

### 3. the Tomb at Tucume

Baseel: Capac Nan Pancar-pucuy coya (flowering moon, Mar. 1534)

Baseel stared at the dark mass of warriors on the road far behind them. He was almost beginning to believe in these pagan superstitions about the Llama God. Misfortune had dogged every step of their hunt for Elias de Pazia.

There had been the incident of the hanging bridge breaking. Or, going back a few weeks further, the Captains discovering his hidden Qur'an. Or their nearly drowning the first time they tried to get across the Marañón river. In fact, coupled with the events of the past two years in this godforsaken land – the death of Inca Huascar, the capture and execution of the usurper Inca Atahualpa, the mysterious demise of the Spanish puppet Inca Tupac Hualpa – Baseel could see a definite causal relationship between the lack of the royal symbol and the lack of blessing.

Rampan, the young Cañari interpreter who was all that remained of their Peruvian escort, shaded his eyes to better see the group about a mile behind them on the Inca's road.

"Can you tell who they are?" Don Luis Vaca, Baseel's employer and the only other Spaniard on this expedition, had not even tried to master the identification system of the Inca, where each tribe wore its own distinctive headdress.

"Not QuizQuiz army. No Quito heads, they wear feather," Rampan replied. "Some Chachapoya, some Cañari. Some more north people, maybe Huancavilca."

"But the important question is, will they aid us or attack us?" Don Luis pulled Cacho, his Percheron battle-horse, behind a rock, the only obstruction available.

"No good trying to hide him now, they can see us if we can see them. Besides, they'll have noticed the horse droppings along the road," Baseel pointed out. The master-servant relationship between the caballero and his squire had been wearing thinner with distance from the other conquistadors. Not only was he older than his employer, he had wider experience, and was far better educated. "We should turn off. If our tracks aren't noticed, maybe they'll pass us by."

The three acted on the idea at once, leaving the highway as soon as they were out of view on the opposite side of the gentle rise. At Rampan's suggestion, Baseel mounted double behind Don Luis and they put the

horse into a canter towards the small hill that rose west of them while the interpreter took another route through the tall clumps of ichu grass.

When the hill was between the conquistadors and the road, Don Luis brought Cacho to a halt and dismounted. Big as he was, the horse was winded from galloping with a double load. It was really a triple load, Baseel thought, if you added the weight of Vaca's plate armor. He wished he still had his brigandine mail-shirt, but at least the native leather armor was less for Cacho to carry.

"I dislike running from natives with bronze weapons. Why don't we just tell them we are Viracochas, Spanish demigods?" Don Luis demanded. "They are under orders to aid us."

"Those were Inca Atahualpa's orders, and Pizarro executed him, remember?" Baseel had of necessity taken it as his job to constantly tutor the thick-headed caballero. At least until the remaining year of his indenture contract to serve Don Luis Vaca expired and he was free of the fool. "What's been keeping us safe on this expedition is the presence of the two Inti-priests."

"So where are they now, then, just when we need them most? I'll wager going off to that shrine was just an excuse. They've probably abandoned us, after that new priest fellow you seem to trust so much led us out here in the middle of nowhere."

Baseel tried to be patient. "First of all, Inti-Sagra went with him. Finding this special conopa-stone is more important to him than it is to Captain Pizarro. Without it, Inca Manco will never be recognized as the rightful successor. And I'm the only person who knows Elias de Pazia well enough to find him."

"Well, maybe the Inti-priest from Cuzco can be trusted," Don Luis conceded. "But what about this northern fellow, this Inti-Tarac? What's in it for him? Why should he care whether or not we find this overrated rock?"

"First, he's a sun-priest, and the Llama God is a huaca of Inti the sun-god. Second, he's looking for someone of the other side of the river too, someone who was traveling with a Spaniard. And last, Inti-Tarac is grateful to me for saving his life, that day I pulled him off the cliff."

