



# Two Moon Princess

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Summary: Andrea, a reluctant, tomboyish princess from the Kingdom of Zeltia—a world resembling medieval Spain—is transported from a forbidden cave into modern California, and when she accidentally returns to her home with the wrong person, it sets off a chain reaction that threatens her family and their kingdom.

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*For Natalia, For Nicolás*

*My angel, my rebel*

*My love*





ONE

*A Broken Dream*

“The arrow knows the way. Just let it free.”

Burnt into my memory by endless repetition, the words came to my mind unbidden, with the soothing rhythm of a familiar song. But somehow this time, they were not just words: A tingling feeling ran through my fingers, and the bow became an extension of myself. I could feel the trembling of the string and the cold of the metal at the tip of the arrow as I felt the tension in my muscles and the pounding of my heart.

Then the arrow took flight. Like a falcon aiming at its prey, it went straight to the target drawn on the trunk of the distant oak. In the complete silence of the wait, I heard the vibration in the air and the thump of the tree hurting as it was hit in the center of the bull’s eye.

All over the field, the roar of the multitude exploded like sudden thunder, breaking my concentration. Still holding the bow I no longer felt, I tore my eyes from the arrow trembling in the tree and walked back to my companions.

Don Gonzalo, our instructor, moved forward as I approached them. “Bravo, Princess Andrea!” he shouted. “A perfect shot!” His red hair a mane of fire in the midday sun, he

crossed his right arm briefly over his chest before extending it toward me, his open hand facing the sky. The salute to an equal. I blushed with pleasure at his words and returned his salute while the pages surrounded me, screaming my name in victory.

I laughed with them and answered their calls. And for a moment, lost in the exhilarating feeling of belonging, I almost forgot the empty seat on the High Stand by the king's side. The empty seat that meant Tío Ramiro had not come to the Games. The empty seat that meant, despite my perfect shot, I had already lost.

"Andrea, I will try to be there," Tío had told me months ago before leaving for his manor. "But you know it doesn't depend only on me. I have other obligations."

It was not exactly a promise, but I had taken it as such because he was my only hope. Tío Ramiro, my mother's brother, was the only one who had shown any interest in my desire to be a knight. I knew that without his help, the king, my father, would not allow me to become a squire. He would send me to Mother instead to be made into a lady as he had promised her he would on my fourteenth birthday. And my fourteenth birthday was only months away.

A lady! I shook my head. As a lady, I would not be allowed to play in the courtyard or hunt in the woods. As a lady, I would have to stay inside the castle and do a lot of curtsyng and smiling.

I shook my head again to get rid of the dreary thought, and closing my fingers around my lucky charm—a flat round pebble with four perfect holes I had found once in my uncle's room—I watched as the herald, magnificently attired in the blue and white colors of our kingdom, rode into the center of the field and in a clear voice announced the winners.

“Winner at the wrestling contest, Don Luis de Can. Winner at the sword competition: Don Enrique de Hul. Winner at archery: Princess Andrea de Montemaioir.”

The world around me disappeared in a cacophony of sounds, and I knew I was shouting, although I could not hear my voice. Moments later, and without any recollection of how I had gotten there, I found myself in front of the High Stand where my father was now standing. His eyes, bright and proud under his bushy eyebrows, met mine briefly as he offered me the prize: a golden arrow. One knee on the ground, my head bent in respect, I took it from his hand and went back to my comrades.

I could not stay long, though. After all, I was a princess and was expected to be with my family in the Great Hall. I would join the pages later and wait with them while the knights met to choose their squires. *While the knights fought to choose me as their squire*, I thought and smiled. Fate was smiling at me today. I had won first place. Father would have to realize at last that I, Andrea, his fourth and youngest daughter, could be as good as the male heir he had always wanted—even without my uncle’s prompting.

My feet barely touching the ground, I rushed to the castle.

