
LADY
ZORO
Her husband wears the mask.
She wears it better.

LADY ZORO

A *novel*

SJ Mohamed

FREE SAMPLE · CHAPTERS 1 TO 3

ABOUT THE BOOK

While Zoro is away on business — as usual — his wife, who is secretly every bit as good with a sword as he is, puts on a mask of her own to save the town, keep her daughter safe and make sure her husband never, ever finds out. The town of San Lorenzo has always relied on Zoro. What nobody knows, least of all Zoro himself, is that his wife, Doña Isabel, was trained in secret by her grandfather, a retired fencing master. For years she has quietly tidied up after her husband's adventures: stitching his cape, hiding his horse when soldiers come knocking, and once or twice finishing a fight he thought he had won. When Zoro rides off to the capital on yet another "business trip", a scheming new commander arrives with a plan to take over the town. With her husband gone and her daughter in danger, Isabel has no choice. Lady Zoro rides out.

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This free sample holds the first 3 of the novel's 50 chapters.

CHAPTER 1

Business as Usual

Don Alejandro de la Vega practised leaving three times before breakfast.

The first time, he swept out of the courtyard gate in a swirl of dark blue travelling cloak and reined Tornado round to face the house. He raised one gloved hand in farewell, and Tornado, who was meant to rear magnificently against the sunrise, sneezed.

The second time, Tornado reared, but a full two seconds late, so that Alejandro, who had already begun his noble salute, was nearly tipped backwards into the bougainvillea.

The third time, the horse simply stood in the gateway and ate the bougainvillea.

Doña Isabel de la Vega watched all three from the shade of the veranda, a cup of coffee warming her hands. She had a face that people trusted, which had always been useful: wide dark eyes, a mouth that seemed about to smile even when it wasn't, and a calm about her that made strangers tell her things they had not told their priests. She wore a plain grey morning dress with the sleeves pushed up, and she had been awake since four.

"He's doing it again," said Luz, appearing at her elbow with her hair in two half-finished plaits and a boiled egg in each fist. Luz was ten, and she approached the world the way a magistrate approaches a suspect. "The leaving thing."

"Your father likes to leave properly."

"Why?"

Isabel sipped her coffee and considered it. "Some men like to arrive. Your father likes to leave. It's when people look at you the longest."

Luz peeled an egg with her teeth. "Tornado doesn't like it."

"Tornado," said Isabel, "has opinions."

In the gateway, Alejandro was murmuring something urgent into the horse's ear. Tornado flattened his ears, which in horse means *I heard you, and no.*

* * *

It was not, strictly speaking, the leaving that Isabel minded. Alejandro left often. He was a gentleman of business, or so San Lorenzo believed: a man who rode to the capital four or five times a year to argue about cattle prices and land boundaries and the price of tallow, and who came back with presents and a sunburnt nose and stories about ministers who had fallen asleep in meetings. The town thought him charming, a little vain, and harmless. Most of it was true, except for the harmless part.

Isabel knew what was in the long saddlebag he had packed himself the night before and would not let Bernardo touch. She knew the black silk folded at the bottom of it, the flat-crowned hat squashed in beside the shaving kit, the mask rolled small as a cigarillo. She had known for eleven years. She had known since the second week of their marriage, when he had come home at three in the morning with a cut across his ribs and told her he had fallen off a wall *while admiring the moon.*

She had stitched the cut while he slept. He had woken up and decided he must have done it himself, in a kind of heroic trance.

That was the marriage, really. Alejandro was Zoro, the masked rider, the fox of the hills, the terror of every corrupt official from here to the sea. And Isabel was the woman who sewed up the fox,

darned the fox's socks and, now and then, very quietly, made sure the fox came home at all.

He did not know that last part. She intended to keep it that way.

* * *

"Isabel! Light of my life!"

Alejandro had given up on Tornado and come striding back across the courtyard, spurs ringing, hat in his hand. He was a handsome man and he wore it the way other men wear a good coat, easily, without checking it in every window. He took the steps two at a time and seized both her hands, coffee and all.

"I go," he said gravely.

"So I see."

"I will be gone three weeks. Perhaps four. The ministers are impossible." He searched her face with real tenderness, and Isabel, who had been married to him for eleven years and still found that look did something inconvenient to her knees, kept her expression mild. "You will be careful."

"I am always careful."