Vaca grunted as he settled in the grass. "What if Inti-Tarac just wanted to get us away from Cajamarca? Maybe we were getting a little too close to one of the places where they stashed the rest of Inca Atahualpa's ransom."

That uncomfortable thought had occurred to Baseel also. While they waited for the Marañón river to go down, the two conquistadors had whiled the time in following a rumor that a portion of the vanished treasure was hidden on the west side of the river canyon. Inti-Tarac's sudden appearance and offer to guide them to a better ford had interrupted them

just as they found signs of a new trail recently made by the passage of hundreds of llamas and people, going towards an impassable cliff.

"There's nothing we can do except show up at the meeting-place and see if they are there. But I'm sure they will be. Given the religious nature of our search, it's understandable that they want to ask their deity's aid in finding this Llama God, and that two foreigners who scorn their rites would be unwelcome. After all, it was only for one day."

"I'm surprised that Fray Valverde went along with all this heathenish superstition." Don Luis fingered the saint's medal he always wore for luck, passed down through generations of Vacas.

"After the Indio army deserted the new puppet Inca and he died mysteriously, the good fathers didn't have any choice. The Peruvians all think Inca Tupac was cursed because he didn't have this Llama God huaca. Fray Valverde can't just wave a cross over the Indios and change the beliefs they have lived under all their lives." Baseel reflected on the arrogance of the Spanish priests. They had tried to do just that in Granada thirty years ago, and of course the Faithful had merely continued to worship Allah in secret. Had not Muhammad (peace be upon him) excused his followers for lying about their allegiance in order to save their lives?

"Well, they're a superstitious bunch for sure," Don Luis said. "I know we were getting close to something just east of Cajamarca from the way all the natives were acting. When Peru is pacified I will ask for that section of land as my fief. Then I can get more Indio workers and look for the ransom's hiding place at my leisure."

"Like the man who stumbled across the buried treasure in the field?" Baseel suggested sardonically.

"One of the Indios found treasure? Why didn't you tell me before?"

"It was a reference to the Gospel," Baseel said. "Don't you listen to the priest's homily?" The Moor did not know the Injeel as well as he knew the Qur'an, but even so he knew more than most Catholics. But then, their lives had not depended on putting up a good Christian front. "A man discovered treasure buried in a field, so he went and bought the land."

"I can't remember half of what the priests say. Speaking of which, what do the priests have against you, anyway?" Don Luis asked, bringing up the subject that had lain unspoken these many weeks.

"Guilt by association with Elias de Pazia." Baseel lied smoothly.

"Why did they send the Chachapoya guard? Were they afraid you will desert with Elias?"

"People have been known to flee rather than try to prove their innocence under questioning by the Inquisitions expert's," the Moor replied with irony. "Fortunately for me, the Captains need this sacred conopastone more than the priests need to pursue my past. And since the news of the two white holy men preaching on the far side of the river, it looks

like we have caught our man.” Which made reinstatement a better option than flight for the Moor, even with the guard gone. If they brought back the Llama God, both conquistadors would receive their share of the booty gained in their absence.

“You should have told me you knew de Pazia was still alive, back when we were searching for him.” This statement had become a litany. Don Luis was bitterly disappointed that he was missing the sack of Cuzco.

“I did tell you. But when we met the old priest, you were the one who swore the footprints we were following were his,” Baseel reminded his employer for the tenth time. “Besides, I didn’t want to miss the sack of Cuzco, and without supplies or an interpreter we could have spent months chasing him with no success.”

“Are you sure you aren’t hiding some sympathy for the Jew?” Vaca asked suspiciously.

“As far as I am concerned, Elias deserves death,” Baseel declared flatly. He did not share his further thought: you don’t know how many times over. “I’d wager he hasn’t given it a moment’s thought whether or not we were both killed that night he made his escape in Cajamarca.” Baseel had given it much thought, and his musings were not pleasant.

There was a rustle in the tall grass. Rampan had caught up to them. “Warriors see where horse leave road,” he panted. “Many turn, come this way. You go away fast on horse; they come run!”

