

The Book of Seven Seeds
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By Jackie Harsha



Prologue:

Writing a prologue is never an easy task. Great writers in history have debated the objectives of a prologue, but the true essence of a prologue is up to the author just as the rest of their work. I knew that I wanted to write a story that had everything from beheadings to romance, sheep to giants, and medieval times to current. However, that creates a dilemma. How do you combine so many strings of history into a cohesive piece of work and still maintain some remanent of theme? How do I write commentary over political themes that trapse through history while still being entertaining? Well, as I thought of these dilemmas, another of my writing friends knocked on my door. He told me that the purpose of a prologue is both to preface to the reader what is going to happen, while still leaving a mystery about the specifics. He also said that one should not use the first person or insert oneself into a story, and that great writers always use poetry. I completely agreed with this premise and decided to do exactly as he said!

The journey you are about to take through Spanish history is filled with an assortment of papers stuffed in walls, lost maps, knife marketing schemes, pomegranate trees, gypsies and more. This modern generation has a hard time focusing on long stories, so each short story can be read independently of the others. However, if you keep scrolling through them, you may notice some common elements in each. For the test portion at the end of this compilation, you may wish to remember important numbers, what different agricultural products represent throughout, and the names of all the sheep.



ONE BOOK, TWO BOOK

THREE BOOK, SEVEN

ALL MEN DREAM OF REACHING HEAVEN

THE END IS A NEW ERA

THE MIDDLE IS THE END

THE BEGINNING IS A START, AND THE FUTURE OF THE DEAD

THE REALITY IS DREAMS

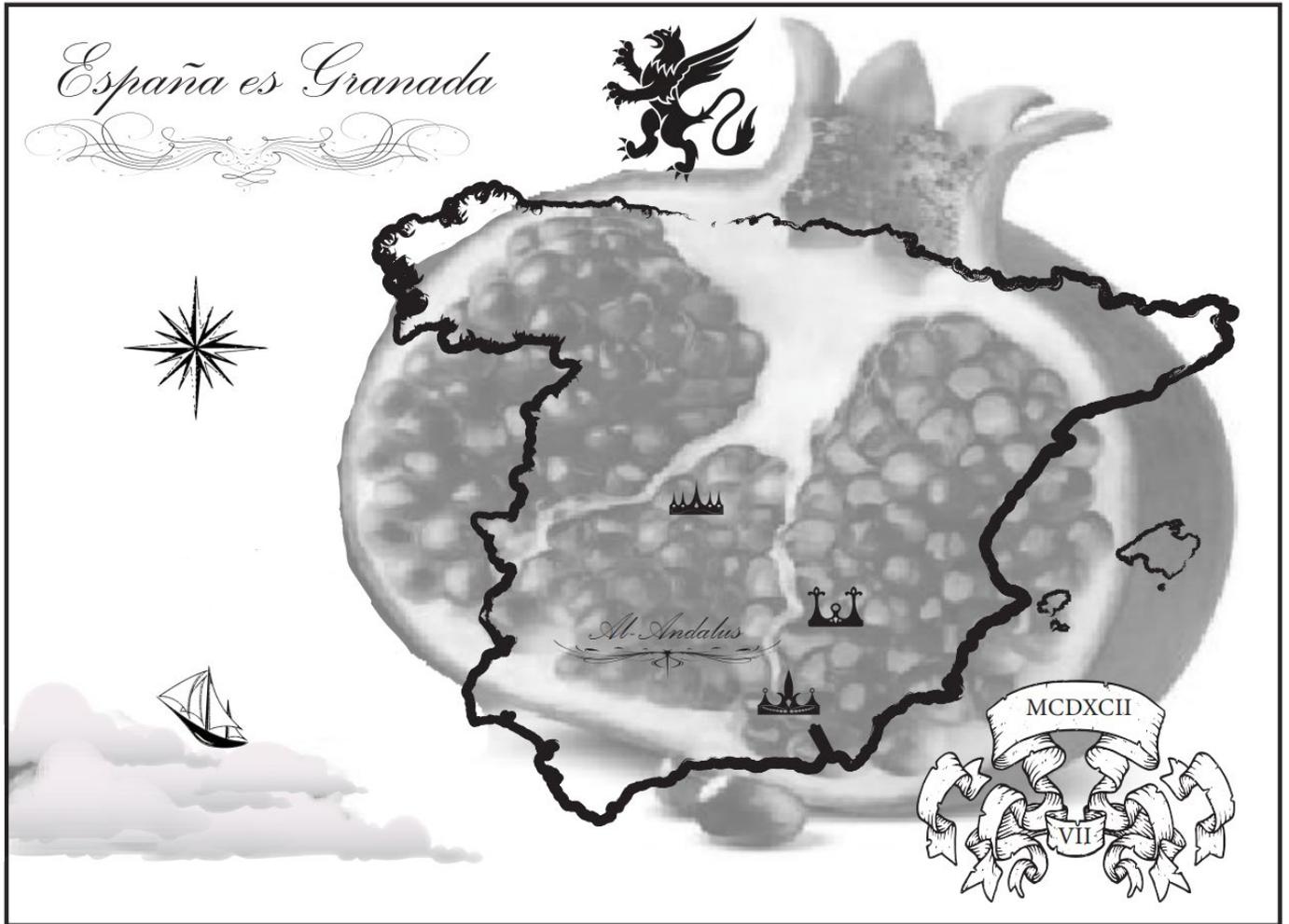
THE NIGHTMARE LIVES ON

CONQUERING CONTINUES AS SURE AS THE DAWN

POEMS DON'T MAKE A BOOK

A BOOK IS NOT A NOVEL

A THESIS IS A STUDENTS WORK, BUT NOT OF ONE WHO GROVELS





Story 1: Paradise is Having a Garden

Cordoba, Spain 957

María always heard about how it used to be a small town by the river, but that was a time she could not imagine. She smiled to herself as she walked to the market as she did every Friday with her in-laws. She had worried that since she was a Christian that her newfound Muslim family would not accept her, but none of them seemed to care when they were out in the town. María had a steep learning curve when it came to cooking for her husband, but besides the recipe changes, her new family treated her like another wife. Of course, the sizeable dowry her father had given was sure to win peace on all sides. Though her mother says she would have preferred a Christian man for her, María's father insisted that Islam was the past, present and future of Cordoba. It was time for their family to get with the times, and let their grandchildren have every opportunity possible. María had grown up helping in the forge with her brothers, always bringing more water or polishing a blade. Her great-grandfather had moved them there from Toledo, where they had been forging for generations. It was this skill that allowed them to keep their wealth in Cordoba, as everyone always wants good steel. Her dowry had numerous top-of-the-line knives, both decorative and practical. As her mother always said, "A rusty kitchen knife is how you get too much iron in your meal. From the knife, and the blood when you nick yourself". The new kitchen knives won over every new sister-in-law that María had.



Walking to the market was the big outing every week. A good wife did not go out without a good number of female friends, relatives and closely related male family. This week, one of the uncles came with them, a necessary escort. Before she was married, María would go out by herself to the well numerous times throughout the day, but that was a necessary sacrifice to remain virtuous for her new husband. She also used to wear necklaces, which she now wore under her veil and layers of clothing. The jewels on the outside of clothing would imply that she was a concubine instead of a wife. There were many rules that she had grown up knowing the wealthy Muslims insisted upon, and she was happy to be included in the group.

María gazed upon the blooming patios and hanging gardens along the walls of the neighborhood. Everyone took pride in who could keep the best gardens. Paradise is keeping a garden, after all. María made her purchases with the other wives, all arguing over who had the best method of picking a good pomegranate.

“The best way is squeeze them between two fingers and check the plumpness.” one wife stated.

“No, no, you must find the one that is closest to half a forearm link.” another proclaimed.

“How do you measure with your forearm when we all have different forearm links?” the first wife argued.

The second wife laughed at the first and said, “Well, I suppose only I can find the perfect one.

Oh well.”



“I always cut one open and see what the inside looks like.” María said.

Everyone else stopped their discussion to look at her.

“You do realize that the point is to figure out what is going on with the inside of the fruit without opening it up?” one of the wives told María gently.

