blades at once. He had made his peace with it in the dark, with a green ribbon wound about his arm. And now — one man would face one man. Every trial. Every pass. Every bout. All of it his, and his alone. He did not know whether the weight upon him had been lifted or merely changed its shape.

In the commons, Ramón de Vivar did the arithmetic softly, for no one in particular. "Three passes at the rings. Six in the lists. Two bouts on foot, if he lives to fight them. Eleven courses of arms in a single day." He glanced at the man beside him — a lean, narrow-eyed figure in dark leather, a scorpion worked in bronze upon his brooch. "Their sons will each fight once."

Miguel said nothing. His narrow eyes settled on the boy in plain armor with the first genuine interest he had shown all morning.

"Let the oaths be sworn," the King commanded. "And the blessings given."

The trumpet sounded once more.

The field now belonged to fate.

The competitors dismounted and approached the raised platform where clergy and heralds waited beneath the royal pavilion. One by one, the young men knelt upon the stone before the altar set for the occasion. Each swore to abide by the laws of the Torneo, their voices carried across the yard by the morning air.

They would strike only with rebated steel. They would not strike a fallen opponent. They would not strike a horse. They would not thrust into visor slit or throat. They would yield when overcome.

Violations would mean forfeiture, disgrace, and judgment before the King himself.

When Lorenzo's turn came, he stepped forward alone.

Teresa's breath caught.

The clergyman before him was not merely a priest of the court. It was Bishop Guillermo de Alcántara — the man who had taught Lorenzo letters and rhetoric,

who had watched the boy grow both clever and hollow, who had worried over the quiet child who learned everything except how to belong.

Don Flavio, custodian of San Lucas, had requested the Bishop's presence for this moment.

The old man looked down at his student. His eyes glistened, but his voice did not falter.

"My boy," he said softly.

Lorenzo knelt.

He unfastened his helm and set it aside. Cool morning air touched his brow. For the first time since entering the lists, his face was fully bare before the court, before the King, before God.

"Your Grace," he said. "I ask your blessing."

The bishop laid his hands upon Lorenzo's head, fingers resting in his hair, feeling the living warmth beneath.

And when he spoke, his voice carried across the field — strong, clear, meant for every ear in the stands.

"Lord God, who grants strength to the weak and courage to the fearful, look upon this young man who stands alone against many. Grant him skill to defend himself, wisdom to temper his hand, and grace to accept whatever fate You decree."

His voice softened — but did not diminish.

"And grant him knowledge that he does not stand truly alone. For You stand with those who fight for love, for honor, and for those who cannot fight for themselves."

He traced the sign of the cross upon Lorenzo's brow.

"Go with God, my son. And remember — a full heart is not a weakness. It is what makes us human."

Lorenzo bowed his head once more. Then he reached for his helm, set it upon his head, and lowered the visor.

Then he rose.

For a moment his eyes met the Bishop's. Something passed between them — the bishop's long-held worry finally laid to rest, and the boy's quiet acceptance of what he had to do.

He turned back toward the field.

God help him.

The Tilting at Rings

The tilting at rings was the first trial.

Wooden arms extended from tall posts along the field, and from them hung a series of rings no bigger than two fingers in width. Each competitor would ride at full gallop and attempt to take the rings upon his lance, collecting as many as possible in three passes. It was a test of precision, timing, and the perfect harmony between horse and rider.

One youth from each team would compete on behalf of the whole. They were skilled, all of them—young men raised in the saddle, trained for war since childhood. Rings slid onto lances. Hooves thundered. The crowd cheered each clean strike.

Fernando de Lara rode for the three great houses and performed well, his score near the top of the rankings. Francisco Montoya, tall in the saddle, matched him ring for ring. As Fernando completed his final pass, Gonzalo called from the barrier toward Lorenzo, who waited at the field's edge.

"Good luck, Ortiz! Though I fear the rings will not be impressed by your grandfather's position." He laughed. "Perhaps you should return to scrolls and ledgers."

His companions laughed. Some in the crowd joined them—uncertain laughter, careful laughter, the laughter of those who knew which side held power.

Lorenzo said nothing. He adjusted his grip on the lance, settled in the saddle, and waited for the signal.

The trumpet sounded.

He spurred his horse forward. Speed built with each stride. The first ring approached. His lance took it cleanly, metal sliding down wood with a clear, sharp note.

The second ring. Taken.

The third. Taken.

He wheeled at the end of the run and returned faster, more assured. Three more rings joined the first three. His lance moved with quiet, exact purpose, finding center after center as though drawn by invisible lines.

The third pass was the hardest—the lance's balance now altered by the weight of the collected rings.

Lorenzo's breathing steadied. The world narrowed to hooves, wind, and the glint of metal ahead.

Clink. Clink. Clink.

Nine rings. A perfect score.

The crowd erupted.

Teresa was on her feet without remembering rising, hands pressed to her mouth. Don Álvaro laughed aloud in disbelief.

In the Ortiz section, the brothers exchanged glances. Gilberto leaned forward. Esteban reassessed. Even Flavio the younger watched with sharpened interest.

Don Flavio sat unmoving, his eyes fixed on his grandson, expression unreadable.

In the noble pavilion, smiles stiffened. Eyes narrowed. Calculations shifted.

Their sons were no longer laughing.

"Lorenzo Ortiz de Sevilla," the herald proclaimed, voice bright with surprise, "wins the tilting at rings with a perfect score."

Lorenzo rode past the stands. His visor remained raised, sweat shining on his brow. He did not look toward the great houses. He did not look toward his family.

Only once did his eyes lift—to the small section where Teresa stood, her eyes bright. He inclined his head to her alone.

Then he turned back to the field.

Gonzalo's voice followed him, low and venomous.

"Wait for the joust, Ortiz. Wait until you face something that can strike back."

The Joust

The joust was a different kind of trial.

Here there was no careful precision, no quiet calculation of distance and angle. Here there was only speed and mass and the brutal arithmetic of two armored men on horseback, each seeking to break his lance upon the other's shield or helm and send him crashing to the earth. The lances were blunted and crafted to shatter on impact, but the force of collision could still crack ribs, dislocate shoulders, or leave a man senseless in the dust.

Rules governed the lists. A strike must land squarely upon shield or helm along the agreed line. A blow angled too high—toward visor, throat, or crown—was forbidden, for such strikes were meant to kill, not merely unhorse. Nor could one strike a fallen man, nor aim at the horse. Violations carried forfeiture and the King's judgment.

But at the speed of a charge, intention was difficult to prove.

Lorenzo watched the early passes with careful attention, studying the riders, their posture in the saddle, the way they set their lances, the moment they chose to

lean into the strike. The sons of the great houses were skilled. They had been raised in the lists, hardened to impact, taught to trust their horses and their armor as second skins.

But there was something else in the eyes of Gonzalo de Mendoza.

A cruelty. A hunger not merely to win, but to harm.

Each team had named one champion to ride in the joust.

Seven champions. Each would ride a single pass against every other—six passes for each man—and the marshals' tally would decide the trial.

Six passes. Six opponents. And no one to take a single one of them in his stead.

When Lorenzo's turn came, he faced his first opponent—Salvador Montoya, youngest of three brothers from the Aragonese border, who rode as if stillness itself had done him an injury.

The first pass went poorly. Don Salvador came on like a loosed bull and drove his lance home with all the fury of youth—a fair strike, clean, and harder than the pass required. The collision was brutal, and Lorenzo was thrown to the ground, armor clanging against the packed earth. He lay still for a moment, breath driven from his lungs, before forcing himself upright. Two Field Marshals came to his aid and steadied him, checked him for injuries, then walked him from the lists.

In the Ortiz section, Guillermo closed his eyes in prayer. Ernesto gripped the arms of his chair. Don Flavio watched without expression, but his knuckles had gone white. Teresa gripped her father's arm.

Other competitors went through their rotations before it became Lorenzo's turn again.

His second pass was against Gonzalo de Mendoza.

They faced one another across the length of the field. Horses stamped. Lances lowered. The crowd quieted, sensing that something more than sport stood between them.

Lorenzo thought of mud on a green dress. Of Teresa's frightened eyes. Of a ribbon tied around his arm and a promise whispered in a garden. I'll come back to you.

His eyes narrowed.

The trumpet sounded.

They charged.

For a heartbeat, both remained in their saddles. Then Gonzalo's lance, which should have met Lorenzo's shield, twisted upward at the last instant. The point slid past the proper line and struck high upon the helm, where steel was thinner and the visor seam weakest.

