



Princess of Wales

Granada, 1491



There was a scream, and then the loud roar of fire enveloping silken hangings, then a mounting crescendo of shouts of panic that spread and spread from one tent to another as the flames ran too, leaping from one silk standard to another, running up guy ropes and bursting through muslin doors. Then the horses were neighing in terror and men shouting to calm them, but the terror in their own voices made it worse, until the whole plain was alight with a thousand raging blazes, and the night swirled with smoke and rang with shouts and screams.

The little girl, starting up out of her bed in her fear, cried out in Spanish for her mother and screamed: ‘The Moors? Are the Moors coming for us?’

‘Dear God, save us, they are firing the camp!’ her nurse gasped. ‘Mother of God, they will rape me, and spit you on their sickle blades.’

‘Mother!’ cried the child, struggling from her bed. ‘Where is my mother?’

She dashed outside, her nightgown flapping at her legs, the hangings of her tent now alight and blazing up behind her in an inferno

of panic. All the thousand, thousand tents in the camp were ablaze, sparks pouring up into the dark night sky like fiery fountains, blowing like a swarm of fireflies to carry the disaster onwards.

‘Mother!’ She screamed for help.

Out of the flames came two huge, dark horses, like great, mythical beasts moving as one, jet black against the brightness of the fire. High up, higher than one could dream, the child’s mother bent down to speak to her daughter who was trembling, her head no higher than the horse’s shoulder. ‘Stay with your nurse and be a good girl,’ the woman commanded, no trace of fear in her voice. ‘Your father and I have to ride out and show ourselves.’

‘Let me come with you! Mother! I shall be burned. Let me come! The Moors will get me!’ The little girl reached her arms up to her mother.

The firelight glinted weirdly off the mother’s breastplate, off the embossed greaves of her legs, as if she were a metal woman, a woman of silver and gilt, as she leaned forwards to command. ‘If the men don’t see me, then they will desert,’ she said sternly. ‘You don’t want that.’

‘I don’t care!’ the child wailed in her panic. ‘I don’t care about anything but you! Lift me up!’

‘The army comes first,’ the woman mounted high on the black horse ruled. ‘I have to ride out.’

She turned her horse’s head from her panic-stricken daughter. ‘I will come back for you,’ she said over her shoulder. ‘Wait there. I have to do this now.’

Helpless, the child watched her mother and father ride away. ‘Madre!’ she whimpered. ‘Madre! Please!’ but the woman did not turn.

‘We will be burned alive!’ Madilla, her servant, screamed behind her. ‘Run! Run and hide!’

‘You can be quiet.’ The child rounded on her with sudden angry spite. ‘If I, the Princess of Wales herself, can be left in a burning campsite, then you, who are nothing but a Morisco anyway, can certainly endure it.’

She watched the two horses go to and fro among the burning tents. Everywhere they went the screams were stilled and some discipline returned to the terrified camp. The men formed lines, passing buckets all the way to the irrigation channel, coming out of terror back into order. Desperately, their general ran among his men, beating them with the side of his sword into a scratch battalion from those who had been fleeing only a moment before, and arrayed them in defence formation on the plain, in case the Moors had seen the pillar of fire from their dark battlements, and sallied out to attack and catch the camp in chaos. But no Moors came that night; they stayed behind the high walls of their castle and wondered what fresh devilry the mad Christians were creating in the darkness, too fearful to come out to the inferno that the Christians had made, suspecting that it must be some infidel trap.

The five-year-old child watched her mother's determination conquer fire itself, her queenly certainty douse panic, her belief in success overcome the reality of disaster and defeat. The little girl perched on one of the treasure chests, tucked her nightgown around her bare toes, and waited for the camp to settle.

When the mother rode back to her daughter she found her dry-eyed and steady.

'Catalina, are you all right?' Isabella of Spain dismounted and turned to her youngest, most precious daughter, restraining herself from pitching to her knees and hugging the little girl. Tenderness would not raise this child as a warrior for Christ, weakness must not be encouraged in a princess.

The child was as iron-spined as her mother. 'I am all right now,' she said.

'You weren't afraid?'

'Not at all.'

The woman nodded her approbation. 'That is good,' she said. 'That is what I expect of a princess of Spain.'

'And Princess of Wales,' her daughter added.



This is me, this little five-year-old girl, perching on the treasure chest with a face white as marble and blue eyes wide with fear, refusing to tremble, biting my lips so I don't cry out again. This is me, conceived in a camp by parents who are rivals as well as lovers, born in a moment snatched between battles in a winter of torrential floods, raised by a strong woman in armour, on campaign for all of my childhood, destined to fight for my place in the world, to fight for my faith against another, to fight for my word against another's: born to fight for my name for my faith and for my throne. I am Catalina, Princess of Spain, daughter of the two greatest monarchs the world has ever known: Isabella of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragon. Their names are feared from Cairo to Baghdad to Constantinople to India and beyond by all the Moors in all their many nations: Turks, Indians, Chinamen; our rivals, admirers, enemies till death. My parents' names are blessed by the Pope as the finest kings to defend the faith against the might of Islam, they are the greatest crusaders of Christendom as well as the first kings of Spain; and I am their youngest daughter, Catalina, Princess of Wales, and I will be Queen of England.

