

Ascension of the Conquistador

by Andrew Bowen

One of Montejo's captains has us drilling in the rain again. The sun hasn't shone for days and the air is stifling, like trying to breath under water. Everything looks gray except the palms. Each green leaf droops in the rain like a salivating tongue hanging from its mouth.

I miss arid Spain.

A man gurgles behind me. I turn to the familiar sound in time to see a robe-clad monk draw a cross in the air between himself and the native on his knees. He flails against two acolytes holding his head in a barrel. The priest baptizes him, but the wretched soul surely doesn't understand. All he knows is that he, at the hands of these conquistadors, has nearly drowned.

He lifts his head from the barrel. Long black hair hangs wet over his face as the two young men pull him up by his elbows. He looks up and meets my eyes. They are dark and eternal. His lips tremble as if words might explode from his mouth. Though he knows why I haven't helped him, the pain rippling across his face argues that I could have chosen to.

His dark features remind me of Isabella.

She was a *conversa*, a Jew who, in light of the Inquisition, had converted to Catholicism. But this was only wool over their eyes. She loved Spain too much to leave, but not enough to abandon Yahweh.

In the bedchamber, she liked to wake just before sunrise and read from her secret Torah and Psalms. The parchment scroll crackled as she unfurled it in her delicate, spider-like hands. I propped on my elbows and watched. She sat on her knees in front of the window and allowed the eastern morning glow to wash over her, as if the sun

itself were brought to life by her voice, and cast a golden hue over her skin. Her linen night gown hung loose off her shoulders and revealed the sheen of skin that only her mother and I had ever seen. The Psalms of David trickled off her russet lips. I smiled as her voice soothed any potential ache my life as a soldier might bring that day.

She turned and caught me watching with a grin. "Can't a lady have some privacy?"

"My darling, if you could see what I wake to every morn..."

Someone kicked in our front door.

I drew my sword as the soldiers, six in all, swarmed the room and overwhelmed us before I could swing my blade. Two held my wife at sword's edge while the remaining four disarmed me and held fast to my arms.

"You had better explain this, corporal."

A priest, draped in a red robe and cap, stepped into my house with two young men, also in red robes, flanking him. A silver crucifix shimmered by a chain at the center of his chest. He smiled and nodded. "Fear not, sergeant, we do not suspect you."

One of the soldiers holding my wife approached the priest with her parchment scrolls. The smile left his face as he looked up at me. "Your wife confessed allegiance to Spain and our holy mother church, yet she carries this?"

She yelled in Hebrew. No one understood the words, but everyone felt the barbs. She spat on one of the soldiers. He slapped her face. My muscles caught fire and lashed out from my captors. I buried my fist into the young man's cheek and fell upon him. Isabella screamed and clawed at the others as they pulled me away from the boy. I could taste his blood on my lips.

The priest raised his hands. "See how the devil works in her? Take her away. Sergeant," he said as she bucked in their arms. "We know that from creation, women are the deceivers of men. We do not blame you for what was held in your home, but we shall free you of it." He nodded to one of the soldier and turned out the door.

Half an hour later, the rush and crackle of flames touched my ears. I was confined to the bedchamber as my wife cooked and

screamed along with other conversos found guilty of apostasy. I trembled with hatred and bloodlust. Because of her and the possible taint of her influence, I was ordered to reestablish my loyalty to God and country with military service in the war against the Maya of the Yucatan. I told them to burn in hell. They smiled and sent me anyway.

Rain drips into my eyes and I blink. The savage stares at me as he's dragged away and replaced by another for baptism.

"Sergeant!"

I shudder and turn about to attention. "Yes sir!"

The captain glares at me. His breath is sour, like dead fish. "Have you found something prettier than me to look at over there?"

"No sir."

"Then keep your eyes forward, conquistador!"

"Yes sir!"

He steps away with his hands behind his back. Raindrops clink against the sword at his side. "Dismissed!"

We break ranks, and make for our tents.

A young private inspects himself in a hand mirror and trims his black goatee. Fresh from the settlement on Cuba, I almost pity him. We are bunked together, I'm sure, out of mutual punishment and jest from our officers.

Sleep pulls on my eyelids as the rain taps on our canvas tent. My throat opens and the beginnings of a snore rumble in my throat.

"Sergeant?"

I open my eyes and sigh. "What is it?"

"Is it true that the men and women from the first expedition were captured and sacrificed by the savages?"

"Perhaps. What of it?"

The crumple of his leather boots bother the rhythm of the rain as he takes them off. "The priest, during mass said that they cut out the hearts of their victims because they believe it will cause the sun to rise." His voice breaks as his throat strains to conceal fear. "Have you ever heard of such nonsense?"

I think about Isabella's Jewish rituals. During Passover, before the Inquisition's grip squeezed our provincial town outside of Cordoba, she would paint lamb's blood on the lentil post of our door. "The Hebrews did this to keep the angel of death away," she would say. "Sergeant?"

I turn away in my bunk. "It's all nonsense, boy. Goodnight."

Whispers and a muffled voice wake me. I draw my dagger and roll over. Several Maya, painted in black stripes, fill the room and surround us. The boy is standing with an arm around his neck by someone from behind. Three Maya tackle me to my bunk and stuff a ball of cloth into my mouth. The boy's eyes flare wide. A long, silvery blade runs through him. Moonlight shimmers on the blood that coats and drips from the steel. I cringe and glance away. When I look back, I see him; the man who had been baptized stares down at me with stripes of shadow over his body. They bring me to my feet and abduct me from the sleepy camp.

They drag me blindfolded through the Yucatan jungle. Branches and leaves flog me as I slip on the muddy path. The gag falls out of my mouth. I scream, "Free me! I beg you," but they do not understand. I lift my face toward the sky and curse God instead for his destruction of the Tower of Babel whose fall now makes moot my plea for life.

The soles of my feet eventually scratch against stone. They are steps. I search for footing with my splayed toes as I'm tugged along. The voices are calmer now as the air cools the higher we go. My leg muscles burn and quiver.

We stop. The blindfold falls from my eyes. A man with black paint over the top half of his face stares at me with the cool indifference of a Greek bust. Red, yellow and blue feathers flutter in the breeze from his hair. I stand atop a pyramid which overlooks the fog-laden forest around us.

"Please," I say.

He mutters something in his native tongue. My captors push me down and turn me belly-up on a large, flat table of cold, wet limestone. One of the men cuts my shirt open with an obsidian blade. I

close my eyes and whimper as the plumed priest chants over me. Thunder rumbles in the west. Hands flow over me as I try and remember Isabella's face. My heart beat drums inside my head and distorts her image.

The blade cuts into my chest. My eyes burst open. I heave and flail my arms and legs as the priest cuts my flesh and cracks my ribs. There is a man holding each limb. Blood squirts onto my face and gurgles out of my mouth. It tastes like dirty coins.

My heart beat quiets. I feel cold and weightless. Sunlight splits the horizon in the east and coats my body in warmth. The priest slowly lifts my heart above my chest. It still beats as the rising sunlight bursts around it. Isabella's face emerges soft and pristine before my eyes. I smile and drift to sleep.