The impact was thunder.

The blow snapped Lorenzo's head back with a sickening crack. His visor crumpled inward. He toppled from his horse and struck the ground without breaking his fall.

Teresa screamed.

She was halfway out of her seat before her father caught her arm.

"Wait," Don Álvaro hissed, his face ashen. "Wait. If you run down there, they can claim interference. They can force him to forfeit."

"Let me go," she pleaded, struggling against his grip. "Someone has to stop this. They are going to kill him."

In the royal pavilion, the King had risen, his jaw tightening. A high blow. Dangerous. Forbidden. But difficult to prove it was done on purpose.

In the Ortiz section, Esteban surged to his feet. "That was deliberate," he growled. "The angle of that lance—"

"Sit down," Don Flavio said, his voice flat as iron. "We cannot prove it."

Esteban obeyed. But fury burned in his face.

Gonzalo reined his horse and trotted toward where Lorenzo lay. He looked down with an expression of theatrical concern.

"Oh dear," he called, loud enough for the nearest rows to hear. "It seems I misjudged the distance. My sincerest apologies. These things happen so quickly." He leaned forward in the saddle, peering at the blood welling beneath the crushed visor, and raised his voice for the stands. "Will he live?"

He did not dismount. He did not wait for an answer. He turned his horse toward his father's pavilion, where the smiles had already begun.

On the field, Lorenzo lay still.

Then a voice, sounding as if from deep water. Then again more clearly.

"Don Lorenzo."

Lorenzo stirred.

"Don Lorenzo, are you alright?"

Blood streamed over his left eye. The world felt distant, muffled. He groped at the ground, trying to find his bearing.

The Field Marshal looked to the High Marshal, "He cannot continue."

Lorenzo pushed himself to his hands and knees. Blood ran from beneath the crushed visor, dark and steady, dripping into the dust.

The High Marshal hurried to his side, offering a hand. "Don Lorenzo?" the man asked quietly.

Lorenzo reached up and pulled away the ruined helm. His face was pale. His hair was dark with sweat and blood. A deep cut ran above his left brow. He could only see from one eye. But he refused to yield.

"I can continue," he said with an unconvincing nod.

A murmur passed through the stands.

He was handed the reins of his horse and led from the lists, where he was checked again.

The Surgeon was called.

His injury assessed.

"Don Lorenzo, I cannot recommend you continue." He said.

"Can you sew the wound closed, and bandage me so I can ride?"

"I can, but I advise against it." The surgeon's concern was genuine.

"Do so, please." Lorenzo was determined; he would not dishonor Risa by withdrawing. He would not dishonor his family.

He listened and counted as each pass was made, as the crowds cheered.

All but Risa. She prayed, prayed with all her heart that Lorenzo would not return to the lists. That he would forfeit, be forced to withdraw, anything but return to the field. She could not bear to watch him take such a blow again.

Her prayers went unanswered.

The surgeon did his work as quickly as he could, and Lorenzo retrieved the only helmet he had left, his field helmet.

His vision was still blurred on his left side; there was nothing the surgeon could do but recommend to the marshal he not be allowed to continue.

The High Marshal asked him again, if he could continue, reminding him he did not have to do this. He had proved his courage by taking such a blow.

"You know I must." Lorenzo said as he with difficulty donned his helmet.

Mounted and ready he returned to the Lists.

Pain slowed his reactions. His balance was compromised. But he faced every remaining pass. Took every blow. And he did not fall again. Some would later say his remaining opponents took pity on him, that they took the easy points from a glancing blow upon his shield rather than risk a blow to his field helmet, which carried too great a risk of proving fatal. Lorenzo for his part was unable to land a strike upon any of their shields.

When it ended, Gonzalo had won the jousting trial by a wide margin. He celebrated loudly, ostentatiously, his companions louder still, casting glances toward the Ortiz section where Teresa sat clutching her father's hand, tears streaking her cheeks.

Lorenzo rode past the stands, his field helm tucked beneath one arm, blood still tracing lines down his jaw.

When he reached the Ortiz section, he halted.

Don Flavio looked at his grandson — battered, bleeding, defeated in the lists, yet unbroken.

Something shifted in the old man's eyes.

"I can continue," Lorenzo said.

"Then continue," Don Flavio answered.

And then, so softly that only Lorenzo heard:

"I am proud of you. Whatever happens next — I am proud."

Lorenzo inclined his head once. As he returned to the surgeon's tent to be checked again and prepared better for the next event, his uncles watched him go. One by one, almost without realizing it, they inclined their heads as well.

Respect, well earned.

The foot combat was next.

Melee

The field had been cleared and reconfigured for the final trial. A large square was marked out with rope and wooden stakes, the boundaries strict and unforgiving. Step beyond them and you were out. Yield and you were out. Fall and fail to rise within a count of ten and you were out.

The rules were simple. Seven champions. Single combat, bout by bout, until one man remained. And by the King's word, proclaimed that morning before all of

Castile, the bye in the opening round belonged to the team of one, to Don Lorenzo.

Lorenzo did not watch the opening round. He sat in the surgeon's tent with his eyes closed while the man worked, and listened. Three bouts. Three trumpets. He heard the one that mattered—heard the crowd's unease as Pedro de Guzmán, fresh and unmarked, took apart a Salamancan youth with more cruelty than the yielding required. The trumpet sounded. The marshals' count was slow in coming.

Lorenzo opened his good eye and watched.

The crowd had grown as the day wore on. Word had spread through Toledo that something unusual was unfolding on the Vega Baja. Common folk pressed against the barriers, craning for a glimpse.

Among them, Ramón de Vivar had moved closer to the field. He watched Lorenzo with the practiced eye of a man long accustomed to judging others—not as they wished to be seen, but as they truly were. Beside him, Miguel leaned upon the barrier, his expression as unreadable as a knife left in shadow.

"The boy has heart," Ramón said.

Miguel snorted. "Heart gets men killed. He has yard skill, nothing more."

"One gold coin says he wins his first bout."

Miguel glanced at him. "A gold maravedí? On a half-blind man against a fresh one?"

"On the scholar."

Miguel smiled thinly. "Done."

Near the front of the commons, Master Valdés had returned to his three students. Diego Fernández stared at the field, pale and rigid. Martín de Soto shook his head slowly, as if trying to reconcile what he was seeing. Íñigo Ruiz watched in silence, his expression unreadable, as though nothing before him came as a surprise.

The herald's voice rolled across the plain.

"The second round. Lorenzo Ortiz de Sevilla. Pedro de Guzmán."

The draw had placed Pedro in his path, and if there was chance in it, no one in the Guzmán pavilion seemed displeased. Teresa clutched her father's hand. "He has barely rested."

"He has rested one round more than the King's enemies wished him," Don Álvaro said quietly. "We must trust it is enough."

Pedro entered the square first.

He was fresh. Unmarked. He had not ridden at the rings. He had not couched a lance. He had spent the day in the shade of his father's pavilion, watching Lorenzo bleed, and had barely exerted himself in his first bout.

Lorenzo entered opposite him, and the crowd hushed at the sight of him. His armor bore the day's history—scratches, shallow dents, dried flecks of blood. Fresh bandages wrapped his brow and ribs, and there was a stiffness to his movements that spoke of bruising beneath the steel. But his sword hand was steady.

The green ribbon still circled his arm, dulled now by sweat and dust but unmistakable against the battered plate.

"Alone at last, Ortiz." Pedro drew his blunted sword and rolled his shoulders. "Unlike the street, there is no city guard this time. No grandfather to save you." His smile was thin and vicious. "Only you and me. And plenty of witnesses."

Lorenzo said nothing. He stood in the center of the square, weight balanced, sword held in a guard drilled into him by years of repetition. His head throbbed beneath the bandage. His ribs protested with each breath.

Beneath it all, something else burned—steady, focused, unyielding.

The trumpet sounded.

Pedro attacked the wound.

There was no pretense of anything else. Every cut came high and from the left—toward the stitched brow, the bandaged eye, the side where Lorenzo's vision

failed him. None of it was against the rules. Every blow was legal. Every blow was aimed at a half-blind man's darkness.

The crowd understood within three exchanges what they were watching. A low sound moved through the commons, and it was not approval.

Lorenzo gave ground. He turned, and kept turning, refusing Pedro the blind side, keeping the fresh man moving, spending Pedro's strength against empty air. He did not counter. Not yet. He measured.