Since I was a child of three I have been betrothed in marriage to Prince Arthur, son of King Henry of England, and when I am fifteen I shall sail to his country in a beautiful ship with my standard flying at the top of the mast, and I shall be his wife and then his queen. His country is rich and fertile – filled with fountains and the sound of dripping water, ripe with warm fruits and scented with flowers; and it will be my country, I shall take care of it. All this has been arranged almost since my birth, I have always known it will be; and though I shall be sorry to leave my mother and my home, after all, I was born a princess, destined to be queen, and I know my duty.

I am a child of absolute convictions. I know that I will be Queen of England because it is God's will, and it is my mother's order. And I believe, as does everyone in my world, that God and my mother are generally of the same mind; and their will is always done.



In the morning the campsite outside Granada was a dank mess of smouldering hangings, destroyed tents, heaps of smoky forage, everything destroyed by one candle carelessly set. There could be nothing but retreat. The Spanish army had ridden out in its pride to set siege to the last great kingdom of the Moors in Spain, and had been burned to nothing. It would have to ride back again, to regroup.

‘No, we don’t retreat,’ Isabella of Spain ruled.

The generals, called to a makeshift meeting under a singed awning, batted away the flies that were swarming around the camp, feasting off the wreckage.

‘Your Majesty, we have lost for this season,’ one of the generals said gently to her. ‘It is not a matter of pride nor of willingness. We have no tents, we have no shelter, we have been destroyed by ill luck. We will have to go back and provision ourselves once more, set the siege again. Your husband –’ he nodded to the dark, handsome man who stood slightly to one side of the group, listening ‘– he knows this. We all know this. We will set the siege again, they will not defeat us. But a good general knows when he has to retreat.’

Every man nodded. Common sense dictated that nothing could be done but release the Moors of Granada from their siege for this season. The battle would keep. It had been coming for seven centuries. Each year had seen generations of Christian kings increase their lands at the cost of the Moors. Every battle had pushed back the time-honoured Moorish rule of al Andalus a

little further to the south. Another year would make no difference. The little girl, her back against a damp tent post that smelled of wet embers, watched her mother's serene expression. It never changed.

'Indeed it *is* a matter of pride,' she corrected him. 'We are fighting an enemy who understands pride better than any other. If we crawl away in our singed clothes, with our burned carpets rolled up under our arms, they will laugh themselves to al-Yanna, to their paradise. I cannot permit it. But more than all of this: it is God's will that we fight the Moors, it is God's will that we go forwards. It is not God's will that we go back. So we must go forwards.'

The child's father turned his head with a quizzical smile but he did not dissent. When the generals looked to him he made a small gesture with his hand. 'The queen is right,' he said. 'The queen is always right.'

'But we have no tents, we have no camp!'

He directed the question to her. 'What do you think?'

'We shall build one,' she decided.

'Your Majesty, we have laid waste to the countryside for miles all around. I daresay we could not sew so much as a kamiz for the Princess of Wales. There is no cloth. There is no canvas. There are no watercourses, no crops in the fields. We have broken the canals and ploughed up the crops. We have laid them waste; but it is we that are destroyed.'

'So we build in stone. I take it we have stone?'

The king turned a brief laugh into clearing his throat. 'We are surrounded by a plain of arid rocks, my love,' he said. 'One thing we do have is stone.'

'Then we will build, not a camp, but a city of stone.'

'It cannot be done!'

She turned to her husband. 'It will be done,' she said. 'It is God's will and mine.'

He nodded. 'It will be done.' He gave her a quick, private smile. 'It is my duty to see that God's will is done; and my pleasure to enforce yours.'



The army, defeated by fire, turned instead to the elements of earth and water. They toiled like slaves in the heat of the sun and the chill of the evenings. They worked the fields like peasants where they had thought they would triumphantly advance. Everyone, cavalry officers, generals, the great lords of the country, the cousins of kings, was expected to toil in the heat of the sun and lie on hard, cold ground at night. The Moors, watching from the high, impenetrable battlements of the red fort on the hill above Granada, conceded that the Christians had courage. No-one could say that they were not determined. And equally, everyone knew that they were doomed. No force could take the red fort at Granada, it had never fallen in two centuries. It was placed high on a cliff, overlooking a plain that was itself a wide, bleached bowl. It could not be surprised by a hidden attack. The cliff of red rock that towered up from the plain became imperceptibly the walls of red stone of the castle, rising high and higher; no scaling ladders could reach the top, no party could climb the sheer face.

