

2. a Perilous Place

Baseel Alcazar: Cadiz harbor, Spain, June 1531

Just when he thought he was finally safe from Cerra's vengeance, Baseel saw the troop of soldiers marching towards the dock. He dove reflexively beneath a nearby tarpaulin, fitting his lanky frame between the ship's boat and the rail of the *Victoria*. The edge of the tarred canvas did not quite cover him, but Baseel knew that in this case, at least, the dark shade of his skin was in his favor. He peered between the supports of the rail, one shoulder pressed into the trough of the deck's scupper.

The soldiers were now close enough that Baseel could see their colors in the gathering dusk. With dread he realized that they belonged to the Spanish Inquisition. Fear rose to choke him: It would be like Cerra to use the church as his tool. Baseel's Moorish ancestry and Granada origins put him under automatic suspicion, and any close investigation would reveal his Catholic baptism for the sham it had been. Allah preserve him from priests and scoundrels!

A shadowed figure burst from one of the narrow alleys that adjoined the dock. There was something oddly familiar about the way it sprinted along the rocky edge. When the runner reached the place closest to the departing ship, it disappeared beneath the greasy waters of Cadiz harbor with a dive that made hardly a splash.

Torches appeared among the pursuing soldiers as they reached the wharf minutes after their quarry. They spread out along the water's edge, shouting to the sailors while the *Victoria* drew further from the land and caught the tide. Others searched every ramshackle warehouse building, barrel and refuse-heap that might afford a hiding place.

The distance between the ship and the dock widened. To Baseel's intense relief, the snap of swelling sails heralded the onset of a favorable offshore wind. The *Victoria* heeled slightly and began to pick up speed.

A horseman dressed in official finery galloped to the pier; he was waving and gesturing that the ship was to turn back. Some of the sailors called out to the soldiers on the dock, pointing into the dark waters. Baseel looked with them for any sign of the diver, but there was none.

The Moor fervently prayed that the Captain would refuse the command, although not half an hour past, he would have welcomed the delay. Paco the horse-boy had not returned to the ship before it cast off; it had been the hope of seeing him racing to make the tide that had brought Baseel to the deck when he should have been settling their employer's enormous Percheron battle-horse in his stall below. But given the trouble on the dock, six weeks in a stinking hold shoveling the copious amount of manure Cacho produced was preferable to being subjected to the Spanish Inquisition.

The wooden beams of the ship vibrated as more canvas filled and a faint wake creamed out behind her. Despite the angry shouts from the Cadiz officials, coming fainter across the water, it seemed the Captain had no intention of missing the tide. Baseel heaved a sigh of relief and risked poking his head out between the stanchions. He scanned the choppy waves, deciding with a twinge of regret that the diver must have gone under.

It would not be surprising if the fugitive chose death by drowning to falling into the hands of the Church. Still, there had been something calculated about the way the figure plunged into the sea that did not suggest the desperation of suicide. And although he could not put his finger on the reason for it, a nagging sense of recognition stayed with the watcher on board.

Above decks it was quiet, now the crew had finished trimming the sails. The Moor eased from beneath his hiding place. Below in the hold Baseel could hear restive noises from the horses which were the ship's most valuable cargo. More resounding thumps reminded him of his current problem: the missing groom. Don Luis Vaca's new battle-charger Cacho was certain to be the worst troublemaker and Baseel should be doing his best to help the animal adapt to the tight quarters.

As he turned to go below, his ears caught a furtive, scraping noise by the waterline. Leaning far over the rail, Baseel could just make out a dark head bobbing among the waves that slapped against the ship. Its owner was somehow hanging onto the hull as it slid through the water. Baseel knew it must be the fugitive from the dock, and looking quickly around to make sure no one was watching, he tossed over a rope from the longboat's supplies. The figure grabbed it and began to climb hand-over-hand up the tautening line.

Within minutes a dripping form stood on the deck. When it turned into the light of the rising moon Baseel froze with shock as he realized why the runner had seemed familiar: he was looking into a well-known face he had long presumed dead.

And with the sight, his memory of a plainer, feminine version of those features could not be blocked out, although he had spent years refusing to think of her. A stab of unexpected pain gripped his heart as he remembered a vanished song, heard the echo of a voice.

Eva.

The swimmer was equally astonished to see who his helper was, but before a word could pass between them one of the crew popped out of the hatch. "Hey! Pox-face! We need help with the crazed beast you brought aboard!" The sailor stared at the man with Baseel. "Who is that?"

"This is Elias, Don Luis' groom," Baseel lied, hoping that the dark would conceal the newcomer's wet appearance. Elias was from a Jewish 'converso' family and Baseel Alcazar had good reason to know why the

Inquisition wanted him.

