

Praise for For the Good of the Realm

“This lighthearted, female-led fantasy adventure from Moore (*The Weave*) follows a pair of Queen’s Guards—staid, circumspect Anna and feisty, impulsive Asamir—as they become embroiled in the machinations of the rulers of Grande Terre. As the threat of war looms and a sinister undercurrent of forbidden magic becomes harder for Anna to ignore, the two women must out-fight and out-think the enemies of the realm in a series of duels and cloak-and-dagger intrigues.... With a principal cast of mostly women, this is sure to appeal to readers looking for stories of empowered female characters that go beyond simply giving them swords.”

—*Publishers Weekly*, June 2021

“*For the Good of the Realm* is a sparkling tournament of a novel, full of thrills as well as feats of storytelling bravado. Moore has invented a feminist medieval otherworld that is egalitarian in its sword and sorcery, yet political intrigue ultimately rules as Anna, a stalwart member of the Queen’s Guard, collaborates with a range of surprising characters to foil the nefarious plots of a power-hungry Hierofante. Spirited and funny, this is a great read.”

—Lesley Wheeler, author of *Unbecoming*

“*For the Good of the Realm* is a splendid, swashbuckling romp that captures the very spirit of the Musketeers. The author weaves palace intrigue, swordplay, romance, and divided loyalties into a deeply satisfying fantasy adventure with women at the center of the narrative, wielding and negotiating power.”

—Tansy Rayner Roberts, author of *Musketeer Space* and
The Creature Court Trilogy

For the Good of the Realm

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by

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This book is fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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Acknowledgments

This book owes its biggest debt to Alexandre Dumas. At the end of the 20th century, I binge-read Dumas's Musketeer books, not just *The Three Musketeers*, but also the sequels that detailed d'Artagnan's later career. I love a good adventure story, and Dumas wrote some of the best, but the women in his stories left a lot to be desired. I always hated the "Milady" story and Dumas's Queen is a weepy mess (or perhaps I am remembering the way Geraldine Chaplin played her in my favorite movie version, the one in which a young Michael York played d'Artagnan).

I doubt Dumas would appreciate where I have taken his story. But perhaps he might forgive me a bit if I suggest that Roland de Barthes in this story bears some physical resemblance to him.

This book started in 1999, when I wrote the first draft of a short story about Anna and the rest during a writing retreat in Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupre, Quebec, with my Clarion West classmates Therese Pieczynski, Robert Wexler, and the late (and deeply missed) Kate Major. That story, "A Mere Scutcheon," was published in my PS Publishing collection *Conscientious Inconsistencies*. It was PS editor Nick Gevers who first suggested to me that it should become a novel.

The idea stayed in the back of my mind, but it took me quite a few years to get around to it. Events of the past few years convinced me that spending time in a world where the political intrigue and crises did not resemble our own would provide me with respite and might appeal to readers as well.

Our local writing group, the Flying Kerrs (named in honor of member Katharine Kerr), read an early draft. I am particularly grateful to Madeleine E. Robins who suggested at one point

that the character who became the Hierofante could be a woman. Once again I discovered the value in shifting genders.

My sweetheart Jim Lutz and my sister, poet Katrinka Moore, both provided useful and encouraging advice when it was most needed. And as always, I greatly appreciate the editing at Aque-duct by L. Timmel Duchamp and Kath Wilham.

The late Vonda N. McIntyre read and commented on a late draft. Her encouragement and advice made this a better book. I wish she could be here to read the final version.

All errors and shortcomings are, of course, my own.

Dedication

In memory of Vonda N. McIntyre

Chapter 1

“OUR CREDIT SHOULD still be good at the Café Maudite,” Asamir said, leaning toward the mirror to rearrange her blonde curls for the third time. She pinched her pale white cheeks to give them a hint of color.

Anna d’Gart waited — with resignation rather than patience — while her fellow guardswoman primped. She had casually tied back her thick chestnut hair after training, but she was accustomed to Asamir’s vanity. “The King’s Guardsmen frequent the Maudite,” she said. “We might find some trouble there.”

“Do you have funds for dinner?” Asamir asked.

“No.”

