

The King's Painter

by Nina Blazon

Gold

"There are many ways to create the impression of real gold on canvas. The shimmering yellow made from orpiment, also known as "sovereign gold," is best for this purpose. Italians call it orpimento.

It is a naturally occurring mineral, but can also be produced chemically. In any event, it is full of arsenic and truly toxic. It is bound in a cloth with a bit of ground glass and rubbed over the nose and mouth. Never inhale the dust or put your hand up to your mouth after coming into contact with this pigment. It would kill you."

Anthonis Mor

It was a worthy start to the year 1560. The Mendozas, the leading family of Guadalajara, had offered to house the royal entourage in their fortified palace. Today was the day of the big festival. Countless carriages and mounts crowded into the inner courtyard. Footmen and servants could hardly scurry around quickly enough to receive the flood of visitors.

Lien was impatient to get out of the uncomfortable carriage. While most of the other guests were eager to meet the new queen, Lien was on the lookout for someone else.

At the home of the Duke of Alba, where Uncle Anthonis and his aides had been quartered, she had seen Sofonisba Anguissola from a distance on several occasions. A very upstanding, graceful woman, she exhibited a self-confidence that vexed even the most arrogant noblemen. But she was nowhere to be found among the guests in the castle yard. Lien spotted a group of priests in dark soutanes instead and . . . an officer of the Inquisition. For a brief moment, she saw it all again: the raging crowd, the smell of the burning funeral pyre, and the faces of the condemned.

Quickly she averted her glance, then pulled the cloak that protected her from the icy wind more tightly around her shoulders. She slid her hand up to the sealed letter that she'd hidden in her sleeve. Her heart pounded at the thought that Sofonisba Anguissola might read it later today.

"We must hurry," whispered Uncle Anthonis, taking her by the arm. "And keep in mind, even though we'll be seated a long way from the king's table, you must be courteous to everyone and make a good impression."

Lien nodded obediently. "Will you speak with the Italian painter, uncle?"

Anthonis threw her a disapproving glance. "Painter? You must surely mean the gentlewoman who paints in her spare time," he corrected her emphatically. "No, I don't think so. What for? There will surely be an opportunity some other time."

"But her artwork is highly respected, sire. You could surely use the connection to . . ."

"Connection!" snorted Anthonis. "Stop talking about things you don't understand, child. Yes, of course her portraits are popular, especially among the vain dandies and the women she flatters unscrupulously in her paintings. She makes a prince out of a monkey's face, but that is not art! Real art portrays reality . . . Oh, that's Graf Sereno just ahead. Come along. Behave yourself and don't say a word!"

As always, Anthonis Mor's entire character changed when he spoke with aristocrats from the court. Gone were his sullen, morose ways. He chatted gallantly in several languages, and there was a spring in his step. He introduced Lien to everyone with kindly words, not allowing them to sense how much discomfort her presence caused him. Yet if her plan worked out, she would not burden him much longer.

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The Mendozas had spared no effort or expense. In the middle of winter, they had had young trees and even fresh flowers and branches brought in from far away lands. The great hall resembled a spring-green arbor in bloom. Never before had I seen such splendor, not even at the most luxurious festivals in Cremona and Milan. All around me I heard people speaking Spanish, French, Portuguese, Flemish, and other languages I didn't recognize. Since King Philip ruled over many countries, countless guests had come from all over. Most of the guests appeared to be nervous and, like me, they agonized over whether they had adequately memorized the strict court rituals.

A server led me to a table where the ladies of the Spanish court were already seated. They were all from the best families, and they whispered and laughed among themselves as if they had known each other for years. They greeted me politely, but with reserve. As the only Italian woman, I was a curiosity to begin with. Furthermore, I came from the lower nobility, and to top it off, I was a painter. The names of these clucking noble hens – each one with so many first names, last names, and titles – just did not want to stay in my head. All the same, there were familiar faces in the room. I knew the Duke of Alba, of course, and I had met Philip's sister, the strict, nun-like Princess Juana, when I arrived. Don Carlos, the king's fifteen-year-old son from his first marriage, was also there. I'd heard people in Italy say that the young man was half-witted and irascible, but so far he impressed me as rather quiet and melancholy.