"Tired already?" Pedro pressed harder, blows raining against raised steel. "The scholar fades. Books do not teach a man to endure—"

Lorenzo stopped retreating.

He stepped inside the next cut—too close for it to carry weight—and drove his pommel into Pedro's chest. Driving the taller youth back. Lorenzo's blade swept low, caught the back of his knee, and Pedro's balance abandoned him. He staggered, recovered, swung wild.

Lorenzo was no longer where the blow fell.

What followed was not a duel but a dismantling. Pedro relied on strength; Lorenzo redirected it. Pedro grew angry; Lorenzo grew exact. He struck where it hurt but did not maim. He disarmed, unbalanced, punished. Again and again, longer than he needed to, in front of the fathers and the King and all of Toledo.

Beside Master Valdés, Diego Fernández had gone white. "My God," he breathed. "He has been holding back. In the training yard—he has been holding back."

"His grandfather's orders, probably," Martín de Soto said, his voice hollow. "To keep the true skill hidden until it was needed."

Íñigo Ruiz said nothing. He simply nodded, in confirmation.

In the Ortiz section, Gilberto had leaned forward, his eyes fixed on the field with new intensity. He turned to his father. "All this time," he said slowly. "You knew?"

Don Flavio's eyes never left Lorenzo. "I suspected."

On the field, Lorenzo gave Pedro no room to recover.

Not this boy who had mocked his blood. Not this noble son who had thrown mud upon Teresa and laughed.

Pedro swung hard, angry and wide.

Lorenzo stepped inside the blow and answered.

Blow upon blow, dominating him like a Lion on a wolf.

Lorenzo caught Pedro's sword arm, twisted, and forced him down until one knee struck the dirt. His own blunted blade rested close against the back of Pedro's helm.

"Yield," Lorenzo said.

Pedro strained against him, breath rasping. His eyes flicked toward the ropes. Then toward his father's pavilion, where no one would meet his gaze.

"Never." The words came out of him like broken glass.

Lorenzo's face did not change.

He struck once with the pommel against the back of Pedro's helmet and released him.

Pedro fell forward into the dirt and did not rise.

For a heartbeat, the field held its breath.

The Marshal stepped in, counted over him, and looked once toward the royal pavilion before lifting his staff.

"Victory to Don Lorenzo Ortiz."

Only then did Lorenzo step back, lower his sword, and give the proper bow: first to the Marshal, then to the King, then to the crowd.

Last of all, he bowed to Teresa.

Correct. Courteous. Utterly devoid of triumph.

but there seemed to be a sense of satisfaction to him.

He had wanted this.

Teresa was on her feet. "He did it," she breathed. "One more. Only one more."

In the commons, Ramón de Vivar held out his palm without turning his head. A gold maravedí crossed it. Miguel paid without complaint, his eyes never leaving the boy in the square. He was no longer watching for sport.

They had always come at him as a pack—in the hall, in the street, but in the Torneo. The King's rule had made each of them face him alone. Fernando had been beaten at the rings. Pedro had been broken on foot. And Gonzalo had needed a blow no marshal could prove to claim his single trial. Alone, the wolves had to be satisfied with one victory among three.

Fernando and Gonzalo helped Pedro from the square. He did not look back.

Master Valdés approached as Lorenzo rested beyond the edge of the lists.

"That was unnecessary, Don Lorenzo," he said quietly. "You could have ended it at any time."

"He insulted Doña Teresa," Lorenzo replied at once. "He soiled her dress. He called her—"

"And Lucas Montoya?" Valdés cut in, his tone calm but unyielding. "Did he insult her?"

Lorenzo's gaze dropped to the trampled earth. "No," he admitted.

Valdés studied him for a long moment. Then, more gently than Lorenzo had ever heard him speak, he said, "Look at me."

Lorenzo obeyed.

"End this next match quickly," Valdés said. "Cleanly."

"How?" Lorenzo asked.

"Don Lucas is a true champion he has won several Torneo's already. You can not outfight him, not as you are, perhaps not on your best day. But you might be able to outthink him. Do what you do best, watch him, wait for an opening."

Lorenzo nodded. He understood.

The final was called.

"Don Lorenzo." Lucas Montoya met his eyes across the square. "My brother Salvador—the blow that unhorsed you in the lists. He is young, and he was overzealous. The strike was harder than the pass required." He inclined his head. "I ask your pardon on his behalf."

"There is nothing to pardon, Don Lucas. It was a clean strike, and I placed myself in the hazard. The fault was mine."

Something like a smile crossed Lucas's face. "I am told this Torneo was about an insult to your intended. Did you find satisfaction?"

"I did." Don Lorenzo nodded.

He drew his sword and saluted. "Good, I came to win, and I will not insult you by holding back."

"I would not forgive you if you did," Lorenzo said.

Respect passed between them, brief and genuine.

The trumpets sounded.

Lucas did not hold back.

He was fresh, and he was good—better, Lorenzo understood within three exchanges, than any man he had ever faced. Where the others had spent strength, Lucas spent nothing. Where they had raged, he worked. His blade came in measured combinations that arrived half a beat faster than they had any right to, and Lorenzo's answers grew shorter, tighter, closer to his own body.

Blow after blow landed. On the shield. On the pauldron. Once across the ribs, hard enough to whiten his vision. He went down. The Marshal began to count, but Lorenzo forced himself back to his feet before the third mark. Had this been the training yard, the count of touches would not have been close.

The crowd saw it. Teresa saw it, her knuckles white against her father's arm.

And still Lorenzo rose.

He could not outfight Lucas. Not today. Perhaps not any day.

So he did not try.

He gave ground and studied. He let the shield take what his footwork could not, let his body pay for time in bruises, and read the man the way Bishop Guillermo had taught him to read Greek—patiently, wholly, until the pattern beneath the pattern showed itself.

Lucas favored the bind. Every third or fourth exchange, when the blades met strongly, he rolled his wrist to drive through—a strong man's habit, a winner's habit, invisible until you had bled for the seeing of it.

He telegraphs with his wrists.

In the training yard. A morning, a lifetime ago. Master Valdés's voice, dry and certain.

Lorenzo waited for it the way he had waited for Íñigo's wrists—watching, filing, letting the pattern repeat until it was no longer a guess.

The blades met strongly. Lucas rolled his wrist.

And Lorenzo turned with him instead of against him.

Yielding.

Trapping.

The crossguard hooking.

The twist that Master Valdés had drilled ten thousand times finishing what strength never could. The sword left Lucas's hand and spun away across the packed earth.

Lucas froze. Looked at his empty hand. Looked at the battered, bleeding, half-blind scholar who had just taken his blade from him.

For one breath, no one moved.

Then he laughed once, breathless, and spread his arms.

"I yield."

Lorenzo lowered his sword at once.

The trumpet sounded.

"Lorenzo Ortiz de Sevilla," the herald cried hoarsely, "is victor of the combat on foot—and by two trials of three, champion of the Torneo!"

They would say afterward that Montoya had won every exchange but the last one. It was true. But Lorenzo had not been fighting the exchanges. He had been reading them.

The two clasped forearms, then embraced briefly. Lorenzo raised Lucas's hand before the crowd before turning them both toward the King in a deep bow.

The roar that followed shook the stands.

They had come for blood. Or humiliation.

Instead, they had witnessed mastery.

Lorenzo turned toward the stands—and the world tilted.

His knees buckled.

Esteban was first onto the field. Gilberto followed, less graceful but no slower. They caught Lorenzo as he fell to his knees, steadying him between them.

An Ortiz does not stand alone.

They guided him down to a bench as murmurs rippled outward.

Teresa was already running.

She pushed through the crowd, ignoring gasps, ignoring the sharp calls of her father behind her. She crossed the churned earth and dropped beside Lorenzo just as his helm was lifted away.

His face was pale beneath streaks of sweat and blood. His eyes fluttered, unfocused.

"Lorenzo," she whispered, taking him into her arms. "You did it."

His fingers closed weakly around hers. His gaze found her face, and despite the pain etched into every line of him, he smiled.

"I promised," he murmured. "I promised I would come back to you."

She rested her forehead against his, breathing him in—steel, sweat, blood, and life.

"Mi valiente," she whispered. "My brave one."

Behind them, Esteban and Gilberto stood firm, hands still steadying Lorenzo, eyes daring anyone to object.

In the stands, Don Flavio remained seated.

But his sons had risen.