Perhaps it could be betrayed by a traitor; but what fool could be found who would abandon the steady, serene power of the Moors, with all the known world behind them, with an undeniable faith to support them, to join the rabid madness of the Christian army whose kings owned only a few mountainous acres of Europe and who were hopelessly divided? Who would want to leave al-Yanna, the garden, which was the image of paradise itself, inside the walls of the most beautiful palace in Spain, the most beautiful palace in Europe, for the rugged anarchy of the castles and fortresses of Castile and Aragon?

Reinforcements would come for the Moors from Africa, they had kin and allies from Morocco to Senegal. Support would come for them from Baghdad, from Constantinople. Granada might look small compared with the conquests that Ferdinand and Isabella had made, but standing behind Granada was the greatest empire in the world – the empire of the Prophet, praise be his name.

But, amazingly, day after day, week after week, slowly, fighting the heat of the spring days and the coldness of the nights, the Christians did the impossible. First there was a chapel built in the round like a mosque, since the local builders could do that most quickly; then, a small house, flat-roofed inside an Arabic courtyard, for King Ferdinand, Queen Isabella and the royal family: the Infante, their precious son and heir, the three older girls, Isabel, Maria, Juana, and Catalina the baby. The queen asked for nothing more than a roof and walls, she had been at war for years, she did not expect luxury. Then there were a dozen stone hovels around them where the greatest lords reluctantly took some shelter. Then, because the queen was a hard woman, there were stables for the horses and secure stores for the gunpowder and the precious explosives for which she had pawned her own jewels to buy from Venice; then, and only then, were built barracks and kitchens, stores and halls. Then there was a little town, built in stone, where once there had been a little camp. No-one thought it could be done; but, bravo! it was done. They called it Santa Fe and Isabella had triumphed over misfortune once again. The doomed siege of Granada by the determined, foolish Christian kings would continue.



Catalina, Princess of Wales, came upon one of the great lords of the Spanish camp in whispered conference with his friends. ‘What are you doing, Don Hernando?’ she asked with all the precocious

confidence of a five-year-old who had never been far from her mother's side, whose father could deny her very little.

'Nothing, Infanta,' Hernando Perez del Pulgar said with a smile that told her that she could ask again.

'You are.'

'It's a secret.'

'I won't tell.'

'Oh! Princess! You would tell. It is such a great secret! Too big a secret for a little girl.'

'I won't! I really won't! I truly won't!' She thought. 'I promise upon Wales.'

'On Wales! On your own country?'

'On England?'

'On England? Your inheritance?'

She nodded. 'On Wales and on England, and on Spain itself.'

'Well, then. If you make such a sacred promise I will tell you. Swear that you won't tell your mother?'

She nodded, her blue eyes wide.

'We are going to get into the Alhambra. I know a gate, a little postern gate, that is not well guarded, where we can force an entry. We are going to go in, and guess what?'

She shook her head vigorously, her auburn plait swinging beneath her veil like a puppy's plump tail.

'We are going to say our prayers in their mosque. And I am going to leave an Ave Maria stabbed to the floor with my dagger. What d'you think of that?'

She was too young to realise that they were going to a certain death. She had no idea of the sentries at every gate, of the merciless rage of the Moors. Her eyes lit up in excitement. 'You are?'

'Isn't it a wonderful plan?'

'When are you going?'

'Tonight! This very night!'

'I shan't sleep till you come back!'

‘You must pray for me, and then go to sleep, and I will come myself, Princess, and tell you and your mother all about it in the morning.’

She swore she would never sleep and she lay awake, quite rigid in her little cot-bed, while her maid tossed and turned on the rug at the door. Slowly, her eyelids drooped until the lashes lay on the round cheeks, the little plump hands unclenched and Catalina slept.

But in the morning, he did not come, his horse was missing from its stall and his friends were absent. For the first time in her life, the little girl had some sense of the danger he had run – mortal danger, and for nothing but glory and to be featured in some song.

‘Where is he?’ she asked. ‘Where is Hernando?’

The silence of her maid, Madilla, warned her. ‘He will come?’ she asked, suddenly doubtful. ‘He will come back?’



Slowly, it dawns on me that perhaps he will not come back, that life is not like a ballad, where a vain hope is always triumphant and a handsome man is never cut down in his youth. But if he can fail and die, then can my father die? Can my mother die? Can I? Even I? Little Catalina, Infanta of Spain and Princess of Wales?

I kneel in the sacred circular space of my mother’s newly built chapel; but I am not praying. I am puzzling over this strange world that is suddenly opening up before me. If we are in the right – and I am sure of that; if these handsome young men are in the right – and I am sure of that – if we and our cause are under the especial hand of God, then how can we ever fail?

But if I have misunderstood something, then something is very wrong, and we are all indeed mortal, perhaps we can fail. Even handsome Hernando Perez del Pulgar and his laughing friends, even my mother and father can fail. If Hernando can die, then so too can my mother and father. And if this is so, then what safety is there in the

world? If Madre can die, like a common soldier, like a mule pulling a baggage cart, as I have seen men and mules die, then how can the world go on? How could there be a God?