“Yes, but if I am buying the fruit to eat, I will probably eat it that day. Why speculate on what is going on, on the inside when you can answer the question for certain? If it is rotten, the seller will want to throw it away anyways, and if it is good I will buy it. Problem solved.” María said confidently.

The other wives looked between each other in some silent conversation, but finally her mother-in-law said, “I hope that works well for you dearest. Lets move on to the flour.”

María stayed in the back, wondering why her answer had been wrong. Maybe other people like the mystery better than the knowledge? She preferred the answer, but these women seemed to hang on their own wisdom fiercely. Her thoughts were interrupted when a man grabbed her arm.

“You know the real perfect way to have a perfect pomegranate every time?” The man was not much to look at, though María knew she should not be talking to him anyways. He was not her family and did not smell great either.



“Sir, I really must be getting back to my party...” the man interrupted her to say, “The best way is to grow your own tree and have as many pomegranates as you want to pick from. I sell the best pomegranate trees for the average patio.”

María thought about it. She did love adding to her new patio. She decided to speak to her husband about it later. “Thank you, sir, I will consider it. Will you be at the market with your trees next Friday?”

“Yes ma’am, I will. I’ll keep a pretty one for you. Pretty women deserve pretty trees in their patio,” the man said walking back to his booth.

María caught up with her family. It was not difficult when you could hear her mother-in-law preaching to the young women in their group from Morrocco.

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María’s husband was a very successful man. He was only ten years her senior but had already worked his way into being one of the main construction managers for Medina Azahara. The progress they had made in the last twenty years had been astonishing, and they did not stop adding to the magnificent grounds. He had brought María the week before their wedding with her father and one of his sisters. She had seen it from a distance, but walking among the sparkling white walls and curving red arches was a sight to behold. She had asked him when they were going to be done with building, and he had smiled at her in the way that made her blush.



He elaborated, “That’s the best part my love, as long as the Caliphate is seated here, I presume we will keep making it bigger. If I had to guess, the day we stop building would be the day the Caliphate is over. Maybe Cordoba will be bigger than Istanbul or Jerusalem.”

Her father had been impressed and told their neighbors about the inside of the palace grounds every chance he could leading up to the wedding. María had asked her husband after the wedding why he had been interested in her. She was merely a middle-class Christian, and he was going to be an upper-class architect for the richest family in Al-Andalus. He said that he had seen her walking to and from the well for years, and always admired how she kept the smile from when she was a child. Apparently, she would always stop to whistle at the birds in cages and chasing the butterflies, sloshing water as she went. María had never noticed that she had done those things until she missed her independent walks to and from the wells. Now she had to take at least two other people with her, and she did not know them well enough to frolic how she used too. Besides, frolicking like that was for a girl and she was a wife now. She decided to save those smiles for her husband, who gave her plenty in return.

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María had been married for six months when she discovered that she was with child. It was a Friday, and her mother-in-law and sisters-in-law stopped by to pick her up on their way to the market. However, María had been sick since she woke up. She told them as much and they all rushed inside to look her over. Her mother-in-law had placed a hand over María’s womb



knowingly and asked her when her last monthly visit had been. When she told them how long it had been, all of the wives danced around her exclaiming how excited they were, which tea she should drink, that her baby would be born in the spring, how they had preparations for a party and a lot of other things that María did not catch. María was shocked, but very pleased with this news. She knew her husband would be overjoyed too. She was also a little bit wistful, as she thought about how her children would not be baptized like she was, never have their first communion, or pray with her in the mornings. She had known when she married a Muslim that her children would practice like their father, but suddenly María did not know if she was prepared to raise her children in a different faith. All of these emotions flashed before her, and her mother-in-law looked at her as if reading her mind.

“All will be well, child. Being a mother is something you practice, not that you perfect. I would not have let you marry my son if I did not think you could keep him and some children alive. Plus, we have all seen how well that tree you dote after is doing. It probably won’t even have fruit for a few years, but still you preen it like it’s a bird. If you take half as good care of this baby as you do that tree, you’ll do just fine,” she said in a comforting tone.

All the other wives nodded in agreement, many with children of their own to attest to this wisdom.

María looked back at her patio, with the young pomegranate tree reaching confidently towards the sky. She thought to herself, this is a great time to raise a family in Cordoba. She had



a beautiful home, a husband that loved her, and this peculiar new family to drag her around town.

She did not feel sick anymore and grabbed her basket to follow the party to the market.



Story 2: Pomegranate Seeds

Cordoba, Spain 857

Muhammad couldn't believe what he was hearing. Everyone in Cordoba was in an uproar about the audacity the Christians had. He had heard the rumors of the protesting, but it did not make any sense. Speaking against the Prophet was strictly prohibited. It was blasphemy. The Koran said to tolerate other peoples of the book, and Cordoba was no exception. They let the Jews do their Jewish things and they let the Christians do their Christian things, even if they were odd. It did not seem like the Christians ever prayed, not like the Muslims did. They just seemed to pray whenever they felt like it and did not if they did not want to. Why would God give you the power of prayer if you do not choose to exercise it? Regardless, these Christians were becoming a problem. They were speaking in the streets against the law and expecting everyone to go along with it! Well, they were warned by the police, and they chose to break the law again. Now, everyone gets to enjoy a public execution. Muhammad's family had always been against executions, but such disrespect to the Prophet was asking for it.

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Mother was stern when she said, "No, we will not go together to the execution. Think about what the crowd will be like? Whenever blood is spilled everyone loses their minds. Plus, Fatima pointed out that we could be giving in to what these Christians want. Apparently, they have odd



ideas about Martyrs and their Saints. Perhaps they think dying in front of us will please their God.”

Father commented, “My dear, the Christians worship the same God of Abraham as us. They deserve the benefit of the doubt. They are a minority in this area.”

She stopped stirring the pot and turned to her husband as she said, “They do not worship *our* God, even if they claim lineage in the Koran. I say we should move them away from here anyways if they are going to be problematic. Maybe we could build their own town down the river?”

“My dear, they were here first anyways. We took this city from them. They built churches here before the first stones of the mosque were laid. Plus, we are friends with some Christians.”

Father started pacing, not enjoying his wife’s stares as she crossed her arms.

“Which Christians,” she said crisply, “are you friends with?”

Father knew he was in for a lecture but took a stance across from her and placed his hands on his hips. “That new blacksmith down the street from Toledo is a Christian. He makes a very fine blade. In fact, he gave me a very nice discount on our kitchen knives, buy six knives and get the seventh free! That is a good businessman right there. Plus, he says that he will sharpen those knives for free for the first six months and has a list of all the knives he’s sold and the date that they are sold.”



Mother pursed her lips as she studied her moron of a husband. “Just because you bought knives from some Christian, does not make you friends with a Christian. He’s probably giving better discounts to his Christian comrades just so they can be ready to stab us all in the backs.”

Father broke his stance, exasperated with the conversation. “What about that one girl that brings you water in the mornings. She’s a Christian right?”

“No, she is Jewish, and she is a child. They turn out different as they age.”

“Okay, okay, there’s also a Christian on the contracting list at work. He’s a sheep farmer and donates wool to the orphanage.”

“Again, knowing someone from work does not make you friends. Plus, sheep farmers are inherently trustworthy even if they are Christians. They spend so much time in nature, they have to be good people.”

“What about that carpenter that fixed the kitchen cabinets? He was a Christian.”

Mother pursed her lips as she said, “Their Jesus was a carpenter too, should we call him back to check the doorframes? Why are you defending them? Do you think that they should be speaking against the Prophet? We named our son Muhammad, and they are blaspheming with the same name.”



Father stopped and sat down again. “No, you’re right. They should not have said those things and those Christians should face the consequences for their actions. I just hope this does not turn into a thing where we treat all the Christians differently for the actions of a few.”

Mother went back to stirring the stew she was cooking, “I do not want you buying knives from that Christian again. He has his own people to support him and his marketing schemes.”

Father pinched the bridge of his nose but nodded his agreement.