And across the field, upon the high dais, the King had not looked away once.

Applause began in the Ortiz section—slow, deliberate—then spread outward until the Vega Baja thundered with it.

In the noble families' gallery, the Marqués de Lara started to rise.

The King's voice stopped him.

"Leaving so soon?" he said. "The day is not yet finished. There is still the feasting... and the awarding of prizes."

It was not a request.

The torneo was over.

The surgeon had stitched Lorenzo's eyebrow properly this time, his hands careful and practiced, then bound the swelling eye to hide the worst of the damage. It would bruise deeply by morning, but for tonight, it would suffice. Enough to let him be seen.

He returned home to wash and change for the feast.

Don Flavio had told him to wear the blue doublet—the one with the family crest stitched over the heart. It always complemented his eyes.

He had survived.

As the water ran red into the basin, Lorenzo found his thoughts circling the same way they always did after training or examination—what he had done well, where he had erred, what he should have seen sooner. The habits of study returned easily, comfortably, as if nothing had changed.

And yet, everything had.

He dressed slowly, fastening each button with care, his mind replaying moments from the lists: the misjudged distance in the joust, the opening he had nearly missed in the melee, the weight of exhaustion that had almost undone him at the end.

And Risa's smile, when it was finished.

That, too, he examined—less critically, more carefully—the very thought of it brought peace and a smile he could not hide.

When he was dressed, Lorenzo knelt beside his bed, a somber countenance restored.

He touched three fingers to his forehead, traced a small circle over his heart with his thumb, and placed his hand there, over the crest sewn into the cloth. The way his grandfather had taught him to pray.

"En el nombre del Dios Altísimo, que fue antes de los siglos, que vino en carne, y que arde aún en nuestro pecho. Amén."

He breathed once, steadying himself.

"Te doy gracias, Señor, porque no me dejaste caer cuando estaba solo. Porque me prestaste fuerza cuando la mía se agotó. Porque tuviste paciencia conmigo."

He paused.

"Te doy gracias por Risa, don que no merezco. Y por mi abuelo, y las lecciones que puso en mis manos antes de que yo supiera necesitarlas."

His fingers tightened briefly over his chest.

"Perdóname por mi ira, por mi orgullo, por el temor que causé a quienes amo. Perdóname por haber llegado a este día por caminos torcidos."

Another breath.

"Si hubo victoria hoy, fue tuya, no mía. Yo solo resistí."

He bowed his head lower.

"No te pido nada más, Señor. Hoy me has dado más de lo que jamás supe pedir."

He paused for a moment, then his hand returned to his heart.

"Sea tu voluntad. Amén."

Lorenzo rose, straightened his shoulders, and left the chamber.

Don Flavio was waiting for him at the foot of the stairs.

They did not speak. There was no need.

Lorenzo took his place at his grandfather's right, half a step behind, exactly where he had been taught to stand. Not as a child. Not as a servant. But as family.

Together, they went to the Alcázar.

The Feast

The great hall of the Alcázar blazed with candlelight.

Long tables stretched beneath banners of Castile, laden with silver plate and the richest fare Toledo could provide. The competitors had been tended by surgeons and servants alike; bloodstained gambesons and battered armor replaced by fine doublets, clean linen, and the stiff dignity of men who had endured pain and been found worthy.

The noble families occupied their customary places, smiles measured and careful, eyes sharper than their courtesies. The King presided from the high table, his expression composed, observant, pleased—but not indulgent.

Lorenzo sat to the left of his grandfather, as custom demanded. Don Flavio's presence beside him was solid and immovable, an anchor amid the murmuring hall. Across the table, Teresa sat at her father's right hand, hands folded, posture perfect, her expression calm though her eyes betrayed a brightness she could not quite hide.

Between them lay the length of the table. Between them lay the watching court.

The green ribbon—cleaned and pressed with care—circled Teresa's wrist. Lorenzo noticed it only when she did, their eyes meeting for the briefest instant. She smiled. He looked away, steadying himself.

Nearby, Don Álvaro de Almazán sat opposite Don Flavio, the two men exchanging quiet words now and then—an alliance neither would have predicted, forged not by politics but by blood, steel, and the will of their children.

The King rose.

The hall fell silent at once.

"Today," he said, his voice carrying easily, "we have witnessed something rare. A contest not decided by rank, nor by advantage of birth, but by discipline, restraint, and resolve."

His gaze settled on Lorenzo.

"Lorenzo Ortiz de Sevilla. Come forward."

Lorenzo rose, ignoring the protest of bruised ribs, and crossed the open space before the high table. He knelt, head bowed.

"You prevailed at the rings," the King continued, "and in the combat on foot—champion of the Torneo, by two trials of three. The champion of each trial shall choose a prize from our treasury, and the champion of the Torneo shall choose first. You are entitled to a choice for each of your victories. After which, Don Gonzalo de Mendoza, champion of the joust, shall make his selection."

Servants stepped forward, presenting treasures upon velvet cushions: a sword of masterful make, its hilt set with gems; a breastplate chased in gold; chains and ornaments worthy of great houses.

Lorenzo rose.

"Your Majesty," he said clearly, "the true champion of the Melee was Don Lucas Montoya. I ask that he be granted first choice for that contest."

A stir rippled through the hall.

Don Lucas stepped forward when summoned, bowing first to the King, then to Lorenzo. With measured dignity, he chose a finely balanced arming sword, its craftsmanship unmistakable. Aragón would boast of it for years.

Gonzalo followed. His choice was swift—a magnificent breastplate, richly adorned. His father nodded approval. Pedro and Fernando watched with envious eyes.

At last, all eyes turned back to Lorenzo.

He studied the remaining prizes only briefly. Then, without hesitation, he reached past them all.

At the far end of the display lay a silver ring. Plain. Simple. Unadorned.

Lorenzo picked it up.

A murmur swept the hall. Even the King lifted an eyebrow.

"This," Lorenzo said, bowing.

The King inclined his head, then turned to the hall. "Your champions."

Lorenzo did not look back at the treasures. He returned to the table where Don Flavio, Don Álvaro, and his beloved Doña Teresa waited.

Teresa's breath caught as he approached her then stopped before her father.

"Don Álvaro," he said, bowing deeply. "With your leave."

Don Álvaro studied him for a long moment. Then he nodded.

Lorenzo turned to Teresa and knelt—not in secret, not in haste, but with the calm certainty of a man who knew exactly what he was doing.

"Teresa de Almazán," he said, his voice steady, "before God and our King, I offer this as a token of that which has already been given consent and blessing."

He took her hand.

"I am yours," he said simply. "As I have been. As I will remain."

He slid the silver ring onto her finger.

For a heartbeat, the hall was utterly still.

Then the applause came—measured at first, then growing, until even the stone walls seemed to echo with it.

Teresa rose, her composure finally breaking into a smile that reached her eyes. She did not speak. She did not need to. She held his hand, and that was declaration enough.

Across the hall, some nobles watched in silence. Others whispered.

And at the high table, the King smiled.

But the day was not yet complete.

When the roar of the hall had softened back into wine-soaked celebration, Lorenzo rose from his place and offered Teresa his arm. Murmurs rippled as they moved—not toward the musicians or the King's table, but toward the section where the great noble houses sat in tight, cold silence.

Conversation faltered. Laughter thinned.

Don Flavio stiffened. Even the King paused mid-gesture, his attention drawn.

What was the boy doing now?

Lorenzo stopped before the Marqués de Lara, the Conde de Mendoza, and the Conde de Guzmán. Their sons stood behind them still—Gonzalo half-turned, admiring the gleam of his new breastplate; the Pedro marked by bruises not yet faded. Anticipation hardened their expressions.

Then Lorenzo bowed.

Not a nod. Not a gesture of convenience.

A full, formal bow—deep, held, unmistakable.

Beside him, Teresa curtsayed.

The hall went still.

"My lords," Lorenzo said, his voice steady and unadorned, "your sons spoke truly. Rings do not strike back."

A flicker of confusion crossed the youths' faces. They had expected reproach. Mockery. Triumph.

"They taught me a lesson I will not forget," Lorenzo continued. "And should any of you ride to war, I would count it honor to ride beneath your banners rather than be the fool who stood against you."

Silence stretched.

He bowed again.

Teresa followed.

The words were measured. Careful. And devastating in their generosity.

The Marqués de Lara's jaw tightened. Resentment gave way to calculation. Lorenzo had not humiliated them further—he had offered them dignity, if they were wise enough to take it.