“Well then.” Asamir gave her hair a final pat and smoothed out the front of her blue velvet tunic trimmed in real gold. Anna’s tunic — like those worn by the rest of the Queen’s Guard — was made of blue wool embroidered with dyed thread. Not as elegant as Asamir’s, perhaps, but much easier to care for.

Indeed, Anna’s prediction proved correct, for men in the red and gold of the King’s Guard filled the Maudite. But the host greeted the women fondly and gave them a good table against the back wall. They ordered bread and cheese, and a little wine. And all went well until a young guardsman began to pester Asamir.

The man was not known to them — a new member of the Guard, no doubt recently come from some province where he had made a name in battle. Handsome enough, with shiny straight black hair and a warm tan complexion, he might have piqued

Asamir's interest but for the fact that he had already reached the obnoxious stage of drunkenness.

At first he tried to entice Asamir to spend the evening with him, for the fact that he served the King and she the Queen did not seem to affect his romantic desires. Nor, Anna knew, would that alone have affected Asamir's, had she been interested.

But Asamir declined his advances—Anna suspected she had an engagement with the Marquis de _____, whose wife was said to be in the country this week—and the young man took offense.

He insulted the Queen's virtue, and Asamir told him to behave himself. Then he insulted the virtue of the Queen's Guard, and that of Asamir in particular, and Asamir put her hand on the hilt of her sword and suggested he watch his tongue.

And then he insulted the fighting ability of the Queen's Guard. Asamir stood up, saying, "You have gone too far, sir." Anna sighed, but also stood.

A couple of the King's men nearby egged him on, but another who had been sitting with him pulled him back. "He is only jesting, my friends," the second man said, but the first shook free and stood up, showing himself to be a head shorter than Asamir.

"I am not. No woman can fight as well as a man, and I will be glad to prove it."

"Shall we step outside, then?" Asamir said.

Anna said, "Let him be. He is drunk."

"What? Let him get away with insulting us in public?" She started for the back door. Anna sighed once more, but she followed. Asamir would need a second.

The night was clear and the moon at three-quarters, providing a little light in the narrow alley behind the tavern. Several King's men had come out to see the show, and two of them had brought candles from the tables inside, increasing the illumination. The strong smell of piss near the door demonstrated that many customers did not bother going as far as the latrine across the way. Given the smells emanating from that location, their

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behavior was wise. The ground was dusty; there had been no rain in the past week.

In the dim light, Anna could see that the drunk had drawn his sword and was making fancy feints with it. Asamir drew her own and crossed swords with him.

The man who had pulled the drunk back also joined them in the alley. He met Anna's eyes. The two were of a height, both taller than his friend but shorter than Asamir. Honor demanded that they fight on behalf of their friends. He bowed. "Roland de Barthes, at your service, Madame."

Anna had heard the name. Rumor said he saved the King's life when the court had traveled to the provinces to view a battle on the Realm's frontiers during the last war with Foraoise. Legend had it that Roland had pushed the King over and yelled, "Down, you fool" to keep him from being shot.

A fine-looking man, with thick black curls that hung to his shoulders, skin a darker shade than Anna's own rich olive brown, and deep brown eyes that looked like they might be merry in other circumstances. "Anna d'Gart at yours, sir."

His eyes widened. "Ah, Jean-Paul has an unerring eye for formidable opponents. Everyone has heard of the honorable Anna d'Gart." But he drew his blade, and they began to parry and strike.

It took only a few moves for Anna to determine that Roland himself was as formidable as his reputation had indicated. She saw what should have been a fatal opening and lunged, but he parried easily and caught the edge of her sleeve with his return.

Out of the corner of her eye she could see that Jean-Paul was giving Asamir some trouble. He used his shorter stature to advantage, crouching and striking low, often a problem for taller fighters such as Asamir. Had he not been so drunk, he would have presented her with a real challenge. But Anna saw him stumble to a knee before Roland came in with a flurry of moves that commanded all of her attention.

She heard Jean-Paul cry out, followed by a triumphant yell from Asamir.

Roland pulled back, holding his sword in front of him, pointing it toward the sky. "Honor is satisfied," he said.

Anna yielded as well. "Best you take him out of here, before someone comes."

Blood stained Jean-Paul's chest. Roland half-dragged him down the alley. Anna took Asamir's arm, and they slipped out the other direction.