Then it was time for her mother's audience for petitioners and friends, and suddenly he was there, in his best suit, his beard combed, his eyes dancing, and the whole story spilled out: how they had dressed in their Arab clothes so as to pass for townspeople in the darkness, how they had crept in through the postern gate, how they had dashed up to the mosque, how they had kneeled and gabbled an Ave Maria and stabbed the prayer into the floor of the mosque, and then, surprised by guards, they had fought their way, hand to hand, thrust and parry, blades flashing in the moonlight; back down the narrow street, out of the door that they had forced only moments earlier, and were away into the night before the full alarm had been sounded. Not a scratch on them, not a man lost. A triumph for them and a slap in the face for Granada.

It was a great joke to play on the Moors, it was the funniest thing in the world to take a Christian prayer into the very heart of their holy place. It was the most wonderful gesture to insult them. The queen was delighted, the king too, the princess and her sisters looked at their champion, Hernando Perez del Pulgar, as if he were a hero from the romances, a knight from the time of Arthur at Camelot. Catalina clapped her hands in delight at the story, and commanded that he tell it and re-tell it, over and over again. But in the back of her mind, pushed far away from thought, she remembered the chill she had felt when she had thought that he was not coming back.

Next, they waited for the reply from the Moors. It was certain to happen. They knew that their enemy would see the venture as the challenge that it was, there was bound to be a response. It was not long in coming.

The queen and her children were visiting Zubia, a village near to Granada, so Her Majesty could see the impregnable walls of the fort herself. They had ridden out with a light guard and the commander was white with horror when he came dashing up to them in the little village square and shouted that the gates of the red fort had opened and the Moors were thundering out, the full army, armed for attack. There was no time to get back to camp, the queen and the three princesses could never outrun Moorish horsemen on Arab stallions, there was nowhere to hide, there was nowhere even to make a stand.

In desperate haste Queen Isabella climbed to the flat roof of the nearest house, pulling the little princess by her hand up the crumbling stairs, her sisters running behind. 'I have to see! I have to see!' she exclaimed.

'Madre! You are hurting me!'

'Quiet, child. We have to see what they intend.'

'Are they coming for us?' the child whimpered, her little voice muffled by her own plump hand.

'They may be. I have to see.'

It was a raiding party, not the full force. They were led by their champion, a giant of a man, dark as mahogany, a glint of a smile beneath his helmet, riding a huge black horse as if he were Night riding to overwhelm them. His horse snarled like a dog at the watching guard, its teeth bared.

'Madre, who is that man?' the Princess of Wales whispered to her mother, staring from the vantage point of the flat roof of the house.

'That is the Moor called Yarfe, and I am afraid he has come for your friend, Hernando.'

'His horse looks so frightening, like it wants to bite.'

'He has cut off its lips to make it snarl at us. But we are not made fearful by such things. We are not frightened children.'

'Should we not run away?' asked the frightened child.

Her mother, watching the Moor parade, did not even hear her daughter's whisper.

‘You won’t let him hurt Hernando, will you? Madre?’

‘Hernando laid the challenge. Yarfe is answering it. We will have to fight,’ she said levelly. ‘Yarfe is a knight, a man of honour. He cannot ignore the challenge.’

‘How can he be a man of honour if he is a heretic? A Moor?’

‘They are most honourable men, Catalina, though they are unbelievers. And this Yarfe is a hero to them.’

‘What will you do? How shall we save ourselves? This man is as big as a giant.’

‘I shall pray,’ Isabella said. ‘And my champion Garallosco de la Vega will answer Yarfe for Hernando.’

As calmly as if she were in her own chapel at Cordoba, Isabella kneeled on the roof of the little house and gestured that her daughters should do the same. Sulkily, Catalina’s older sister, Juana, dropped to her knees, the princesses Isabel and Maria, her other two older sisters, followed suit. Catalina saw, peeping through her clasped hands as she kneeled in prayer, that Maria was shaking with fear, and that Isabel, in her widow’s gown, was white with terror.

‘Heavenly Father, we pray for the safety of ourselves, of our cause, and of our army.’ Queen Isabella looked up at the brilliantly blue sky. ‘We pray for the victory of Your champion, Garallosco de la Vega, at this time of his trial.’

‘Amen,’ the girls said promptly, and then followed the direction of their mother’s gaze to where the ranks of the Spanish guard were drawn up, watchful and silent.

‘If God is protecting him . . .’ Catalina started.

‘Silence,’ her mother said gently. ‘Let him do his work, let God do His, and let me do mine.’ She closed her eyes in prayer.

Catalina turned to her eldest sister and pulled at her sleeve. ‘Isabel, if God is protecting him, then how can he be in danger?’