The Conde de Mendoza spoke at last. "You are... gracious in victory, young Ortiz." The words did not come easily. "Your offer is... noted."

"Perhaps," the Marqués said coolly, "there will come a time when such service is required."

Lorenzo inclined his head. "Your consideration honors me, my lords."

Nothing more was needed.

As he turned away, Don Flavio felt something warm and unfamiliar settle in his chest. This—this—was the boy he had raised. Able to navigate the social order and treachery of court with diplomacy and calm.

At the high table, the King watched in silence, his approval unmistakable.

When Lorenzo and Teresa returned to their places, the hall exhaled. Wine flowed again. Conversation resumed, though quieter now, more thoughtful.

Teresa leaned closer. "That was beautifully done," she whispered.

Lorenzo looked to the old man sitting next to him. "My grandfather taught me well."

Don Flavio nodded.

Her fingers brushed the ring on her hand. "And this?"

"So you will always have something of me," he said softly.

She smiled softly. "Mi valiente."

"Always," he said.

And for a moment—rare and unguarded—he smiled fully, as if the weight of the day had finally found somewhere safe to rest.

After the Feast

The feast carried on late into the night, but at last the candles burned low and the great hall began to empty. Voices softened. Laughter thinned. One by one, the guests took their leave.

Lorenzo walked with Teresa through the quieter corridors of the Alcázar, her father and his grandfather following at a respectful distance. Their footsteps echoed softly against stone worn smooth by centuries of passage.

At the door to the Almazán quarters, they paused.

"You should rest," Teresa said gently, lifting her hand to his face. The bruises had darkened beneath his skin, and exhaustion lay heavy in his eyes.

"In a moment." He caught her hand and held it there, warm against his cheek. "I only wished to speak with you."

She smiled. "Then speak."

He searched for words and, finding none that seemed sufficient, kissed her fingers instead.

"Before I met you," he said quietly, "I did not know how much of the world I had missed." His thumb brushed the silver ring at her hand. "You taught me to see it."

Her breath caught, but she did not interrupt.

"When I stood today," he continued, "I knew what I was standing for." His eyes held hers, steady and unshaken. "And that was enough."

Teresa's cheeks were flushed now, but her smile was radiant.

"I love you," she whispered.

"And I you," he answered simply. He pressed her hand to his lips once more.

"Sleep well, Risa."

She went inside, the door closing softly behind her.

Lorenzo remained a moment longer in the corridor, his fingers brushing the place on his arm where her ribbon had rested. Then he turned and fell into step beside his grandfather.

They walked in silence through the sleeping city until Don Flavio spoke.

"You conducted yourself well today."

"Thank you, Grandfather."

"The ring was... unexpected."

Lorenzo allowed himself a small smile. "The jeweled sword would have impressed more people."

"The jeweled sword would have been forgotten," Don Flavio said. "The ring will not. Long after the bruises fade, they will remember the man who won a tournament and chose a simple band of silver for the woman he loves."

They reached the great house at the center of Toledo. Don Flavio stopped and placed a hand on his grandson's shoulder.

"I trained you to observe," he said. "To think. To speak with care." His voice roughened. "You have become more than that."

"Grandfather—"

"I am proud of you, Lorenzo." The words sounded unused, as though they had waited years for this moment. "I am very proud of you."

He embraced him — not formally, not briefly, but fully. Lorenzo, never comfortable with such closeness, stood still and accepted it.

"Thank you," he said at last. "For everything."

Don Flavio stepped back and gave his arms a final, steadying pat. "Go to bed. You have earned your rest."

Lorenzo went inside and closed the door.

His body ached. His wounds throbbed. The city beyond the walls settled into silence.

But when he lay down at last and closed his eyes, he was smiling.

And in his dreams, there were roses, and mint, and the sound of Teresa's laughter.

Chapter VII – La mañana siguiente

Breakfast

Morning came gently to the house in Toledo.

The bells of San Lucas rang Prime, their bronze voices rolling across the city as they always had, but Lorenzo was already awake. His body protested as he rose—bruises blooming into deeper ache, ribs stiff, the stitched cut at his brow pulling slightly when he frowned—but the pain was clean, honest. The pain of having endured.

He dressed more slowly than usual. A simple linen shirt. A dark doublet, unadorned. No armor. No finery. When he descended the stairs, the house was awake but quiet, servants moving with practiced efficiency, the smell of bread and warm oil drifting from the kitchens.

Don Flavio was already seated in the small dining chamber.

As always.

But today there was a difference.

The silver cup before his grandfather held wine uncut by water.

Lorenzo noticed at once. He did not comment.

"Good morning," Don Flavio said, inclining his head.

"Good morning, Grandfather."

Lorenzo took his seat. A servant placed bread, cheese, and fruit before him, then poured wine into his cup—also unwatered. The servant's hand hesitated, just for a breath, before withdrawing.

Don Flavio waited until both were served.

"Drink," he said simply.

Lorenzo obeyed. The wine was strong, warming as it went down, settling something in his chest he had not realized was tight.

They ate in silence for a few moments, the familiar rhythm reasserting itself. Bread broken. Cups lifted. The distant sounds of the city beginning its day.

At last, Don Flavio spoke.

"You will not have lessons today."

Lorenzo looked up, surprised despite himself.

"You are injured," his grandfather continued, as if stating a point of law. "You need time to recover. When you have, your instruction will resume."

"Yes, Grandfather."

There was no praise in the words. No indulgence. Just recognition.

Don Flavio took a sip of wine. "That does not mean the day is without purpose."

Of course it didn't.

"Tell me what you observed last night."

Lorenzo did not need to think long. "The Marqués de Lara left early. He did not speak to the King again after the exchange." He paused. "The Conde de Mendoza stayed, but he watched Gonzalo more than the table. As if measuring what the day had cost him."

"Good."

"The lesser nobles spoke loudly of honor and chivalry," Lorenzo continued, "They avoided talking directly about the Torneo, to avoid offending the greater houses."

Don Flavio's mouth twitched—not quite a smile.

"And the King?"

"He said little," Lorenzo replied. "But he watched everything. Especially when you did not intervene."

That earned him a longer look.

"Yes," Don Flavio said at last. "He did."

They ate again for a moment.

"And your English?" his grandfather asked, as casually as if inquiring about the weather.

"I can read simple texts now," Lorenzo said. "The grammar remains... irregular. But I am improving. Bishop Guillermo says my pronunciation comes naturally—hardly any accent."

"You will continue," Don Flavio said. "Albion will not forgive a man who stumbles over his words."

"No, Grandfather."

Don Flavio set his cup aside and rose. "I have petitions to hear before noon. A dispute over water rights. Then the council." He paused, adjusting his robe. "You will rest today. I believe Master Valdés will be busy spending his day counting his coin."

"Yes."

Don Flavio hesitated—just slightly—then placed a hand on Lorenzo's shoulder. The weight of it was steady, deliberate.

"You conducted yourself as a man," he said. "Do not forget that."

Then he turned and left, his footsteps firm as ever.

Lorenzo remained seated for a moment longer, the warmth of the wine and the weight of the words settling into him.

When he finally rose and stepped into the garden, the morning sun was soft on the stone paths, the air cool with the scent of earth and leaves. For the first time in days, nothing was required of him.

Not training. Not study. Not vigilance.

Just recovery.

Just breathing.

And the day unfolded gently around him.

Don Álvaro

Don Álvaro found Lorenzo in the garden.

The spring sun lay warm across the stone bench where Lorenzo sat, the same bench where he had learned—slowly, awkwardly—to notice the scent of roses, the way light moved across leaves, the simple fact of being present. His body still ached. The stitches above his eye pulled faintly when he moved. But beneath the soreness there was a stillness he had never known before. Not emptiness. Not exhaustion.

Peace.

"May I join you?"

Lorenzo started to rise at once and regretted it immediately as his ribs protested.

"Don Álvaro—of course."

The older man waved him back down and seated himself beside him with the careful economy of someone who had known injuries of his own. For a moment, they sat without speaking, watching sunlight creep along the garden wall.

"Teresa is still sleeping," Don Álvaro said at last. "She was awake half the night. Reliving everything." He paused but a moment. "I do not think I have ever seen her so happy."

"I am glad," Lorenzo said.

Don Álvaro turned his head and studied him.

"Are you?" he asked quietly. "You took a lance to the head. You were unhorsed, injured, and then fought through a tournament that should have ended your future." His voice was not accusing. It was exact. "Are you truly glad? Or are you simply too tired to feel otherwise?"