A murmur went through the hall as several women entered the room in colorful gowns, the very latest in French fashion. Since the Spaniards all wore black, they looked like colorful pet birds among a flock of ravens. These must be the ladies of the French court, the ones the queen had brought with her from Paris! I secretly breathed a sigh of relief. Their garb certainly defied protocol, so I could be sure of being granted a temporary reprieve from the prying glances. All the same, I felt like an old widow in the black courtly dress that I had donned today for the first time. I stood on tiptoes and tried to catch a glance of the French ladies.

"That's women for you! The minute they leave Italy, they don't even see their old friends anymore!"

Startled, I turned around and looked into the strange, yet familiar face of a man with fine features and blond hair.

"Flavio?" I asked incredulously. It had been many years since I'd last seen him. But as the tall, handsome cavalier laughed, I suddenly recognized the lanky youngster with the mischievous smile.

"But it can't be!" I cried in Italian.

Flavio made a deep bow.

"So I've managed to surprise you after all. You haven't actually been in Spain for as long as I have, but if the rumors are to be believed, a certain pretty painter is already the main topic of conversation, and not only among cavaliers." With these words, he came as close to me as was fitting and looked deeply into my eyes. The Spanish gentlewomen

immediately huddled together. *"My goodness, just look at that Italian painter!"* one hissed to another.

"Flavio, stop that," I whispered, half amused, half concerned. "Do you want to ruin our reputations on the very first day at court?"

"Ours? If anyone's, then yours!"

"Really?" I retorted with a deliberately serious countenance. I began to enjoy the old, friendly banter again. "Now, if I recall correctly, you are engaged. Isn't the lucky girl Eufrosina Cappina from Milan? She's supposed to be the jealous type."

"So I see you are well acquainted with the rumor mill," said Flavio with a crooked grin. "But in this case the stories are entirely true . . . including the jealousy."

"The Cappinas are rich and very influential. You are making a great move in the chess match of family politics."

"I would hope so. But after checkmate at the altar, who knows whether I will take a bishop, a pawn, or a queen to the marriage bed?"

I stifled a laugh and put some distance between us. But I couldn't hide the fact that I was delighted. It was as though we'd never lost sight of one another.

"How is Elena?" Flavio asked. I merely nodded, because at that moment the master of ceremonies gave the signal for us to take our places. Flavio bowed quickly and hurried to the table where his cousin, Ferrante Gonzaga, was seated. The Spanish ladies near me fell silent.

I will never forget the sight that greeted the guests as the royal couple made their entrance. I must have secretly expected to encounter the young prince whom I had missed the opportunity to meet years ago in Cremora, for I was surprised to find a worthy king before me who looked every bit his age at thirty-two. Seldom would I see King Philip in any color other than black, but at this celebration, he wore a magnificent robe of white silk and gold.

And the young queen who walked at his side – I was so amazed by the delicate apparition that it took my breath away. Diamonds and rubies glistened in her hair and around her neck, but the colors of her wardrobe were even more dazzling. No Spanish black for her, oh no. My queen gave no thought to strict rituals! She was a true Parisian

and wore burgundy red, gold, and orange. A murmur went through the hall as the child-queen took her place on the throne.

There are moments in life when all one's cares and doubts simply fade away like rags that you have carried around for too long. That is how it was for me with Elisabeth de Valois. I beheld her and loved her from the very first. As with everything I loved, I instantly began to envision painting her. From her Italian mother, Catherine de' Medici, she had inherited her thick, black hair and a complexion so fair that it appeared to be carved in ivory. Her narrow face and rather pointed chin did not make her a striking beauty. But although the many gemstones and gown seemed much too heavy for her delicate body, I had never seen a more comely young woman. Yes, she was still a child, but a queen all the same. Even though she was still tired and pale from her journey, she greeted her guests with a friendliness that warmed many hearts, including my own. "Isabel de Valois!" I heard people behind me whisper. Of course, no one called her "Elisabeth" here; they used the Spanish form of her name, and she would henceforth be called "Isabel."

