

4. the Moor's Task

Baseel Alcazar: Nombre de Dios, New Spain, September 1531

The surface of the New World heaved and swayed unpredictably beneath Baseel's feet, but he could have kissed it, he was so grateful to step onto solid ground. His land-legs would return soon. He much preferred land journeys to sea ones, even though everyone warned him that the trip over the mountainous, disease-ridden isthmus of Panama was more hazardous than the Atlantic crossing.

The wharf of the settlement at Nombre de Dios was much more primitive than that of Cadiz; the Moor watched as the ship's crane lowered the horses, passive and dispirited, onto the rickety pier. Cacho came last, the most fit of the six. Elias was already on land to meet him.

Baseel unpacked the bales that contained Don Luis Vaca's things. Their employer himself was already in the shorefront tavern, making arrangements for a guide to take them across the forty miles to Panama city. Pizarro had left that place many months earlier, but his partner Diego Almagro was said to be recruiting more conquistadors for reinforcements before they penetrated to the heart of the great empire of Peru. Don Luis did not want to miss this second wave of conquest.

The Moor sorted through the pieces of Don Luis' plate armor, a pair of leather-and-scale mail shirts for himself and Elias, morion helmets with their high riveted coxcombs. Below these was the Percheron's tack: caparison-style chain skirts for Cacho's chest and hindquarters, a bridle with protective mail attached to the headstall, spare horseshoes —and at bottom the item he sought, carefully wrapped against the damp.

Elias led Cacho to the pile of cargo, as wobbly-legged as his handlers. He stared in surprise at the saddle in Baseel's hands. "How did Don Luis come by that?"

"It's on loan. His own was irreparably damaged just before we boarded ship." Baseel had been careful about weakening the framework so that it would break at just the right moment, when there would be no time for his employer to replace it. "So we had to bring mine." His emphasis on the last word slipped out unintentionally.

Elias caught it at once. "I'm not disputing your right. I'm just surprised you haven't sold them yet. They are worth a fortune, to the right buyer."

"I missed the chance when I was in Morocco." *The pain was still too new*, supplied the little voice of honesty in his head, which Baseel could

never quite get to go away. "Once back in Spain, revealing that I owned such things was hazardous, and prospective buyers hard to identify."

"No other reason?" Odd, that Elias should ask that question; for a second there was something behind the bland expression, perhaps a flicker of sadness.

Baseel was not in a charitable mood. "It was your rule, not to speak of her."

Elias turned back to the task of unloading, his voice hard. "Nothing has changed."

That suited Baseel. He did not want to remember the past. What would be the point? But his hands lingered on the rolled leather of the cantle. How different his life might have gone if he had never become entangled with the de Pazias! He tried to think what he had been doing, who he had been, before he had first met the siblings almost twenty years ago.

Baseel Alcazar: Granada, Spain September 1513

With an enraged roar the camel snapped at the youth, who dodged out of her way. Her two remaining lower teeth barely missed his shirt. The animal pulled up short at the wall of the courtyard. She turned and stared balefully at her intended victim, considering her next move.

The focus of the camel's ire was a young man, his head shaved in the tonsure of the Dominican novitiate. He was breathing as hard as the camel, having done several laps of the adobe-walled courtyard at a dead run with the beast close on his heels. His once-fine shirt was torn and smeared with dirt where he had rolled from under her attempt to pin him, as was his face; but there was an expression of alertness on it rather than the terror which was typical of those put into the pen with old Fatima, the cantankerous dromedary.

Thirty paces in either direction limited the antagonists' movement; a large carob tree in the center had a watering trough on one side, which was the only obstacle for the youth to put between himself and the camel. Other than the solid doors that led to the stables, stoutly barred from the outside, there was no exit but a tiny arch which he had not bothered to explore.

Baseel gazed down on the scene from the balcony overlooking the enclosed courtyard behind the majordomo's quarters. The ground level below the balcony contained only the human and the camel, who was warily eyeing the whip in the youth's hand. Baltasar Cerra, the head of the trading concern in which the young Moor was rapidly rising, watched from above along with his new manager.