Lorenzo did not answer at once.

He considered the question the way Teresa had taught him to—without strategy, without deflection.

"I am glad," he said finally. "Not because I won. Not because of the prize, or the crowd, or what it cost Gonzalo de Mendoza to lose." He touched the bandage above his eye. "I am glad because Teresa smiled. Because she ran to me across that field and did not care who was watching. Because she held me in front of the King and all of Toledo and did not apologize for it."

The words surprised him with their certainty.

"This pain will fade," he went on. "But that moment—I will remember it for the rest of my life."

Don Álvaro said nothing for a long time.

When he spoke, his voice was roughened by something held tightly in check.

"I gave my daughter to you because I believed you would be kind to her. That you would respect her. That you would protect her from what you could." He shook his head once. "I did not allow myself to hope you would love her. Not truly. Not the way I loved her mother."

"I do love her," Lorenzo said. "More than I knew was possible."

Don Álvaro reached out and took Lorenzo's shoulder in a firm, warrior's grip.

"I know," he said simply.

He released him and leaned back.

"I knew it when you stood alone in the street. I knew it when you refused to withdraw yesterday. And I knew it beyond doubt when you chose that ring."

A faint smile touched his mouth.

"You could have chosen anything. Steel. Gold. Armor that would have marked your house for generations." His eyes softened. "You chose what you could give her."

He looked out across the garden.

"Her mother would have loved you," he said. "She believed, as you do, that the heart behind a gift matters more than its worth."

"I wish I could have known her."

"She would have recognized in you immediately what I have," Don Álvaro replied. "A young man willing to stand when standing costs him everything."

He rose and placed a hand on Lorenzo's shoulder once more.

"Thank you," he said. "For defending my daughter when I could not. For loving her without calculation."

Lorenzo could not speak. He bowed his head instead.

Don Álvaro nodded, as if that were answer enough.

"Rest," he said. "And when Teresa wakes—" He paused, then smiled. "No. I will tell her myself. That I am proud of her choice."

He walked away, leaving Lorenzo alone in the garden.

The roses stirred in the light breeze. The city breathed beyond the walls. And for the first time in his life, Lorenzo felt not merely approved of—but entrusted.

Teresa

Teresa found him an hour later.

She came quietly through the garden gate, her steps light on the stone path, as if the morning itself were something fragile. Lorenzo did not turn—but he knew she was there. He always did. Some part of him had learned her presence the way one learned the sound of rain or the change of light.

"You should be resting," she said, settling beside him on the bench.

"I am resting."

She smiled faintly. "You are sitting alone in the garden, thinking."

"I am remembering."

She tilted her head. "Remembering what?"

"Everything." He took her hand, his thumb brushing the simple silver ring. "The day I first saw you. The moment you took my hand as if it were the most natural thing in the world. The day you asked me what I liked—and I realized I had never been asked that before." He lifted her fingers and kissed them gently. "The moment I understood what love was."

Her eyes shone.

"I was so afraid yesterday," she said softly. "When the lance struck your helmet—when you fell and did not move—I thought..." Her voice failed her.

"I know." He drew her close, careful but unwilling to let go, his breath hitching once at the protest of his ribs. "I am sorry I frightened you."

She pressed her forehead to his shoulder. "Do not apologize." She pulled back just enough to look at him, her smile breaking through her worry for him. "You were magnificent. You were..." She laughed quietly. "Mi valiente."

"I would do it again," he said, his voice low and steady. "Every moment. Every blow. For you."

"I know." Her fingers traced the bruises on his face with infinite care. "That is what frightens me."

She met his eyes.

"And it is what I love."

They sat together in the sunlight, her head resting against his shoulder, his arm secure around her waist. The garden breathed around them—roses heavy with scent, a bird singing somewhere in the branches above.

After a long while, she spoke again.

"Your birthday is coming," she said. "I have been trying to think of what to give you. What do you wish for?"

Lorenzo considered it.

Once, he would have had no answer. Wanting had never been part of his life. Duty had been enough. Discipline had been sufficient. Teresa had taught him otherwise.

"I already have it," he said.

She smiled at him sideways. "That is not an answer."

"It is the only one that matters." He lifted her chin gently. "I have you. I have your love. I have a future beside you. What more could I ask for?"

She laughed softly.

"You are impossible."

"Perhaps."

She kissed him, slow and careful. "And I love you."

They remained in the garden until the sun climbed high, speaking of nothing and everything, shaping a future with quiet words and shared silences. And when they finally rose and walked back toward the house, hand in hand, Lorenzo carried with him a certainty deeper than triumph.

Not glory. Not victory.

Belonging.

The King

In the royal chambers of the Alcázar, the King stood at the window, looking out toward the Vega Baja below the city walls.

The stands were gone now. The lists dismantled. The ground raked smooth. Yet he could still see it as it had been—the lone rider on the grey horse, the battered armor, the refusal to yield.

Don Sebastián waited behind him, hands folded, saying nothing.

"You have read the reports?" the King asked.

"I have, Your Majesty. Ramón was... thorough." A pause. "The city speaks of little else. Lorenzo Ortiz de Sevilla has become the talk of Toledo. They call him *the Scholar Knight*."

The King smiled faintly. "*Mi valiente*. That is what his Intended calls him. My brave one."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

The King turned from the window. "Tell me of his mother's line."

Don Sebastián hesitated. "She lives. Holds land. A noble house." He chose his words carefully. "She acknowledges no child."

"Bastardy," the King said, tasting the word. "A convenient cudgel."

He crossed to his desk, where a single parchment lay waiting.

"Tell me, Don Sebastián—have you seen blood more noble than what that boy showed yesterday?"

Don Sebastián did not answer lightly. "No, Your Majesty."

"Nor have I." The King took up the quill. "I have seen sons of ancient houses falter at lesser trials. Men of impeccable lineage who would have withdrawn, pleaded, survived—then congratulated themselves for it."

He signed the document with a decisive stroke.

"That boy took a lance to the head and returned to the saddle. He stood alone in three trials and did not bend. And when he had won—when he might have humiliated his enemies without consequence—he showed restraint."

The King looked up.

"That," he said, "is nobility."

Don Sebastián inclined his head. "Noble in deed, Your Majesty. But if his birth were ever questioned—"

The King's gaze hardened.

"I will hear no whispers of bastardy in my court," he said. "Not about that boy. Not now. Not ever."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

The King gestured toward the desk. "He could have taken steel, gold, armor worth a fortune. He chose a silver ring." A pause. "A man who chooses love when temptation is sitting before him is a man to watch."

Don Sebastián nodded. "Very good, Your Majesty."

"Keep observing him," the King said. "I told him once I expected great things of him. I begin to suspect I was thinking too small."

Don Sebastián bowed and gathered the papers. Yet as he turned to leave, his thoughts lingered on the image of a young man standing alone in the yard, bloodied and unyielding.

The King was right.

There was no blood more noble in all Castile.

And yet—

The law would not forget. The world would not forget.

And should the truth never be spoken aloud, Lorenzo Ortiz de Sevilla would carry it with him always.

Even if legitimized.

He would still be a bastard.

Nothing would change that.

Chapter VIII — El mejor día

Almazán Estate

The morning of Lorenzo's seventeenth birthday dawned warm and clear, summer sunlight spilling across the hills of Almazán like a blessing all too brief.

He woke alone.

For a moment he lay still, listening to the estate breathe around him—the distant clatter of servants beginning their work, the sound of cattle beyond the walls, the steady chirring of cicadas already awake in the grass. The stone beneath him still held the night's cool, but the air promised a warmth he had come to appreciate. It would be a good day.

He lay longer than he should have, waiting for the bells of San Lucas which would never come. They had been so much a part of his life that he was still not used to being without them.

He dressed without assistance, as he always had. A simple linen shirt, a light doublet suited to the countryside rather than court, boots worn soft from walking the estate paths. He paused only once, glancing toward the small table by the window where she had laid mint before he slept.

This is heaven, he thought.

He stepped into the corridor and followed the sound of voices.

Teresa was in the kitchen.

She stood near the hearth, sleeves rolled, hair loose around her shoulders in a way that would have scandalized Toledo and mattered not at all here. The cook was scolding her gently about honey ratios while Teresa argued back with cheerful defiance. The room smelled of fresh bread and cinnamon and summer.

She looked up and saw him.