Back in my room, I gave myself over to Ama Bernarda, my old nurse, to be dressed for dinner. For the first time ever, I did not argue when she slipped my fanciest dress over my underdress and combed my hair again and again in a useless attempt to make me look like a lady. I did not even complain when she scrubbed my nails with a sharp brush until my fingertips were red and sore.

Once I was ready, I looked in the mirror. A tall lanky girl with dark green eyes and short brown curls returned my stare. I couldn’t recognize in her the mighty warrior I really was.

A sharp knock interrupted my musings. Margarida, I thought. When I opened the door, however, I didn't find my sister, but one of my father's footmen standing outside.

"Princess Andrea," he said. "His Majesty the King demands to see you."

I froze. Why should Father want to see me now? Had I already been chosen? Or . . . ? Someone—Ama Bernarda, I realized—touched my elbow.

"Come on, Princess. Don't make Don Andrés wait."

"But . . ."

Ama smiled, her eyes so surprisingly blue in her worn-out face staring right at me. "Have no fear, my child. You have worked hard. Maybe we were all wrong and your father will grant you your wish to be a squire after all."

Encouraged by Ama's words, I rushed to Father's quarters, and after the footman's formal announcement, I hurried inside. From behind the immense mahogany table that dominated the room, Father looked up. "Pray have a seat, Princess," he said as I curtsied to him.

I did as ordered. My fingers tightly wrapped around the carved armrest of the chair, my feet on the deep red carpet, I leaned forward.

Father smiled—the unusual gesture making the old scar that ran down his right cheek stretch itself into a pale line. "Today has been a great day for you, Princess," he said. "One phase of your life has come to a close, and a new one is about to begin. So it is with joy that I dismiss you from my service as a page and welcome you as a lady into my family."

I jumped to my feet. "A lady? But, Father, I don't want to be a lady. I've won the golden arrow. I—"

"Silence!"

Father's voice was cold. Cold and hard as hail, and his eyes were ice. Under the soft silk of my skirts, my legs were shaking and refused to hold me. Gasping for air, I stumbled back.

Again Father smiled, a brief sharp grimace that did not reach his eyes. "You are right, Princess. You didn't do too badly this morning—for a girl—and I am proud of you. But you are almost fourteen now, and the queen and I have an agreement. Your time to play games with the pages is over."

"Games?"

Father raised his hand. "Yes, Princess, all you have done until now, I call games. Even if playing them has taught you the basic skills of a soldier, that is all they were. But from now on, your comrades will start the real training, and believe me, it will not be a place for a girl. You are a princess, Andrea, like it or not, and you have to learn to behave like a lady. One day you will understand and thank me for having sent you to your mother, Doña Jimena, today."

Pushing the heavy chair back, he got up and offered me his ring. The audience was over. As powerless as a bow under the skilled archer's hands, I rose and, bending over the polished table, kissed the blue stone on his middle finger: the symbol of Gothia, our kingdom.

Behind Father, from the tapestry that covered the wall, the brown damp eyes of the hunted stag were pleading with mine for help. Around him in a *mêlée* of bodies and legs, several hounds, fangs bared, were waiting for their master to finish the kill. I was the stag. And my time was over. I turned and the walls swirled in a blur of colors, while ahead of me the doors swung open without a noise.

When I came back to my senses, I found myself in the garden, standing by my old companion, the oak tree. Up on its

branches, hidden by the dense foliage of summer, my secret hideout was waiting. I reached up, and grabbing its lowest limb firmly with my hands, I swung my body up. But my gown, entangled on the undergrowth, pulled me down.

Jerking the skirts over my knees, I kicked the trunk. "How can Father do this to me? Sending me to Mother? Isn't it obvious I'm not a lady? I don't look like a lady, I don't feel like a lady, and I definitely don't act like one."

I hit the tree again. Pain shot up my legs from my bruised toes, and brilliant points of light flashed in front of my eyes.

"Andrea!"

I ignored the call.

"Andrea," the voice repeated, closer now.