"There are bandits on the south road. There is talk of trouble at the garrison. Old Comandante Ortega has been recalled, and nobody knows who they will send in his place." He squeezed her fingers. "If anything happens, anything at all, you stay inside. You bar the doors. You leave the dangerous things to the men."

"Which men?"

He blinked. "I'm sorry?"

"Which men should I leave them to, my love? Bernardo is seventy-one. The Alcalde faints at the sight of a chicken being killed. Padre Ignacio is very holy but I believe he once lost a fight with a goat." She smiled sweetly. "I only ask so I know whom to send for."

Alejandro opened his mouth and then shut it. Behind her, Luz made a small noise into her egg.

"The soldiers," he said finally. "The garrison. That is what they are for."

"Of course."

"And Zoro." He said it lightly, airily, the way he always did, with a little flick of the eyebrows that he believed was mysterious. "They say he always comes when San Lorenzo needs him."

"Do they," said Isabel.

"So I have heard."

"Then I shall sleep soundly."

He kissed her. She let him, because it was a good kiss and because, while he was kissing her, her left hand found the buckle of his sword belt and pressed the loose tongue of it back into its keeper. He had been wearing it half undone for a week. If it slipped in a fight, the scabbard would swing between his legs and trip him. She had been meaning to sew a new keeper on but there had been no chance; he slept with the thing on the chair beside him like a dog.

The buckle clicked. Alejandro did not notice. He drew back, gazed at her nobly and turned to Luz.

"And you, my little mouse."

"I am not a mouse."

"My little lioness. You will look after your mother."

"I want to come with you."

"To the capital? It is all old men in wigs, mouse. You would die of boredom by Tuesday."

"I wouldn't." Luz thrust out her chin, and Isabel saw her husband's own stubbornness looking back at him and his face softening helplessly. "I could carry your bags. I could be your secretary. I can write in three colours."

"When you are older."

"You always say that."

"Because you are always younger than you ought to be." He kissed the top of her head, egg and all. "I'll bring you back a book.

A big one. With maps."

Luz considered this, a lawyer weighing a settlement. "With pirates."

"With pirates," he agreed, and was forgiven.

* * *

Bernardo had brought Tornado back to the foot of the steps. The old servant moved as silently as he always had, a stooped, bright-eyed man in a dust-coloured coat who had served the de la Vega family since before Alejandro was born. He did not speak, he never had, but he had a face that could say a great deal, and just now it said, very clearly, *For the love of all the saints, señor, just get on the horse.*

Alejandro mounted. He arranged his cloak. He gathered the reins. He looked up at the house with an expression of tremendous sorrow, like a man in a painting about a man going off to war.

From the upstairs window came a voice like a rusty gate.

"Is he gone yet?"

Abuela Pilar, Alejandro's grandmother, was ninety-three and claimed to be eighty. She had outlived two husbands, a revolution and most of her enemies, and she regarded the rest of the world as a play being put on for her personal entertainment, rather badly.

"Not yet, Abuela!" Alejandro called up.

"Well, hurry up. You've been leaving since the cock crowed. In my day a man said goodbye and went. Your grandfather once left for a war in the time it took me to blow my nose."

"Yes, Abuela."

"And tell your horse to stop eating my flowers."

Tornado, with great deliberation, took another mouthful of bougainvillea.

Alejandro raised his hand in farewell, and this time, perhaps because nobody was expecting it, the black horse reared. He rose up tall and shining against the morning, hooves pawing the air, and Alejandro sat him like a statue, cloak flying, hat raised. For one perfect moment he looked exactly like every story the town had ever told about him.

Then they were away through the gate in a clatter of hooves and a rolling cloud of red dust, and the courtyard was suddenly very quiet.

"Show-off," said Abuela Pilar, and shut the window.

* * *

Isabel stood on the veranda until the dust on the road had thinned to a faint gold smudge. Then she put down her coffee and went back into the house, through the cool dim hall with its painted saints and down the passage to her husband's study.

His second-best sword was lying on the desk.

She had known it would be. He had taken it down the night before to look at the blade, a beautiful thing of Toledo steel with a plain cup guard and a grip worn smooth by his hand. He had meant to pack it in the long saddlebag as a spare. Instead, he had been distracted by Luz demanding a story about pirates, and he had left it there on top of a letter about cattle prices.