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Muhammad was not supposed to hear his parents the day before the execution. He was walking past a window when he crouched below to spy on the conversation. He conveniently had a lie about where he was going to be during the execution. He told them that he had to study with Amir for school the next day. His parents seemed surprised that he was studying at all so they did not pry into the situation. The next day, he did indeed meet Amir but they snuck off to the execution instead. It was almost like a festival, with street vendors roasting nuts and other with oranges and pomegranates. Nothing helps the excitement in the stomach like street food.

Muhammad had just enough change to buy a pomegranate with Amir. They tore into the fruit, with the juices staining their hands. Amir squished some of the seeds and smeared the red juice along his neck. “Look Muhammad, I’m one of the Christians!” Amir stuck out his tongue and rolled his eyes to the back of his head, pretending to be very dramatically dead. Muhammad laughed but brushed the juice off his friend’s neck. “Don’t say that too loud, someone will think



you're being disrespectful." "Disrespectful?" Amir snorted, "Those Christians were the ones being disrespectful. This is the punishment they are owed. Do you want a mutiny of Christians in Cordoba?" Muhammad sighed and said, "No, but stop with the joking." Amir wiped the juice off his hands but stuck out his tongue and whispered, "Fun hater" under his breath.

The Christians were brought out one by one. Some of them prayed their strange prayers, while others yelled at the crowd that they were all going to hell. The audience laughed and jeered until the officials told them to be somber for the execution part. Muhammad had never seen an execution before. He thought it was going to be fun, but nothing prepared him for the audible thump on the head as it fell into the basket in front of the execution block. The lifeless bodies had to be dragged away one by one and tossed to the side of the stage. The other Christians cried out as their comrades who were so vocal before ceased to breath. A woman was crying in the audience next to Muhammad, and he did his best to not look at her. An older man stepped up to the execution block. They offered him a blindfold, but he refused, before asking if he could say his last words. Because of his calm demeanor, the judge allowed it but told him to make it quick. "Heaven beckons the hearts of men, and those who follow the teachings of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ are openly given salvation and an eternity in paradise. These false walls that you have built are not mimicking paradise, only your human vision of selfishness. It will not be forever that you are allowed to stand on the backs of others, for one day you will be brought before The Judge. The difference for Christians is, that we will be forgiven our transgression as



we allow Jesus to cleanse us of our sins. I hope one day I will see you all in this paradise that I am about to enter, as the gates are open to all.”

The audience was quiet as he bent slowly to his knees, arthritis obviously painning him as he knelt. A man next to Muhammad whispered, to no one in particular, “We could all learn from the faith this man keeps in his God.”

Muhammad felt sick to his stomach as his watched the executioner lift his sword, and he look away as he heard the *woosh* of the blade. The woman next to him had stopped crying to listen to the man, and he noticed a cross with beads in her hands as she tearfully look up at the man second away from death. The whole audience winced as the blade met its mark, though this time it was not a clean cut. The executioner quickly repeated his stance, to separate the head on his second swipe. Another man commented behind him to his wife, “It is not the loud ones that we should worry about. It is the quiet ones that seem to appeal to the other ones like them. The Christians are going to remember this day for a long time, and I can only imagine what would happen if their numbers grew above our own.”

The wife was quick with a response as she said, “The Christians witnessing this should know to value their necks more than their pride. It is hard to pray when your throat is severed. They would do well to stay in their Churches and let us stay in our Mosques.”

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Muhammad went back to his home, and his mother found him puking pomegranate seeds in a bucket. “I knew when you said you were studying that you were lying. It seems like you figured out why your father and I did not attend today's judicial process.”

Muhammad glared at his mother, but only saw the newly lifeless heads from the execution every time he blinked. His mother grabbed him by the arm to come sit with her in their garden. The fresh air settled his stomach, and he stared at the serene fruit trees that had grown since before he was born. His mother extended her hand, offering something to him. In it, she placed seven pomegranate seeds. He looked up at her as she said, “I want us to plant these here. Maybe they will help your great-great grandchildren remember what happened here as a warning about what happens when you let Christians speak out in public.”

Muhammad obeyed and found a sunny spot in the corner of the garden. He dug a small hole and covered the seeds gently with the soil. He hoped that at least one of the seeds was strong enough to withstand the hot summer, so maybe something beautiful could come out of this week after all.



Story 3: Peace and Conquering

Granada, Spain 1492

Ġarnāta was beautiful all year long, but the winter always felt crisp in the mornings. David had seen frost in the mountains the week before as he went with his cousin and brother looking for a missing herd of sheep. By the time they had found them all huddled together by a waterfall, it was too dark to start the walk back to the city. However, that night, his teenaged-cousin Eli shook him awake, and they all watched what appeared to be stars falling out of the sky beyond the city. The stars were darker, and they realized soon that they were not falling stars at all, but a massive collection of torches and fire creeping closer to the city. They watched with horror and awe as the stars kept falling in orderly lines over the horizon, knowing that each torch carried could be for multiple people or horses. David was not surprised. He had never seen the Christian Armies come into the city from this vantage point in the mountains, but the 10-year-old had seen the invasions every year of his life. His parents use to joke that he was born so that each birthday they could remember how many years the Christians had tried to take the city, and how many years they had retreated during the winter back to the North. David had heard his parents saying that the taxes kept increasing, and their Rabi had come to visit often to discuss “adult matters” with his dad. David was always shooed to another room, or told to go play outside, but he knew that something was happening.



It was too dark to start the long walk back, but the boys couldn't help watching the army march closer, and seeming bigger, late into the night. When they roused from their fitful dosing in the first streams of dawn, they silently packed their sleeping rolls to start their own march. The silence was only broken by Eli, being the oldest and wisest of the bunch, trying to reassure the group.

“We knew after Malaga fell that it was only us left. The Christians saved the best for last for a reason, because there is no way they can get through the mighty walls of the Alhambra. No one ever has, and God willing, no one ever will.”

David's older brother Aaron retorted, “Maybe if the Christians are in charge the taxes will go back down”.

Eli stopped and pushed Aaron against a tree, “Don't ever say that Aaron, what if someone heard? The Nasarid treat us well. We can go to temple, we can work for them, and they mostly leave us alone. There have been our people working at the Alhambra! Haven't you heard Rabi when he talks about our brothers and sisters in Malaga? They had to leave or convert to following the Christian Messiah. The taxes are hard right now because there is a war happening, and you should be grateful the Nasarid look after us.”

Aaron pushed Eli back, “Hands-off cousin, you're scaring David.”

David stopped petting the sheep in front of him, which bleated its disdain for his lack of attention. “I am not scared. The Christians don't scare me. Josephine told me that if we were



invaded again, that we might hide inside the Alhambra and see it from the inside. No one gets inside the Alhambra.”

Eli frowned, absentmindedly patting the sheep that was butting his head against his leg, “Maybe David, but-”.

Aaron cut him off and said, “Remember David, Mom named you after a great warrior and King, and he was young like you when he faced Goliath. Do you remember that story? You are strong like King David too. Maybe we can find some smooth stones on the walk back for good luck from your namesake.”

Aaron glared at Eli as he pushed past him to lead the sheep on. The sheep sauntered after Eli dutifully, as sheep do. The brothers sauntered less but followed all the same.

They knew the war drill and knew that the missing sheep of yesterday would be the most fun chore any of them would have for a while. In the sunlight, the armor of the Christians gleamed, and almost made their army look like a mirror. As they walked closer to the city, they started picking out colored flags, and the sounds of clanging. It's astounding how many sounds so many knights, horses, carriages, wagons and swords could make. As they leveled off with the city, the army disappeared, but the city preparations grew louder. Carts with supplies started passing them into town, everyone knowing what a hungry time a siege was.



David thought to himself, this siege was different. No one came from Malaga, or Cordoba, or anywhere else David had prayed for help from. They were all told to come witness the Christian Alliance meet King Boabdil to sign a treaty for peace. Peace was a good thing, right? There was not going to be a battle, and King Boabdil was a good King. David had wondered if Eli would have to fight, but now he wouldn't have to. Maybe it was a good thing. The meeting was outside the city, and everyone started the walk at daybreak to witness. David's parents had argued all night over if they would watch or not. They thought David was asleep, but the anticipation kept him awake.