"Go away!"

I waited for the rustle of the skirt on the grass that would tell me Margarida was leaving. But my heavy breathing was the only answer.

"Ama Bernarda told me Father had summoned you," my sister said after a pause. "When you didn't come back, I guessed you would be here."

My nails biting deep into my clenched palms, I turned. "Leave me alone."

A flash of pain crossed my sister's eyes. "I gather Father said no," she said.

I wanted Margarida to hold me in her arms and hated myself for it. That would only prove my father was right, that I was only a girl. I shook my head. "I don't care what Father says," I cried. "I am a squire."

"Andrea, you are a lady."

"No, I'm not. I don't like to sew. And I hate curtsying."

Margarida smiled. "I don't like sewing either. But that is not all ladies do and you know it."

"The only thing I know is that I like to be outside in the meadows, and to shoot and fight, and that I only feel alive when I'm riding on Flecha."

"You can still ride Flecha."

"Sure, and when would that be? Once a month if I behave. That is not enough. You know I'll die if I have to stay inside."

"But Andrea, you cannot be a squire. If Father has forbidden it, no one in the castle will take you at his service."

I sulked. Margarida was right. No one in the castle would dare defy Father. No one in the castle. Suddenly the total implications of her words hit me, and I laughed. "Margarida, you are brilliant!" Rushing to her, I hugged her wildly.

My sister moved back and, holding me at arm's length, stared into my eyes. "What is it, Andrea? One of your crazy ideas?"

"My ideas are not crazy," I said. But as I was talking, I remembered the time some winters past when, annoyed at my sister Rosa's teasing, I ran away and almost froze to death in the snow. I shrugged. "This time I will plan my journey carefully."

"A journey? But where would you go?"

"It doesn't matter where as long as it's away from this awful castle. I will dress like a boy and offer my services as a squire to some distant lord."

"Andrea, please, don't go. You left once before, remember? And Father had to rescue you."

"Sure." I sighed in exasperation. "But thanks to my running away, Mother agreed I could train with the pages until my fourteenth birthday. Besides, it's summer now."

Margarida hesitated. I had to keep her busy so she could

not think to alert Mother. "I will need a page's clothes, a blanket, and some food."

"What you need is some sense, Andrea."

"You may be right, sister. But it wasn't my fault you took it all."

Margarida laughed.

"So dear sister, would you be so kind as to get me some food from the kitchen?"

"You have made up your mind, haven't you?"

I nodded. "Please, Margarida, I need your help."

"All right, all right, I'll help you. But—"

"You will not regret it, I promise. Now go. And meet up with me at the stables."

I had almost reached the door to the keep when I remembered Ama Bernarda would be in my quarters. I hesitated. Ama would get suspicious if I were to change into my page's clothes. I could not take that risk. Turning back, I ran to the laundry house. I picked some plain tights and a soldier's tunic from the clean pile. I rolled them into a bundle under my arm and rushed across the cobblestones of the courtyard toward the stables.

From the darkness of her stall, Flecha greeted me with a loud nicker. Stretching her neck, she rubbed her head against my chest. I ran my hands through her golden mane. Flecha neighed.

"Shh. Nobody must hear us," I whispered into her soft warm ear.

Flecha's big limpid eyes looked at me for a moment, questioning. "We are going away," I told her. She snorted and remained still while I slid the bridle over her head.

While my hands worked on her saddle, the faces of the lords I had seen at my father's court flashed through my mind. I rejected them one by one until I found the perfect candidate.

“I’ve chosen Don Pelayo as my future lord,” I told Margarida after she had joined me. “His castle is on the Boreal Island. Father will never imagine that I have crossed the ocean. He knows I hate boats.”

“But the Boreal Island is so far away; Father will find you before you get there.”

I thought for a minute. The shortest distance to the island from the mainland was from the village of Forcarei at the other side of the Northern Sierra. Although it was not far in a straight line, to actually reach Forcarei would take me several days because the road made a long detour east around the mountains. Unless . . .