Isabel looked down at her little sister. ‘God does not make the way smooth for those He loves,’ she said in a harsh whisper. ‘He sends hardships to try them. Those that God loves the best are those

who suffer the worst. I know that. I, who lost the only man that I will ever love. You know that. Think about Job, Catalina.'

'Then how shall we win?' the little girl demanded. 'Since God loves Madre, won't He send her the worst hardships? And so how shall we ever win?'

'Hush,' their mother said. 'Watch. Watch and pray with faith.'

Their small guard and the Moorish raiding party were drawn up opposite each other, ready for battle. Then Yarfe rode forwards on his great black charger. Something white bobbed at the ground, tied to the horse's glossy black tail. There was a gasp as the soldiers in the front rank recognised what he had. It was the Ave Maria that Hernando had left speared to the floor of the mosque. The Moor had tied it to the tail of his horse as a calculated insult, and now rode the great creature forwards and back before the Christian ranks, and smiled when he heard their roar of rage.

'Heretic,' Queen Isabella whispered. 'A man damned to hell. God strike him dead and scourge his sin.'

The queen's champion, de la Vega, turned his horse and rode towards the little house where the royal guards ringed the courtyard, the tiny olive tree, the doorway. He pulled up his horse beside the olive tree and doffed his helmet, looking up at his queen and the princesses on the roof. His dark hair was curly and sparkling with sweat from the heat, his dark eyes sparkled with anger. 'Your Grace, do I have your leave to answer his challenge?'

'Yes,' the queen said, never shrinking for a moment. 'Go with God, Garallosco de la Vega.'

'That big man will kill him,' Catalina said, pulling at her mother's long sleeve. 'Tell him he must not go. Yarfe is so much bigger. He will murder de la Vega!'

'It will be as God wills,' Isabella maintained, closing her eyes in prayer.

'Mother! Your Majesty! He is a giant. He will kill our champion.'

Her mother opened her blue eyes and looked down at her daughter

and saw her little face was flushed with distress and her eyes were filling with tears. 'It will be as God wills it,' she repeated firmly. 'You have to have faith that you are doing God's will. Sometimes you will not understand, sometimes you will doubt, but if you are doing God's will you cannot be wrong, you cannot go wrong. Remember it, Catalina. Whether we win this challenge or lose it, it makes no difference. We are soldiers of Christ. You are a soldier of Christ. If we live or die, it makes no difference. We will die in faith, that is all that matters. This battle is God's battle, He will send a victory, if not today, then tomorrow. And whichever man wins today, we do not doubt that God will win, and we will win in the end.'

'But de la Vega . . .' Catalina protested, her fat lower lip trembling.

'Perhaps God will take him to His own this afternoon,' her mother said steadily. 'We should pray for him.'

Juana made a face at her little sister, but when their mother kneeled again the two girls clasped hands for comfort. Isabel kneeled beside them, Maria beside her. All of them squinted through their closed eyelids to the plain where the bay charger of de la Vega rode out from the line of the Spaniards, and the black horse of the Moor trotted proudly before the Saracens.

The queen kept her eyes closed until she had finished her prayer, she did not even hear the roar as the two men took up their places, lowered their visors, and clasped their lances.

Catalina leapt to her feet, leaning over the low parapet so that she could see the Spanish champion. His horse thundered towards the other, racing legs a blur, the black horse came as fast from the opposite direction. The clash when the two lances smacked into solid armour could be heard on the roof of the little house, as both men were flung from their saddles by the force of the impact, the lances smashed, their breastplates buckled. It was nothing like the ritualised jousts of the court. It was a savage impact designed to break a neck or stop a heart.

'He is down! He is dead!' Catalina cried out.

‘He is stunned,’ her mother corrected her. ‘See, he is getting up.’

The Spanish knight staggered to his feet, unsteady as a drunkard from the heavy blow to his chest. The bigger man was up already, helmet and heavy breastplate cast aside, coming for him with a huge sickle sword at the ready, the light flashing off the razor-sharp edge. De la Vega drew his own great weapon. There was a tremendous crash as the swords smacked together and then the two men locked blades and struggled, each trying to force the other down. They circled clumsily, staggering under the weight of their armour and from their concussion; but there could be no doubt that the Moor was the stronger man. The watchers could see that de la Vega was yielding under the pressure. He tried to spring back and get free; but the weight of the Moor was bearing down on him and he stumbled and fell. At once the black knight was on top of him, forcing him downwards. De la Vega’s hand closed uselessly on his long sword, he could not bring it up. The Moor raised his sword to his victim’s throat, ready to give the death blow, his face a black mask of concentration, his teeth gritted. Suddenly he gave a loud cry and fell back. De la Vega rolled up, scrambled to his feet, crawling on his hands and knees like a rising dog.