“If we leave you behind, how will we find the place where we are to meet the Inti-priests?” Baseel asked. “Without their protection, two foreigners would never make it, now that the whole country is in pieces.”

“Cacho can take three,” Don Luis said decisively. Rampan shook his head in alarm, but the caballero insisted. “We’ll put you between the two of us, you won’t fall off!”

Big as he was, the Percheron grunted under the weight of three men, one in plate armor. Baseel, sitting on the horse’s wide rump behind the saddle, figured that the three of them must total seven hundredweight. But the horse obediently shifted to a canter across the open grassland, picking his way heavily between the clumps of ichu.

If they could reach their rendezvous with the Inti-Priests before the warriors caught up to them, they would be safe. All the Peruvians feared and respected the cult of the sun.

The horse gave them a good lead before he began to stumble under the triple burden. Even Don Luis consented to walk, leading the exhausted Cacho. “How far are we from the crossroads where we meet our Inti-priests?”

Rampan pointed north where the road entered some tumbled hills. “Not far. Just over high place. Reach tonight.”

They topped the rise where the Inca's highway threaded between a low place in the volcanic rock formation. Before them stood a mass of warriors, waiting. Behind them, another group came out of the rocks and silently closed in.

The two conquistadors drew their swords. The warriors with bows drew them back; some held them aimed at Baseel and Don Luis, others at Cacho.

Three men who were apparently their leaders came forward. Rampan stepped out to meet them. A torrent of words flowed from him, and he gestured towards the Conquistadors, the horse, and pointed imperiously in the direction they had been traveling.

"Who are they? What did you say?" Don Luis asked.

"They troops of Inca Huascar, go home from Condesuyu. I tell you on important journey for Manco, new Sapa Inca."

The three leaders appeared to be arguing among themselves over Rampan's declarations. More questioning ensued. Rampan translated his answers.

"He say, not hear of new Sapa Inca. I say, two Inti-priests with us, we meet soon at crossroads."

Baseel watched the leaders discuss this last. He only knew a few words of Quechua, but he was good at reading men's faces, and the expressions of the leaders clearly said they thought Rampan was bluffing about the Inti-priests. Most of the discussion now appeared to center on the horse. Baseel gathered that they both feared and coveted the animal.

Eventually the three came to a conclusion. After more discussion Rampan turned to the two conquistadors. "They not believe we with two Inti-priests. But they say you give horse and long knives, they let go."

Don Luis put his hand to his scabbard. "They'll have to kill me before I give up my horse and my sword!"

"There are hundreds of them and only three of us," Basil pointed out. "If they let us go, we can meet up with Inti-Tarac and Inti-Sagra. The priests can get us our arms and Cacho back, and then we can go on with our mission. Otherwise, we kill some of them, they kill us, and they take the horse, our swords, and everything else too. Inca Manco won't get the Llama God, so he can't establish himself as supreme ruler. Peru dissolves into anarchy, and our fellow conquistadors are slaughtered on the retreat to the coast, like Cortez' men were."

Without waiting for Vaca's consent, Baseel handed Cacho's reins over to the warrior next to him and offered his sword, hilt-first, to the nearest of the three leaders, a Cañari by his headdress.

Reluctantly, Don Luis unbuckled his sword-belt and gave it to the second leader, whose turban was the same as that worn by their Chachapoya escort lost in the Marañón when the bridge broke.

The third leader, from the tribe Rampan identified as Huancavilca, tried to take one of the swords, and an argument broke out again. At last they came to some sort of agreement. Rampan turned to Don Luis. "They want shiny shirt, too."

Don Luis' face was set in helpless fury as he let Baseel unbuckle the front and back plates of his cuirass. When these had been given to the third chief, the group seemed satisfied. At a signal from the leaders, the men fell to one side of the road and let the two conquistadors and their Cañari guide pass.