“No,” I said. “He won’t.”

Margarida frowned.

“I will not take the main road. I will go west until I hit the ocean, then continue north along the coast. I will be in Forcarei by morning.”

Margarida gasped. “But you cannot do that, Andrea. You’d have to cross the Forbidden Lands. It is too dangerous. People disappear there without a trace, and strange creatures swim ashore at night.”

“Come on, Margarida. You cannot seriously believe those stories.”

“They are not stories. My dueña remembers. She saw the strangers they found by the shore in Grandfather’s times. They looked like us, she says, but spoke a strange tongue, and they were naked like animals. Then one night they disappeared from the dungeon, through the castle walls, and were never seen again.”

“So what? Even if that was true, which I very much doubt, why should I care? That was a long time ago.”

“Please, Andrea. Be reasonable. Don’t go.”

Her face was tense with fear. I knew her resolve to help me was melting. I hugged her quickly. “Now sister, promise me you will not tell.”

Margarida sighed. “Will you be careful?”

“I will. Don’t worry. And before you know it, I’ll be back. A real knight.”

Margarida shook her head. I hugged her again. Then I turned to Flecha, and not wanting to waste any more time, I tucked the stolen uniform and the food in her saddlebag. The reins wrapped around my hand, I led her into the courtyard.

The castle gates were open. I jumped on Flecha’s back and cantered toward the sentries. The guards came to attention as I approached and crossed their spears. But when I got close enough for them to see me, they moved back and saluted. I returned their salute and, pressing Flecha’s flanks, sprang forward.

Soon I had left the drawbridge behind and, at full gallop, dashed ahead across the plains that surrounded the castle in the direction of the Northern Sierra. I wanted to pretend I was going north just in case someone was watching.

The evening was warm and clear, not a single cloud tainted the sky. On my right, beyond the thatched roofs of the village, over the eastern horizon, Athos the golden moon was rising. I could not have asked for a better night.

By the time I reached the forest, the sun was already on my left, sinking rapidly toward the raised lands that hid the ocean. The day would soon be over. I reined Flecha in and looked back toward the gray walls and towers of my father’s castle. Nobody was following me. Yet.

I took a deep breath. The air smelled of grass and pine, of horse sweat and leather. It smelled of freedom. Over the repetitive call of the crickets, invisible birds were singing.

Flecha neighed. I pressed my legs, and her supple body turned at my command. Leaving the road I had followed so far, I headed west, toward the Forbidden Lands.

At first the woods seemed no different from the ones that flanked the highway. But little by little, trees became scarcer and were replaced by shrubs and bracken until finally, after a steady climb, I reached a plateau, a raised land that ended abruptly over sharp cliffs that plummeted to the sea. In front of me over the ocean, where the sun had been, the sky was burning red, orange, and purple, turning Athos the golden moon into a ball of fire.

Flecha neighed again, and the sound echoed in the distance like a warning. I shivered. "Let's go, Flecha. We must hurry. We have to reach Forcarei before Father's men."

I pressed Flecha's flanks, and at a fast canter, we continued north following a winding path along the coast. But before long, big boulders, still and menacing like giants turned to stone, blocked our way. Flecha reared.

I stroked her neck to calm her down and dismounted. Holding her reins, I stepped on the narrow ledge left between the rocks and the cliffs. Flecha reluctantly followed. We strode thus for a while, my eyes on the gravel to avoid taking a false step, until Flecha, letting out a loud snort, pulled at the reins and refused to go farther.

"Come on, Flecha. What is it now?" Tearing my eyes from the slippery ground, I looked up. What I saw was not encouraging.