The Moor was down, plucking at his breast, his great sword dropped to one side. In de la Vega’s left hand was a short stabbing dagger stained with blood, a hidden weapon used in a desperate riposte. With a super-human effort the Moor got to his feet, turned his back on the Christian and staggered towards his own ranks. ‘I am lost,’ he said to the men who ran forwards to catch him. ‘We have lost.’

At a hidden signal the great gates of the red fort opened and the soldiers started to pour out. Juana leapt to her feet. ‘Madre, we must run!’ she screamed. ‘They are coming! They are coming in their thousands!’

Isabella did not rise from her knees, even when her daughter dashed across the roof and ran down the stairs. ‘Juana, come back,’ she ordered in a voice like a whip crack. ‘Girls, you will pray.’

She rose and went to the parapet. First she looked to the marshalling of her army, saw that the officers were setting the men into formation ready for a charge as the Moorish army, terrifying in their forward rush, came pouring on. Then she glanced down to see Juana, in a frenzy of fear, peeping around the garden wall, unsure whether to run for her horse or back to her mother.

Isabella, who loved her daughter, said not another word. She returned to the other girls and kneeled with them. ‘Let us pray,’ she said and closed her eyes.



‘She didn’t even look!’ Juana repeated incredulously that night when they were in their room, washing their hands and changing their dirty clothes, Juana’s tear-streaked face finally clean. ‘There we are, in the middle of a battle, and she closes her eyes!’

‘She knew that she would do more good appealing for the intercession of God than running around crying,’ Isabel said pointedly. ‘And it gave the army better heart than anything else to see her, on her knees, in full sight of everyone.’

‘What if she had been hit by an arrow or a spear?’

‘She was not. We were not. And we won the battle. And you, Juana, behaved like a half-mad peasant. I was ashamed of you. I don’t know what gets into you. Are you mad or just wicked?’

‘Oh, who cares what you think, you stupid widow?’

6th January 1492

Day by day the heart went out of the Moors. The Queen’s Skirmish turned out to be their last battle. Their champion was dead, their city encircled, they were starving in the land that their fathers had

made fertile. Worse, the promised support from Africa had failed them, the Turks had sworn friendship but the janissaries did not come, their king had lost his nerve, his son was a hostage with the Christians, and before them were the Princes of Spain, Isabella and Ferdinand, with all the power of Christendom behind them, with a holy war declared and a Christian crusade gathering pace with the scent of success. Within a few days of the meeting of the champions, Boabdil, the King of Granada, had agreed terms of peace, and a few days after, in the ceremony planned with all the grace that was typical of the Moors of Spain, he came down on foot to the iron gates of the city with the keys to the Alhambra Palace on a silken pillow and handed them over to the King and Queen of Spain in a complete surrender.

Granada, the red fort that stood above the city to guard it, and the gorgeous palace which was hidden inside the walls – the Alhambra – were given to Ferdinand and to Isabella.

Dressed in the gorgeous silks of their defeated enemy, turbaned, slippered, glorious as caliphs, the Spanish royal family, glittering with the spoils of Spain, took Granada. That afternoon Catalina, the Princess of Wales, walked with her parents up the winding, steep path through the shade of tall trees, to the most beautiful palace in Europe, slept that night in the brilliantly tiled harem and woke to the sound of rippling water in marble fountains, and thought herself a Moorish princess born to luxury and beauty, as well as a Princess of England.



And this is my life, from this day of victory. I had been born as a child of the camp, following the army from siege to battle, seeing things that perhaps no child should see, facing adult fears every day. I had marched past the bodies of dead soldiers rotting in the spring heat because there was no time to bury them, I had ridden behind mules whipped into

staggering bloodstained corpses, pulling my father's guns through the high passes of the Sierra. I saw my mother slap a man's face for weeping with exhaustion. I heard children of my own age crying for their parents burned at the stake for heresy; but at this moment, when we dressed ourselves in embroidered silk and walked into the red fort of Granada and through the gates to the white pearl that is the Alhambra Palace, at this moment I became a princess for the first time.

I became a girl raised in the most beautiful palace in Christendom, protected by an impregnable fort, blessed by God among all others, I became a girl of immense, unshakeable confidence in the God that had brought us to victory, and in my destiny as His most favourite child and my mother's most favourite daughter.

Alhambra proved to me, once and for all, that I was uniquely favoured by God, as my mother had been favoured by God. I was his chosen child, raised in the most beautiful palace in Christendom, and destined for the highest things.



The Spanish family with their officers ahead and the royal guard behind, glorious as Sultans, entered the fort through the enormous square tower known as the Justice Gate. As the shadow of the first arch of the tower fell on Isabella's upturned face the trumpeters played a great shout of defiance, like Joshua before the walls of Jericho, as if they would frighten away the lingering devils of the infidel. At once there was an echo to the blast of sound, a shuddering sigh, from everyone gathered inside the gateway, pressed back against the golden walls, the women half-veiled in their robes, the men standing tall and proud and silent, watching, to see what the conquerors would do next. Catalina looked above the sea of heads and saw the flowing shapes of Arabic script engraved on the gleaming walls.