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In order to reinforce their marriage by proxy, which had taken place in a closed circle in June, the marriage ceremony was repeated for all to see. The Cardinal of Burgos read the vows and blessed the royal couple. My young lady responded very softly to the priest's questions, but it was so quiet in the room that you could understand every word. Philip smiled at her gently, and this gesture moved me. This was already the third marriage for the king. His first wife, Maria of Portugal, died very young in childbirth, just after giving the gift of life to Don Carlos. His second wife, Maria Tudor, Queen of England, had been much older than Philip. She had died the year before last from a serious illness. I asked myself what it must be like for the king to be promising a third wife that he would love her till death do them part.

I was startled for a moment when the cardinal called the king "Felipe," in Spanish. This is how he would go down in history, as *Felipe Segundo*, a king like a monk, severe, bureaucratic, and hated by many for his harshness. They would charge him with atrocities and accuse him of having a cold heart. Just a few years later in the Netherlands, they would call him a butcher and a monster.

During the banquet that followed the marriage ceremony, I etched every line of Isabel's face in my memory, selecting and mixing the colors: an especially fine green primer would give her delicate complexion a beautiful, radiant peach tone. Malachite green for her eyes, whose sparkle I could only surmise from a distance. A touch of vermilion for her lips and vivid red for the rubies that suited her so well. I was completely absorbed in my reflections and startled when the music started.

"The king wishes a galliard!" whispered one of the ladies of the court next to me. Instantly, the celebration had my full attention again. Oh, how I loved that spirited dance with its daring jumps and figures! But the dance floor remained empty, as no one dared to be the first to dance. The courtiers quietly discussed who, according to court ceremony, was permitted to begin. Then I spotted Flavio looking at me from across the large, open dance floor between the tables. "*So are you in the mood for a little scandal, Sofonisba?*" his mischievous expression asked me. Well, it didn't take long for him to convince me.

Flavio led me to the dance floor, and we bowed deeply before the royal couple. Had I been wearing a white dress, I couldn't have caused any more of an uproar than I did now. Hundreds of eyes were trained on us and a sea of whispers surged around us. I could just imagine what they were asking one another: "*Who is she? An Italian? What is her rank?*"

"The king smiled at you," Flavio murmured to me as we began to dance. "And now he's explaining to the queen that this high-spirited painter is her wedding gift."

Other couples now ventured onto the floor, but to me it seemed as if Flavio and I were dancing all alone. If I could remember just one dance at the end of my life, I would choose this galliard, these happy moments in which my new life really began. I felt freer than I ever had, and an alluring, golden future loomed on the horizon.

"It was an honor for me to dance with the famous painter."

Completely out of breath, but with eyes aglow, Flavio bowed before me at the end of the dance. He offered me his arm to escort me back to my seat. But he suddenly stopped short and hesitated.

"Flavio, what is it? Who did you see?"

"Only . . . the court painter," he responded.

“Anthonis Mor? Where is he? Twice I wanted to visit him in his studio, but each time the arrogant fellow sent a message that he was too busy.”

“He’s standing over there, near the door.”

As they struck up the next dance, I peered across the tabletops to the back of the room. Indeed, there stood Mor, talking to a man with an aquiline nose and pointed chin. That must be the other painter, Sanchez Coello, from Portugal. I had already marveled at his outstanding portraits and was sure that, given his talent, it was only a matter of time before Philip would also engage him as a court painter. Just a short distance from the two painters I spotted a young woman. She was slim and svelte as could be, and her demeanor was one of fierce self-control. Yet she seemed strangely lost, as though none of the music and laughter around her penetrated her shell. This demeanor so reminded me of Elena in her nun’s habit that it pricked my conscience a bit. But her hair was not blond; it was a special shade that shone like sinopia in the light of the innumerable candles. The young woman fiddled nervously with her sleeve, then let her searching gaze wander over the crowd. Her facial features conveyed the severity, but also the suffering, of a Madonna. *Perhaps she has a married lover and is unhappy*, I thought to myself. But I realized a moment later that she had been observing me for quite a while. I was shocked at the intensity of the demanding gaze that bridged the distance of half a hall. There was something gloomy and sad about this young woman, and had I been able to look into the future then, I would have seen that it was a dark cloud on my golden horizon.