Fortunately the sailor had other worries. "Well, he had better get down to the stalls in the hold and see to his charge!"

With a surge of relief the Moor realized that by the kindness of Allah his original problem was solved. Beckoning the rescued man to follow, Baseel led the way below.

Cacho was whinnying. There was a hollow thud of hooves striking wood as they approached the stalls. Baseel stepped aside and let Elias slip past to approach the plunging horse, making soothing noises and moving with the unconscious competence of the natural horseman.

Cuyaiya: Kuelap, Peru 444 Inti-raymi (winter solstice, June 1531)

Cuyaiya almost wept with frustration, although she knew it would do her no good. Maqui, the second llama, refused to budge. They *must* reach Kuelap before dusk!

They were a mile away. She could see the huge line of wall at the top of the hill, taller than ten men with only two narrow entrances sloping into the fortress. She had been here no more than three times before today; the great citadel of her mother's people was deserted now.

As soon as the trail left the river road, the llamas had become reluctant to go further. Yana, the old black trail-boss, moved at a slow unwilling pace. Maqui, the young brown one, had to be dragged every step. Yana would usually assert dominance and drive the others forward. Today he seemed unable or unwilling to help.

The leader hummed. She scratched his neck and explained the problem to him as if he could understand. "Yana, we *must* be at the sacred place of Machacuay tonight to meet the High Priestess. Churi's recovery depends on it!"

He rubbed his head against her arm, a sign of special privilege that would be forward in a young male, but in Yana's case was simply part of the years of trust. Not for nothing were these beasts of burden called 'speechless brothers' among both her peoples. He hummed again, high and anxious, a double wrinkle of concern beneath each of his deep brown eyes.

There was too much at stake to humor the llamas and no time to puzzle out their behavior. Cuyaiya released the rope that held Maqui's basket panniers to the pad, then took out the supplies she would need for tonight's rituals and put them on her own back. Yana had load enough, and only Yana could be trusted to carry Churi.

"Come!" she commanded the black llama and started up the trail, going faster to make up for lost time. Yana followed her. Maqui jumped to his feet and hummed after them, but he did not come.

Yana was also distressed at leaving his herd-mate behind, but un-

like the brown llama, he was seasoned in obedience. Still, he made it plain that he did not want to go near the citadel. His steps slowed as they drew close to the shadow of the great walls, until at last Cuyaiya was tugging steadily at his collar to get him up the entrance channel. What was wrong with him?

As they came out onto the high place, Cuyaiya looked anxiously for signs that Tumbai had arrived. "Oh Machacuay, double-headed serpent!" she breathed in prayer as she gently unloaded Churi and settled him against the wall. "Please, let nothing delay her, not tonight!"

She went to the edge, near the wall, and looked over. In the distance she could see a woman approaching with two men. One was leading a white llama who seemed as reluctant as her own two beasts. Another man followed behind the animal urging it along.

Cuyaiya breathed a sigh of relief. They would be in time for the ceremony which would mark the mid-point of Churi's recovery, if his spirit was only willing. She should not have doubted that Tumbai would be on time for the solstice. Her aunt Tumbai, the fugitive high priestess of the Chachapoya god, had a knack for always turning up in the right place at the right time. If she had not happened to come by ViraVira last winter solstice, the day after Cuyaiya had interfered with the rite to Inti, there would have been no hope for Churi.

Tumbai was powerful, more powerful than the high priest of Inti the Inca sun-god. Under her curse, that priest had been dead before sunset on the day following the ceremony. Though Churi's recovery hung on such a slender thread, with her aunt's knowledge and skill, Cuyaiya's little boy might run laughing at her side in the pastures again.

It was all she lived for now.

Baseel Alcazar: Cadiz harbor, Spain, June 1531

The light from the end of the narrow passageway was dimmed by the hulking figure of Don Luis Vaca. "Who is that man with Cacho?" he demanded, eyeing Elias with suspicion.

"You remember you charged me with finding a groom for your horse, Don Luis," Baseel said. "And so I have. This is Elias."

Baseel's employer, an impoverished caballero (knight) of the lower nobility, scowled at the newcomer in confusion. "What happened to Paco?"

"Paco had second thoughts about leaving Spain. I found Elias just before we left the dock," Baseel put all the enthusiasm he could muster into his normally unemotional voice. "It is our good fortune that he was persuaded to throw in his stake with us. I know this man from Granada; he is a superb handler of animals. Worth ten of Paco."

Elias, who always had picked up cues quickly, smiled and bowed

obligingly. "It would be an honor to serve you, Don Luis."

