

1. a Warning

Baseel Alcazar: Granada, Spain, January 1514

Standing in the back with the ordinary tradesmen requesting audience, Baseel Alcazar could not at first see who had entered, but he heard those nearest the door fall silent. The buzz of conversation that echoed off the elaborate plaster-carved walls in the reception hall of the Alhambra palace died, replaced by the rustle of silks as heads turned to see who the newcomer was. Baseel's scalp tightened with the same dread on most of the other faces when he saw the badges of the Spanish Inquisition.

Enjoying the fear he generated, Abbe Matias paced slowly between his two escorts down the space that opened for him, barely acknowledging the deference of those cooling their heels in the anteroom. No one had forgotten the Inquisition's most recent exposure of the wealthy Converso merchant family, the Casa de Pazia. Not even the fact that the heir of the house was his personal secretary had been enough to save them.

Count Tendilla de Mendoza, Regent of Granada, would not dare keep the Inquisition waiting.

Like most 'Moriscos' – Moorish converts – Baseel Alcazar was scrupulous about observing all the rituals of the Catholic Church. Nevertheless, he shifted behind the bulky man near him and bent at the knees to make himself shorter. It was hard to escape notice when you were taller than most and stood out in other ways. Best to keep his face out of view; the churchman would not likely have forgotten it.

Abbe Matias' cold gray eyes slid over Baseel's section of the waiting throng with no flicker of recognition, and the young Moor breathed a sigh of thanks to Allah, the merciful. When he reached the carved doors at the end of the hall the Abbe was speedily received into a private audience with

Count Tendilla. Conversation started up again.

As he straightened, Baseel saw someone staring and pointing rudely at him while the gawker's companion mumbled an explanation. The darkness of Baseel's skin, inherited from his Moroccan Tuareg mother, was not the cause for comment – half of Granada was Moorish, of as many complexion shades as five centuries of intermarriage with the Spanish Visigoths could produce – but rather the whiteness of his profuse smallpox scars created a startling polka-dot effect against the deeper tones.

Baseel heard the name of Casa Cerra, the trading house for which he was the newly promoted majordomo. The stare was replaced by an expression of respect. Baltasar Cerra, his employer and one-time master, might be only a merchant, but in Andalusia – as the Spanish called their recently conquered possessions from Granada to the coast – Casa Cerra was a force to be reckoned with.

Indeed, Casa Cerra was on excellent terms with Abbe Matias himself as they did business together often. It was on account of their most recent bit of business that Cerra's new majordomo preferred to avoid the Abbe at this moment.

The Abbe must not suspect that Baltasar Cerra had captured the man the Inquisition so eagerly sought. Baseel would not breathe easy in the Abbe's presence until Elias de Pazia was safely sold and shipped to his new master in the Ottoman Empire.

And Eva de Pazia had become Eva Alcazar.

Baseel wondered if he should leave. But doing so would call attention to himself; and after all, he had waited half the morning already. Business was business, and Count Tendilla owed Casa Cerra for three months' supply of spices to the Alhambra kitchens.

A servant in palace livery came out of the double doors, and to Baseel's discomfiture the man looked directly at him and beckoned. The Moor made his way forward at the summons, a cold knot of fear forming in his stomach.

Perhaps this had nothing to do with the de Pazia affair. Perhaps the Abbe merely wanted to arrange for another of the clandestine transactions whereby Baltasar Cerra took the more marketable children of the Inquisition's victims off the Church's hands. Even though he had never personally participated in these arrangements in the past, now that Baseel was majordomo such things fell under his management.

But no; the Abbe would not discuss such an exchange here, in the Alhambra. Baseel was certain that Count Tendilla would not approve. The official explanation for Casa Cerra's dealings with the Church was that the

children of apostate Conversos, declared Jewish by default, came legally under the expulsion edict of Ferdinand and the late Isabella, the 'Catholic Kings'. As such, Baltasar Cerra kindly undertook to find them new homes outside Spain.

Baseel was ushered into the beautiful room where Count Tendilla, Regent of Granada in King Ferdinand's absence, sat with his ecclesiastical guest on elaborately carved wooden chairs. "...you are to be congratulated on your elevation to chief Inquisitor of Cadiz," the Regent was saying. "Ah, here is Alcazar, Cerra's steward."

Baseel bowed low. "My lord, I hesitate even to trouble you with so small a matter, which no doubt you do not even know of, but..."

"Yes, yes, the spice account," Tendilla interrupted impatiently. "I have instructed the steward to make payment at once. You may stop by the purser when you leave."

Baseel began to stammer out his gratitude at this unexpected capitulation. King Ferdinand had not reimbursed his government and they were notoriously late in paying their bills. But Tendilla cut in again. "The Reverend Abbe here was reminded of a matter that concerns your house when he noticed you in the anteroom, and has asked that you attend him."

Had news come to the Abbe's ears that Cerra had a slave educated in five languages for sale? And had he connected that fact with Elias de Pazia? Baseel felt the coldness grow in the pit of his stomach, but he kept concern from his face as Abbe Matias led the way to the small side alcove.

"What was your name again, Moor?" Echoes ran around the tiled walls of the small room that had been built as a place for Muslim prayers by the Alhambra's original architect.

"Baseel Alcazar, your Reverence."

"Hm. How pleasant to find a Morisco who chose a Christian name other than Jose."

"Thank you, your Reverence." The Abbe did not speak Arabic, or he would have known that Baseel was also a Muslim name. That it sounded the same as that of a Christian Saint was a coincidence which had saved Baseel the trouble of changing it at his compulsory baptism. "St. Basil enjoined us to poverty, a quality I admire."