Before me, the coastline had lost its battle against the ocean and receded inland to form a small bay. Except for a huge rock carved like an arch, which appeared to be still fighting the pull of the water, the cove was covered by the tide. Up the cliffs, where I was standing, the ledge we had been following didn't

turn with the coast to surround the cove, but continued straight, took a deep descent, and disappeared. We couldn't go on. Still I hesitated. It didn't make sense. Paths are supposed to lead somewhere. They cannot just vanish.

My hands firmly on the reins, I looked to my right, trying to find a way to get around the cove, but the boulders, impressive and bare, formed an insurmountable wall.

“You are right, Flecha. We have to go back.”

I was still talking when, over the roar of the waves breaking against the rocks, I heard a rumbling noise—like horses galloping. Down at the cove, the solitary arch I had noticed before seemed to fade away, and the water at its base withdrew as if caught in a whirlpool. Under my feet, the ground shook.

Flecha neighed in fear and reared, pulling at the bridle. Just as I turned to hold her still, I saw a dark form emerging from the broken rock in the cove. For a moment, I froze. Again Flecha pulled, and the leather ran through my fingers, burning them. I screamed in pain and let go of the reins so suddenly I fell backward. I heard Flecha's hooves against the ground, and I knew I had lost her. But I did not have time to worry about her. Under my weight, the gravel cracked and scratched my legs as I slid faster and faster down the broken trail that ended right where the cliffs began.



TWO

*The Forbidden  
Lands*

Brambles and bushes flashed by my side. I tried to grasp them. But they escaped through my fingers, leaving only their thorns in my scratched skin.

Blinded by pain, I screamed. Suddenly, over the cracking noise of loose gravel, I heard the sound of cloth tearing. Then I felt a strong pull on my legs, and I stopped moving.

I lay on my back, my whole body hurting, my head hanging over the edge of the cliffs. Down, down below, I could hear the roar of the waves breaking against the rocks and the cries of the seagulls fighting for food. I stayed still, barely breathing, waiting for my rescuer to help me up. No one came.

Slowly I raised my head. The sky was burning in a shimmering fire as Lua, the copper moon, rose from behind the boulders. For a moment I just stared, awed by its majestic beauty. But soon the pain of my beaten body reminded me of my dangerous predicament, and lifting my head as far as I could, I looked at my feet. Nobody was there. This didn't make any sense. Someone had grabbed my feet.

I squinted my eyes against the glow of the full moon and searched the ledge. No one was in sight. I shivered as the old

stories of strange creatures that lived in the Forbidden Lands rushed to my mind. Were they true after all? It was then I heard the cracking sound of rocks falling; someone was climbing up the cliffs. I remembered the shadow I had seen emerging through the arch, and again I shivered.

I had to get out of there, and fast. Trying not to think of the ocean-beaten rocks below me, I lifted myself to a sitting position. But when I tried to crawl forward away from the cliffs, my skirts caught in a bush, holding me back. Suddenly I understood. It had not been a person but my long dress that had stopped my fall. How ironic, I thought, that my lady outfit had saved my life, when I was running away from all that it represented.

“Thank you, Mother,” I said aloud and meant it. After all, she was the one who had insisted on my always wearing a gown for supper.

Once more I reached forward and pulled at my skirts. But the thorns pricked at my fingers, fighting for their prey. Over my heavy breathing, the sound of pebbles rolling was getting closer. Frantic, I pulled again and again, until my hands started bleeding. Still the thorns refused to let go.

I had no choice. I tore open the front laces of my bodice, and like a snake shedding its skin, I emerged from my gown. Wearing only my underdress, I ran to the boulders that flanked the ledge and squeezed myself into a crack. Barely breathing, I waited while the steps got louder and louder. Then suddenly they stopped.

After an indefinite time of anguished silence, I leaned forward and peeped through a gap in the rocks. A dark shape was bending over the bush that still held my dress. Although I couldn't see his face, something in his appearance was vaguely familiar. I was still trying to figure out what it was when the stranger straightened his back and, turning toward me,

demanded in a heavily accented voice, “Andrea, would you please come out from wherever it is you are hiding?”