Isabel picked it up. She did not pick it up the way a lady picks up a sword, gingerly, by the middle, as if it were a dead snake. She picked it up the way a cook picks up her best knife. Her fingers settled round the grip without her thinking about it, her forefinger curling over the crossbar, her wrist turning to feel the weight. Balanced a little forward. He liked it that way. She had always thought it made him lazy on the recovery.

For a moment she simply stood there with the sword in her hand and the morning sun lying in stripes across the floor. Something old and quiet stirred in her chest, the way it always did.

Not now, she told it. *Not for years. Possibly not ever.*

She went to the bookcase behind the desk, put her hand on the third shelf and pressed the carved rosette at the end of it. There was a soft click. The bookcase swung inward on oiled hinges, and a breath of cold, mineral-smelling air rose up from the dark stairway beyond.

Alejandro believed that the cave beneath the hacienda was known only to himself and Bernardo. He believed that he had discovered it as a boy. He had told Isabel this, in a moment of great tenderness on their tenth anniversary, as a secret too dangerous to share. Then he had remembered that it was too dangerous to share and had laughed and said he was only joking, there was no cave, he had drunk too much wine.

Isabel went down the stairs without a candle. She knew every step.

At the bottom, in the green half-light that came through a crack in the hillside, the cave opened out like the inside of a church. Tornado's empty stall stood against one wall, with its rack of tack and a barrel of oats. There was a workbench covered in Alejandro's mess: whetstones, oil, a torn black glove, a half-eaten orange gone furry. There was a rack for swords. Isabel slid the Toledo blade into its place, straightened the sword beside it and wiped a fingermark from the guard with her sleeve.

He would come home in a month and find it there and assume he had put it back himself. He always did.

She turned to go. Then, out of an old habit she could not quite shake, she looked across the cave to the far wall, where the rock folded back on itself in a narrow seam of shadow. To anyone else it was a crack in the stone. Alejandro had walked past it a thousand times.

Behind it, in a dry niche she had found the first winter she lived here, hung something wrapped in oilcloth. She did not go to it. She

only looked, for a slow count of five, the way you look at a letter you are not ready to open.

Then she went back upstairs, closed the bookcase and called for Bernardo to bring the carpets out to be beaten.

* * *

It was Luz who saw it first.

She had climbed onto the courtyard wall after breakfast, which she was not allowed to do, in order to watch the road, which was pointless. Her father was long gone. But Luz had a theory that if you watched something long enough it would eventually do something interesting. She was usually right.

"Mamá," she called down. "There's more dust."

Isabel, who was hanging a rug over the line with Bernardo, shaded her eyes. "Your father's dust has settled by now, my love."

"Not his. The other way. Coming from the north." Luz pointed, her plait swinging. "Lots of it."

Isabel climbed three steps of the mounting block and looked.

On the far side of the valley, where the north road came down out of the brown hills towards San Lorenzo, a long low cloud was crawling along the horizon. It caught the sun and glittered. Not one rider or two. A column. Isabel counted, the way her grandfather had taught her to count a crowd, by fives. She stopped at forty because the dust swallowed the rest.

Something flashed at the head of the line. Steel, or brass. A banner, perhaps, or the polished breastplate of an officer who liked to be seen.

Beside her, Bernardo had gone very still. He looked at the dust and then at the empty south road where his master had disappeared not two hours before, and then at Isabel. His face said, very plainly, *Oh, no.*

"It's probably nothing," said Isabel.

Luz looked down at her mother with the flat, patient expression of a child who has been told *it's probably nothing* before.

"You're holding the carpet beater like a sword again," she said.

Isabel looked down. Her right hand had closed round the cane handle in a perfect fencer's grip, thumb flat along the top, point raised towards the north road as though the whole column were about to charge her laundry.

She lowered it. She hung the next rug over the line. She hit it, once, very hard, and a great cloud of dust burst out of it and hung glittering in the morning air, as though it were answering the cloud on the hill.

"Business as usual," she said.

CHAPTER 2

The Pointy End

By the time the column reached the bottom of the valley, Isabel had beaten six carpets, and every one of them had lost.

She did it the way she had done it for eleven years, three mornings a week, in the far corner of the courtyard behind the laundry line where nobody looked. The beater was a long cane with a woven paddle on the end, and to anyone passing, the lady of the house was simply very thorough about dust. If they had watched more closely, they might have noticed that she never hit the rug the same way twice. A straight thrust to the centre. A cut from high left to low right. A quick double tap on the edge, high and low, so fast that the two sounds came out almost as one. Then a step back, a turn of the wrist and a long lunge that drove the paddle into the very heart of the pattern, where the red flower was.