"Yes, very commendable." The Abbe, one of the wealthiest men in Granada, now turned to his purpose. "Before I leave for my new sinecure, there is a matter I desired to inquire into. Do you recall the de Pazia girl whom we gave into the 'protection' of Casa Cerra?"

Baseel's blood ran cold. What could the Inquisition want with Eva? He kicked himself inwardly. He should not have let her set foot outside

Cerra's compound. What if she had been recognized in the bazaar? He promised that from now on, any time she was out she would wear the heavy mantilla of a married woman over her face. "I vaguely remember dealing with some such person in Cerra's business letters. We arranged for her—ah —passage—out of the country at once, as required by the edict of 1492, issued after the fall of Granada."

"Oh." The Abbe seemed disappointed. "Is it possible to trace where she went?"

The usual place was the slave market at Tangier. "One of the ports in North Africa. I would have to check our records. But from there she might have gone to — reside — with any of a number of households. The de Pazias had a far-flung network."

A distraction was in order. Baseel knew his employer sometimes supplied the old pedophile with boys; he would pretend to think this the reason for their conversation. "Of course, Baltasar Cerra lives to serve the church, and has instructed me to provide anything your Reverence wants. Perhaps someone else might do as well?" The dissipation in the evil face made Baseel's skin crawl. Even the thought of Abbe Matias in the same room with his Eva —

The Abbe's eyes narrowed as he searched Baseel's scarred face. Baseel looked back blandly. They could torture him to death before he would reveal that Eva de Pazia was still at Casa Cerra. "We heard a rumor that Elias de Pazia has been seen in Granada, and it seemed advisable to put his sister to the question if she was available."

Baseel felt a sudden sympathy with Elias' desire for vengeance against this man. But being born a palace slave had taught him to guard his expression. His smile was sincere and servile. "Given time, a search could be made for her. As it is January, the Mediterranean ships are not setting out from port; but perhaps in the spring?"

"No, by then it will be too late. You are dismissed."

Baseel bowed and removed himself as quickly as he dared. Black anger boiled in his gut. Put Eva to the question! He counted the months until Elias would be safely out of Spain. He must be very careful the Abbe's former protégé did not escape and endanger them all.

Elias had given his word not to try. But what was that word worth? Baseel had upheld his end of the agreement, to arrange an honorable marriage for his sister in return for Elias' cooperation. Just a few more formalities, and Eva would be his.

Baseel let the thought of Eva warm his soul. Gentle, courageous, self-effacing Eva, with her serving heart and her willing hands. Eva, who did not

see his conspicuous scars but agonized over her own invisible wounds.

Whatever it took, he would heal her.

As he threaded his way through the corridors towards the purser's office, the Moor considered possible sources of the rumor Abbe Matias had heard. None of the servants in Cerra's Granada compound had been told who Elias was. The prisoner in the walled courtyard was just another educated slave waiting for shipment to some Ottoman merchant while the majordomo taught him to write Arabic. And they knew enough to be discreet; Cerra's dealings with the Inquisition were dangerous to all who might show any undue knowledge or interest.

Except Conchita, the tavern dancer who had briefly served as his personal housekeeper and Eva's 'chaperone'. Conchita knew who Elias was; he had been in and out of Baseel's apartments for Arabic writing lessons the whole time she was in his service. Why hadn't he thought to give his student a false name?

Baseel reassured himself on her account. He was a good judge of people, and Conchita was in a profession where discretion was required. Besides, angry though she might have been at her summary dismissal, Baseel did not think she could be the source of rumors about Elias. However much she disliked Eva, the tavern girl was completely smitten with the handsome young Jew. No, Conchita would do nothing to put Elias in danger.

That left Manuel, one of Cerra's new men-at-arms. Manuel must have seen Elias being brought to and from the bath-house for his lessons. He had worked for Casa de Pazia; he would immediately have recognized the son of his former master. Manuel bore a grudge, and his loyalty to Casa Cerra was untried.

Baseel regretted that he had not killed Manuel the first time he assaulted Eva. Well, too late now; the damage was done, and Manuel was reassigned to Cerra's warehouse in Almería.

As he was leaving the purser's office, his mission accomplished, a female figure veiled in a heavy lace mantilla detached from the shadows of the huge arched gate. "Señor!" she hissed. "If you could get a letter to Eva de Pazia, I would pay well."

Baseel was alarmed, wondering if the Abbe had set up this test. "Who is this you speak of, and who are you?" he asked.

"I cannot say. I am not even supposed to be here. But I know you work for Casa Cerra, and that Eva went there last September. Please, she was a friend of mine. I need to know what has become of her, and if I can help her."

Baseel was too wise to fall into such an obvious trap. “I am sorry, but she was probably sent to Tangier last September,” he lied. “No message can go out until shipping opens in the spring.”

He was not surprised to find the Abbe and his retinue taking their time going down the main road from the Alhambra’s lofty hill. Baseel hung back, making a pretense of finding the right coin to pay the boy who held his horse, but the cleric caught his eye and beckoned him close to his litter with a beringed hand.

“Alcazar, I want you to pass on a precautionary message to your master Baltasar Cerra, lest his desire for profit make him – *incautious*.” Abbe’s subtle emphasis on the last word was not lost on Cerra’s majordomo. “The younger de Pazia is the Devil’s own pupil. Anyone who has dealings with him will have cause to regret it.”