

THE ROYAL COUNCILOR • 1

DON PEDRO KNOCKED SOFTLY on the door of the king's bedchamber before turning the knob and entering. The king lay on his bed in a tangled pile of sheets and covers, arms wrapped tightly around a pillow. He was sound asleep. A single oil lamp played its amber light upon the walls.

Shaking his head in mild exasperation, Don Pedro marched to the tall windows and pulled the curtains back. Sunlight flooded the room, causing Don Pedro to shield his eyes and the king to burrow more deeply into his bed.

"Your majesty, it's time to rise," said Don Pedro.

The king responded with a muffled groan.

"Your majesty, in one hour you are expected at the meeting with the ambassador from the Netherlands," said Don Pedro. "I know you'd rather be doing something else, but it's important."

The king answered with an exaggerated snore. Don Pedro smiled. He opened the tall mirrored doors of the bedchamber closet and rummaged within for garments suitable for the occasion. At length, he emerged holding a maroon doublet trimmed with lace and gold braid and a black velvet hat.

The king had abandoned all pretense of sleep. He lay back on his pillows, his covers bunched about his legs, and followed Don Pedro's movements with a baleful stare.

"Here, your majesty," said Don Pedro, holding up the

garments for the king's approval. "I've chosen one of your favorite doublets, one that makes you look very handsome. The Queen Mother will be pleased. Come, your majesty. We don't have much time, especially if you'd like to eat something before you meet the ambassador. I'll assist you, but we must hurry."

The king scowled and pulled the covers over his head. Don Pedro sighed in frustration and draped the doublet over the back of a chair.

"Your majesty," he said, his voice low but firm. "If we're late for this meeting, the Queen Mother will be furious. It'll be decidedly unpleasant for us both."

Slowly, the king's covers were lowered from over his head. With a resentful look at Don Pedro, he sat up and rubbed his eyes.

"I'm hungry," he said. His words were slurred by his grotesquely misshapen jaw and a tongue far too large for his mouth, but Don Pedro had no trouble understanding him.

"Of course you're hungry, your majesty," said Don Pedro. "I've ordered the servants to prepare a breakfast table in your sitting room. If you dress quickly, there will still be time to eat. Come, I'll help you."

There were no further objections from the king as Don Pedro helped him put on a white silk chemise and white satin leggings. The doublet remained on the chair as the king and Don Pedro went through the connecting doors into the sitting room.

The breakfast table had been set beside a window that faced the palace courtyard. Below, the courtyard reverberated with the sounds of men and animals; it was a scene the king enjoyed watching for hours on end. As usual, an assortment of soft, easily chewed foods had been prepared for the convenience of the king whose misshapen jaw made it difficult for him to eat most foods. The king gulped spoonful after

spoonful of porridge and washed them down with mouthfuls of frothy milk. A long rivulet of milk ran down his jaw and onto his shirt, but he was too absorbed in his food to notice. Don Pedro watched the king in silence, his thoughts preoccupied with the upcoming meeting with the Dutch ambassador.

A knock on the door interrupted his concentration. The door opened, and a page announced Countess Maria Dolorosa de Travera. Don Pedro motioned to the king to continue eating breakfast, then he stepped from the room to hear what the countess wanted.

The countess was waiting in the antechamber of the king's apartment, nervously twisting an ostrich plume fan in her hands. She waved the fan with false gaiety when she saw Don Pedro.

"Ah, Don Pedro!" exclaimed the countess. "I'm so glad you're here. It makes my task so much easier. So very, very much easier. The Dutch ambassador arrives at eleven o'clock, and the queen sent me to make sure the king is not late for the meeting. The queen attaches great significance to this meeting."

"Rest assured, my lady," said Don Pedro. "His majesty will be on time."

"Wonderful, wonderful," said the countess. "I shall go inform her majesty immediately. But just between the two of us, Don Pedro, I cannot see why the ambassador needs to meet an eleven-year-old boy who is little more than an imbecile, even if he is King Carlos II of Spain. The queen is just using him to impress the ambassador."

Don Pedro wrinkled his nose in distaste at the countess's offensive words, but he made no comment.

"Don't give me your disapproving looks, Don Pedro," sniffed the countess. "You know perfectly well that what I say is true. After all, it's not very surprising that insanity would

surface after so many generations of uncles marrying nieces and first cousins marrying each other.”

“Perhaps,” said Don Pedro. “He is king nonetheless.”