The red flower had been the heart of an imaginary opponent for nine years. It was getting threadbare.

"You're doing the long one again," said Luz from the wall.

"I'm cleaning the carpet."

"You always hit the flower."

"It's the dirtiest part."

"It's not. I checked." Luz swung her legs. She had given up watching the road an hour ago and was now watching her mother

instead, which was worse. “The corner by the fringe is dirtier. Chato sleeps on it.”

Chato was the cat, a vast orange tom with one ear and the moral character of a pirate. He was also, at present, the only other member of the Society for Mysteries. Luz had founded the Society the previous spring after reading a book about a detective in Madrid who solved crimes by noticing what people did with their hands. She had a notebook. It was bound in red leather that had once been one of Alejandro’s riding gloves, and it contained, among other things, the case of the missing honey cakes (solved: Bernardo), the case of the strange noises at night (unsolved, but she had suspicions about the bookcase) and a long list headed *Things Mamá Does That Are Odd.*

Isabel knew about the list. She had read it twice when Luz was asleep. It currently had fourteen entries, of which four were alarmingly accurate and one was about the way she ate oranges.

“Come down off that wall,” she said. “If you fall and break your neck, your father will blame me for a year.”

“He’s not here.”

“He’ll come back to blame me. He’s very thorough.”

Luz came down, not because she had been told to but because Chato had wandered off towards the kitchen and she suspected him of something. Isabel watched her go. Then she turned back to the rug, set her feet, and hit the red flower so hard that the line twanged like a guitar string.

Forty riders, she thought. *At least. Probably sixty.* That was not a new comandante coming quietly to take up his post. That was a garrison being replaced.

* * *

The trouble with being a woman who could do things, Isabel had found, was that nobody would let you do them.

She had learnt this early. She had learnt it at eight years old in her grandfather's long, dusty salle d'armes in Sevilla, where the shutters were always closed and the floor was marked with chalk lines worn pale by forty years of feet. Her grandfather, Maestro Gaspar Ibarra, had been the finest fencing master in the south of Spain until he had fought a duel with a duke's nephew, won, and found that winning against a duke's nephew is a great deal more dangerous than losing. After that his pupils had drifted away. By the time Isabel came to live with him, an orphan with skinned knees and a temper, he had nobody left to teach but a little girl who would not sit still.

So he had taught her. In secret, at first, because it was not done. Then in secret always, because by the time it might have been safe to tell people, she was too good, and he had said that was even less safe.

"A woman with a sword," he had told her once, tapping her blade aside with a lazy flick that sent it skittering across the floor, "frightens men far more than a man with a cannon. A cannon they understand. Pick that up. You dropped your wrist again."

She had picked it up. She had always picked it up.

All of that was a long time ago and a long way away, across an ocean, and Maestro Gaspar was twelve years in his grave. Isabel had come to the New World as a young bride and become Doña Isabel de la Vega of San Lorenzo: a good wife, a careful mother, the mistress of a great house, and famously, delightfully hopeless with anything sharper than a sewing needle. She had cultivated the reputation lovingly. She had once cut herself with a butter knife in front of the Alcalde's wife, with such conviction that the woman had sent round a jar of healing salve the next day.

It had been a very good performance. Isabel sometimes thought it had been her best.

* * *

The house without Alejandro had a different sound. It was quieter, but not peaceful. It was the silence of a stage after the leading actor has gone off and the rest of the cast are wondering what to do with their hands.

At midday Isabel did the accounts in the little sitting room with the green shutters, the cattle, the hides, the barley, the money owed by this tenant and that one. Alejandro believed the hacienda ran itself, more or less, with occasional help from the saints. It did not. It ran because Isabel sat at this desk two hours a day with a pen and a bad temper, and because the tenants knew that Doña Isabel remembered everything and would not be told a sad story twice.

At one, Abuela Pilar came down for lunch, which she called "breakfast" to annoy the cook.

"Where's my grandson?"

"Gone to the capital, Abuela. You watched him go."

"Did I?" The old woman lowered herself into her chair at the head of the table, from which she had ruled the family for sixty years, and arranged her black skirts like a general arranging his battalions. She was tiny and brown and wrinkled as a walnut, and her eyes were as sharp as tacks. "I remember a man on a horse being foolish in the gateway. I assumed it was one of the neighbours."