Her face lit in that way that still startled him, as if joy were something she carried and chose to share rather than something that happened by chance.

"You were meant to stay in bed," she said. "I was bringing you breakfast."

"I came to find you," he replied. "I thought we could go for a walk."

She laughed, stepping into his arms without hesitation. He kissed her hair, breathed her in—warmth and soap and something unmistakably hers.

"Happy birthday, mi valiente."

"It already is."

They ate beneath the old apple tree in the garden, the table set small and simple. Bread still warm. Honey from the estate hives. Fruit cut by Teresa's own hands. No ceremony. No audience.

"Do you remember," she asked, as she poured wine. "The first time I asked you what you liked?"

He groaned softly. "I began listing my schedule."

"You looked terrified."

"I was."

"And now?"

He considered the question, not as an exercise, but as she had taught him to—by listening inward instead of outward.

"I like the smell of roses," he said slowly. "And mint, when you crush the leaves. I like rain on the roof but not on my skin. I like honey in wine, not in bread. I like the sky just before sunset, when it turns that deep blue that is almost purple."

She watched him closely.

"I like the way you hum when you think. I like the way you look when you fall asleep by the fire. I like sitting beside you without speaking. I like knowing where I will be tomorrow."

"And?" she prompted.

He reached for her hand.

"I like who I am with you," he said simply.

Her eyes brightened as she smiled.

"That," she said, "is a far better answer than your schedule."

They rode later—out into the hills Teresa had known since childhood. She showed him the waterfall where she had played as a girl, the flat stone overlooking the valley where she had once gone to grieve alone. He listened. He learned where her memories lived in the land.

"This is where I learned to breathe again," she said softly.

He took her hand. "Thank you, for sharing it with me."

They returned sun-warmed and tired. A bath waited. Laughter echoed off stone walls not meant for laughter at all. Dinner came quietly, by candlelight, the kind meant to linger.

And then, when the evening had settled and the world felt kind enough to trust—

She brought him a book.

Wrapped in cloth. Plain. Hand-bound. Empty.

"It is nothing grand," she said quickly. "But I wanted you to have something that was yours. Something you could fill. With what you notice. With what you feel."

He opened it.

On the first page, in her careful hand:

Mi valiente, May these pages hold the things you have learned to feel. May they keep what joy has taught you. May you never again be empty. —Risa

He closed the book without speaking and pulled her into his arms.

"It is perfect," he said finally. "You are perfect, my Princess."

She smiled into his shoulder.

That night, after she had gone to her chambers and the estate lay quiet, Lorenzo returned to his room.

He sat at the small table by the window and opened the journal.

Staring at a blank page for a long time.

Then he wrote.

And wrote. And wrote until the candle burned low.

Until he had poured his thoughts, his heart, his very soul into the paper.

When he finished, he closed the book and pressed his palm to the cover.

Tomorrow, he thought.

But today—today was complete.

He lay down smiling.

He did not know that this was the best day of his life.

Only that it was full.

And he was happy.

Chapter IX - Invierno

The Winter Road

Five months later, the world was white with snow.

Winter had come early to the borderlands, sweeping down from the mountains with bitter winds and iron skies. The fields lay buried beneath drifts of pale silence, the roads narrowed to dark scars cut through the white. Travel was slow, treacherous, and best avoided—but the year was turning, and Christmas was near.

Teresa wished to be in Toledo for Midnight Mass.

She had not knelt in San Lucas since autumn. She had not prayed beneath its vaults, nor lit a candle for her mother, nor stood before the altar where—come summer, the summer he came of age—she and Lorenzo were meant to be married. And Lorenzo, who could deny her nothing, could not bring himself to refuse.

They had spent the summer in Almazán under her father's roof, as agreed. Winter was to be passed with Don Flavio in Toledo. This journey was only meant to bridge the seasons—a final visit before the year closed.

"The roads are dangerous," Don Álvaro had said when they told him. "A few days more, and the weather may break."

"The weather will not break until February," Teresa had replied, laughing softly. "If we wait for good roads, we will wait until spring."

"Then wait," her father had said, smiling despite himself.

"Father." She had taken his hands, her voice gentler now. "I want to pray where I will be wed come summer. I want to light a candle for mother in the church. I want to hear midnight mass in the chapel where I will stand beside Lorenzo and promise my life. Please."

Don Álvaro had looked to Lorenzo then, searching his face. Lorenzo had inclined his head once. He understood the pull of sacred places, her eagerness to be in the place they would wed.

"Be careful," her father had said at last, drawing her into an embrace. "Promise me."

"Always," she had said. "You know Lorenzo. He would never let anything happen to me."

They left Almazán four days before Christmas Eve, planning to reach Toledo by nightfall on the fifth. The carriage was sound, the horses strong and well-rested, their breath steaming in the cold air. Provisions were packed carefully, gifts wrapped and tucked away beneath the bench.

Lorenzo took the reins himself, as he always did when they traveled together. It was their custom—he driving, she beside him, wrapped in furs against the cold. Sometimes they spoke; sometimes they sat in silence, watching the winter countryside pass by. Often, when the road was straight and the horses steady, Teresa would rest her head against his shoulder and sleep.

The final day dawned cold but clear. Snow lay thick across the land, unmarred save for animal tracks and the narrow road cutting its way toward Toledo. The sky was pale and washed clean, the sort of beauty that concealed danger beneath its calm.

"I love winter," Teresa said, her scarf pulled high against the cold. "Everything is so quiet. Like the world is holding its breath."

"You love every season."

"That is true." She smiled at him. "But winter with you most of all."

By nightfall, the Alcázar rose faintly on the horizon, its dark shape barely visible against the stars. Lorenzo felt the tension in his shoulders ease. They were close now—less than a day's ride. The road had held. The weather had stayed clear.

Teresa slept against his shoulder, her breathing slow and even. Lorenzo guided the horses with careful hands, his eyes never leaving the road.

He was her protector. Her guardian. Her *mi valiente*.

He would never let anything happen to her.

The sound was small.

A crack. A groan. Something shifting beneath the carriage that should not have shifted.

Lorenzo had time for half a breath—time to feel the carriage lurch, to understand that something had gone wrong—

Then the wheel tore free.

The carriage tipped violently. Wood splintered. The horses screamed. Lorenzo felt the world tilt and then fall away entirely as they struck the ground.

Pain exploded through him. Something struck his head, and the night went black.

He came back to himself in fragments.

Cold first. Then pain. Then silence so complete it rang in his ears.

He lay half-buried in the wreckage, blood blurring his vision, his chest grinding painfully with each breath. His hand throbbed, numb and burning all at once.

Then he heard her voice.

"Lorenzo."

"Risa?" His throat barely shaped the word. "Risa!"

He tore himself free of the wreckage, every movement agony. The carriage lay on its side, one wheel missing, the other spinning uselessly in the air. The horses stood nearby, shaking but alive.

And there—there in the snow—

"No. No, no, no—"

She lay tangled among broken boards and torn fabric, her dark hair spread across the white like spilled ink. He crawled to her and gathered her into his arms.

She stirred. Thank God, she stirred.

"Lorenzo?" Her voice was thin, unfocused.

"I'm here," he said desperately. "I'm here."

Her breath shuddered once. Her body went slack.

"No—Risa—please—"

"I'll get help," he said, frantic now. "Hold on. I'll get help."

He tried to stand.

The world reeled. The snow rushed up to meet him.

They found him hours before dawn.

Travelers on the road, drawn by the wreckage and the frightened horses, found a young man lying unconscious in the snow not far from a woman's body. He was alive—barely. She was not.

Lorenzo woke in Toledo.

They told him Teresa was dead. That her body lay in San Lucas. From that moment, he did not speak.

He did not answer questions. He did not weep. He did not react. He lay still, his eyes fixed on the wall, his lips moving silently as if repeating words no one could hear.

Don Flavio sat at his bedside.

The messenger had come in the night. There had been an accident. A carriage. A broken wheel. Teresa was dead. Lorenzo lived—but was badly injured, unconscious, uncertain.

Don Flavio had listened without interruption. He had asked questions. Issued orders. Summoned the surgeon and the bishop. Arranged for Teresa's body to be brought to the church and his grandson carried home.

He had built the boy from nothing. Had shaped him. Had watched him learn to feel, to love, to stand alone against impossible odds.

And now Teresa was dead.

And Lorenzo was gone.

Not dead—but gone.

"I am sorry, boy," Don Flavio whispered, sitting through the long hours of night. "I am so sorry."