“Who is that young girl there?”

“Lien,” said Flavio unhesitatingly. “Lien van Leyster, Mor’s niece.”

“So you know her.”

“I have only spoken with her once.”

“With a commoner who doesn’t have a single diamond bracelet, Flavio?” I tried to tease him.

Oddly, though, Flavio didn’t respond to my needling this time.

The girl nodded at me as if in greeting, and I feared she would make a beeline for me at any moment. I was relieved when several ladies squeezed by us, causing the annoying apparition to disappear behind a curtain of black veils and skirts.

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She had spotted her! Lies would have preferred to dash out onto the dance floor and taken Signora Sofonisba by the hands. But she knew her place all too well, and it was not among the aristocratic guests, but far away from the dance floor among the spectators. From her vantage point, she could only see the dreadful king as a tiny figure seated on his throne, a silvery-white man alongside a new queen who could have been his daughter. Lien shuddered at the sight of him, thought about Anna, and hated this Spaniard as never before. This was the man who carried out the sentences of the Holy Office. However contentedly he might smile, Lien knew his true face: that of an executioner in service of the Inquisition.

The music had begun again. Dancers and curious onlookers crowded from the tables to the dance floor, forming a sea of people that carried the Italian woman along with it. The letter in her sleeve burned. She feverishly considered how she could get close to Signora Sofonisba, but it was clear to her that the gulf between onlookers and guests was as deep and difficult to breach as a stormy sea between two continents. She would just have to succeed in catching the lady on her way to her carriage!

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The servants went from table to table, snuffing out the candles. The scent of extinguished wicks filled the spring-bedecked ballroom, and it glowed in a mysterious half-light.

“The last dance of the evening is the torch dance,” Uncle Anthonis whispered to Lien. His mood had improved, perhaps because he’d enjoyed all the conversation. But he may also have been pleased that Lien had spoken animatedly with his painter colleague, Coello, and his wife. In the course of the evening, the candlelight and guests had caused the ballroom to heat up. Sweat poured off the faces of counts, dukes, and their female companions. It was waved away with fans and handkerchiefs, and everyone drank too much wine.

The assembled company applauded with delight as the torches were carried in. Lien cast a glance at her uncle, unobtrusively edged a few steps to the side, then closer to the dance floor. She had to keep Sofonisba in sight and watch to see what path she would take after the final dance.

"Where are you going in such a hurry?" Lien jumped. Flavio Gonzaga was standing next to her.

"You are the second lady to have overlooked me tonight," he whispered to her with a smile. "The Spanish air must have made me look very ugly, or even invisible."

She didn't know how to answer him. Of course she had seen him dancing with Signora Sofonisba.

"I'm glad to have run into you," he continued softly. "I have been on the lookout for you ever since I heard that you had come to Guadalajara with your uncle. Where have you been hiding for the past several weeks?"

"In my uncle's studio. He lets me ... grind colors."

"Grind colors? What coarse work for a lady! Of course, it has left no trace in your case – I have seldom seen finer, whiter hands."

Lien hid her hands in her skirt pleats and immediately scolded herself for this awkward behavior. Flavio's presence annoyed her. The secrecy concerning Ana Moreno stood between them like a sad guest that didn't fit in with the present company and festivities.

"Why ... aren't you dancing?" she asked quietly.

Gonzaga shrugged his shoulders. His left cheek was hidden in the semidarkness, but his blond hair shone in the torchlight. Lien caught herself observing him more closely than was seemly. He was attractive, and he lacked the arrogance of the Spanish courtiers.

"I have something for you," he said, "but I wanted to hand it to you personally. I've been carrying it around for weeks in hope of running into you."

All of a sudden, Lien felt cold in spite of the heat. *Not the phial*, flashed through her mind. The smooth veneer of polite conversation finally broke like a thin layer of ice that had been demolished by a flying stone. For a brief moment, Lien knew, they both saw the same things: the dungeon, the crowd in the May sun, the soldiers.

"The doctor," she put her greatest fear in words. "He didn't ... take the phial?"