"It was Alejandro."

"Ha. Well. He gets that from his father." She speared a slice of ham. "His father once fell off a balcony while singing to me. Broke his leg in two places. I married him out of pity." She chewed. "Best decision I ever made. Why are you so tired?"

"I'm not tired."

"You have rings under your eyes like a raccoon. You were up in the night. I heard you." Abuela Pilar pointed her fork down the

table. “Creeping. In my day, when the husband went away, the wife slept like a baby. It was the only rest she got.”

Isabel had, in fact, been up in the night. She had been up most nights for the last week, because Alejandro had been restless and had twice slipped out after midnight for what he believed were secret rides and had come back with mud to his knees. Each time she had lain awake in the dark until she heard the bookcase click.

“I had a headache,” she said.

“Hmph.” Abuela Pilar looked at her a moment longer than was comfortable. Then she turned to Luz. “Child. What’s that cat doing under the table?”

“Investigating.”

“Investigating what?”

“The ham,” said Luz.

* * *

The column did not come to the hacienda. Isabel had not really expected it to. Around three in the afternoon, Bernardo came back from an errand in town on the mule, and from the speed at which he got off it, which for Bernardo was very fast, she knew that the news was bad.

They met in the kitchen. The kitchen was where all the real business of the house was done. It was a long, low room with blackened beams and strings of chillies and onions hanging from them, a great iron range that never quite went out, and a scrubbed table big enough to lay out a body on, which, the cook liked to say darkly, had happened twice.

Bernardo did not speak. Bernardo had never spoken, not in all the years anyone had known him. But he and Isabel had long ago worked out a language of their own, part gesture, part expression and part something that was almost thought-reading, and they could have a conversation faster than most people could say good morning.

He held up both hands, fingers spread, then closed and opened them five times. *Fifty.*

"Soldiers?"

He nodded. He drew a line across his chest from shoulder to hip, a sash, and then put his fist under his chin and raised his nose to the ceiling, a man who thought very well of himself. *An officer. A proud one.*

"The new comandante."

A shake of the head. He held up a finger, made a little cap of his hand on his head and tapped it twice. *Capitán.* Then he scowled and sucked in his cheeks, and Isabel, who knew all of Bernardo's faces, recognised this one. It was the face he made about men who whipped horses.

"Did he hurt anyone?"

Bernardo hesitated. He held his hand out flat at shoulder height, *not yet*, and then pointed to the floor, to the town, and to the sky where the sun was sliding west. He made a ringing motion with his fist, a bell rope pulled.

"The church bell. Tonight?"

He nodded. He held up his palms, *everyone*, and then laid his finger very seriously on his lips.

"A meeting," said Isabel slowly. "The whole town, at the church. And we're not to talk about it?"

Bernardo shook his head and made a face that said she had got it wrong. He pointed at his mouth, then at an imaginary person beside him, and made a long sweeping gesture of grandeur, like a man unrolling a proclamation.

"He'll speak. The Capitán will address the town." Isabel's mouth tightened. "Tomorrow, at market?"

Bernardo nodded. Then, after a moment, he reached out and touched the back of her right hand, where it rested on the table. She looked down. Without noticing, she had picked up the long kitchen knife the cook used for onions and was holding it exactly

as she held the carpet beater, as she had held the Toledo blade that morning, thumb flat along the spine, point steady as a compass needle.

Bernardo looked at the knife. Then he looked at her face, and his eyebrows went up and up until they nearly met his hairline.

Isabel put the knife down.

"Onions," she said. "For supper."

Bernardo, very slowly, nodded. But he went on looking at her all the way to the door, and at the door he stopped and looked back again, the way a man looks back at a dog he has just realised might be a wolf.

* * *

The bell began to ring at dusk.

It was the old bell of the mission of San Lorenzo, cracked in the earthquake of '98 and never mended, and its voice carried out across the fields like a cow with a cold. It rang and rang. From the veranda Isabel could see lamps coming out along the road as people began to walk into town, little bobbing points of light in the blue evening, and hear the dogs barking from farm to farm all down the valley.

Luz came and stood next to her in her nightgown.

"What's it for?"

"An announcement, my love. About the new soldiers."

"Are we going?"

