

O. Cat and Mouse

the Cat

Tabita waited out the storm, licking her fur. Eva had gotten herself lost again. As soon as the snow stopped, Tabita would have to go find her. Even though she was one of the hind-walker oversized cats, Eva needed a lot of watching over. Not like the other member of their pride, Eva's litter-mate Elias.

Of all the hind-walkers Tabita knew, Elias was the most like a real cat. His behavior was completely consistent. Outside of Tabita and Eva, the two other members of his pride, he looked out for his own interests. Self-concerned. Pride-aware. Cat-like. Right and proper.

Not that Tabita could make much sense of how these clawless creatures went about their hunts, but she could smell many of their relationships. For instance, the dark one, the alpha lion they called Baseel. He was not a member of their pride, whatever Eva thought about him. Eva's judgement had proved flawed before. Tabita could see that Elias did not trust him. Around the dark one, Elias was wary, ready for action, dangerous. Elias was a hunter.

Eva was not much of a hunter. When troubled, she would close her eyes and bow her head – a position of unpreparedness, unwise. She would miaow plaintively to nobody – under her breath, if other hind-walkers were nearby. When she was done, all her adrenaline was gone. Then she would very likely expose herself to situations any cat could read as risky.

Eva was clearly not very bright. But Tabita loved her anyway.

Casa de Pazia, Granada, Spain, January 1514

She would have to go back and face the hurt—and surely also the disgust—in Baseel's eyes. Eva sat shivering on the stairs in the vacant house, wondering if her courage was sufficient for what lay ahead.

Their carefully-laid escape plans had not anticipated yesterday's Moorish revolt. Eva shuddered, thinking of the newly dead that dotted the plaza fronting the Chancellery. But even that could not block out the more pressing memory of her last talk with Baseel.

She would never have revealed her terrible secret if she knew she would have to see that knowledge reflected in his eyes. A last choice to give her the resolve to flee, to carry out her brother's plan.

Yesterday she had thought to leave worldly things behind forever and

go into the Carmelite convent where Fray Pablo had obtained a place for her. Beneath the coarse nun's robes that she had so hastily thrown over her simple dress, two steel tubes pressed against her. They contained the precious scrolls that should have changed her brother's future.

Now she had to take them back. The worst of it was that there would be no way to avoid Baseel. If he had ever cared, he didn't now. Not after what she had told him the night before he left for Cordoba. Not after her escape, knowing what that would cost him.

The pale light of a January dawn began to increase, reflecting the white on the small patio beyond the open arch. The rare snowstorm that had forced her to shelter here for the night had cleared. As a child in that very patio, how quickly she had once raced to make patterns in the frosty layer before it was melted by the noon sun.

A sudden thought gave her hope: if Baseel's return had been delayed by the snowstorm, maybe she could make it back before he even knew she had gone! Nobody would question her being out all night if she blamed yesterday's revolt. Her heart leaped at the thought of seeing him once more, even as she wished the ground would open and swallow her at the thought of what he now knew.

She would have to hurry. Eva rose, stiff from the cold and her night spent huddled in the old linen-cupboard for warmth.

The bang of a heavy wooden gate slamming shut made her jump. Outside, a rough male voice shouted. "Hey, look here! Those are tracks in the snow across the patio. Made just before the snow stopped last night, from the looks of it."

Another voice, accusing. "I *told* you we should have locked the back gate before we ran to help in the fight!"

"But it could be our good fortune! What if it's de Pazia himself? Think of the reward the Inquisition has promised whoever catches him!"

The Inquisition guards! Of course, they were still looking for her brother Elias. Eva had not thought that their old home might still be watched. The gate must have been left unguarded during yesterday's turmoil, but now the lapse had been discovered. The way she had come in was now barred, and they would be searching the house. How would she get out?

The second voice sounded less interested. "Whoever made those prints won't be de Pazia. By all accounts he's a slippery fish. Not the sort to leave tracks across the snow when he could as well have stayed along the sheltered wall. It's probably just some cutpurse or beggar."