The caballero was unconvinced. "Second thoughts! Paco put his mark on the indenture papers already! He cannot change his mind until his four years are up. By God, I'll make the Captain turn around and get him. He should have turned back when the harbor-master signaled!"

"That could delay us so that we would miss the expedition!" Too much concern; Baseel willed his voice calmer. If the Inquisition caught Elias, the Moor was sure to be implicated, however far in the past the transgression was. Under torture men spilled everything they knew.

Don Luis Vaca's slow brain was churning on. "Paco had second thoughts? That doesn't sound like the man you brought me two days ago; he was eager to win treasure in Peru." Don Luis glared at Elias. "Why are you wet?"

"I threw a bucket of water over me. It is a secret for working with frightened horses; they can get more of your scent," Elias invented smoothly. The Percheron, calmer now, nuzzled Elias' shoulder as though to confirm his statement.

Vaca nodded, not willing to admit ignorance of anything to do with war horses. "Come over here in the lantern where I can see you."

Elias followed to the wider space at the foot of the ladder. "You will find I am a man of many talents, Señor. Should you have need of it, I can also read and write."

"God save me from scholars! I already have Alcazar here to do that!" Don Luis frowned with increased suspicion. "Being a Moor, his reasons for leaving are plain enough, while Paco staked four years of his life against the possibility of Indio plunder, and I dare the risk to make a name for myself in arms. But why are you, a learned man, so eager to quit Spain?"

Elias put a hand to his heart; his face showed nothing if not earnest sincerity. "I would go for the glory of spreading our most holy faith among the Indios." Baseel winced. It was the wrong answer.

Don Luis swore. "A cleric! Young and green with stars in his eyes and his head full of psalms! That settles it. Paco was a seasoned fighter, hardened and well-built. We'll turn back and fetch him."

Elias shifted his tactics quickly to match the clues he had. "Appearances can deceive, Señor. I am older than I look. I was born the year Columbus returned from Hispaniola, and I marched in the funeral procession of Queen Isabella the Catholic as a youth. I have thirty-eight years."

Don Luis stared at him disbelieving. "Do you know if he is speaking true?" He asked Baseel.

"It is true. When I first met Elias in Granada, he was nineteen, I was twenty-eight." Studying Elias, Baseel could sympathize with his employer's doubts. His ancestry was standing the Jew well: face unlined, straight hair still dark. In fact, there had been hardly any change in his appearance

in the ten years since they had parted, although the Moor himself was much the worse for wear. He had little chance to examine his reflection and less desire to do so than most, but he knew that his smallpox scars had encouraged a network of tiny wrinkles and his wiry hair showed gray at the temples. Vaca was also comparing the two faces. "I'm only forty-seven," Baseel added defensively. "Captain-General Pizarro is in his fifties."

The caballero glowered uncertainly. Don Luis Vaca was typical of the landed gentry, jealous of his small claim to importance and not accustomed to thinking on his feet except with a weapon in his hand. He did not like surprises. Elias' speech and manners were above the servant class.

Don Luis had apparently decided against the new groom as he moved toward the ladder. "He's no replacement for Paco. Pizarro wanted fighters, this man is built like a dancer with the face of a dandy, not a scar on it. Too skinny and too pretty by half."

"You will find no lack in my toughness or fighting experience, Señor." Before Don Luis could put his boot on the first rung, a knife appeared as though by magic in Elias' hand and in one fluid movement he had it pressed to the caballero's jaw, while his other hand held Don Luis's sword-arm doubled behind his back in a bone-cracking grip.

Yana: Kuelap, Peru 444 Inti-raymi (winter solstice, June 1531)

They must leave this place! In his mind's eye Yana saw the ground begin to shake, the wall holding the terrace ripple like water. Then rocks started falling, dirt sliding, trees were torn up by the roots. A roar like a huge beast came from all directions, surrounded him; he saw the terrace give way, the stones from the wall above falling on the llamas at the base, burying them with the two-legs, whose mouths opened in shrieks that could not be heard over the rumble of the earth. It had been daylight then, now it was nearly dark. No matter: They must move away from the edge *at once!*

When his michec Cuyaiya had dragged the old black llama up onto this high platform he recognized it as a place of sacrifice, even though he had never been here before. Bloodstained masonry supported a stone carving that loomed over the altar, seeming almost alive in the shifting light of the smoky fire: an enormous coiled serpent with one end in the form of a puma face and the other shaped like a snake's head, the forked tongue forever outthrust. Emanating from the idol Yana could sense a menacing presence, silent, odorless, and unseen.