"Not tonight. Tonight they're only telling us that there will be telling. Tomorrow is the telling." Isabel put her arm round her daughter's shoulders. "We'll go to market in the morning and hear it."

"Papá would go tonight."

"Papá isn't here."

Luz was quiet for a moment, listening to the bell. "When Papá isn't here," she said carefully, "who is supposed to do the things

Papá does?"

Isabel looked down at her. In the last of the light Luz's face was very serious, very young and very much like her father's, and her eyes were fixed not on the road but on her mother.

"What things?" said Isabel.

Luz shrugged one shoulder. "Things."

The bell stopped. In the sudden silence a nightjar began to churr in the orchard, and somewhere down in the town a man laughed, too loudly, the way men laugh when they want to be heard by everyone.

"Bed," said Isabel.

When Luz had gone, she stood alone on the veranda for a long time. Then she went to the study, took a sheet of paper from her husband's desk and began a letter to him in the capital. *My dearest*, she wrote, *you will be pleased to hear that all is quiet here.*

She looked at it for a while. Then she tore it up, put the pieces in the stove and went down to the kitchen to sharpen every knife in the house.

CHAPTER 3

The New Capitán

Market day in San Lorenzo started before dawn and was never entirely over, because there was always someone still haggling over a goat when the lamps were lit.

The plaza was a long dusty square with the mission church at one end, white as a wedding cake, and the garrison at the other, low and brown and squat, like a toad that had sat down in the sun and decided to stay. Between them, on market days, the whole valley came to town. There were stalls of melons and chillies and dried beans, pots and blankets, saddles and caged birds. Women sold tamales from steaming baskets. Old men sold advice for free. There was a man who pulled teeth under an awning, and a man who sold a tonic to cure toothache two stalls further down, and Isabel had long suspected they were brothers.

She came in with a basket on her arm and Luz at her side and Bernardo three paces behind with the mule, and she felt the difference the moment she stepped into the square.

Nobody was shouting. A market should shout. The melon sellers should be bellowing that their melons were sweeter than honey, and the tamale women should be calling out the names of every child they knew, and somewhere a donkey should be complaining about the general injustice of the world. Instead there was a low, uneasy murmur, like bees in a wall. People were doing their buying with their eyes on the garrison.

The soldiers were everywhere. New ones, in new uniforms, a deep blue with red facings, too heavy for the heat and buttoned to the throat. They stood at the corners of the square in pairs with their muskets grounded and their faces blank. Two of them were walking slowly down the line of stalls with a ledger, stopping at each one. When they moved on, the stall-holder's face had always gone tight and pale.

"Mamá," said Luz quietly. "They're taking money."

"I see it."

"Is that allowed?"

"It's a tax," said Isabel.

"Is a tax allowed?"

"Sometimes." Isabel watched one of the soldiers lift a fat chicken off a stall and tuck it under his arm without paying. "Not like that."

* * *

Old Mateo Ruiz had the best melons in the valley, and everybody knew it, especially Mateo. He had a stall in the middle of the square under a patched yellow awning, and he had been selling there for forty years. He was a small, bandy-legged man with a white moustache like a broom and hands like tree roots, and he had once told Alejandro to his face that his horse had better manners than he did.

Isabel liked him enormously.

She was buying a melon from him, a heavy green one he had tapped with his knuckle and pronounced *perfect, señora, like a love song*, when the soldiers with the ledger arrived.

"Ruiz," said the one with the ledger, reading. "Mateo. Melons. Twelve reales."

Mateo looked at him. "Twelve reales for what?"

"Market tax."

"I paid market tax last month. To Comandante Ortega. Two reales, like every month for thirty years. I have the paper."

"Comandante Ortega is gone. New tax. Twelve reales."

"Twelve reales is everything I take in a week!"

The soldier shrugged. He was very young, Isabel saw, with a sunburnt neck and a soft mouth, and he did not look happy. "Orders," he said. "Twelve reales or we take goods to the value."

"Then take goods to the value of two," said Mateo, "and go and tell your orders to put their heads in a bucket."

It was the wrong thing to say. Isabel knew it the moment he said it, because she saw the other soldier glance over his shoulder towards the garrison steps. She followed the look.

A man was standing on the top step, in the shade of the portico. He had been there, she realised, all along.

* * *

Capitán Ramón Vargas was not what she had expected.

