

The Rosary

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## *The Rosary*

There was a party that night (the fourth that week), and this time, Ana Maria stepped outside of the small, stucco archway and began to stroll along the dirt roads lined with cobblestones. She did not mind the other citizens, jovial and drinking the not-so-fine wine that the mayor had finally released after months of war. Ana Maria ran her hands across the red brick, feeling the tiny ripples and rivets, pausing on the yellow paint marking the entrance of the party; she could hear the cries of *Fiesta!* and *Viva la España!* coming from the square. The girl took in a deep breath, stepped through the gate entrance, and with a loud yell was whisked into the crowd of dancing and drinking.

Ana Maria heard the cries of joy from the crowd around her, reveling in the new wine and the new streets and the new world that the people had taken back. She whirled around on the dance floor, feeling the rough stones grate against her feet and the wind on her skin. The dress she wore twirled around her legs, the red and orange frills spinning like fire on her toes. Her black hair contrasted with the hanging lanterns that illuminated her dark eyes. Although she smiled at her companion, a tall man with brown curls and fantastic dancing ability, her smile could not mask the deep frown lines in her forehead and the tears threatening to spill from her eyes.

After the *guitarristas* had finished, she excused herself, placing a small kiss on the man's cheek. While the rest of her people continued to celebrate their new lives, Ana Maria knew that her life would soon end.

The young girl pushed her way through the crowd and sat on the edge of the fountain and brushed back the black curls atop her head. Something caught her eye and she turned towards it.

Her hand fell slowly beside her, sinking into the black and red fabric. A clear vase filled with roses rested beside her, the red petals fluttering in the wind. He used to give her roses...

A tear trickled down her face, finally letting the dam of emotions overflow as she recalled the conversation from only a couple of hours earlier.

Her father had thrown harsh words at Ana Maria, smacking her with cries of duty and commands of commitment to her family. She'd stood fast, her fists clenched in the red and black fabric of her dress. Tears in her eyes, she retaliated, pleading her case to him. Her father shook his head and proceeded to vehemently yell at her. So she left, ignoring whatever else he would say to her about dowries and dead lovers.

And now here she was, her mind wandering back to when times were good, and her love was here, and there was nothing to worry about but when the next meal would come. Ana Maria reached out and stroked the rose. It was softer than the finest of silks. She took in a deep breath and closed her eyes. She *had* to think about this rationally. Her father would find her eventually - this was a small village - and she'd be dragged back to a life of commitment she couldn't handle.

Ana Maria took the rose out of the vase and inhaled deeply. Her memories of her lover had become more precious the longer he'd been away. He would have loved to be on the dance floor with her right now, putting a rose in her hair, telling her how much he loved her...

She dashed the rose to the ground. Ana Maria stood up. She would not live like this anymore. She had two options: marriage or death. She was going to pick neither.

A tap on her shoulder startled the poor girl, tossing her head back and she almost bolted out the door and down and out the alleys forever. But it was only a confused server offering her a drink of champagne. Graciously, she took it and, once the server had left, guzzled every last drop. Bubbles tingled her spine, and above in the heavens, her *abuela* was throwing a fit of fury

at her granddaughter's lack of self-control. If that hurt her, Ana Maria's next stunt was going to give her another heart attack.

The young girl stepped into the crowd, hips swaying to the strum of the guitar and the beat of the drums. Her skirts mixed with the other colors of blue, yellow and green. Finally, she made it out of the courtyard and proceeded to make her way back down the cobblestone streets.

After a half hour of walking, the cobblestone separated into a white stone. In front of her stood a cathedral fit for a king, carved from the most beautiful marble into spires and arched doorways, decorated with gold trimmings and sculptures of fallen angels and risen sinners. Figures dressed in black robes with hoods drawn over them drifted across the expanse, moving as if in a trance induced by the holy lights of gods and whatever prophecies and commandments had been given to these faithful servants.

Ana Maria thought about her decision, knowing full well the consequences of becoming a priestess, of entering a holy communion without the approval of her father. She would never be able to come home. Never get to rejoin the village in parties or dances again. Never look at another man beside the god she chose to worship.

She shook her head and reached up to her neck, rubbing the small gold, black, and white beads draped across her collarbone. The necklace had come as a gift in one of the small packages given to her by a man dressed in green and brown. A tiny note had come with it, listing the small fortunes that had blessed the militia that month. This necklace had been one of them. He had thought that she'd need more faith to get through her trials.

Ana Maria smiled half-heartedly. She said one last prayer to that god who had abandoned her three months ago when a man had given her a scrap of paper bearing her lover's name and the words *desaparecido en combate* on it. A week's worth of sobs accompanied that note.

Hopefully, another god listened and softened those hearts in front of her. The girl took in a deep breath and a step forward.

The figures in black robes swarmed her, touching her and asking her questions. What was she doing here? What were her intentions? What was she promising? They brought her into the middle of the mass, in front of a man holding a tome. He asked her why she had come. Ana Maria looked up, her red lips forming the words.

“To give my life.”

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The girl looked out over the balcony, staring at the sunset fading into the fields of corn and beets. The past few months had been good to her. Maria (her newer, simpler name that had come along with new clothes, new responsibilities, and new beliefs) had found a purpose to her sorrows. Amongst the books and the candles, she had found someone new. A god who would not leave her.

A tap on her shoulder. Maria turned around, her smile shining under the wraps of cloth and spoke to an older sister. The sister was concerned. There was a man downstairs in the chapel, looking for an Ana Maria. A drop of fear shook Maria’s face but was quickly wiped away by a sincere smile. Perhaps it was just an old friend from her town, looking to see what had happened to her.

Yet, the stairs seemed to stretch forever as Maria walked down the echoing steps. The candlelight flickered in the darkness. Finally, she reached the wooden door that led to the pews and altars. Another deep breath. She pushed the door open.

A man stood there, his dark hair swept back. His uniform was in shambles, a backpack slung over his shoulder. Maria stopped. He turned around and for a moment, they watched each

other. His face was the same (plus a few scars) and his eyes were still a crystal blue and *Dios mio*, he was watching her with the same deep gaze, like a man drowning in water. He was holding something in his hand but she couldn't tell what it was. His eyes began to tear and with a stumble in his step, he made his way to her. He fell to his knees and clutched the bottom of her robes like life support. Ana Maria would have run her hands through his hair and soothed him.

All Maria could do was watch and cry for his forgiveness.

*“Lo siento. Lo siento mucho.”*

Maria dared to take a look down at his hands. In his hand, clenched between her robes and his trembling fingers, was a single red rose. The petals had already begun to wilt.

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