"They lead straight to the stairs. We'll likely find him on the second story, rooting through the best bedrooms for pickings."

"Ay, but he'll find the Inquisitors have left little enough!" The voices

were coming closer.

Eva forced her exhausted mind to think. She must get off the stairs! The door to the front courtyard was slightly ajar. She slipped through it just before the guards entered the anteroom from the other side.

There was no snow to leave tell-tale marks on the columned walkway that surrounded the formal space. Trying not to rustle dead leaves piled along the walls, she crept towards the study.

The guards' heavy feet clomping upstairs covered the study door's groan. It had another exit leading into the kitchen courtyard; from there she could go through the stables and over the place in the wall where Elias had made footholds so long ago.

As shutters banged open in the room above, Eva belatedly realized that she could not cross the kitchen patio without leaving tracks or being seen from the windows of the upstairs rooms. Well, if there was nothing of value left the guards might soon give up looking. She would just have to hide until then.

Cautiously Eva made her way across the dark once-familiar room, feeling nothing except a few papers underfoot. Near the wall she stumbled against a broken table. Her hands traced the pomegranates carved into the edge, the symbol of Granada. She huddled behind it, grateful for the coarse robe Fray Pablo had given her to wear over her everyday clothing.

A noise made Eva catch her breath. The back door opened ever so quietly, a widening rectangle of light against blackness. The pale pre-dawn light outside seemed bright compared to the dimness of the study. Something came in; it became dark again as the door sighed shut.

Overhead feet could be heard through the carved wooden ceiling. Whoever had entered was not one of the guards. Perhaps Eva was not the only thing hiding in the abandoned collection of buildings and courtyards that had once been the proud Casa de Pazia.

She clasped her hands together and tried to pray, beating back the ghosts of her nightmares. Stealthy whispers of sound made their way across the study towards her.

A touch on her ankle made her start. "Miaow?" the shadow inquired.

Eva had to stifle hysterical laughter at the anticlimax as she gathered the cat into her lap. An insistent nudge of a furry head against her hand, the feel of a torn left ear, identified the intruder.

"Oh, Tabita, what are you doing here?" Eva breathed, burying her face in the cat's warm fur. It was not really much of a mystery, once she thought about it; high walls meant nothing to Tabita. From Casa Cerra to Casa de Pazia required no roundabout route for her pet. The cat must come frequently to her old hunting grounds.

Tabita began to purr under her strokes, that funny little stop-and-start purr that was this cat's distinction and the mark of her offspring. How old was she now?

It had been just after the death of Queen Isabella. Eva remembered being held up to see King Ferdinand ride in with the great funeral procession that bore her casket to its resting place in Granada. So it was nine years ago this January that her brother Elias had given her Tabita. Elias had been ten, and she had been only eight. Eva rested her aching head against the wall and let her mind stray back to that day in this room, at this very table, the day she heard Mother had abandoned them

Eva was jerked out of her reverie by the creaking study door. It was the two guards who had been upstairs. She hardly breathed as she listened from behind the broken table's sheltering bulwark.

"There is a way out to the work courtyard through here," a gruff voice said. "If whoever it was went this way, there will be more tracks."

Thank God she had not done that! As soon as the two crossed the study and stepped out onto the kitchen patio, Eva rose and crept out the door they had come in, back along the colonnade towards the stairs. They had already searched the second story; that would be the best way to go. Light-footed, she hurried up to the open-faced balcony. Eva dared not hide in the salons where her footsteps overhead would be heard as easily as she had heard theirs.

Well, then, it was the women's gallery of the great hall. Tabita followed as Eva turned in the other direction and flitted silently along the veranda to the small door. Once inside she slipped into her old hiding place, a niche behind the railing that looked down below.