“Of course. But you know what everyone says about him, don’t you? That witches and demons have cast spells on him. Carlos the Bewitched, they call him. The boy is an idiot, and the queen is the first to admit it. Why pretend otherwise? Well, I shall be getting along. Please give my best to his majesty.”

The countess waved her fan at Don Pedro and swept from the room. Don Pedro shook his head in disapproval and returned to the sitting room.

The king had both elbows on the windowsill. He was watching an argument in the palace courtyard between an irate muleteer and a sergeant of the guard.

“Your majesty,” said Don Pedro. “It’s time to go.”

“Later,” the king protested. “I want to go later.”

“You must come now, your majesty,” insisted Don Pedro. “You must still change into a fresh shirt and put on your doublet and hat. If we stay to watch those people in the courtyard, we’ll be late for the ambassador. Your mother will be angry.”

The king let out a pitiful sigh.

“Yes, Don Pedro,” he said. He tore himself away from the window and followed Don Pedro back into the bedchamber.

Several minutes later, they were hurrying through the palace toward the chambers of the Council of State. As they neared their destination, they entered a lengthy stretch of hallway. The unbroken wall to the left was hung with oil portraits of scowling Spanish *hidalgos*, while the wall to the right opened onto a row of balconies overlooking a cavernous gallery. This was the king’s favorite spot in the entire palace.

With a squeal of delight, the king ran to the first of the balconies, his frail wobbly legs barely able to support his

overgrown torso. He grabbed the railing and cried out at the top of his lungs, then he clapped his hands and jumped up and down as the echo of his voice resounded through the empty gallery. He then ran to each balcony in succession and repeated the ear-shattering performance with the same degree of energy and delight.

Accustomed to the eccentricities of the king, Don Pedro did not alter his stride or the expression on his face. As he passed the last balcony, the king fell in beside him, and together, they entered the chamber of the Council of State.

They arrived at the meeting not a moment too soon. The king had just taken one of the two vacant seats at the head of the table when Queen Maria Anna arrived simultaneously with the Dutch ambassador and a Spanish captain. The ministers and courtiers at the table immediately rose to their feet. Only the king remained seated. The queen, a hard-faced woman in her late thirties, surveyed her surroundings with a smug expression on her face. She waited a fraction of a moment more than was necessary before she strode to the table and took her seat to the right of her son.

"Your majesty," she said to him, "I have the pleasure of presenting to you his excellency, Señor Maarten van den Groot, ambassador from the United Provinces of the Netherlands."

The ambassador, a portly man with shrewd eyes, bowed deeply from the waist. The king bobbed his head in acknowledgment and looked about for an avenue of escape.

"You may all be seated, gentlemen," said the queen. "Señor van den Groot, you will occupy the seat to my right. You have met Captain Gaspar de Leon, my military attaché. Gaspar, my dear fellow, will you make the introductions?"

"Certainly, your majesty," said the captain. "I will present everyone in the order they are seated, if it so pleases your majesty."

"Naturally," said the queen with a sly wink at the

ambassador. "All my royal councilors are of equal importance. Proceed."

"Yes, your majesty," said the captain. "Seated directly across from you, your excellency, is Señor Fernando de Valenzuela, prime minister of the Council of State. Seated beside him is Father Diego Sarmiento de Valladares, Bishop of Plasencia and Inquisitor General of the Supreme Council of the Holy Office of the Inquisition for all the Spanish Empire. Seated beside him is Don Pedro Manuel Luis Dominguez, Duke of Monteverde and Count of Saluria, minister of the Council of State and kinsman to the royal family."

The ambassador bent his head in acknowledgment of each introduction.

"And now to your right, your excellency," continued the captain. "First is General Miguel Saavedra Quirones, Minister of War. Next to him is Don Jorge Santiago, Count of Travera, minister of the Council of State. And then, Father Francisco Escobar Carnejo, personal confessor to his majesty."

Once again, the ambassador nodded at each man in turn. The atmosphere in the chamber was cordial and relaxed. The queen was pleased.

"Now, it appears to me that his majesty is weary," she said.

"Be so kind, my dear Gaspar, and escort his majesty to his chambers."

The captain offered the king his arm, but the king first looked to Don Pedro for a sign. Don Pedro nodded, and the king rose and let the captain escort him from the chamber.

"It's amazing how much his majesty values your counsel, Don Pedro," remarked the queen, with a mischievous twinkle in her eye. "Perhaps you can tell us your secret."

"There is no secret, your majesty," said Don Pedro. "It is simply that his majesty knows I always have his best interests at heart."