Outside, the winter deepened its hold on the world.

And Lorenzo Ortiz de Sevilla did not speak again for many days.

The Funeral

San Lucas was cold.

Not the polite chill of stone and winter air, but a deep, seeping cold that settled into bone and refused to leave. The chapel smelled of wax and incense, of old stone and damp wool, and beneath it all the faint, unmistakable stillness of death.

Lorenzo stood at the front of the church and did not move.

He had not spoken since they told him she was dead. There had been no point. Words could not change anything. Words could not rewind the road, mend a broken wheel, wake her in the snow. Silence was the only honest thing left to him.

The Mass passed around him like water flowing past a stone.

Prayers were spoken. Candles were lit. Latin filled the vaulted space, beautiful and distant and utterly meaningless. He heard none of it. His gaze remained fixed on the coffin before him—plain wood, unadorned, too small to hold everything she had been.

Teresa de Almazán. Risa.

They had dressed her carefully in a wedding dress. He knew this because Don Flavio had told him they would, as if it mattered. As if anything could soften the fact that she was gone.

When the time came, he stepped forward.

Holding the journal in his hands.

The leather was warm from the chapel, soft beneath his fingers. Blank pages waited inside—pages she had given him so he could learn to notice the world, to feel it, to live inside it. He opened it once, just enough to see her handwriting on the first page.

Mi Valiente.

His vision blurred, but no tears came.

He leaned over the coffin and placed the journal gently between her hands, arranging her fingers around it as if she were only sleeping, as if she might wake and complain that he was fussing.

Then he reached for the ring.

The silver band slid easily from her finger. It was cold. So very cold. He closed his hand around it for a moment, breathing once—just once—before threading it onto the thin golden chain he had brought with him.

When he lifted the chain over his head, it felt heavier than it should have. When the ring came to rest against his chest, directly over his heart, it was like a wound reopening.

He did not kiss her goodbye.

He did not say he loved her.

Those things were finished. They belonged to a life that no longer existed.

They closed the coffin.

The sound of wood meeting wood echoed through the chapel like a final nail driven home.

Outside, the ground was frozen hard. The grave had been dug with effort and curses and tools that rang against stubborn earth. When they lowered her down, the ropes creaked softly, and Lorenzo watched until the coffin disappeared from sight.

Earth followed.

Clods struck the lid with dull finality. Each sound landed somewhere inside him, hollow and permanent.

When it was done, when the prayers ended and the mourners drifted away in small, uncertain groups, Lorenzo stayed.

The grave was marked. The ground smoothed. Footprints filled with drifting snow.

Still, he did not move.

Cold crept into his boots, up his legs, into his hands and spine. The wind cut through his cloak as if it were nothing. He welcomed it. Let it settle. Let it deepen.

Take me, he prayed silently. Take me too. Or bring her back to me O Lord.

For I cannot live without her.

He let the cold settle into his bones. If his heart simply stopped beneath the weight of it all, he would welcome it. He had no reason left to live.

It was his fault.

If they had stayed in Almazán. If they had waited for morning. If he had driven more slowly. If he had been more careful. If—if—if—

A thousand thoughts, endlessly circling, each one sharp enough to cut.

He had promised her nothing would happen.

He had failed.

A hand came down on his shoulder.

"Lorenzo."

He did not look up.

"We have to go," Don Flavio said quietly. There was no command in his voice. Only grief, heavy and worn. "You cannot stay out here."

Lorenzo did not answer.

The ring pressed cold and constant against his chest, the last thing she had ever worn, all he had left of her.

At last, Don Flavio tightened his grip—not rough, not forceful, but firm enough to remind him that he still had a body, that he was still bound to this world.

"We must go Lorenzo," his grandfather said.

Lorenzo allowed himself to be turned away from the grave.

He did not look back.

Behind him, the earth lay smooth and white, hiding everything that had mattered.

And something inside him was now buried there with her, forever.

Alone

At last, the world left him alone.

The house had been full since the accident—voices murmuring in corners, footsteps in the halls, prayers whispered whether he wanted them or not. Someone was always watching him, sitting with him, waiting for him to break, to speak, to weep.

But now the door was closed.

Lorenzo sat on the edge of the bed in the room that had once felt warm and safe and now felt hollowed out, like a shell washed empty by the sea. The candles burned low. The air smelled faintly of incense and cold stone.

And he wept. Uncontrollably.

She was gone.

His heart had been torn from his chest. And yet it was worse than that. His soul had been ripped from within him, a truth so absolute it left no room for breath.

Risa was gone, and all his prayers to bring her back went unanswered.

He remained there until the candles guttered, the room shrinking to shadows and breath.

From the chest beneath the window, he took a dagger—not to raise it, not to test its edge, only to hold it.

The he rested its point against his chest, above his heart.

He bowed his head.

"Señor," he whispered, voice hoarse and small. "Concédeme la fuerza... o la debilidad."

Grant me the strength. Or the weakness.

He waited.

No fear came. No resolve. Only stillness.

His hand did not move.

A shame deeper than pain settled into him—not that he wished to die, but that he could not follow. That even now, he remained behind. Alive.

Slowly, he lowered the dagger and set it aside.

He understood, at last, that even this road was closed to him.

Despair settled in.

His mother had been gone all his life. A name never spoken. A presence defined by absence. His father had died far away, across the sea, in service to a righteous king—dead in Albion, they said. Killed honorably. A death worthy of heaven.

Honorably.

That word stayed with him.

He had been told his father died with sword in hand. That he had stood his ground. That he had not fled. That he had met his end as a man should.

And his mother... his mother, they had told him, had joined his father not long after Lorenzo was born.

Lorenzo lowered his head, his hands clasped loosely between his knees.

They were together now.

Father and mother. Reunited in Heaven.

And Risa—

The thought came unbidden, fully formed, terrible in its clarity.

Risa would be there too.

Waiting.

His fingers closed slowly around the chain about his neck. The ring rested against his chest, cold even through the linen of his shirt. He pressed his palm over it, as if holding it there could keep her from slipping farther away.

He had loved her with everything he was.

But love, it seemed, was not enough to keep the world from taking what it wished.

She was in Heaven...

His path was clear.

His father had found his way there through war.

Through service. Through sacrifice. Through blood spilled in a foreign land.

Lorenzo lifted his head.

Albion.

The name settled into him, heavy and inevitable.

He would go where his father had gone. He would fight as his father had fought. He would give his life as his father had given his.

He would be with her again.

He could not take his own life—that was forbidden, a sin without redemption. But to die in battle, serving a righteous cause... that was permitted. That was honorable.

That was a road that would lead him to Risa.

His jaw tightened, not with anger, but with resolve.

Heaven had taken everything from him. And left him alive as punishment for failing the one person who mattered to him.

Risa waited beyond the veil, so he would go and earn the right to stand beside her again.

This world had taken her.

He would leave it behind.

Lorenzo rose slowly and crossed the room to the small window. Outside, the city lay quiet beneath the winter night, roofs silvered with frost, the towers of Toledo dark against the stars.

Somewhere beyond that horizon lay the sea.

And beyond that lay Albion.

He rested his forehead against the cold glass.

"I am coming," he whispered—not to God, not to the dead, but to the promise that had taken root inside him. "I will find my way back to you."

The words did not bring comfort.

They brought direction.

And maybe that was enough.

To be continued...

Dark age of Camelot

A Spaniard in Albion



Book I – The Hollow Name
by Losnoopy

He came to Albion to find his grave. He founded a Legend instead.

Lorenzo “Los” Ortiz de Sevilla has lost everything. Haunted by the death of his fiancée and self-exiled from his Spanish homeland, he arrives on the shores of Albion with a single purpose: to die with honor in a war that isn’t his.

But Albion has other plans.

Taken in by the Order of Paladins, Los is thrown together with two unlikely companions—a flamboyant Latin duelist and a stoic Briton of old Roman stock. Though he longs for death, his sorrow awakens in him something he does not yet understand. And when a corrupt noble marks him for death, sending him on missions meant to kill him, Los doesn’t fall.

He rises.

From haunted catacombs to giant-ridden forests and dragon-scarred ruins, his death wish is mistaken for fearlessness. Whispers of the Epic Paladin spread across Camelot.

Now Los must choose: chase the ghost of the woman he lost... or embrace the life he is cursed to live.

In the Dark Age of Camelot, the most dangerous man is the one with nothing left to lose.