But the presence did not cause him as much concern as the inadequate pedestal beneath the stone. Pictures replayed in Yana's brain, making his split upper lip clamp in remembered terror, as vivid as when the incident had happened before his eyes fifteen years ago. He hummed urgently again to alert the two-legs. Surely his own michec, who went daily

with the herds, would realize that he was trying to warn her. The same feeling was beneath his feet now that had preceded that quake; the same vibration below the range of hearing. His michec must move away from that looming stone!

The old llama flexed his toes as he shifted from foot to foot, badly wanting to bolt back to his own pastures. ViraVira was four days to the south. The trouble beneath the earth came from the north. Safety was towards home. He hummed again. Usually Cuyaiya noticed his signals. They had worked together for so long; why did his michec not hear him?

But she was watching the opening in the terrace, where a ramp sloped up from the lower part of the empty citadel. Yana knew whom Cuyaiya waited for, and also that the old one would be here in a matter of minutes. He had smelled her coming on the light breeze for over an hour, since she was not moving fast. She had another llama with her, a female Yana remembered from the solstice last year.

Sure enough, up the incline came an older woman that the llama knew as TUUM-bye. She was not a michec; she was one who came and went unexpectedly and always with a stealthy air. He had never liked to be near Tumbai. The old woman reeked of blood and strange herbs. When she was around every other human except Cuyaiya gave off the acrid smell of fear.

She spoke in the soft rolling tongue of the Chachapoya, so unlike the hard consonant-filled staccato of the Inca. "Well, my daughter. I see you are in good time for the rites of recovery. Here is the pregnant doe; soon your son will be restored."

"Thank you, my aunt. I have also just arrived." Cuyaiya's voice was excited, hopeful. She did not hear Yana's warning humm.

All the llamas liked Cuyaiya best of ViraVira's michecs because she was so diligent to care for the herds and at peace when she was with them. Many of the other michecs acted as though they could hardly wait to get back to their own kind, and some of them did not watch very well. But Cuyaiya preferred the pastures. When the llamas and alpacas were brought in at the end of the day, Yana could feel her growing sad and tense. She was most joyful during the dry season, when they must go far from the home grazing lands to find food and would not return to ViraVira for weeks.

It was out in the fields that she always met with this other. Tumbai was something of a puzzle to Yana. The old woman never came inside the AY-yu, a sound that referred both to the stone-walled enclosures of Cuyaiya's people and to the two-legged clan. Tumbai behaved as though she were hiding, which was the behavior of the lowest member of the herd. Nevertheless, she had the natural demeanor of a very dominant female; often others accompanied her who were clearly subservient. Cuyaiya always

acted humble in her Aunt's presence. Amid the members of his michec's own herd her usual attitude was that of a llama about to spit.

This was yet another reason that Yana did not like Tumbai. After meeting her in the pastures, Cuyaiya was more belligerent with her own herd, and they reacted in kind. It was not good to have strife among herd-fellows.

It pleased Tumbai when Cuyaiya was at odds with her ayllu.

The earth gave a tiny tremor, a forerunner of what was to come. Yana's ears pricked as he looked towards the two-legs. Surely they had felt that? Surely they would at least leave the dangerous edge, move away from the stone idol on its flimsy pedestal!

The women paid no notice, which was no longer unusual. Cuyaiya had not gone with him on any of the ayllu trading trips this last year. Those few times she had been in the pastures, she was preoccupied and oblivious to his signals. Many other michecs of ViraVira had not come to the pastures, either. There was a *wrongness* to the patterns, the measured seasons and activities that had regulated all the years of the lead llama's long life. The wrongness had something to do with the last solstice festival, when it had begun. He brought the memory up and replayed it:

Cuyaiya had come to find him in the pastures, the day after the usual feast. Even though he knew her so well, all the llamas were frightened by the odor of anger that radiated from every exposed pore of her skin. And there was another disturbing smell on her clothing, the smell of blood. Yana followed at her imperious signal, but they did not go back to the ayllu. Instead, she led him down to the lake where there was only a small strip of grass between the shore and the cliffs.

There, before a dark opening in the rocks, Tumbai waited with this same doe. She was not of his own herd, and she did not smell pregnant. It was not the right season, but the new doe fanned her tail and sat at his approach. Yana proceeded to breed her.

Replaying the memory, the llama noticed more now than he had at the time, occupied as he was: On the periphery of his attention, Yana saw the old one begin chanting and burning something in a small concave stone. He heard vocalizations that referred to two-legs he knew: Wayko, Cuyaiya's current mate; and Churi, her small son.

In the days that followed, Wayko often went with the pack caravans, when before it had been Cuyaiya who had accompanied them. From the few interactions Yana observed, there was trouble between them. And Churi did not come running out to greet the llamas as he used to.