Father had said, "What other time would we get to see Queen Isabella I of Castille and King Ferdinand II of Aragon with the last Nasarid King at the same time? Do you not want to witness history such as this? Don't you want to see what the fabled Christian Monarchs look like? I heard they wear twelve layers of clothes like their disciples, to keep the sins out and smell in."

Mother replied, "I don't know where you heard that. It is cold but no one would wear that many clothes. I also don't understand why you aren't more concerned about the goliath army surrounding this exchange."

"You must remember dear, in this moment the only thing these Christians will hate more than a Jew is a Muslim. No one will bat an eye at us tomorrow. This may be our last chance to go out in



public for a while. You heard what happened in Malaga. We may have to follow your sister to Morocco.”

“I worry for Aaron and David. This is the only home they have ever known. The world is changing so fast. It’s almost like there is a whole world out there, just beyond reach. But if we touched it, would it be paradise, or would we just spoil it too?”

When David awoke in the morning, they all dressed to witness the “peace”. When they arrived at the spot, David’s father put him on his shoulders so he could see above the crowd. They must have arrived just in time because drummers somewhere started their cadence. The crowd parted for two horses, both beautiful and strong. Both horses were adorned with beautiful fabrics, with symbols David did not understand except for the large crosses that symbolized all the pent-up fear he had felt when he saw the falling stars in the mountains.

David saw the man first, with a long cape and a large hat, wait, no it was a crown with jewelry hanging from his neck. He seemed slightly uncomfortable and glanced often at the rider beside him. The horse handler had to fight to stay exactly one step in front of the white mare beside the man’s mount. The woman on the white mare was beautiful, and terrifying. She must have been wearing the horse's weight in clothes, with a large crown over her head. Even though the man and woman’s crown were probably the same height, the woman seemed to ride taller. Her cape almost dragged on the ground behind her. David wondered who would be executed if the horse decided to defecate, the handler or the horse. Then again, maybe even the man beside



her. She stared straight in front of her, and it seemed like she did not notice the horse beneath her, the handler, the massive army, or anyone else. She held up her hand, in a gesture both delicate and firm, and the whole of the procession stopped. She looked up to the sky, unusually cloudy for this time of year. David could see her mouth whispering something into a beaded necklace in her hand, and then she crossed herself as David had seen other Christians do. She then moved her attention slowly to the man, who signed and whispered to the sky before crossing himself quickly. He then spurred his horse, ever so slightly to be just ahead of the woman, who pursed her lips but said nothing.

Suddenly, a man in a much less grand outfit, with what seemed to be an assortment of paints covering his smock yelled, “STOP, STOP RIGHT HERE.”

The woman’s full attention was on him when she asked, “Is the palace in the background here? Is this the angle?”

“No majesty, we need to angle more to the leffffttt, no, no, a little bit more right, its just the sun you see? I think... okay, now move the horses a little bit more to the ummmm, the angle, sir, your majesty sir, YES, right there aaaaaannnnnd perfect. No, flare the cape this way, great breeze for this right? Okay carry on.”

Eight other men with easels all set up beside him as he gave his orders, “I want COLOR people, look at this city, feel this city, internalize this city now paint this city. I want this to



scream MONUMENTAL. If you do not make the Queen as beautiful as her likeness, I will use your blood to embolden the colors...FOCUS!”

Everything seemed to be ready, until David heard behind him a more familiar drum. It appears the Nasarid procession did not receive the memo about which way they were supposed to come and had to snake around most of the crowd, following a Christian man with large flags that directed them to “the spot”. King Ferdinand seemed impatient, but Queen Isabella seemed to bask more with every passing moment as King Boabdil made his way to the royal pair. David’s mother started crying as he dismounted his horse with a large scroll in hand.

“To my loyal peoples, I say with much grief and despair that I have failed you. While I could cower in my palace, maintaining my pride for a few more months is not worth all your lives. I sign this treaty with the assurance that you will not be persecuted and that you will be allowed to follow the Last Prophet in peace and with your property intact. I must leave this city with my family, never to return, but I hope to all of you that you will continue to make this city a home for many generations, and that one day perhaps my descendants will return here in peace.” He stepped forward, handing the scroll to an official-looking man who started to turn to give walk to scroll to the King and Queen when,

“No”, the Queen said, “I want him to give it to King Ferdinand. It is only fitting.”

King Boabdil grimaced, but stated, “I am a servant to my people. If it pleases you, so be it.”



“Granada”, the Queen smiled. “What a beautiful name for a beautiful city. Our little pomegranate.”

King Boabdil looked a little bit confused as to why the Queen was saying *Ġarnāṭa* with such a strange emphasis, but decided he had better things to do than correct a bemused Queen that was taking the city his family had built ten generations ago.

The crowd did not really seem to know what to do, because Queen Isabella made them all stand there for the painters after all the speeches and prayers were done. She was kind of bossy. King Ferdinand did not seem surprised.

The people on the edges started backing away, muttering about getting ahead of the traffic leaving the city. David saw a pomegranate fall out of a man's picnic basket as he walked back toward the city, and saw a young soldier stab it with a rusty sword. He picked it up, balancing it with the pointy end toward the sky, until the fruit succumbed to the pull of the Earth. Slowly, then too quick to catch, the pomegranate sliced itself, falling into the dirt where no one would want to eat its delicate seeds.



Story 4: Olivia in Spain

Granada, Spain 2022

Olivia still had not gotten used to the pomegranate trees throughout the city. Walking from her apartment to her classes, she must have passed seven of them, each amongst the bustling city and the starkly blue sky. She had come to Granada to get away from the monotony of college life in Ohio, and to have an adventure of her own. So far, she had immensely enjoyed the cobble-stone roads, the teterías in the Albacín, her class on classic Spanish literature, and of course the view of the Alhambra. The only worry she had was a hole she found in her apartment the night before when she moved the bookshelf. Olivia was big on feng shui, and that bookshelf was really messing up the flow in her living room. She had called the landlord and he said that he would come take a look soon, so that either meant in five minutes, or three weeks from now. Since he had not knocked on her door that night, she decided it was probably the latter. She thought about her plans for this afternoon since her university had scheduled a tour for her to attend for one of her classes. The lazy two in the afternoon lunches and the lack of homework had given her more time than she ever had in the States, and she found herself mindlessly walking around the city most days to think.

But not today! Today she was going to finally visit the Alhambra. She had seen it from afar, at The Mirador De San Nicolas and her daily walks. She could not imagine what the inside



must look like since the outside is was so grand. Her friend Sebastian had a running joke of rating different buildings by how easy they would be to take by force, and the Alhambra had scored a solid rating of one. Its placement on a steep hill, huge sandstone walls and numerous fortifications made the list of “Never would I ever try to take this Palace by force”. Olivia put on her scarf, necessary to blend in with the locals in February, and put her water bottle in her bag. She knew this water bottle would mark her as an American, but hopefully if it was hidden, she would have fewer men trying to sell her trinkets on the way.

She met the group at the fountain of Isabella Catolica, though it was drained for the winter. At first, she had thought the monument was a king on the throne but on closer inspection of the pretty features on her face she could see how it was the infamous queen. The bowing man in front of the bronze queen was none other than Christopher Columbus, in all his finery. Olivia was just glad that current Spanish fashion did not include draping 18 capes over everything. The group started walking toward the Alhambra at four in the afternoon. The town was still sleepy from the siesta, but stores were starting to turn their signs to *abierto*. The group passed the gelato shops, and Moroccan themed tourist traps turning to a very steep hill. As they trekked up the picturesque path, the chatter ceased as no one wanted to draw attention to how out of breath they were. Olivia instead noticed the cobblestones, worn by foot traffic, the trees that must have provided shade in the summers, and the beautiful gutters with clear water running down to the city below. She was slightly jealous of how easy the water had it. When they reached the top, the tour guide stopped to explain how the main gate to the palace complex was made winding to the



right, and steep to deter a cavalry from using it. Even as a human, Olivia disliked trudging up the slick stones.