Asamir went off to keep her engagement with the Marquis, and Anna took a discreet way home. She thought someone might have reported them. And, indeed, when she reached her flat, she saw two soldiers attired in the Hierofante's white and gold loitering in her street. None lurked in the alley behind her building, however. She climbed to her lodgings using the solid chestnut that grew outside her rear window.

A girl wearing the finery of a Queen's page sat at her table. And the impertinent snip was drinking the last of her wine!

The girl jumped up. She gave Anna a deep curtsy, and said, "Madame, the Queen would like to see you forthwith."

"At this hour, child? Surely Her Majesty has gone to bed."

"Well, indeed, Madame, she wished to see you some hours earlier. But she said to bring you as soon as I found you, and I have found you." The girl broke from her formality to finish her wine. "Come, let us be gone," she said, moving toward the window.

Anna looked at her, somewhat surprised.

"The Queen did bid me be very discreet. And the Hierofante's soldiers wait in your street, as you must know."

The girl scrambled down the tree as easily as Anna, despite her fancy dress. Likely she would become a guardswoman rather than a lady-in-waiting when she grew older.

They used a back entrance at the palace as well. The Queen was pacing up and down her chamber when Anna was shown in.

"Your Majesty," Anna said, giving a deep bow.

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“Oh, Madame, I am so glad you have come. I am in great need of your wise counsel and your strong arm.”

“I am at your service, Your Majesty.”

The Queen wrung her hands. Dark purplish circles under reddened eyes marked her light brown face. Her hairdresser would have bemoaned the state of her ebony curls, pulled this way and that.

“The King is giving a ball in two weeks.”

Anna nodded. She had heard of the ball. She was among the members of the Queen’s Guard who had been selected to attend.

“He has asked that I wear the sapphire necklace he gave to me at the first anniversary of our marriage.”

Anna nodded again.

The Queen turned her back. “I have given it to the Countess of Beaufort.” She buried her face in her hands.

Anna sighed, though not loudly enough for the Queen to hear. The Countess’s estate lay far north of the Capital, a good four days’ ride. With no complications, she would just be able to get there and back before the ball. And no gambler would bet on there being no complications.

“The King must not hear that I have sent you to the Countess, else he might suspect something amiss.”

Anna rather thought the King already suspected something amiss, or he would not have made an issue about the necklace.

The marriage of the Queen to the King five years earlier had reunified the Realm. For the hundred and fifty years previous to that marriage, there had been two competing royal families, the Andrean line, which had produced the Queen, and the Meloran line, ancestors to the King. They had not officially divided the Realm between them, but only because when duels and even battles between the factions reached a peak and some began to press for a complete division, saner heads had prevailed, pointing out that complete severance would leave the Realm at the mercy of Foraoise on its northeast and Alhambra on its southwest borders,

not to mention several other nearby countries. And indeed, whenever the Realm had been threatened, the two sides joined forces in its defense, though if the truth be told, they squabbled quite a bit over how to do so as well.

The separation had meant the competing rulers usually made policy separately, decisions that not infrequently caused complications for the Realm as a whole. For example, the Meloran rulers often provoked difficulties with Foraoise over the Airgead mines, a major source of gold and other valuable metals located in the east on the border between the two realms. It was the Meloran contention that those mines belonged to the Realm, while the rulers of Foraoise were equally adamant about their ownership of the mines. The Andreans took no position on the mines, but from time to time disputed with the Alhambrans over the precise location of the southwestern border.

Control of the Church also passed back and forth between the two sides, since the Hierofante who led it was always appointed from among members of the royal family not destined to rule. At times, there were competing hierofantes as well as rulers.

The negotiations that led to the marriage of the current King and Queen also led to the installation of the King's aunt as Hierofante. There were those of the Andrean side who objected to this, but as the Andrean claimant to the position had recently died, leaving no high ranking bishop or even priest among that line, the Queen's family agreed to this compromise. While the Hierofante's preference for the King her nephew and the Meloran side were well known, the Andreans who agreed to the decision considered the Queen more than a match for the Hierofante.