The old llama had noted discordance between human mated pairs before, something he never saw in bird or fox pairings. From the way Wayko reacted to her, Cuyaiya had ceased to attract him. Since Yana's concept of female appeal centered around robust health and happiness,

he thought he knew why: Cuyaiya was sick. It would explain why she was indoors so much.

It was after the solstice when she began to lose her vitality. Her once springy and lustrous red-black hair became flat and brittle; her unusual golden-brown eyes lost their quickness and flash, her skin became yellowed and blotched and the flesh left her bones. Her face was etched with lines of misery and she smelled of unhealth.

The cause for Cuyaiya's physical condition might also be due to the constant presence in her mouth of a kind of cud. The two-legs called it CO-ca. When she was chewing coca, his michec worked with unusual energy but she would become distant and unresponsive; there was no odor of either sadness, anger or fear in her sweat. After it wore off, those symptoms of despair would intensify. Yana did not like it when Cuyaiya met with Tumbai: she was the source of this plant that was not good for his michec.

The earth shivered again, and for a moment the sound stopped. Then the growling at the edge of his hearing resumed, stronger than before. Nearby, two mice had come out of their holes to hide on the surface, sensing the shifting in the grains of their world. Only the humans appeared unaware. Yana hummed more urgently, desperate to communicate.

His michec must move to a safer place!

Cacho: *Victoria*, off Cadiz, Spain, June 1531

Cacho whickered anxiously. At the end of the row of stalls he could see the big man with the yellow mane who had taken him from his home place last week and the dark one who had ridden the second horse, the one that had not been eaten earlier today. They were having some sort of interaction with the pleasant new human who communicated so reassuringly in horse moves. It did not sound friendly.

The world heaved again. Cacho remembered the straps around his body that had lifted him struggling into the air and dropped him into the mouth of the strange wooden beast whose stomach he was now inside.

There were other horses who had been swallowed alive also. Across the passage, a stallion eyed him with fierce hostility. Cacho did not want to fight him; he did not care about the mares as much as he once had, and the only two inside the beast were on the stallion's side anyway. To his right, another horse stood in an even tighter enclosure. His head hung down dispiritedly and he smelled sick. The big Percheron would have moved away from them all if he could, but he was trapped by divisions made of heavy wooden planks held between posts. On his left, his enclosure curved upwards in a strange manner, and on the other side of the wall he could hear the ebb and surge of water.

When the new man first came and stroked his ears, he seemed so

matter-of-fact that Cacho had decided he was not inside a living creature, but merely an odd kind of barn surrounded by water. But now that same human was acting upset; the two-legs were definitely fighting. A resounding whoosh of waves outside lifted and dropped the floor suddenly, making him shake with renewed fear; he must get out of this tight, dangerous place! The horse directed another kick at the partition whose planks jumped between their supports when struck. This time, the boards gave under his hind hoof.

It was a beast after all! The topmost board became alive, and one end swung free and came down to attack him with a blow on his head! Cacho went wild with panic, bucking and plunging, feet striking out reflexively in all directions as the living monster that enclosed him threw more boards his way. He hardly felt the shock to his front leg as the tendon tore; survival was now at stake, and he must struggle free or die trying.

The new man was beside him; a wet cloth wrapped his muzzle and covered his eyes. Cacho shook his head frantically, but the cloth only wound tighter. Screaming in terror and fighting for his life he reared again, rising until his head struck the underside of the beast's stomach. Stunned and blinded, it seemed death was inevitable.

The horse froze, waiting for the great beast to digest him. He felt a weight on his back, gentle hands moving over his hide. The voice of the new human was saying soothing things, a tone so calm it belied the terrible peril. He smelled calm, too. Surely if they were being eaten he would smell afraid. The hands kneaded his skin pleasantly, shifting, stroking. Cacho relaxed, and after a few moments, the man pulled the blindfold off the horse's eyes and slid down to his foreleg. It was starting to hurt.

Yellow-mane and dark-skin had come over. They were putting the boards back in place, working together. Whatever the altercation between them had been about, it was settled now.

Dark-skin and yellow-mane were speaking in everyday tones. Cacho felt the new man's kind hands wrapping wet cloth around his aching leg and hoped he would stay.

The horse became aware that another man had entered the hold. He must have been called by the racket of the wooden beast attacking Cacho. Right now he was out of sight over by the stall where the two mares were stabled. He did not appear to have anything to do with the Percheron's own people, but behind the other stall partition his breathing and smell were obvious to the horses. He might be hiding from the other humans, or he might not. Since he carried no odor of fear, there must not be any danger. The horse decided to ignore him.