Baltasar chuckled as the youth dodged another blow from the foot of Fatima. "Ho, Jew! When you decide you prefer the life of a well-cared-for slave to that of a camel-boy, just let my majordomo here know," the mer-

chant shouted cheerfully down to the panting newcomer. "He will come onto this balcony morning and evening to see if you have changed your mind."

The figure below did not answer as he moved carefully around the walled space. He passed the arch again without a second glance, unlike the last two youths Baseel had watched. Had the captive investigated it, he would have discovered it gave onto a cave-like hole eight feet deep and a scant three feet high.

"So his name is Elias. What is his history and value?" Baseel asked, adopting what he hoped was just the right air of professional detachment.

Baltasar smiled with satisfaction. "The best catch yet. Below you see a prize who was both the heir of Casa de Pazia and the most talented protégé of Abbe Matias of Holy Cross."

"De Pazia! Related to the woman who came recently?" Baseel studied the face below him. "Yes, I can see he has a Jewish look. This one seems older than the usual dispossessed rich brat sent by the Inquisition."

Cerra laughed, rubbing his hands. "Nineteen, I believe. The girl is his sister, who the most reverend Fathers gave us. But they most certainly did not send this one; in fact they are searching for him as we speak. I caught him trying to rescue her, the inexperienced fool."

"He was really very inept at this whole fugitive business, although I must commend him that he caught wind of the accusations and had the wit to flee before they got him. But fortunate for me; I was beginning to think I had made a mistake in taking his sister off the good Fathers' hands. It seemed an excellent deal at first; gently bred, and seventeen, a most marketable age. I had a few prospective buyers in mind. Until I found out she would not suit. But no matter. She has been profitable if only to act as unwitting bait for this fish. Once he is pliable I'll be able to ask a fortune for the de Pazia name alone."

Baltasar undertook another moment of instruction for his protégé, now the new manager of the Granada arm of Casa Cerra. "Remember, our reputation depends on the cooperative conduct of our stock. Unwilling bodies do not fetch much of a price and the handling of them eats up the profit. It is trained minds that are rare and valuable," He turned to go. "Do nothing; just wait him out. I will leave the affair in your hands while I am gone."

Baseel, reveling in the coveted title of majordomo, watched from the balcony, sizing up the job ahead of him. Most youngsters new to slavery spent only a few terrified hours cowering in the hole away from Fatima's reaching neck or treed among the carob branches before they willingly agreed to any future rather than be killed (as they thought likely) by the menacing beast. Cerra's human chattel did not know that she would attack

anyone who held a whip—the one item of equipment always sent in with the captives—and she chased whatever ran from her.

Elias de Pazia appeared to have surmised this already. He dropped the whip, lowered his gaze and turned slightly away. The camel hesitated. She seemed to be thinking this over, making a breathy roaring noise. He moved slowly to the center of the walled space, then shinnied up the carob trunk. Fatima eagerly snapped up the few pods which fell down. The young Jew composed himself to sleep in the tree while his tormentor settled herself at the base to chew her cud.

Although this was the first time he had seen the new captive, the majordomo knew something of the sudden fall of Casa de Pazia. He knew that Eva, the only daughter, had been housed in the serving women's quarters for the last week. He had caught sight of her from a distance and knew what Baltasar was referring to. Her appearance was certainly unimpressive, and the cook had already told him that she was a weepy religious fanatic.

Well, that would have to change, Baseel thought. Almost any man who cared enough to pay would probably provide a better life than what she would suffer as a penniless waif on the streets of Granada.

Unless... But he put the uncomfortable possibility out of his mind. It was a last resort. What was important was that the handsome, educated brother, a much more valuable prize, had fallen into the merchant's hands.

His former master dealt in any product that would turn a profit in the thriving trade along the Mediterranean coasts and he kept a select list of clients who were on the lookout for educated slaves; those who could read and write were much in demand in the Ottoman Empire. Even more expensive were those with experience in handling trade, as Elias must surely have learned under his wealthy merchant father. Youth and good looks increased the asking price.

But the Jew's salability depended on his cooperation. If Baseel proved himself capable in handling this prize and the Granada base prospered under his care, the future held great prospects.