"Do not worry yourself," Gonzaga reassured her. "He pocketed the remedy. You did everything for Anna, everything that was possible. And this remains our secret, as promised."

Tears of relief came to Lies's eyes. *Pull yourself together!* she admonished herself. *For heaven's sake don't start to cry in front of the count and in public!*

"Thank you," she finally managed to say. "I will never forget you, Signor Gonzaga."

Flavio lowered his gaze and reached underneath his mantilla. What was he looking for? Lien surreptitiously wiped her eyes. Her eyes moved to the dance floor. Huge, grotesquely contorted shadows danced on the walls as the ladies and gentlemen summoned one another to dance and passed around the torches. Between the silhouettes of the dancers, Lien spotted the painter in a veil of light. She had just curtsied before the king and offered him a torch!

"Signora Sofonisba!" she whispered aghast.

Gonzaga looked over his shoulder and observed how the monarch smilingly accepted the invitation. Lien was stunned. The painter and the hangman were dancing!

"That's just like her," opined Flavio Gonzaga. "She was always a clever woman, and now she knows just how to secure her place at court."

"Do you know her well? Signora Sofonisba, I mean?"

"Oh yes, since we were children. We're both from Cremona and . . ."

"Niece?"

Lien flinched. Anthonis Mor was looking for her. But in the dimness he had not yet spotted her, and was looking in the wrong direction. As if they were both thinking the same thing, she and Flavio moved deeper into the shadows, retreating behind one of the lemon trees that grew out of large, gold-plated pots. *The world is crazy*, Lien mused. *I am standing next to green trees in the middle of winter, speaking to a count. And we're both acting like a couple of thieves who share a new secret.* Then another thought ran through her head: Flavio and Sofonisba.

She hastily removed the letter from her sleeve. "I know that it's presumptuous of me to ask you for a favor again. But would you please give this letter to Signora Sofonisba? Please, Don Flavio! This is very important to me. I will find a worthy way to express my thanks. I promise!"

In the shadows she couldn't tell whether the Italian count was annoyed or teasing when he replied, "I seem to have been chosen to be your messenger."

Lien gasped for air. Had she offended him?

“Don’t be startled, Lien,” Flavio reassured her with a gentle laugh and took the letter. “I have nothing against being your messenger. And please take this in exchange!” Lien did not recoil when he reached for her hand and placed a knotted silk cloth in her palm.

“Don’t worry,” Flavio said cryptically. “The doctor received his due. But I couldn’t allow you to lose a precious item that obviously means very much to you.”

A moment later he had disappeared into the crowd, leaving behind a bewildered Lien. Carefully, with trembling fingers, she felt the silk handkerchief that contained a small, hard object. She didn’t need to loosen the knot to know that it contained her mother’s ruby ring.

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Shortly after midnight, the royal couple brought the celebration to a close. I could have sworn that Philip looked over at me again and nodded before he offered Isabel his arm and departed the hall with her.

I couldn’t suppress a triumphant smile.

The first step in my life at court could not have been more successful. It had been a daring move, to be sure, and my heartbeat had quickened as I approached the throne. But the king had inquired in Spanish about my trip and seemed to appreciate my presence. He was friendlier and more gracious than I had expected.

The Spanish gentlewomen now looked at me with an entirely new respect and bid me an astonishingly cordial farewell.

“Well, Count Gonzaga?” I greeted Flavio, who already awaited me at the door. “Have you stolen enough pretty Spanish ladies’ hearts? You danced rather intimately with Anna de Mendoza. I fear your fiancée will find out.”

“But much sooner, all of Cremona will know what a certain painter allowed herself to do at this celebration. I don’t know whether I should consider you courageous or brazen.”

An icy midnight wind cooled our hot faces as we stepped into the courtyard of the Infantado Palace. Torch flames hissed in the bitterly cold drafts. I looked forward to returning to my guest room in the Alba family’s city palace. In the coming years, I would share sleeping quarters with other ladies of the court, but tonight my path led back to my trunks, already packed, and a few precious hours of solitude.