The tour inside the complex started with the old Roman section and the beautiful view of the city, and all the girls got new profile pictures with the flags. Olivia loved taking photos, but she noticed that she had taken more photos in the last three weeks since she arrived than ever before in her life. As they passed the “Alhambra cats”, basking in the winter sun, Olivia wondered how many people those cats saw every year coming into their territory. Finally, the main part of the tour started with walking toward the main palace. Well, at first Olivia had thought the giant building in the middle was the palace, but it turns out the huge building was just the Palace of Carlos V, grandson of Isabella and Ferdinand. The tour guide mentioned with a slight bitterness that King Carlos built it as a monument to the Reconquest of Spain but had torn out part of the original palace to do so. The Roman-styled columns on the inside juxtaposed the Arabic style of the original palace, and Olivia thought to herself that it did not look like it belonged.

The tour guide showed them through the Mosques and Patios, each more beautiful than the last, and talked about how difficult it was to build fountains without pumps. He pointed out the secret doors that archers would stand behind just in case, and where the walls were thin to let the women observe the political meetings without being immodest. Olivia could not picture how much more beautiful the Alhambra must have been when all the paint was still on the walls, the



carvings in Arabic were beautiful anyway, with enough remnants of a blue paint that she pictured the artistry it must have been. Finally, the Generalife gardens and summer palace across the way were next. Olivia looked back on the main palace from the arched vines in the summer palace and watched the sunset turn the red Alhambra to glorious gold. Of course, all the students clamored to get the best photo, with lots of selfies with the caption #LivingMyBestSpanishLife.

The walk down the hill of the Alhambra was much easier than the way up, and Olivia went the rest of the way back to her apartment. When she walked in, she realized that her landlord was already there, with a bucket of something she presumed was to cover the hole in the wall. He told her that he had just gotten there and asked her where the hole was. They moved the bookshelf together, and she leaned down to peer inside, which she had been too scared to do by herself the night before. Olivia had already decided that living by herself in Spain was not the time to catch up on horror movies. As she looked, she noticed some papers stuffed inside the wall and gently took them out. She showed them to the landlord, who shrugged and said that it was probably just some old flyers or newspapers to be utilized as a cheap insulation.

The landlord started fixing the hole, but Olivia could not shake the feeling that these papers were older than her landlord had presumed. She started looking at them, and she noted that most of the words were written in letters like she saw at the Alhambra only hours before. A couple of them looked different than the others and appeared to be in another alphabet. Greek? Maybe Hebrew? The only ones she could clearly make out were some old maps of Spain and

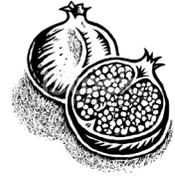


another city. It looked like the city had canals in it, so maybe it was Venice or Amsterdam? The more she studied these papers, the more questions she had. Her thoughts were interrupted when the landlord asked her if she wanted him to take the papers to the recycling. Olivia pulled the papers to her chest protectively and thanked him, but that she would like to try deciphering them first. The landlord shrugged and wished her a good evening as he gathered up his bucket and tools.

Olivia went to lock the door behind him and noticed her neighbor María Carmen watching through her doorway. She had been living in the building since the dark ages, and since Olivia had arrived, she had regularly checked in on her. María Carmen also insisted on inviting Olivia to almuerzo at least three times a week as, “Cooking for two is not different than cooking for one, but cooking for two means I get an excuse to make *paella*.” Olivia had never really liked seafood before Spain, but María Carmen must enchant the squid and shellfish to make them taste so good. At first the *paella* reminded Olivia of her grandmother’s jambalaya, but now she knows that the jambalaya she would eat back home will forevermore remind her of her sweet neighbor in Spain.

Olivia stepped out into the stairwell to say Hola to María Carmen, which of course meant a conversation was coming that neither would know how to end. She didn’t mind, Olivia saw it as a perfect way to practice her Spanish.

” Hola María Carmen!”



“Hola bonita, que tal?”

“Bueno, ~ I just found some weird papers behind the bookshelf in that hole I told you about.”

“Weird papers? *¿Qué dicen?*” María Carmen asked.

“I think some of them might be in Arabic like at the Alhambra, there’s also some maps. I do not know what they say but I do not think any of them are in Spanish” Olivia explained.

“Hmm, you can probably just throw them away. I’m sure its nothing important.” María Carmen said with a frown, taking out the Rosary she always seemed to have in her pocket.

“*Pues*, I think they might be interesting to translate. That is one of the reasons I picked Granada to study in was the Arabic influence in the art and architecture of the city. Plus, that Shwarma place down the street might be some of the best hummus I have had in my entire life.” Olivia elaborated.

María Carmen’s face turned stony as she stated very clearly, “I do not support *those* businesses, and neither should you”.

Olivia stared, more than a little confused and asked, “Which businesses?”

María Carmen went on to explain, twiddling her rosary in her fingers “*Los Arabes* do not belong here. They never have and they never will belong here. I do not go to their stores, I do not



look at their art, and I especially do not eat their food. The Alhambra is beautiful, yes, but Granada was never meant to be Arabic”.

Olivia could barely avoid her jaw hitting the ground as she heard these words. She thought maybe she had translated incorrectly in her mind, but she knew she had not. She did not really know what to say as she knew that Granada had been built originally by “*Los Arabes*”, but there were not a ton of “Arabic” people in Granada. Most of the Shwarma places were owned by Turkish immigrants, not people from North Africa or the Middle East. However, what Olivia knew María Carmen was avoiding saying was that it wasn’t “*Los Arabes*” that she did not want here, it was the fact that they were Muslim.

Awkwardly, Olivia checked her watch, looking for her time to get away. “*Madre Mía!*” she feigned, I forgot I have a zoom meeting in just a few minutes. You’ll have to excuse me *Señora*”.

The next day, Olivia could not get the old papers out of her head. She had a tour booked for the Tomb of Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand that day. Upon entering the chapel she quickly crossed Latin off her list of languages to compare her papers too. The cold tomb was dark for having so many windows, and Olivia pulled her sweater closer as the marble seemed to suck the heat from her skin. Going from the light Alhambra on top of a hill, to a tomb a few feet into the ground in the middle of the city was disorienting. Olivia took note of the walls, which were all covered in a dusty gold color. The tour guide went on to explain that the walls were



covered in gold, but it was so pure and soft that they could not clean it very often. Dusty indeed. Of course, what the tour guide failed to mention was that this gold was taken from the New World, in the years after Granada was conquered. Olivia viewed the paintings, and noticed the various pomegranates impaled by swords. She asked the tour guide what that meant, because she had seen it at the tomb of Cristopher Columbus in Seville as well. The tour guide told her that the impaled pomegranates symbolize the fall of Granada, as it was the last Muslim stronghold left from medieval Spain. Olivia nodded her understanding but thought the image of the impaled pomegranate left a bad taste in her mouth when she remembered how much conquering would happen after Granada at the hands of the Spanish Empire.

After the tour of the chapel part of the tomb, the group walked up to the tomb itself. The tour guide explained that the sculptor who made the life-sized renderings of the passed King and Queen intentionally made the marble pillow squish more under the Queen's head. This was a nod to how he thought she was smarter than her husband and therefore had a heavier brain. When they walked underground one by one to view the actual caskets, Olivia was struck by how even in this ornate place the caskets themselves were small wooden boxes. She thought to herself, no matter what you do in your life, death evens out all the riches.

Over the next few weeks, Olivia tried to figure out where she could take these papers to be translated. She ended up finding the email of one of the professors that studied Arabic. After emailing back and forth, they decided to meet at a tapas bar. When she took the papers out of her



bag, the professor's eyes went wide, "Is this Don Quixote?" he asked. "Umm, I don't really know. But why would a Spanish story be written in Arabic and stuffed in a wall? That seems a little far-fetched," she commented. The professor looked at her for a second, not hiding his smirk very well and said, "You haven't read Don Quixote, have you?" Olivia, not understanding the humor defensively stated, "Well, I read the spark notes when we did a section over it in my Spanish Literature course. It's just a cooky knight fighting sheep anyways. Maybe I would have read it if there had been parts about interesting things." The professor smiled bigger and asked, "What would have been more interesting?" Olivia thought for a second, and then very confidently said, "Stories of love, anguish, strangers in a strange land, women being movers of the story, aliens, or anything along those lines would have been refreshing instead of some old man charging windmills." The professor decided to leave that statement where it was and turned back towards the papers. "These maps are dated 1550, but I think some may be copies of an older map. These two are written in Hebrew, but stylistically they almost look like Arabic. These other ones are written in Arabic, except this last one which is just old Spanish. There are even some Nahuatl or Mayan words if I am not mistaken."