And indeed, the marriage had up to this point brought about a more peaceful time within the Realm, for the ongoing skirmishes between the Andrean and Meloran armies had been reduced to duels between the elite Queen's and King's Guards. These duels were numerous, since the initial members of the Queen's Guard had been part of the Andrean forces, while the

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King's had been staffed exclusively with Melorans, but they were rarely fatal. Since both guards added new members from time to time, this distinction had faded, but the politics of it still held sway. The members of most of the other forces—with the major exception of the Hierofante's Guard—had been combined into a national army, with a number of separate guard troops; this unification had gone more smoothly than the other compromises, in part because of a short war with Foraoise that, while it resolved very little between the two countries, allowed the members of the new army to develop *esprit de corps*. It rained excessively throughout that war, and the soldiers had united in cursing both the mud and those who led them into an impossible conflict.

Upon their marriage, the Queen and King had moved into the royal palace in the Capital, a building that had been vacant for a century and a half, except for the brief occasions when the two sides had come together to fight outside attack. It promised to be a new era for the Realm, if they could manage to work together. Their heir—should they ever get around to producing one—would rule without the division. But since it was a marriage made for political reasons, not for love, both parties had an incentive to seek love elsewhere. Such behavior was usually ignored so long as no evidence of it was produced. But the absence of the necklace threatened that *détente*.

Certainly the Hierofante would take advantage of the situation. She had manipulated the King his entire life. Her Majesty, though religious, was not easily swayed by the Hierofante's words, particularly when the religious leader opined on issues not related to God and worship. The two were often at odds, with the Queen usually prevailing on matters of state. Should the Queen be discredited...

Her Majesty did not impress in this moment of personal need. Her behavior had been foolish in the extreme. Taking a lover was one thing, but giving gifts that could be traced quite another. However, Anna had also seen the Queen meet with generals and

make hard decisions of state, and at those times she acquitted herself well. Better, in fact, than her husband, who was not noted for his ability to understand the details of affairs foreign and domestic. In fact, many whispered that the King's father had sought the marriage and reunification because he knew his son was incapable of ruling on his own.

And even had Anna not respected the abilities of the Queen, she was sworn to protect and defend her. If that meant a hell-for-leather ride to retrieve a gift that should never have been given, so be it. Honor demanded it.

"I dare not give you any written message for the Countess," the Queen said. "You will have to persuade her of your bona fides."

"Perhaps a word shared between the two of you that no one else might know would establish my good faith," Anna said.

"Yes, of course." The Queen hesitated, then leaned forward to whisper in Anna's ear. "Tell her that her Royal Honey needs her help." Her Majesty blushed as she said it.

Anna managed to control her impulse to smile. She backed up and bowed, but did not turn to leave.

"Please hurry, Madame. We have not much time."

"My lady, I will need supplies and a horse."

"Oh, yes, of course." The Queen motioned to the nearest lady-in-waiting, who handed Anna a purse. "Please leave as soon as you can."

"Of course, Your Majesty." She gave her best bow.

Anna spent the remainder of the night in a tavern where she was unknown. In the early morning, she set out for the Queen's Guard headquarters to get permission from the Captain for a few days' leave.

At the gate of the barracks she met Asamir. "The Captain wants to see us," Asamir said.

"Someone did turn us in for dueling, then."

And, indeed, the gate guard confirmed it. "An emissary from the Hierofante came earlier."

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Asamir touched her head and then her heart, a gesture used by the religious to seek holy protection. “If the Hierofante has heard of this, I will never be allowed to take holy orders.”

Anna gave her a look. She did not believe in Asamir’s oft-repeated plan to take vows. The vow of chastity might not cause much of a problem—it was but lightly honored by most of the clergy—but the idea that Asamir would cover the hair she fussed over and dress in black wool was frankly ludicrous. However, all she said was, “I told you not to fight a drunken man. If you had not run him through, we would not be in all this trouble.”

“He besmirched my honor—our honor,” Asamir said. “How could I allow such disrespect? Besides, we followed the proper rules of dueling. The fight was fair.”

“That will not keep us from being hanged for dueling,” Anna said.

“Oh, they will not hang us,” Asamir said confidently as they went in. “The Captain will protect us.”