Fatima: Granada, Spain, September 1513

Fatima vocalized loudly, a long, woeful roaring camel noise. She stopped and listened hopefully for the answer of another of her kind, but none came to ease her loneliness. It had been this way since Abdul, the last of her herd, had died. She moaned her loneliness again to the uncaring group of horses and mules stabled on the other side of the wooden door.

She was from the once-great royal stable of racing camels of the kingdom of Granada. For years, equines had coexisted with her and her mate as fellow grass-eaters of no particular interest. They had their kind, the

camels had each other, and except for the most basic sharing of information about possible danger or food and water sources the two species had comfortably ignored one another. But since the death of Abdul, Fatima had tried to join the horses for want of any better company. Without success. They had shunned her.

Now she was shut off from even the unfriendly horses. She hung by the gate, rubbing her head on it in the hopes the keeper would come and let her out. She did not like these sessions trapped in the courtyard with frightened, whip-bearing humans.

The camel caught a concentrated odor on the dawn breeze that brought her to attention: Carob! Looking around, she saw the young male human from yesterday's encounter coming towards her across the courtyard. He was the source of the appetizing scent. Stiffly, her old joints protesting at every move, she got up and shambled in his direction. He had taken off his upper clothing and tied it in a bundle from which came the smell of carob pods, normally hanging high above her reach. They were not feeding her enough.

The youth held up a hand with one pod, and she accepted it gratefully while he clucked at her softly. She nosed the cloth bundle unsuccessfully trying to get at the contents. The human clucked and gave her another pod. The lonely old camel's heart warmed toward this person. He did not smell of either fear or anger, as all her handlers had of late. He had not brandished the whip threateningly. He gave her carob. She butted his shoulder gently. The human clucked and gave her another pod. She had had no congenial company for a long time.

Over the next several days, Fatima came to understand the rules of the new game that this two-legged companion was playing with her: When she did what he wanted, he made the clucking sound, ever fainter, and gave her a carob pod. It made her remember all the pleasant and stimulating things she used to do in the company of humans. She enjoyed the challenge and having something to do even more than the treats. Every day he added some more complicated move; even the hated whip became part of the play. It was good to have a herd-fellow again.

Baseel Alcazar: Granada, Spain September 1513

Baltasar Cerra watched the camel run after his latest prospect for profit in the courtyard below. Although Elias was dashing fast enough between the tree and the refuge hole, there was something lacking in Fatima's ferociousness. "And he has not yet begged for mercy?"

"Not yet." Baseel followed his employer's glance. "I think old Fatima may be a little slow this evening," he said. "She's always more energetic before noon." Technically, this was the truth, but not in the way that Cerra assumed. Baseel had been covertly watching all week, fascinated, while

Elias trained the once-incorrigible camel. He did not know why he was reluctant to tell his master that the camel now did only the youth's bidding.

"It is to be expected that this one will hold out longer than most," the merchant said, waddling within and settling his bulk on the divan in his majordomo's sparsely furnished study. "If he's anything like his father, he's as stubborn as the camel. But he will soon learn where his advantage lies."

"Are you so sure the Jew can be made cooperative?"

Cerra had an idea. "We should make better use of the sister. After all, if he hadn't tried to rescue her, we wouldn't have caught him. Bring the girl here to your quarters for a while, and keep her miserable. In your case, the face alone should be good for a few tears. Let him see and hear her now and then. Then promise to better her condition when he capitulates."

Baseel ignored the reference to his scars. Many people bore the marks of smallpox, though his were more extreme than most. Knowing the strict morals of the Jewish Converso middle class, he supposed the mere idea of what might be happening to his sister would be sufficient persuasion for their purposes.

"I presume that I should be careful that her harem sale value remains intact?"

"Don't bother," Baltasar made a sour face. "That was why taking her was a mistake. I have since been informed about the dark side of the family history. Old Yacov, like his father, had a fondness for young girls."

Baseel was shocked. "Surely not his own daughter?"

"Really vile," Cerra agreed. "Though he told me that he thought himself cuckolded. Why else send his only heir to be a priest?"

"Perhaps he also felt it would help him buy safety from the Inquisition," Baseel suggested.

"No doubt. Not that it availed him, in the end. He was too obviously prosperous." Cerra looked with approval at the plain dress of his majordomo. The Granada compound of Casa Cerra was well-cared-for but Spartan; it revealed nothing of the assets of its owner.