It was my uncle, Tío Ramiro.

I jumped to my feet, staring at him over the boulder. What was my uncle doing here? And more important, how was I to convince him not to tell Father he had seen me?

Tío Ramiro came over. “Hello, Andrea. It’s always nice to see you, too.” With a bow, he offered me his hand to help me climb over the rock.

I shook my head. “I don’t have a dress, Tío.”

Tío smiled. “Of course,” he said. Sharply, he slid the strange jacket he was wearing over his head, handing it to me with a mock bow.

I held the garment in my hands. It was blue and tightly knitted in a soft material I had never seen before. Bright yellow letters on the front formed words I didn’t understand. After a slight hesitation, I put it on and climbed the boulder.

Once more, Tío was kneeling by the bush. When I got closer, I realized he was cutting the thorns with a little knife. With a pull of his free hand, he lifted the dress. “I got it,” he said and, getting up, faced me.

I stared in amazement. Several pebbles similar to my four-holed lucky charm formed a straight line down the front of his shirt.

“What’s wrong, Andrea?” As Tío talked, he made the blade of the small knife disappear into its red handle with a sharp movement of his hand.

I gasped. “What is that?” I asked, pointing at his hand.

Tío hesitated. Then he shrugged. As quickly as it had vanished, the blade reappeared in his palm. “It’s only a knife,” he said. He handed it to me.

The blade was sharp only on one side; a thin crack ran along the other. The handle was . . . different. Memories of the wondrous gifts Tío Ramiro used to give me when I was a child rushed to my mind—toys made of soft materials that bent without breaking, books that talked when I touched them, musical boxes that didn't need to be rewound. I would play with them many happy days until one night they would vanish from my room. When in the morning I begged Ama to give them back to me, she would insist I had been dreaming.

“May I have it back?”

Once again, Tío made the blade disappear into the handle.

“Let's make a deal, Andrea,” he said. “You will forget you ever saw my knife, and I will not tell your father I found you in the Forbidden Lands.”

I considered his proposition for a moment. If Tío wanted me to forget the knife, I was sure it was worth knowing why. But if Father were to learn of my whereabouts, my plan would be doomed. “Deal,” I said, and raising my hand, I hit my palm against Tío's. The pact was sealed.

Tío smiled. “And now, young lady,” he said, turning to go, “I would appreciate it if you were to escort me to your father's castle. I'm afraid without your assistance I may fall down the cliffs or even worse, end up as food for the ferocious white wolves of the mountains.”

Go back to the castle? Not in a million years. “I'm afraid, Tío, I can't go back with you now. I mean . . . I have to find Flecha.”

“Really?” Tío Ramiro frowned. “Is that why you came here?”

“Well, yes. Flecha ran away. I have been looking for her all over. Why don't you go ahead? I will join you as soon as I find her.”

“Don't you think, Andrea, that you have had enough adventures for one day? If I am not misreading the signs, you've

barely missed falling down the cliffs. Don't waste your energies making up a story. You're coming back with me."

"No I'm not." I stamped my foot. "You cannot force me. And you promised not to tell Father you found me."

"I didn't promise not to tell your mother, did I?"

I sulked. "That is not fair. Besides, it's true. I do need to find Flecha."

"Fine. Go ahead then, while I get ready. But promise you'll wait for me at the end of the ledge."

"I'll think about it," I said and turned away.

"Andrea!"

I ignored his call, and as fast as the treacherous ground allowed, I rushed down the narrow rim I had walked with Flecha before. Soon I had reached the open plateau where we had joined the coast. My eyes swept eagerly over the barren landscape, looking for the golden shape of my mare. But Flecha was nowhere to be seen. Neither did she answer my repeated whistling and callings.

Systematically I searched the plain for hoofprints in wider and wider circles, but I couldn't find any—which was not strange, as the terrain was mostly rock. Hoarse and exhausted, I sat by one of the boulders flanking the ledge. What was I to do now? I couldn't escape on foot. Father's men would have no trouble finding me, especially now that Tío would tell them where to look. I might as well go back on my own and wait for a better chance.