She had expected a brute. Garrisons on the frontier were usually commanded by brutes, or drunks, or old men like Ortega who had been sent to the end of the world to be forgotten. This man was none of those things. He was perhaps forty, tall and lean and beautifully turned out, his blue coat cut close to his body by a tailor who knew what he was doing. His boots were polished to mirrors. His dark hair was swept back from a high forehead and touched with grey at the temples, in a way that she suspected he admired in the glass every morning. He had a narrow, clever, smiling face, and he was smiling now as he came down the steps, unhurried, pulling off his gloves one finger at a time.

The crowd parted for him without anyone telling it to.

Behind him came a second man, who was entirely the opposite. Where the Capitán was lean, this one was round. Where the Capitán was polished, this one was dusty, with his coat buttoned wrong and a crumb of pastry clinging to his chin. He was very

large, with a big soft moustache and the mournful eyes of a bloodhound, and he was eating an empanada.

"Sergeant," said the Capitán, without looking round.

The large man swallowed hastily. "Capitán?"

"Is there a difficulty?"

The sergeant peered at the melon stall. "The old man doesn't want to pay, Capitán."

"Ah." Vargas reached the stall. He looked at Mateo's melons, piled in a careful green pyramid. He looked at Mateo. He looked, briefly, at Isabel, a cool flick of the eyes that took her in from her hat to her shoes and sorted her into some private drawer. Then he smiled at the old man as if they were old friends.

"Señor Ruiz. I've heard a great deal about you. The finest melons in the valley, they tell me."

Mateo eyed him. "They tell you right."

"And a man of strong opinions."

"I'm seventy-three. I've earned them."

"Indeed you have." Vargas picked up a melon from the top of the pyramid and weighed it in his long fingers. "You see, señor, I have a problem. I have come here with sixty men to protect this town. There are bandits on the roads, Indians in the hills, smugglers on the coast. And now, I'm told, there is this masked fellow." He smiled. "This *fox*. Who rides about at night breaking laws and making fools of His Majesty's officers. Sixty men must be fed. Sixty men must be paid. And who should pay for the men who protect the town, if not the town?"

"Ortega managed on two reales."

"Ortega," said Vargas pleasantly, "was a fool, and the fox made him one." He turned the melon in his hands. "I am not a fool."

He let go of it.

It fell onto the cobbles at his feet and burst. Pink flesh and black seeds sprayed over Mateo's boots and the hem of Isabel's skirt. Somebody in the crowd gasped.

Mateo went white under his tan. “That,” he said, his voice shaking, “is a week’s work.”

“Is it? How careless of me.” Vargas picked up a second melon. “Twelve reales, Señor Ruiz.”

“I don’t have twelve reales.”

The second melon fell. And then, without any change in the Capitán’s pleasant expression, he put his polished boot against the side of the trestle table and pushed.

The whole pyramid went over. Forty melons, the best in the valley, rolled and tumbled and split across the square. Children scattered. A dog dashed in and began to eat one. Mateo made a sound Isabel had never heard a man make before, a kind of grunt, as though someone had hit him in the stomach, and took a step forward with his fists up.

The two soldiers caught his arms.

* * *

Isabel’s basket creaked.

She did not notice at first. She was standing very still, as she had been taught to stand when an opponent did something unexpected, with her weight balanced and her breath slow and her eyes not on his hands but on his centre, the middle of his chest, where every movement starts. She was measuring distance without meaning to. Three paces. The sergeant on his left, slow, eating. Two soldiers holding Mateo, muskets slung, useless at that range. The Capitán wore a sword, a fine slim smallsword with a gilded guard. He had not touched it. He did not think he would need to.

Three paces, said a voice in her head, very calm, very old. It was her grandfather’s voice. *Step in on the left, take his wrist, turn it, and the sword is yours before he remembers he has one.*

The handle of the basket groaned again under her fingers. It was woven willow, and she was crushing it.

"Mamá," whispered Luz.

Isabel looked down. Luz was looking at her hand. It was white to the knuckles, the tendons standing out like cords, and the basket handle had bent nearly in half.

Isabel opened her fingers. She took a breath. She made her face into the face of Doña Isabel de la Vega, who cut herself on butter knives, and she stepped forward, not three paces but one, and said in a soft, clear, slightly tremulous voice:

"Oh dear. Oh, what a dreadful mess."

Vargas turned. His eyes moved over her again, slower this time, and something in them sharpened with interest.

"Señora. I apologise. Your dress."