Baseel had to admit it was a good idea, especially as the camel threat was now useless. "By your leave, I'll just make a good pretense. Just in case your information is wrong." He faced enough revulsion without meeting it in bed.

"Oh, it's accurate enough. I just hired one of their former servants, and he tells me that it's generally known in the Casa de Pazia that her prime value has been lost long since." He eyed the Moor with a frown. "This is the next step for you, if you are to handle slaves directly. You are still too soft. You need to practice what I have taught you: all people are just another kind of animal, to be used judiciously and trained to the purpose. If the girl objects, she will learn what her future role is from the

experience, and you will get over your foolish sentiments. It is not good to be too serious; relax and take your pleasure where you find it."

The wisest course with the merchant was to agree. "So after I take the girl under my 'protection', what conditions am I authorized to give her brother?"

The merchant waved his hand. "Use your discretion. Without her virginity, she is hardly worth the cost of handling. Promise to marry her off to some merchant, if we can find one to take her. Her face is as tanned as a commoner's, she has a prominent Jewish nose, she's used goods, and by all accounts, of a dreary religious disposition. The profit from de Pazia's son will compensate for what I lose on his daughter."

Baseel considered the task before him in the light of last week's observation of the youth. "Do I have a free hand to manage both siblings as I see fit?" he asked cautiously.

"By all means," Baltasar replied expansively. "I will be spending most of my time in Malaga now, where I can better arrange the most advantageous sale for de Pazia. Don't worry, the Jew will come around if he is given sufficient incentive. After all, it is a pampered and privileged life of considerable influence he is being offered—far more so than in the church, and with less pretense. A clever and careful slave can wield great influence and power, even be made a freeman once he proves his loyalty."

"Indeed," Baseel agreed, "Who would know that better than I?" With the sister's fate as added incentive, reasoning with the young man would be more effective than threatening him with a camel.

A knock on the door as Baseel ate his solitary meal heralded the arrival of the de Pazia girl. She was shoved unceremoniously inside the entry; the majordomo acknowledged receipt of the goods. The guard made a few suggestive crudities, and as they were ignored, he took the hint and left.

Baseel looked down at her covered bent head with annoyance. A long day of handling trade correspondence had put him in no mood to deal with a weeping and frightened female. Baltasar Cerra thought this would be good for him; as though he needed somebody else to manage his private life! Well, she could sleep in the storeroom.

"Come sit here," He ordered brusquely, pointing to a chair near the table. She obediently sank into it, looking frightened but composed. So far, she had kept her head down; Baseel waited the inevitable moment when she would look up at his face and see the ravages that smallpox had left. As Cerra had unkindly pointed out, his appearance alone would probably be enough for their purpose.

He had borne the extreme scarring since his fifteenth year and by now was resigned, sometimes even amused, at the reaction of people when

they first beheld his damaged countenance. Well, best to get that part over with. "Are you hungry?" he asked, indicating the cold meat, fruit, bread, and cheese.

She shook her head, looking towards him at last. To his surprise, the girl did not give the usual gasp of horror, nor stare, nor quickly avert her eyes as many did. Her gaze met his and seemed to look past the ravaged skin, as though she were peering inside his head to see what it contained regarding herself. It was surprising, especially for one who was clearly still frightened—and had been given every reason to be. Intrigued, Baseel returned her scrutiny, appraising her potential asking price.

She was too plump for his taste. Her most noticeable feature was a too-large, very Jewish nose, although wide-spaced green eyes helped distract from it. A dark auburn curl escaped from the unattractive head cloth, which despite the severe tying did not hide that there was a mass of unruly hair underneath. Her complexion, unlike his, was healthy and unscarred, but sun exposure gave her a wealth of freckles that made her appear lower class and would hold down her market value. She was dressed in a baggy gray Spanish surcote of some coarse fabric that resembled a nun's and did her figure and coloring no favors.

"Drink a little wine," he ordered, pouring some in a pewter goblet. The girl obeyed, although she could not keep her hands from shaking. Baseel was irritated at her obvious expectations.