So when I heard my uncle's steps coming down the path, I was still there, crouched under the boulder. I looked up at him as he approached, noticing he had changed into the long dark tunic he always wore in the castle. A leather bag I hadn't seen before was strapped to his back. He didn't seem surprised to see me.

"I have your dress here," he said.

Tío waited as I put my dress back on. But I still kept his jacket.

"You're going to need a new dress," he said when I was done, his eyes on the tears running down my skirts. "This one looks quite useless as it is." And then, as I nodded with embarrassment, he added, "Don't worry, Andrea. I think it was about time anyway. You've had this one for ages."

"You recognized my dress. That is how you knew it was me."

Tío smiled. "Of course. What did you think? I'm not a wizard."

Bending over, he offered me his hand. "Come on, now. We must get going. It would be better if we reach the castle before Don Andrés notices your absence."

He started walking on a narrow path heading south along the coast. I hesitated. Now that the moment had come to give up my dream, I just could not move. Maybe if I waited, Flecha would come back. Maybe Tío was bluffing and would not tell Mother he had seen me. After all, he had always approved of my training. If only he would have been at the Games and talked to Father. Why hadn't he? A flash of anger shot through my body. Jumping to my feet, I ran after Tío.

"Why didn't you come this morning?" I yelled at his back.

Tío turned and stared at me for a moment, his forehead creased in thought. "The Games," he said at last. "They were today, weren't they?"

"Of course! And you . . . you forgot."

Tío seemed genuinely upset. "I'm sorry, Andrea, but I couldn't come. Your father ordered me to patrol the Forbidden Lands."

He was lying. I knew he was lying. "But you promised. You promised to help me convince Father I could be a knight."

“And I did, Andrea. I did ask him on my last visit. Your father refused. Nothing I might have said today would have changed his mind.”

I looked away. So it had all been decided in advance, and my winning at the Games had made no difference. Through my unshed tears, the pebbles glittered at my feet like jewels in the bright light of the two moons.

“Why don’t you tell me what happened?” Tío asked, his voice warm and inviting. I tried to answer, but my words came out broken, as if a heavy hand were squeezing my throat.

“I guess things didn’t go well for you at the Games,” Tío he added.

My head shot up. “They did! I won the golden arrow.”

“Congratulations, Andrea! I knew you could do it.”

“Yeah, sure. But it was useless. Father has ordered me to join Mother tomorrow.”

“Your father has ordered you to join your mother tomorrow? How cruel of him, indeed, my dear Andrea. Doesn’t he know you need a vacation?”

“A vacation?”

“Yes, Andrea. A vacation. A couple of weeks on your own to get used to the idea.”

I stared at him. What was he talking about?

Tío smiled. “I’ll tell you what. Let’s go back now, before your father gets angry with you for leaving. Tomorrow I’ll ask him for permission to keep you as my helper. This will give you time to think about it.”

Time to think of a better plan for leaving. I smiled back. “I guess I could do that.”

Tío’s eyes looked deeply into mine. He frowned. “But you must promise you will join your mother as soon as I leave.”

I sulked.

“Come on, Andrea. Promise or there is no deal, and you’ll have to join your mother tomorrow.”

“All right, I promise.”

Tío beamed at me and, with his arm behind my back, pushed me along.

“You know, Andrea, I don’t know why you dread being with your mother so much. If you are not meant to be a lady, eventually she will have to desist.”

“Do you really think Mother will give up?”

“Of course she will. Jen—I mean Doña Jimena is very strong-minded. She always has been. But not even she could make you into what you are not.”

I wanted to believe him so badly, I pushed my fears to the back of my mind and lost myself in his stories. Stories of another time and place, of when Tío and Mother were children, of the smart and strong-minded girl Tío claimed had been my mother.