"Well, what do they say?" Olivia asked anxiously.

"They all appear to be different stories," the professor began, "This first one says, "Cordoba was always a bustling place...."



Story 5: Los Gyptanos

Granada, Spain 1492

Eli thought to himself that the end of Granada was the beginning of a new era in Spain. Suddenly, the way of life that had been established for 700 years was now the enemy, and even converting might not save you if the crown wanted your property enough. Of course, the Catholics claimed that they were returning to their old way of life from before the Caliphate. Then again, the Visigoths also claimed to take back their life from the Roman Empire, and the Roman Empire reclaimed something before that, and probably the people there reclaimed something or another before that. In any situation, being a Jewish boy was a risky occupation in any of these times.

When Eli thought back to that fateful day of Granada becoming Catholic with a signature, he did not remember much changing at first. That contract had been in negotiation for months, and his family knew the changes would not be in their favor. Their cousins in Malaga had left for Morocco, but they never received word back on if they were invited to join them. God knows that his mother and his father's mother chose to live in different cities in the first place for many reasons. However, they started sending money and things to Morocco in the hopes that they would not lose everything. That all changed when Eli was tending the sheep up in the mountains. When he returned to his home, everything was gone, including his parents. His



neighbor had found him before he lingered too long and pulled him inside his own home to tell him what had happened.

“Agents of the crown came in the middle of the night for your parents. They kept shouting, so they woke everyone up to watch. Of course, this is the Jewish quarter, so no one raised a hand to them. Sorry, Eli, but it looks like your house was the unlucky example to the rest of us. They pulled your parents out of the house and kept asking them if they were believers of Christ. They said that they were Jewish, and they asked them again to proclaim Christ as their Saviour. The third time they caved and said that they were actually Christians in secret, and the star of David was just decoration. The agents said that they did not believe them and took them away to get the truth from them. After that, other agents came in and took everything from your house for the crown. I did see them pocket some things though, and they sold the miscellaneous household things to the neighbors. I bought that rug that was in your front room, always liked that one... But, you can have it back if you think it doesn't really go with the décor in here.”

Eli sat listening to this account, horrified at what had happened. He did not take back the rug, and assured his neighbor that it would be safer with him, and that a houseplant would probably tie the room together. He had heard rumors that they were going to convert everyone to be Catholic, but he never thought it would happen to his family. He went back to his empty house and wondered if the agents had found the secret floorboard. In the back of one of the corners, he lifted a loose nail from the floor, and found the secret box beneath. In it, was the



money his parents were saving to go to Morocco, along with his families most precious things. He stuffed a baby shoe that had been worn by all the babies of the family in his pocket, and the rest of the money in his satchel. He replaced the board and nail, and left again, telling none of his neighbors goodbye. None of them had said goodbye to his parents, or tried to keep them there, so he decided they were not worth his goodbye in turn. He went back to his flock and tried to remember what his father had told him in case something ever happened to them.

His father had always said, “Use the flock to blend in. Christians always trust shepherds for some reason. They find it a very admirable profession.”

Eli took this advice and went and found his fluffy charges by the creek he had left them. As he counted them, naming each one as he went, he noticed that Lana was missing. She was always a troublemaker. As Eli went off to find her, he ran into his third greatest fear. The first fear was losing his family, and the second was losing his sheep, but the third was definitely *los giptanos*. The Jews might always be unpopular, but even more unpopular was the travelers in their odd-looking caravans and caves. Eli had always heard that they would steal your nose out from under you and could put curses on people and sheep alike. Eli thought to himself that this day just kept getting worse, as he saw Lana butting her head against the bright skirt of a woman stirring a pot by a fire. The woman stopped stirring to pat Lana on the head, cooing to her like she was a lamb. However, she was not a lamb, just a small sheep and Eli rolled his eyes as he thought about how Lana should have been born a pig for how much she hogs all the attention. Eli



snuck up at the edge of the camp, behind some brush and whistled quietly to Lana to come back to him. However, Lana merely glanced his direction and defiantly sat beside the woman for her to continue petting her.

“That’s a really cool whistle, can you teach me how to do that?”, came a young voice from behind Eli.

Eli jumped, hitting his head on a branch, then very unfortunately tripped on a root behind him. “Get back fiend! I’ll have no use of your curses today.” Eli looked up from his fall to see a young girl, maybe the same age as his cousin David, looking down on him with big eyes and a bigger smile.

“I don’t think you need a curse; you seem clumsy enough without one.” the girl sang.

At this point, the woman by the fire had walked over to see the commotion. “Hello stranger, I see you’ve met my daughter Esmeralda.”

Eli had stood up and was brushing off the leaves he had collected on his pants. “I see you have met my sheep, Lana. I hope you were not planning on stealing her to eat and using her bones for witchcraft.”

The woman widened her stance, and crossed her arms to say, “Well, that sure is a lot of accusations in the first thing you have ever said to me. I did not steal your sheep; I would have stolen a bigger one if I wanted to eat it. She wandered in here all by herself. In fact, she stole half



the carrots I had in that box, so really you owe me. However, I am feeling generous today and will not curse you if you stay for supper. I feel auras and you seem very distressed young man. Come now.”

Eli was quite confused, but she spoke to him like his mother always had and he did not have the energy to argue. He did not know what an aura was, but if it meant the energy he was feeling from her, he knew the energy was saying that there was no room to argue. He numbly went to the fire and sat beside it as the woman poured him a bowl. Esmeralda sat next to him, and Lana came over to lick him on the cheek.

“That sheep sure does seem to like you.” Esmeralda commented.

“She’s just an attention hog.” Eli muttered.

The woman chuckled to herself and said, “I guess you could say she is woolly baaad.” The girl and the woman laughed, and Eli couldn’t help but smile at the joke.

The woman continued, “See now? You do smile. I never met a shepherd who was so sullen. Are you in love with a lost maiden or something? Shepherds are always the purest of romantics, aren’t they?” Eli did not really know what she meant, but he found himself telling her everything about his day, and how he might never see his parents again. Lana licked away his tears as he told his story, probably just because they were salty. Eli didn’t have the motivation to bat her away, even though her breath smelled like carrots.



The woman and girl listened to his story, them both very sullen by the end. The woman introduced herself as Roma and insisted that they eat their supper. After they had eaten, she proclaimed that she had a great idea, "You should come with us!"

Eli did not understand her meaning, and asked, "Go with you where?"

Roma smiled and said, "Well, my husband will be back in a few days, and we will move on from here. We can take you to Gibraltar and then you can go on to Morocco to find your family." The Catholics don't like us either, but we wear some crosses, and they mostly leave us alone."

Lana bleated her agreement and Eli considered the proposal. He had no other way to get to Morocco, and he knew deep down that he would not be able to find his parents. "Alright, I will go with you."

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When Roma's husband came back, he also appreciated how friendly Lana was. He had brought back some crates that they would take with them on their journey. When Eli peered inside of them, he noticed that they were all full of pristine looking pomegranates. "Why are all of these full of pomegranates?"

The man replied, "They sell well in other places, and the best ones come from here.

Pomegranates are as good as gold the further away from the source they are. You just sell them before they go bad, and hope that there is not a bad one in the batch to spoil the rest too early. It



is a salesman's burden to know the line between where to cash out and the depletion of value.

Somehow, one is always tempted to make it to the next big city where they will be worth more, and then they spoil halfway there.”



Story 6: Giants and Windmills

Somewhere in La Mancha, Spain sometime after 1492

Lots of people talk about what Heaven must look like. Everyone seems to have different ideas about why you want to be there instead of the alternative. Most people agree that there must be lots of beautiful plants, happy people, harmony, music and more. No one has a ton of proof of why Heaven must look like that, but it stands to reason that things humanity likes must be in the perfect place. This is reflected in how we build societies as we emulate how we want Heaven to look. Heaven is a garden and listening to water babbling down a brook. Heaven is children laughing and playing in the streets.