'What does that say?' she demanded of Madilla, her nursemaid.

Madilla squinted upwards. ‘I don’t know,’ she said crossly. She always denied her Moorish roots. She always tried to pretend that she knew nothing of the Moors or their lives though she had been born and bred a Moor herself and only converted – according to Juana – for convenience.

‘Tell us, or we’ll pinch you,’ Juana offered sweetly.

The young woman scowled at the two sisters. ‘It says: “May God allow the justice of Islam to prevail within”’

Catalina hesitated for a moment, hearing the proud ring of certainty, a determination to match her own mother’s voice.

‘Well, He hasn’t,’ Juana said smartly. ‘Allah has deserted the Alhambra and Isabella has arrived. And if you Moors knew Isabella like we do, you would know that the greatest power is coming in and the lesser power going out.’

‘God save the queen,’ Madilla replied quickly. ‘I know Queen Isabella well enough.’

As she spoke the great doors before them, black wood studded with black nails, swung open on their black hammered hinges, and with another blast of trumpets the king and queen strode into the inner courtyard.

Like dancers rehearsed till they were step-perfect, the Spanish guard peeled off to right and left inside the town walls, checking that the place was safe, and no despairing soldiers were preparing a last ambush. The great fort of the Alcazaba, built like the prow of a ship, jutting out over the plain of Granada, was to their left, and the men poured into it, running across the parade square, ringing the walls, running up and down the towers. Finally, Isabella the queen looked up to the sky, shaded her eyes with her hand clinking with Moorish gold bracelets, and laughed aloud to see the sacred banner of St James and the silver cross of the crusade flying where the crescent had been.

Then she turned to see the domestic servants of the palace slowly approaching, their heads bowed. They were led by the Grand Vizier,

his height emphasised by his flowing robes, his piercing black eyes meeting hers, scanning King Ferdinand at her side, and the royal family behind them: the prince and the four princesses. The king and the prince were dressed as richly as sultans, wearing rich, embroidered tunics over their trousers, the queen and the princesses were wearing the traditional kamiz tunics made from the finest silks, over white linen trousers, with veils falling from their heads held back by filets of gold.

‘Your Royal Highnesses, it is my honour and duty to welcome you to the Alhambra Palace,’ the Grand Vizier said, as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world to hand over the most beautiful palace in Christendom to armed invaders.

The queen and her husband exchanged one brief glance. ‘You can take us in,’ she said.

The Grand Vizier bowed and led the way. The queen glanced back at her children. ‘Come along, girls,’ she said and went ahead of them, through the gardens surrounding the palace, down some steps and into the discreet doorway.

‘This is the main entrance?’ She hesitated before the small door set in the unmarked wall.

The man bowed. ‘Your Highness, it is.’

Isabella said nothing but Catalina saw her raise her eyebrows as if she did not think much of it, and then they all went inside.



But the little doorway is like a keyhole to a treasure chest of boxes, the one opening out from another. The man leads us through them like a slave opening doors to a treasury. Their very names are a poem: the Golden Chamber, the Courtyard of the Myrtles, the Hall of the Ambassadors, the Courtyard of the Lions, or the Hall of the Two Sisters. It will take us weeks to find our way from one exquisitely tiled room to another. It will take us months to stop marvelling at the pleasure of

the sound of water running down the marble gulleys in the rooms, flowing to a white marble fountain that always spills over with the cleanest, freshest water of the mountains. And I will never tire of looking through the white stucco tracery to the view of the plain beyond, the mountains, the blue sky and golden hills. Every window is like a frame for a picture, they are designed to make you stop, look and marvel. Every window frame is like white-work embroidery – the stucco is so fine, so delicate, it is like sugar-work by confectioners, not like anything real.

We move into the harem as the easiest and most convenient rooms for my three sisters and me, and the harem servants light the braziers in the cool evenings, and scatter the scented herbs as if we were the sultanas who lived secluded behind the screens for so long. We have always worn Moorish dress at home and sometimes at great state occasions so still there is the whisper of silks and the slap of slippers on marble floors, as if nothing has changed. Now, we study where the slave girls read, we walk in the gardens that were planted to delight the favourites of the sultan. We eat their fruits, we love the taste of their sherbets, we tie their flowers into garlands for our own heads, and we run down their allées where the heavy scent of roses and honeysuckle is sweet in the cool of the morning.

We bathe in the hammam, standing stock still while the servants lather us all over with a rich soap that smells of flowers. Then they pour golden ewer after golden ewer of hot water over us, splashing from head to toe, to wash us clean. We are soothed with rose oil, wrapped in fine sheets and lie, half-drunk with sensual pleasure, on the warm marble table that dominates the entire room, under the golden ceiling where the star-shaped openings admit dazzling rays of sunlight into the shadowy peace of the place. One girl manicures our toes while another works on our hands, shaping the nails and painting delicate patterns of henna. We let the old woman pluck our eyebrows, paint our eyelashes. We are served as if we are sultanas, with all the riches of Spain and all the luxury of the East, and we surrender utterly to

the delight of the palace. It captivates us, we swoon into submission; the so-called victors.