“Do you know your mother was determined to be a physician before she married your father?” he asked me sometime later.

“A physician? How disgusting!”

“Disgusting? Oh, well, I suppose you can call it that. Or maybe I got the story a little confused. But I am sure she had great aspirations once, before she grew up. We all do, don’t we? Even princesses in torn dresses.”

“What about you, Tío?” I asked him to hide my embarrassment. “What did you wish for when you were a child?”

Just then the path veered left, and as we turned, my father’s castle came into view, glowing softly under the copper light of Lua. Over the keep, which was the tallest tower, the blue-and-white banner of Gothia, our kingdom, undulated in the evening breeze. The king was in the castle.

Tío didn't answer. He stood by my side, eyes wide open and staring ahead, a light of wonder in them. I waited, silent as well, breathing deeply the salty breeze flowing up from the ocean. Suddenly the sound of an owl hooting broke the evening silence. As if waking from a dream, Tío shook his head.

"I wished," he answered, resuming his walk, "to live in a castle where everybody would comply with my every whim."

"You can't be serious, Tío." I couldn't imagine anything more boring.

Tío laughed. "Andrea, today you are serious enough for the both of us."

And so I returned to my parents' castle, not as a knight covered in glory, galloping in front of an army as I had imagined, but escorted by my uncle, wearing his jacket over my torn dress and, alas, on foot.

I DO NOT KNOW WHAT TÍO RAMIRO TOLD MY PARENTS. BUT whatever it was, it worked. They never asked me about that evening, and Mother agreed to let me be on my own during the time Tío remained with us. On my part, I didn't tell anybody, not even Margarida, what had happened. My sister, discreet as usual, didn't ask.

Although I missed my comrades and the excitement of the training, I tried to make the best of my last days of freedom. And after Flecha reappeared, dirty and wild at the gate of the castle on the second day after my return, I rode often across the plain toward Mount Pindo, the sacred mountains of the Xarens, the old inhabitants of the kingdom. At other times, I would walk by myself deep into the woods, listening to the season of plenty burst upon the branches of the trees and watching the animals wander. They were collecting food to survive

the winter. I felt I was also saving for harder times, although in my case it was not because of a physical hunger that I worried, but because of a longing inside me I could not name.

My uncle was busy with the kingdom's affairs. For as long as I could remember, he had been the arbiter of the complaints arising between the farmers and hunters and their lords. He was renowned for his unusual solutions, and everybody accepted his judgment.

When he managed to escape his duties, we would go for long walks. Then he would tell me fantastic stories of enchanted lands where girls were allowed to dress as they pleased and choose their own destinies. He had a great imagination and his stories sounded so real—sometimes more so than the trees in the orchard or the walls around my father's castle.

Four weeks passed like this, and finally the morning arrived when Tío told me he was leaving. I looked away to hide my disappointment.

"Come now, Andrea. Don't make it more difficult. You already knew I'd be leaving tonight."

"True," I replied. I had known all right. But knowing did not mean I had accepted it.

"You must keep up your part of the deal now. Promise you will join your mother tomorrow."

I nodded.

Tío grabbed my arms, forcing me to look into his eyes. "Also, Andrea, you must promise that you will never go down to the beach with the broken arch, the beach your people call *Cala dos Mortos*, 'The Cove of the Dead.'"

I pushed him away. "Why can't I go there?"

"Because it's forbidden. Believe me, Andrea, some things are better left alone."

I promised as he asked, thinking it was strange that my rational uncle would care about old superstitions. And his request had seemed irrational that morning in the bright sunlight. But later in the evening, while I watched him leave from my favorite place on the castle ramparts, and I could see the shadows crawling from behind every tree and every rock, I was not so sure anymore. It did seem possible then that something dark and evil might indeed be lurking down on the beach, by the arch not even the ocean had dared to destroy. And although the days were still warm, I wrapped my cape around me because suddenly I felt cold inside.