"It's nothing, Capitán. Only melon." She smiled at him, a little foolishly, the way she had smiled at a hundred officers at a hundred dinners. "I am Isabel de la Vega. My husband is Don Alejandro. I don't believe we've been introduced."

"De la Vega." He took her hand and bowed over it, his lips not quite touching her glove. His fingers were dry and cool. "I have heard the name. Your husband is a man of property."

"Oh, a great deal of it. Cows, mainly. He is always going on about cows." She laughed. "He's in the capital just now. Business. He's always away on business."

"Always?" said Vargas.

"Oh, *always*. Sometimes I think he loves the ministers more than me." She sighed. Then, still holding his hand, as if it had only just occurred to her, she said: "Capitán, how much did you say Señor Ruiz owes? Twelve reales? Let me pay it. Please. I couldn't bear to see a scene. My nerves. My husband says I have the nerves of a hummingbird."

There was a pause. Behind her she could feel the whole square holding its breath.

Vargas looked at her for a long moment. His smile did not change, but Isabel, who had spent twenty years watching men's

faces over the tips of swords, saw the tiny shift behind his eyes, a door opening a crack and closing again.

"How generous," he said. "Sergeant Gordo. Take the lady's money."

The large sergeant stepped forward, wiping his fingers on his coat. He took the coins Isabel counted out of her purse with a look of deep apology, and then, because he was standing right next to the stall and a melon had rolled against his boot, he picked it up, looked at it with longing and handed it to Luz.

"For the little one," he mumbled. "It's only a bit cracked."

"Gordo," said Vargas.

"Sorry, Capitán."

The soldiers let go of Mateo. The old man stood among the ruins of his melons with his fists still clenched, shaking, and did not look at Isabel. She did not blame him. A man does not like to be saved by a woman with the nerves of a hummingbird. She would have to send Bernardo out to his farm tonight with something, money disguised as a debt, or a sack of seed he could pretend he had lent them years ago.

* * *

Vargas had not moved away. He stood beside her, pulling his gloves back on, and he spoke softly, for her alone.

"You must be lonely, señora. With your husband always away."

"Oh, I keep busy. Embroidery. I'm doing a cushion."

"And yet so far from town. A house full of women and old men. In times like these." He smoothed the leather over his knuckles. "You must let me know if you are ever troubled. By bandits. Or by anyone at all."

"You're very kind."

"I am," he agreed, "when it suits me." He smiled and touched his hat. "I look forward to meeting Don Alejandro. I have a feeling we shall get on."

He turned and walked back to the garrison steps. At the top he turned round, and the sergeant hurried to bang a halberd three times on the stones for silence. The whole plaza went still.

"People of San Lorenzo!"

He had a good voice, carrying and warm, the voice of a man used to speaking in courtrooms and ballrooms. "I am Capitán Ramón Vargas, by appointment of His Excellency the Governor. I have come to bring order to this town, and order is what I shall bring. From today, the market tax is twelve reales a week. The curfew is nine o'clock. Any person found on the roads after dark without a pass will be arrested. Any person found giving aid or shelter to the outlaw known as Zoro will be hanged."

A ripple ran through the crowd at the name. Isabel kept her face very still.

"And," said Vargas, "by order of the Governor, effective at noon today, the waters of the Río San Lorenzo, from the hills to the sea, are declared the property of the Crown, to be administered by this garrison for the good of all. Any farmer who wishes to water his fields will apply for a permit." He paused. "The fee will be posted."

For a moment nobody spoke. Then old Mateo Ruiz, standing ankle-deep in ruined melons, said in a cracked voice that carried right across the square:

"You can't own a *river*."

Vargas smiled down at him.

"Señor Ruiz," he said, "you would be amazed what I can own."

He went inside. The door of the garrison closed behind him with a heavy wooden thud, and in the silence Isabel heard, very clearly, the sound of the river itself, faint and far away beyond the rooftops, running down out of the hills the way it had run for a thousand years, as if nothing had happened at all.

Luz tugged her sleeve. She was holding the cracked melon in both arms like a baby, and her eyes were enormous.

"Mamá," she whispered. "When are you going to tell Papá?"

Isabel looked at the closed garrison door, and at the soldiers in their blue coats, and at the hard white noon light pouring down over the plaza like water.

"I'm not," she said.

Luz stared at her. Behind them Bernardo, who had heard, slowly put his hand over his eyes.

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