Hell is thought of in the same way. We envision fire and smoke and lakes of vile fluid. We think people must be screaming and crying as they are tortured for all eternity. Humanity thinks in these extremes for many situations from executions to war, and from orchards to building cities. However, these visions of Heaven and Hell are restricted to what we experience on Earth in the time that we live.

This is what Maria Zoraida was thinking about as she trekked her way from Cordoba. When she was a child, Cordoba was the ornament of the world. There were gardens, babbling fountains and children laughing in the streets. Now, she had come accustomed to a new reality where people were forced to convert to following the God of Love and Grace by being beaten into submission.



Maria Zoraida used to just be Zoraida, but times have proven that being named Maria was excellent for fitting in.

The reason Maria Zoraida was thinking about Heaven and Hell was because in that moment, she was confronted with Purgatory. If Heaven was paradise and Hell was misery, then Purgatory was La Mancha. She thought to herself, if only someone could write a book about La Mancha, maybe everyone would convert or condemn, because in some ways boredom seems worse than lakes of fire. She had her nag with her, which seemed just about as old as she was. Both Maria Zoraida and the nag walked slowly through the endlessness of land they found themselves, with each step seemingly inconsequential. There was nothing wrong with La Mancha, there was grass and windmills and the occasional critter scurrying across the road. The windmills did help break up the monotony, but as Maria Zoraida looked up at the closest towering beast, she let herself become mesmerized by the spinning turbines.

Maria Zoraida noticed that it was starting to become dusk, and she decided that sleeping under a windmill was better than the silence of the field and took the saddle bags from the tired nag.

Maria Zoraida took out her bedroll and prepared to stare up at the stars until sleep overtook her.

While La Mancha was Purgatory, the endlessness of the galaxy never ceased to make her wonder.



In the darkest part of the night, Maria Zoraida woke with a start. She looked up and realized that the windmill had stopped. Before her eyes, the windmill seemed to come out of the darkness. It was not a windmill at all, but a giant!

“A giant?” Maria Zoraida exclaimed!

The giant, towering and stoic looked down upon the old woman and said, “That is a very offensive term. How would you feel if I called you a hag? You humans are all the same.”

Maria Zoraida got over her initial shock and realized that she was in fact too old to care if she answered that Heaven and Hell question this night. “Whatever Señor, is there something you wanted to talk about, or did you wake me up for no reason?”

The giant sat cross-legged with a thump, the dust rising as he settled. “There was something I wanted to talk about. I had a very odd experience the other day and you are the first person I have seen since then. Do you know anything about knights?”

Maria Zoraida thought for a moment, thinking back to stories she had heard as a child and said, “I suppose it depends on if you mean personal experience or stories.”

The giant thought for a moment and said, “Either will do I suppose. Reading is basically the same as living through it. It was a few days ago, and I was fixing the windmills as I always do. Everyone knows that giants are good at fixing windmills. Plus, I get extra pay for the isolation aspect of La Mancha. Anyways, this guy who looked like a knight started charging towards me. I



was shocked at first because there are not really knights around here these days. When he got closer, I realized he was wearing a costume because he had a very old horse and a weird bucket on his head. I did not know what to do because obviously this guy was unwell, so I picked him up before he could hurt himself. He was very adamant that I set him down, so I made him promise to not charge unsuspecting giant handymen anymore. He agreed and I sat him down. At the same time, all these sheep came over the hill and he started charging the sheep. He kept yelling about the battle he was in. Veterans have it rough I suppose. I saw another man over the hill, and I knew he probably was not tall enough to see this guy, so I walked over to him and asked him if he knew the crazy knight guy. He said, “Yes, where is he?”, and I took him to the crazy old knight. Turns out, the younger man was his nephew and he had taken out his lunatic uncle hoping he would give himself a heart attack so he could move into his house. Then I felt bad because I like to think that I have a giant heart, right? I just gave this vulnerable old man back to his nephew who is taking advantage of him. It's not like I could have kept him, but I still feel strange about it you know?”

Maria Zoraida completely understood where he was coming from and said, “I completely understand where you are coming from, but he was not your responsibility. Sometimes you must pick your battles.”

The giant seemed comforted by these words and nodded. “Well, there's room in the windmill if you would rather sleep in there.”



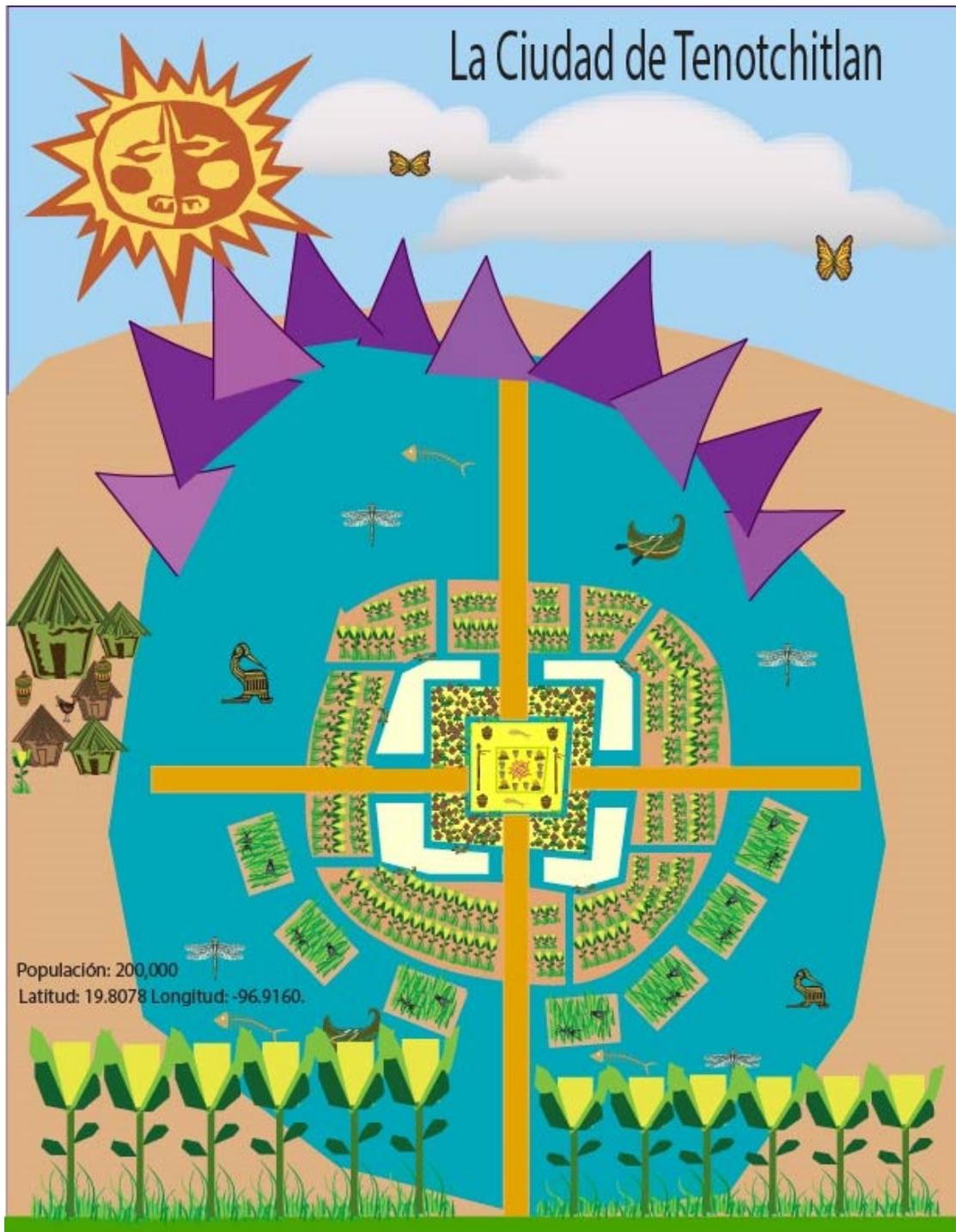
Maria Zoraida replied, “That is a kind offer, but it's nice outside tonight so I think I would rather be under the stars.”

“That is totally cool. It was nice talking to you, Señora.” The giant stood back up and went over the hill in the distance. Giants always prefer walking at night, as everyone knows.