They filed past the silent groups of Inca troops, pulled to the side of the road and watching the foreigners with wary interest. Baseel could see the last of the Inca troops below them as they dropped down out of the rocks. A group near the end was pointing at them with more interest than most.

"Piura," Rampan identified them as they drew even. "Lands not far from Cañari. Maybe never see Viracocha before."

Suddenly two warriors exploded out of the press. They fell on Don Luis with a blood-curdling scream. Baseel leaped to the caballero's aid, withdrawing his knife from its sheath.

"Treachery!" Don Luis cried, pulling out his own dagger. "I told you we should never have given up our swords!"

The two Spaniards were hopelessly outnumbered, but the groups around the attackers intervened, until at last both sides were separated. Several Indios apiece held the two conquistadors and their guide, while their companions held the two attackers, who each bore several knife wounds. Don Luis was bleeding from a gash on his left leg.

The leaders came hurrying toward them, frowning at the lack of discipline. Several sharp questions in Quechua were issued, and the Piura thrust their brethren forward with much excited jabber. The two who had attacked Don Luis were distinguished by a curious pattern of marks they carried below the knee. These scars seemed to be of importance to the bearers, because they kept holding out their legs for the leaders to see and pointing to them as they talked.

Baseel looked at the pattern of angry red welts and twisted skin. These weren't tattoos or ritual marks; the men's legs had been burned from foot to knee.

Rampan interpreted in an undertone. "Men say, Don Luis bad man, come to village of Sipan last year. Burn, torture many people." He waited for the caballero to respond.

Don Luis Vaca, still breathing heavily, did not deny the accusations. Baseel remembered that when he had been sick from an infected wound, Don Luis and Elias had gone off with some others on a treasure-hunt-

ing expedition. He looked hard at his employer, and Don Luis avoided his gaze.

“Cañari all angry, ask for take foreigners to Tucume, special sacrifice to sea god,” Rampan whispered. “Not look good for you.”

The leaders conferred together and came to a decision. But when Baseel turned to ask Rampan what their fate was to be, the young Cañari had disappeared.

Baseel: Tucume, Peru Ayrihua coya (twin ears moon, April 1534)

It took ten days for the triumphant Piuras to march Baseel to the coast. The occasional glimpses he got of Don Luis, surrounded by another group of captors, gave him the impression that Vaca was receiving worse treatment than Baseel was. Under the circumstances, he could muster little sympathy.

The great mound that rose in the center of the Tucume pyramids was visible for two days' march before they reached it. Baseel's Peruvian captors' animation increased as they approached the holy site, but he was filled with dread. All of his speculations pointed to an unpleasant death of one sort or another. Perhaps just for once Vaca had been right: they should have gone down fighting.

He was brought to a large edifice whose steeply sloping sides boasted only one opening. Into this the Moor was thrust. Behind him a large open-work gate of lashed timbers was dropped into place. Baseel sat until his eyes could adjust to the darkness from the bright sun. It smelled of earth and dust and human waste, but at least this place was cool.

Before long, the features of the enclosure became discernible in the checkered light that filtered through the lattice of the gate. He was in a room set below ground level, about thirty feet long and ten wide. On the wall opposite the opening, where the light fell strongest, Baseel could see that the walls were covered with frescoes of birds and sea creatures. There were also depictions of mummies. This place had been, or perhaps was planned to be, a tomb.

A sound from one of the darker corners gave notice that he was not the only occupants. Four other Indios huddled there dispiritedly. Baseel tried his few words of Quechua on them without getting any sign of recognition. He gave it up as a bad job and settled over on the other side.

The heavy lattice of the gate was opened again, and the caballero was half-thrown, half dumped in before it thudded shut. Baseel could see Don Luis groping against the wall with a pronounced limp, cursing at the pain from his leg. Vaca's wound had not seemed that serious when they had been captured, but now it smelled of putrefaction even from a distance.

Baseel was not sure if he was glad to see his employer, after the accusations of the Piuras who had been burned. Of course, such acts were

committed by certain men the world over, but Baseel did not want to serve such a person. Or to die in his company.