Even Isabel, grieving for the loss of her husband, starts to smile again. Even Juana, who is usually so moody and so sulky, is at peace. And I become the pet of the court, the favourite of the gardeners who let me pick my own peaches from the trees, the darling of the harem where I am taught to play and dance and sing, and the favourite of the kitchen where they let me watch them preparing the sweet pastries and dishes of honey and almonds of Arabia.

My father meets with foreign emissaries in the Hall of the Ambassadors, he takes them to the bath house for talks, like any leisurely sultan. My mother sits cross-legged on the throne of the Nasrids who have ruled here for generations, her bare feet in soft leather slippers, the drapery of her kamiz falling around her. She listens to the emissaries of the Pope himself, in a chamber that is walled with coloured tiles and dancing with pagan light. It feels like home to her, she was raised in the Alcazar in Seville, another Moorish palace. We walk in their gardens, we bathe in their hammam, we step into their scented leather slippers and we live a life that is more refined and more luxurious than they could dream of in Paris or London or Rome. We live graciously. We live, as we have always aspired to do, like Moors. Our fellow Christians herd goats in the mountains, pray at roadside cairns to the Madonna, are terrified by superstition and lousy with disease, live dirty and die young. We learn from Moslem scholars, we are attended by their doctors, study the stars in the sky which they have named, count with their numbers which start at the magical zero, eat of their sweetest fruits and delight in the waters which run through their aqueducts. Their architecture pleases us, at every turn of every corner we know that we are living inside beauty. Their power now keeps us safe; the Alcazar is, indeed, invulnerable to attack once more. We learn their poetry, we laugh at their games, we delight in their gardens, in their fruits, we bathe in the waters they have made flow. We are the victors but they have taught us how to rule. Sometimes

I think that we are the barbarians, like those who came after the Romans or the Greeks, who could invade the palaces and capture the aqueducts, and then sit like monkeys on a throne, playing with beauty but not understanding it.

We do not change our faith, at least. Every palace servant has to give lip service to the beliefs of the One True Church. The horns of the mosque are silenced, there is to be no call to prayer in my mother's hearing. And anyone who disagrees can either leave for Africa at once, convert at once, or face the fires of the Inquisition. We do not soften under the spoils of war, we never forget that we are victors and that we won our victory by force of arms and by the will of God. We made a solemn promise to poor King Boabdil, that his people, the Moslems, should be as safe under our rule as the Christians were safe under his. We promise the convivencia – a way of living together – and they believe that we will make a Spain where anyone, Moor or Christian or Jew, can live quietly and with self-respect since all of us are 'People of the Book'. Their mistake is that they meant that truce, and they trusted that truce, and we – as it turns out – do not.

We betray our word in three months, expelling the Jews and threatening the Moslems. Everyone must convert to the True Faith and then, if there is any shadow of doubt, or any suspicion against them, their faith will be tested by the Holy Inquisition. It is the only way to make one nation: through one faith. It is the only way to make one people out of the great varied diversity which had been al Andalus. My mother builds a chapel in the council chamber and where it had once said 'Enter and ask. Do not be afraid to seek justice for here you will find it', in the beautiful shapes of Arabic, she prays to a sterner, more intolerant God than Allah; and no-one comes for justice any more.

But nothing can change the nature of the palace. Not even the stamp of our soldiers' feet on the marble floors can shake the centuries-old sense of peace. I make Madilla teach me what the flowing inscriptions mean in every room, and my favourite is not the promises of justice, but the words written in the Courtyard of the Two Sisters which says:

'Have you ever seen such a beautiful garden?' and then answers itself: 'We have never seen a garden with greater abundance of fruit, nor sweeter, nor more perfumed.'

It is not truly a palace, not even as those we had known at Cordoba or Toledo. It is not a castle, nor a fort. It was built first and foremost as a garden with rooms of exquisite luxury so that one could live outside. It is a series of courtyards designed for flowers and people alike. It is a dream of beauty: walls, tiles, pillars melting into flowers, climbers, fruit and herbs. The Moors believe that a garden is a paradise on earth, and they have spent fortunes over the centuries to make this 'al-Yanna': the word that means garden, secret place, and paradise.

I know that I love it. Even as a little child I know that this is an exceptional place; that I will never find anywhere more lovely. And even as a child I know that I cannot stay here. It is God's will and my mother's will that I must leave al-Yanna, my secret place, my garden, my paradise. It is to be my destiny that I should find the most beautiful place in all the world when I am just six years old, and then leave it when I am fifteen; as homesick as Boabdil, as if happiness and peace for me will only ever be short-lived.