Flavio accompanied me to my carriage and kissed my hand in parting. He then slipped me a letter so quickly that I hardly knew what had transpired. And I hid it under my mantilla without thinking, before anyone could notice it. That's all we needed, to furnish more gossip for the rumor mill on the very first night!

"What are you doing?" I hissed. "The time for us to be passing secret love letters back and forth is long gone."

"It's just a letter from someone I hold in high regard," Flavio responded mysteriously and winked at me. "Read it!"

Snow crunched beneath the carriage wheels as the procession of people returning home moved downhill toward the city. The cold in the carriage cleared my mind and drove out the last remnants of music echoing in my head. The letter felt heavy in my hand. I pondered who could have so much to say to me. Oddly, the girl with the sinopia-red hair immediately came to mind. The memory of her also evoked the image of Elena – and the dark aura I had sensed around the stranger. With mixed feelings, I ran my fingertips over the paper. I could not make out the handwriting in the darkness, but I felt a wax seal.

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Bartola had fallen asleep by the fireside in an armchair. Her chin was pointed in the air and she snored softly with her mouth open. I had to smile when I saw my old maidservant, defenseless as a child. Quietly, so as not to wake her, I took off my coat, removed my jewelry, and placed a simple wooden chair beside the fire. It felt good to take off my shoes. My feet hurt and my fingers were so numb that the letter nearly fell out of my hands before I could break the seal. The paper was dry and rustled loudly with each movement. I could tell right away that the script was steady and sweeping, slanting slightly to the right. Casting an anxious glance at Bartola, I opened the letter to its full size and began to read.

Worthy and Esteemed Signora Anguissola!

In the studio of my uncle, Anthonis Mor, I had the good fortune and honor of being allowed to see your portrait. Ever since that day, I have had only two wishes: to be permitted to serve you, Signora, and to perhaps one day also become a painter.

Until I saw your masterpiece, I did not know it was possible to accomplish so much with a simple paintbrush. You have given me so much hope, Signora, so much joy, and a belief in truth and beauty. My uncle appreciates my help, because I have demonstrated great skill in grinding all of the colors so finely that the pigments are like powder. I have mastered the preparation of oil, the priming of canvases with glue, plaster and bone ash, as well as the smoothing of the surface with pumice better than any other assistant. If you are in need of such help, I beseech you, please do not hesitate to ask for Lien van Leyster. It would be the greatest honor for me to assist you and to learn by observing your artistry. I also draw and would gladly hone my skills. I enclose a sketch in the hope that it will be acceptable in your eyes.

Your most humble servant,

Lien van Leyster

Niece of Anthonis Mor

The letter in my hands made me vaguely uneasy. It wasn't because the lines sounded terribly stilted and clumsy or because they were written in faulty Italian. Rather, it was the girl's resemblance to Elena that both fascinated and disconcerted me: the rigid posture, the stony sorrow, and the secrecy that surrounded her. My sister had looked just like that when I visited her at the cloister in Mantua for the last time. But I knew Elena's secret. And what was Flavio's association with Lien van Leyster? Shaking my head fiercely, I threw the letter into the fire and the dry paper instantly turned to ashes. *No, Flavio, I thought. Not even for you. I've had enough girls around me in recent years!*

Relieved, as if I had warded off danger in the nick of time, I quickly stood up and intended to move to the bed, when my foot caught on a piece of paper. I lifted my skirt hem and saw the sketch. It must have fallen out when I opened the letter. Tentatively, I bent down and picked up the paper. *I do not want to see it*, I tried to convince myself. *It doesn't interest me*. But even as these thoughts ran through my mind, I turned the drawing upright with my fingertips. It was quite a good sketch, a bit coarse. A woman's face, framed by black hair and with . . .

I clasped my hand over my mouth to stifle a scream. The sheet sailed through the air and landed on the floor. My heart pounded so loudly that I thought it would surely awaken Bartola. It took me a few moments to regain my composure. I bent over the image,

observed it again with a cooler head, and could not shake the feeling that shadowy phantoms from the past were reaching out to me.

In the light of the fire, the portrait came eerily to life. The woman in the portrait was a stranger, but her eyes and expression were the mirror image of the unfortunate Maria Fogliami.