Well, if he was going to suffer for the sins of others, then he might as well know the full tale. Baseel discarded the subordinate relationship altogether. “Vaca, I think you owe me an explanation.”

“Is that you, Alcazar? Are you in this hole too?” Don Luis was so glad to hear him—his vision had not yet adjusted enough to see the Moor’s dark skin against the shadowed walls—that he did not even appear to notice the discourtesy in his squire’s address.

“Yes, I’m here, and I want to know the reason why.”

“I suppose it has to do with a village near here called Sipan.” Don Luis growled.

“I never heard of it. Tell me more.”

“You remember when we were in San Miguel, and that Indio brought in those articles of gold and silver?”

Baseel remembered. Items of exquisite workmanship in gold, silver and turquoise, inlaid with shell and mother-of-pearl. The patterns of octopus, spiders, and puma faces worked in the ornaments were reminiscent of the frescoes incised on the walls around them. “The ones he said came from an old tomb?”

“Those. Well, the Indio who brought them told Gomez that he could take him to the place where there were more. He told us that there was a whole cache of such treasure – roomfuls of it.”

“So that was the reason for that scouting expedition! I half thought you’d gone on ahead and left me to die of my wound and the flux.”

“We got an old Cañari woman to care for you,” Don Luis protested. “You’re still alive, aren’t you?”

“But for how long?” Baseel asked sardonically. “Go on.”

“Well, the Indio took us to this village called Sipan. Most of the people fled as soon as they saw us coming, but we were able to catch a few.”

“And those Piura warriors were some that you caught?” Baseel was sick with disgust.

“How would I know? One Indio looks just like another to me.”

“These can be differentiated from others by the burn marks on their legs,” Baseel retorted. “They seem to have no trouble remembering you.”

“Well, at least I left mine alive to tell the tale, didn’t I? The one Elias caught died.” Don Luis grunted. “They didn’t have any gold anyway. We found a few more pieces of the same workmanship, but no more. So we never got anything for our pains.”

Don Luis read the contempt in Baseel’s silence. “All right, we shouldn’t have tortured them,” he admitted sullenly. “But I confessed before the next mass. I got fifty rosaries for penance, and I said them all. So I have been forgiven.”

“Tell that to the residents of Sipan,” Baseel retorted.

“At least Gomez, Navarro and I confessed,” Don Luis repeated defensively. “That’s more than Elias did. He was only interested in getting treasure; didn’t show any more concern than if he were crushing a bug. Would have cared more if the Indio he caught was a dog. Coldest man I ever knew. And you were glad enough to share *his* company for months.”

Baseel pulled away to sit by himself. Vaca’s comment struck too close to home. The fact was, he disliked Don Luis more for his ignorance and uncouth stupidity than for his prejudice and arrogant racial superiority. The former were as Allah had made him, the latter as his upbringing had shaped the Spaniard. But within his class code the caballero tried to abide by his limited morality and when he stepped beyond it he had the grace to be ashamed.

Why did he prefer the company of Elias? Baseel had to admit it was for purely selfish reasons. With de Pazia, he did not have to maintain the Catholic pretense. They shared a common childhood city and language. The Jew was at the same level of intelligence and education; they could discuss ideas. But perhaps the greatest reason was that next to the other’s cynical lack of morality, the Moor could feel righteous by comparison.

Baseel knew that Elias de Pazia would not have been ashamed of his evil actions then, and wherever he might be, he was not ashamed of them now. Neither would he feel Vaca’s need to confess his sins, for Elias held the position that each man was his own god. He had lived for vengeance until it corroded his soul; having achieved that, now he lived for himself. No one else’s need or pain could touch him any more.

And how much responsibility did Baseel bear? Soon he would stand before the judgment of Allah, his good deeds weighed against his bad ones. The result would determine whether he could join his Eva.

His part in saving, training, and loosing Elias de Pazia on the world might weigh heavily on the bad side of the recording angel’s scales.