“A most formidable secret, indeed,” said the queen, and the members of the council responded with chuckles and smiles. “Now then, let us proceed to the business at hand. The ambassador and I have already conferred in private, but I should like you gentlemen to hear what he has to say. Señor van den Groot, would you care to make some opening remarks?”

“I would be delighted, your majesty,” said the ambassador.

He bowed his head to the queen. Then he stood and turned to face the members of the council.

“I’m sure most of you are well aware of much of what I’m about to tell you,” he began. “Therefore, I beg your indulgence for a few minutes while I review the wretched state of affairs that has befallen my country.

“It all began about five years ago, in the spring of 1667, when King Louis XIV of France, the most aggressive monarch this continent has ever seen, claimed the Spanish Netherlands as the inheritance of his wife Queen Maria Theresa, the daughter of King Philip IV of Spain by his first marriage. A spurious claim, as Spain so rightly pointed out at the time.

“The French king declared the War of Devolution and sent fifty-five thousand troops into the Spanish Netherlands, overwhelming by sheer numbers the eight thousand brave Spanish defenders. They captured Charleroi, Tournai, Courtrai, Douai, Lille, Artois, Hainaut and Walloon Flanders. Another French army captured Franche-Comté.

“Stabbed in the back, Spain appealed to the German states of the Holy Roman Empire for help, but the French king concluded a secret treacherous agreement with the Austrian Emperor, promising to divide the Spanish Empire with him upon the death of the Spanish king, a sickly child who was not expected to survive.

“Well, thank Heaven, the king survived, and thank

Heaven, the French treachery was thwarted, at least in part. The United Provinces of the Netherlands persuaded England and Sweden to join with us in a Triple Alliance against the aggressive French king. That gave him pause, and in 1668, in the Treaty of Aix-le-Chapelle, he returned Franche-Comté to Spain, although he retained his ill-gotten gains in Flanders.

“But the French king never forgave us for thwarting his plans. What’s more, he now turned his covetous eyes upon our prosperous cities. In the secret Treaty of Dover in 1670, he pried England away from the Triple Alliance, and earlier this year, he bought off Sweden with ships and a significant money payment. Our former ally England has now joined our enemies. The United Provinces stood alone. Spain, the Empire and Brandenburg graciously offered us assistance, but time was of the essence.

“On March 23 of this year, 1672, the English attacked us at sea, and on April 6, the French launched their invasion with one hundred thirty thousand men. We fought valiantly, but how could we be expected to defend ourselves against such a colossus? One province after another fell, until only Amsterdam and The Hague remained free of the French invader. We sued for peace, but the French terms were far too humiliating to accept. We had no choice but to call upon our ancient enemy to defend us. We opened the dikes and let in the sea.

“How can I describe to you the devastation in my country? Our roads are washed away. Our cities are flooded and choked with debris. Our rich farmlands are contaminated by salty sea water. It will take us years to rebuild, but at least the French armies were forced to withdraw. Still, we are in dreadful peril. Should we rebuild our country, the French will simply march right back in. Should we not rebuild it, we will starve to death.

“Gentlemen, my mission to Spain is to present to you a

plan that will restore the balance of power in Europe. True, my country stands to benefit the most right now, but the fact is that every sovereign nation in Europe is threatened by this rapacious king. Once he captures the Netherlands, do you think he won't turn and swallow Antwerp and whatever else is left of the Spanish Netherlands? And how about the Palatinate and the other German states he covets? And how about Savoy and Italy? There's no limit to this man's ambitions. We know this only too well from painful experience."

He paused to survey the faces of the ministers of the Council of State. They were listening intently to every word, and Valenzuela was nodding gravely.

"Gentlemen, besides my own mission here in Spain," he continued, "we have also sent emissaries to the Empire, Brandenburg, Lorraine, the Palatinate, Denmark, Brunswick-Luneburg and several other states and principalities with a plan to create a Grand Coalition to counter the advances of the French.

"United, we can prevail against the French menace. Perhaps we can even roll back some of their ill-gotten gains. In such an alliance, it would be possible for Spain to recover all its lost territories in Flanders and perhaps even the frontier province of Rousillon, which the French stole from you thirty years ago under Richelieu.

"I am pleased to report that we have already received favorable responses from the Empire and Brandenburg. If Spain likewise graces us with a favorable reply, we will have all we need for the foundations of a solid alliance, although the affiliation of the other states I mentioned will surely strengthen us.

"Gentlemen, the future of Europe is in your hands."