He knew his reaction was irrational, considering the pretense under which she had been sent, and concluded that it was knowing how old de Pazia had used his daughter that made the comparison to himself so repulsive. He filled his own goblet and drank, trying to gather his thoughts. The sooner her brother was persuaded, the sooner they were both released from this awkward situation.

To start with, he should find out what she knew. "Can you guess why you are here?"

She spoke hesitantly, surprising Baseel with the steadiness of her soft low voice. "I am not sure. The priests took me to the women's quarters of Baltasar Cerra, who used to do business with my father, after the officers of the Inquisition confiscated our estates." Her reserve broke, and she slipped from her chair to kneel before him, pleading. "I beg you, send word to my brother, Elias de Pazia. He is studying at Holy Cross and has powerful friends in the church, even though our father betrayed the faith. He will recompense whatever Cerra has paid on my account."

Baseel looked into the hopeful upturned face, whose eyes were still not averted from his complexion, and made a quick decision. She seemed remarkably straightforward; he was no actor himself, and would prefer to conclude this distasteful business without violence.

He had a fair offer to make, a better future for both of them than

anything Spain would allow the destitute children of a condemned Jewish apostate. His tactics would be plain and direct. "It is about your brother that we must speak. Sit, please," he said, waiting for her to get up off the floor.

"I am afraid he too has fallen out of favor with the Dominican order. He is accused both of practicing Judaism and of secretly conspiring with the Devil."

Eva's face registered sincere dismay. "Oh no, that is a lie! Elias is a true son of the church. Both of us had our first communion with the most Reverend Bishop Hernando Talavera! When the fathers examine him they will discover that they are mistaken, and they will restore him to his place."

Baseel's heart was unexpectedly wrung that anybody who had been through what this girl had endured in the last weeks could still believe so naively in the institutions of her family's borrowed religion. To guard against pity, he made his voice rough. "He has already been tried *in absentia* and condemned to be burned for heresy as your father was."

Eva stared at him, her face becoming white under the freckles. Then tears began to course down her cheeks, and her head bowed. "It is my fault. Elias too will die for my sin."

Well, it was a good start. Baseel suppressed another twinge of sympathy and pressed on. "As it happens, because of his fondness for you he has one chance to stay alive. In trying to locate you, he fell into the hands of my master Baltasar Cerra. I am the majordomo of his Granada operation, and you were given to me in the hopes that you might care enough to help him."

Hope filled her expression and she struggled for composure, mopping her face with her sleeve. "Elias is here? May I see him?"

"Not just yet. First there are some harsh new facts of life which it is needful for you to understand." Baseel paused, measuring her and trying to choose words that would persuade. "Your brother will find no safe places in Spain or Portugal, now that he has been tried and found to be a heretic. In fact, since the inquisitors have mounted a special search for him, we will have to smuggle him out of Granada.

"The one hope he has is the same route many Spanish and Portuguese Jews have taken before him: to go to the Ottoman Empire, where educated men are valued. Unfortunately, such a journey is costly. The only thing of value the church has not taken is himself."

Baseel paused, watching the girl for her reaction. She sat perfectly still, the occasional tear still escaping, hands tightly clasped in her lap as though to keep them from trembling. He noted that the fingers were capable and the nails work-roughened; not the sort of hands one would expect of a de Pazia. This girl was unusual on many counts. Perhaps she

might be more understanding than the typical pampered daughter of a wealthy merchant.

"Since your father and the church have taken such great pains to make him skilled in languages and writing," Baseel continued, "My master might be able to find a place for Elias as a valued slave in one of the great trading houses of the east."

"Elias a slave! Oh, no, anything but that!" Eva seemed to forget her own circumstances in the horror of this new revelation.

"Anything but that, in his case, would be an agonizing death," Baseel said brutally. "Your brother, for all his learning and intelligence, knows nothing of making his way in a world without privilege and position. His inexperience practically dropped him into our hands. If my master had not captured him, the Inquisition would have broken your brother on the rack by now. But Baltasar Cerra did not become wealthy because of his charitable nature. He expects to realize a handsome profit."