Inside the gate was a large compound, with training grounds, barracks, and other facilities scattered about. In the center, a three-story building overlooked the entire area. The first floor was an open space used for meetings and large dinners; the second consisted of offices, with the captain’s being the largest. The captain herself lived on the third floor. She had chosen this arrangement, she said, because when she reached the point where she found it too hard to climb the stairs, she would know it was time to retire.

Anna and Asamir reached the landing that led to the captain’s office. The captain’s squire started to say something but her words were lost as the Captain flung open the door of her office and said, “Have they arrived yet?”

The squire indicated the two guardswomen. The Captain, a large woman, her gray hair cut close to her scalp, had a sharp-angled face that looked to be carved from the heart of a mahogany tree. She gave them a look that spoke volumes—unpleasant

volumes. They crossed the landing and entered her office without waiting for another word. Anna noticed that Asamir now appeared less confident.

Both women stood at attention while the Captain paced up and down her office. “What am I going to do with you?” she said. “You know that dueling is outlawed—and you further know that it is outlawed precisely to keep members of our Guard from dueling with the King’s men. And yet you persist not only in challenging others, but in doing it in public taverns so that the whole world hears about it.”

“But, Captain,” Asamir started.

“Be quiet. I do not wish to hear your excuses. I am sure they involve declarations of honor. Anyway, I know you have no sense. But you,” she said to Anna, “you do know better than to participate in such ludicrous behavior. Why were you there?”

Anna said nothing.

“I know, I know,” the Captain said. “Everyone praises the honor of Anna d’Gart. You would not abandon your friend. And you should not. But your friend should pick her causes more carefully.” She paused. “The Hierofante is demanding that I do something about the behavior of my guardswomen. She suggested prison.” She gave them a hard stare. “The idea has its merits.”

Anna prayed silently to her patron saint—for even a casual believer takes refuge in prayer in times of crisis—and trod on Asamir’s toe to keep her from saying anything.

“Fortunately, you did not kill the man. He is only slightly wounded.”

Asamir looked disappointed.

“And I am sure the King’s men contributed to the disturbance, but the Hierofante does not seem to take the same interest in their misdeeds.”

Anna knew the Hierofante’s favoritism toward the King’s Guard was a sore point with the Captain. She offered more prayers.

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The Captain sighed. "As it happens, I am owed some few favors. Why I protect the two of you I do not know. Perhaps God does. Hide yourselves for a week. Leave the Capital."

"Yes, Captain," Anna said.

"Return in time for the King's Ball. Despite your behavior, I shall still need you in attendance. Too many things can go wrong." She waved her arms at them. "Go, go. Get out of here before I change my mind. And do not expect to draw your pay for that week."

They both pivoted sharply and left. Neither spoke until they had exited through the main gate of the barracks.

Asamir sighed. "A week's exile, and no money to spend. I shall have to go to a convent or I will starve."

"I can offer you both sufficient funds and entertainment," Anna said, and she told her about the Queen's mission.

Asamir rubbed her hands together with glee. Nothing pleased her more than a chance for adventure, except on occasion a handsome man. "Just the sort of thing we need. But why did you not tell the Captain? Do you not trust her?"

"With my life. But this is the Queen's secret, and honor demands that we not share it."

About the Author

Nancy Jane Moore started making up stories about women with swords when she figured out at the age of nine that, under the rules of Spanish, she could change “Zorro” to “Zorra.” With the help of her sister, she acted out sword fights and other adventures in the back yard. Eventually she moved on to writing the stories down.

Her other books include the science fiction novel *The Weave* and the novella *Changeling*, both from Aqueduct, and the collection *Conscientious Inconsistencies* from PS Publishing. Her short fiction has appeared in numerous anthologies and in magazines ranging from *Lady Churchill’s Rosebud Wristlet* to the *National Law Journal*.

She practiced law for fifteen years, specializing in cooperative organizations, and then worked as a legal journalist. In addition to writing and law, she has studied martial arts since 1979 and holds a fourth degree black belt in Aikido. She teaches, speaks on, and writes about empowerment self-defense.

A native Anglo Texan, she lived for many years in Washington, DC, and now resides in Oakland, CA, with her sweetheart and two cats.

And yes, she owns a sword.

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Pronouns: she/her