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When Maria Zoraida woke up in the morning, she put the saddle bags back on the nag. She noticed that there was a crate next to the windmill. Out of curiosity she went to look at it. Inside sat a handful of withered pomegranates. There was no telling how long they had been there. She started walking once again away from the windmill.

She always enjoyed talking to the giants. Sometimes, when you have to endure purgatory, your best option is to have interesting dreams.





Story 7: A Maize of Corn and Waterfront Property

Tenochtitlán (Modern location of Mexico City), Mexico 1519

You would think conquest was a young man's game, but one certainly stood out as traveling around the sun a few more times in his life. The conquistador was not an imposing figure and was smaller than his comrades. Of course, no one noticed this because he was very wise. He had sung old songs in strange tongues through the rough nights at sea, and always had a parable to soothe the spirits of those around him. He always seemed happy, except when it came time to do the conquering. He always had an excuse to stay on the ship, or not go on an diplomatic mission to speak with the tribes. His most recent excuse, pain of the head.

The old conqueror reminisced with himself by a cliff, as he overlooked the spectacular city beneath him. A sparkling lake glittered in the basin, surrounded by imposing mountains. The mountains had been smoking recently, a sure sign to the people living there that time was about to end. The city in the middle of the Lake seemed both to float on the water, but also tower above in a way that water should not be able to support. At first the Spaniards had thought that they were boats, but these structures never moved. These islands in the lake were discovered to be intentionally built, through a mastery of craftsmanship that had not been achieved elsewhere. The old conqueror had heard of canals going through a city, but this city seemed to be one with the lake, rather than forcing itself above. He remembered another city he was familiar with, with a palace above the people, and thought about how a city's rulers can achieve great intimidation



simply by having tall buildings. This city was no different, and its King or *Tlahtoani*, had built a huge structure in the middle of the city with palaces that sprawled high and low. Only the rich here could have certain roofs, or multi-story buildings, which is not so different than Spain.

The King and his court were familiar to the Spaniards. There was the King, their priests (though barbaric by the Church's standpoint), there was a bureaucracy of individual who all seemed to be related to each other, and of course everyone else. The King was a descendant of the original King, and he apparently took wives of every important family in the area to ensure a continuous pool of options to be future Kings. This had worked out well for the Mexica, and they soon became lords to everyone around them. The legend had gone that they wound up in the lake after a long exodus from the caves that they had crawled from, with a symbol of an Eagle letting them know that they had found home at last. Not so different from another legend of an Exodus to a promised land. The old conqueror thought to himself that they might have ended up in the lake simply because of a universal truth. Waterfront property is always more valuable, and if you come late to the game, it is probably already taken. This theory was further confirmed by the surrounding tribes being exceptionally easy to ask to ally against the Mexica. Apparently, ever since they established their city, they went about warring with everyone around them, forcing them into submission, and sacrificing their warriors to appease the sun. These things, of course, do not make you a popular neighbor. Popular neighbors give you tortillas, which seemed to mean something different here, but the analogy stands. It was not a goliath task to rally warriors to the cause of overthrowing the Mexica, all it took was a few stones.



The first stone was the friar. He had apparently been shipwrecked with the Maya, who kept him with them since he had nowhere else to go. He took up Maya and then took up a Maya wife. When Cortes found him, he quickly joined him and their cause for the crown. After all, how could a man of the Lord turn down the opportunity to serve both Jesus, and more importantly, the Catholic Monarchs? Cortes had papers and everything, so threatening the friar's family was perhaps unnecessary.

Stone two was the woman. She had been given to them with other woman to be their slaves, but she was the most beautiful. When Cortes discovered that she spoke both Maya and Nahuatl, he kept her as a useful prize. He had heard from everyone about the big dogs being the Mexica, so a woman that could speak both languages would be handy indeed. Next, she learned Spanish from the friar and she could speak directly to Cortes. She would become even handier when she gave Cortes a child, which was only a matter of time.

Stone three was the horses and dogs. There were not many of them, but they sure did terrify everyone in this land. They had never seen such fearsome beasts, and with the horse armor and the armored knight on top, they were the things of nightmares. There had been rumors that the horse and knight were one dragon-like beast. The war dogs were nothing like the small dogs that were kept around here. War dogs were twice as smart, and almost as big as horses.

Stone four was the gun, which had never been the old conquerors' favorite. They were terrible at aiming, but when one tribe had seen the horrific destruction of a cannon ball through a



reed hut, heard the loudest sound of their life, and smelled the terrible sulfur, surrender was imminent. Cortes only had to use a muzzle-loaded handgun on one village for the whole of the land to understand that being penetrated by a bullet was worse than an arrow. At least you can pull an arrow out, while the bullets and their cloth stayed inside the body most of the time. Word travels fast among the Maya, and fear traveled faster.

The final stone was the demon who orchestrated the assault. Hernan Cortes was nobody, but not anymore. The old conqueror had seen many a leader in his day, and conquests near and far. However, no one came close to the ruthlessness Hernan Cortes brought to the table. Everyone was a pawn to him, and the luck he had in every situation made his men whisper about deals with the devil. How did he stumble upon the perfect storm to assault such a grand city, with a border-line forged letter of the crown? How did he find more warriors, when his Spaniards fell left and right to disease and wounds? The men gossiped among themselves that the woman, Malinche, was sent from the devil to steer Hernan Cortes to his destruction. If it was destruction she brought, it was not for Cortes. Cortes was a mad man, who burned their ships so they could not leave. He let the man with the pox live long enough to infect a few of the locals, which led the assault on Tenochtitlan long before they set foot on that causeway. He was smart, he was mad at the world, he was malicious, he had nothing to lose, and he was lucky. David only needed one of his five stones to down Goliath, but Cortes used every stone he had.

“Hey! Old Man!” a voice called from behind.



The old conqueror turned, to see the demon himself approaching. Being the wise man that he was, he was endeared to Cortes as a confidante. They were almost the same age after all.

“Hey, boss. How was the meeting?” the old conqueror inquired.

“Oh, ya know. Malinche does the talking, I look imposing, I threaten with my steel knife, and they all agree to do whatever I want to overthrow the Mexica. Was conquering this easy back in Spain?”

“Well, I must admit that I was a bit young to participate myself, but there were many more treaties and far fewer sacrifices.”

“I bet there was still blood and sacrifices, maybe just not barbaric like these people. They could really use the love of our Savior Jesus Christ, don’t you think? They sacrifice humans to appease their gods, can you believe that?”

The old conqueror decided to not bring up how many Spaniards they had sacrificed in various situations, and how many more of the Maya that they had thrown at a fight with no preparations. After all, invoking the anger of Hernan Cortes was beating a wasps’ nest. Except the wasps were his sword, and he did not need a swarm to kill one man.

“Yeah, for sure” the old conqueror decided on. Agreeing was always better than invoking anger.



“Have you tried this thing they all eat? It’s kind of a weird color and breaks your teeth, but when they make bread out of it, it isn’t so bad.” Cortes pulled a husk of maize out of his bag, along with a pomegranate. The old conqueror raised his eyebrows wondering how a pomegranate had ended up on the other side of the world but decided that stranger things had ended up here. Cortes pulled out a knife, and started cutting the pomegranate, tossing the maize to the side. “Ya know, this maize thing might be the new hot thing. Think about how much the pope would like a new food with seeds like this. Apparently, it keeps a super long time and is really filling...” As he spoke, he got pomegranate juice all over his already stained hands. The old conqueror looked wistfully at the juice, knowing that it would taste like his childhood, and that Cortes was just wasting it. He wondered if he would ever get to go home and eat a pomegranate from any number of trees around his childhood home, or if he was going to die here with a wasteful man and his maize. “...so that’s why I feel pretty justified in liberating these people. Kind of a roundabout answer, but I feel pretty good about the logic.”

“Yeah, for sure” the old conqueror once again decided on.

“Hmm, I think this pomegranate went rancid somewhere between here and Granada. Hope the same doesn’t apply to you!” Cortes walked away, throwing the precious fruit behind him, whistling a tune somehow both off key and pitchy.

The Book of Seven Seeds
Jackie Harsha