She frowned slightly in concentration. Good. She was intelligent and was working this out. It was time for a more gentle tone. "Slavery is not such a bad fate for one of his talents. Indeed, the day-to-day existence of a learned slave can be much better than that of many freemen. I speak as one with experience," he added dryly. "Unfortunately for all concerned, Elias needs to be convinced of this. His lack of acceptance will not change the fact of his slavery, only the conditions of it.

"A cooperative slave of your brother's ability and learning is worth a fortune. Uncooperative, he is just another rebellious body, useful only for chain labor or the galleys. And there is another reason you should help me persuade him. His cooperation could buy your freedom."

She flinched and her eyes went unwillingly to the curtained arch that partitioned the bedroom from the salon. She turned a greenish color under her tan, and swallowed several times in barely-controlled fear. Baseel pointed hastily. "There is a privy off the entry!" One hand clamped over her mouth, the girl disappeared in the direction indicated.

After such a refreshing and unanticipated beginning, the plain statement on his lack of attraction stung. In spite of his scars, there were women who welcomed his advances. He did not need or want this girl.

When she came out she was composed again, and her face was set like the condemned. "I deserve death," she said. "You may do what you want with me if it will help Elias."

"You are no use to either your brother or my master dead," snapped Baseel, annoyed at being cast in the role of a 'fate worse than death'. "Tomorrow I must leave at dawn to meet a shipment of spices from Tangier. I will give you until I return to consider how you can persuade your brother to see reason, and if you have questions you may ask me then."

Baseel indicated the door to a small storeroom. "You will make your-

self a pallet in there for now, and I will have someone attend to your needs tomorrow." He paused at the door with a last thought. "Until I return, the conditions are the same as last week: You may have the freedom of the compound, but the gate-keeper will not let you outside it. It will go badly for you if you put him to the test."

Baseel made a point of detouring past the Casa de Pazia when he returned two days later. The extent and obvious wealth of the palatial villa gave him new insight into why the Inquisition had pounced so fast on de Pazia's heresies. He could well imagine the life of ease that had gone on behind those walls; it was the life of his childhood in the Alhambra, where even the palace slaves had leisure within their servitude. Until the court of the deposed King Boabdil had retreated to the Alpujarra in the nearby mountains, the Alcazar family had watched comfortably from the sidelines while the rich amused themselves.

But in the impoverished circumstances of defeat, life for the slaves had been quite different. Baseel's thoughts hardened. When Granada was conquered and the Jews were ordered to convert or be expelled, many principled men had left their riches and gone into exile. Yacov de Pazia, when forced to choose between his wealth or his faith, had gambled on the former. And it had been his downfall; the money was no good to him where he was now and his descendants would not even own themselves.

The place was deserted. On the elaborate iron gate which hung open onto the formal courtyard was a paper with the seal of the Inquisition. Dismounting to read the charges against the family, Baseel started at a movement from across the street. A woman darted out from the side gate of a nearby villa, a servant by her dress. "Señor, you work for Casa Cerra, yes? Do you know what has become of the daughter of this house?"

Baseel's curiosity was piqued. "I might know. Why do you ask?"

"I have her guitarra, and she will be wanting it. It is a little damaged, but I hid it for her, when the priests came."

Baseel was surprised. Anything to do with the Inquisition involved risk, and the woman would have been accused of stealing if she were caught. What astonishing loyalty the girl inspired! "Were you her nurse?"

"No, I just worked in the kitchens," the woman mumbled, embarrassed. "But if you see her, please tell her that Old Juana is well, and has found employment with the Casa Lorenzo, and that I will bring her instrument if I may."

"Why would the daughter of a rich merchant care about the fate of her kitchen servant?" Baseel asked.

The woman's face fell. "I see that you do not know Eva, or you would not be asking that. We don't grieve the father or his majordomo, but it was hard to lose the young mistress." She looked over her shoulder. "I must

return to my work. Is she still at Casa Cerra?"

Baseel was alarmed. If the de Pazia girl had people who were loyal to her, right here in Granada, she could easily escape and disappear. And how would that make him look? "I know she was sold into slavery, and is probably on the way to the coast now," he said brusquely. "She will not be needing the instrument. Sell it, or keep it yourself." He mounted again and hurried towards home, wishing he had not been so lenient in setting Eva's boundaries and hoping that she had not taken this opportunity to vanish.