What if she was caught, sneaking around here in her former home? They would assume—rightly!—that she knew where Elias was. The Inquisition would break her. She did not have much confidence that she could hold out long against their tortures. Once Eva might have thought so, but it had not taken them long to break her father.

She had heard of people who invented things, babbled accusations against everybody they knew to stop the pain. Eva's knees shook as she realized what was at stake. Her own life was not worth much, especially now. But her brother—! And Baseel would be involved as well. He was a Morisco. They would show him no mercy.

She had a horrible vision of his beloved scarred feet mangled like those of the prisoners at the auto-da-fé. No, she must not get caught! She murmured a plea to Jesu, and her head cleared with a gust from the great doors opening below.

The two guards stood in the door of the great hall. "Come on, Franco, there's nobody in here."

“Well somebody left those tracks across the patio, and we haven’t found any leading out yet.”

“It’s only a beggar. The gates are all shut now. Mark my words, we’ll find some urchin hiding against the cold.” They left the double doors hanging open.

The great hall, hard to heat in the best of circumstances, was cold. Outside a new day reflected rosy on the snow; Eva could see a rectangle of light on the shallow pool of the main courtyard. But the rising sun had brought no warmth with it. Eva began to shake so much she could hardly keep her teeth from chattering. She wondered how cold it had to be before a person froze to death.

As she had once before, Eva longed for death as the quick solution to her trouble. Then she would not have to face Baseel. Eva buried her face in Tabita’s fur. Her neat little addition to Elias’ plan had all gone awry: tell him the truth and then disappear forever. Why had this all come to pass? She had obeyed her conscience, had refused to live a lie. It had been the hardest thing she had ever done. Shouldn’t there be some reward for that?

The guards could be heard at the front gate now, greeting what must be their replacements. There were more men now by the sound of it; last night’s guards were talking about the footprints.

Tabita jumped out of her arms and walked to the small door, looking back at Eva to open it. If the search was to be expanded, then hiding was no use. If she was not to be caught and questioned, she was going to have to find a way out.

Eva reflected on how much of her life was spent hiding, trying not to be noticed. Going into seclusion with the Carmelites would have been the final step. But perhaps that would not have suited her as well as she hoped. After all, she hid of necessity, not choice. She still liked to be where she could see the hustle and bustle of life, participate a little from the sidelines.

That was how she had first come to notice Baseel. She smiled briefly at the memory of that day under the table in her father’s shop. That small glimpse of his earlier self had changed the course of her life, although she could have had no way of knowing then how important it was to be. If her only picture of him was the one that Cerra’s servants painted, how differently she would have regarded him!

Eva heaved a deep sigh and carefully pushed the door open a little. The guards had gone on a circuit of the grounds.

Eva hurried back across the open balcony and took the narrow staircase to the mirador on the third floor, the tiny lookout tower that would give her a view of the whole Casa and the grounds around it. Then she could better plan how to get out without leaving more tracks in the fresh snow.

Graceful Moorish arches opened onto the clear morning, framing the view in all directions. A movement on the grounds made her duck behind the wide brick corner pillar. Below her to the west, four armed men in the livery of the Inquisition were crossing the kitchen yard toward the stables. Eva would wait to see which way they came back to the main Casa.

She turned her eyes east, towards the Alhambra. A dusting of snow edged the tile roofs of the palaces in stark contrast to the slotted tops of the towers and battlements, all outlined against the white peaks of the Sierra Nevada. Today there was barely enough breeze to lift the banners of Castile and Aragon that floated from the masonry bell-tower of the old Alcazaba fortress. To the left of the Alcazaba, shorter but more massive, was the square bulk of the tower of Comares. Behind it was the palace of the Nasrid Sultans, that fairy-tale confection of lacy plastered walls and water-decked patios that Eva had visited so often.

Just looking at the grouping of buildings where so much Moorish intrigue had happened made her remember Blanca. She must have heard about the revolt by now. Would she know that it had ruined all their carefully-laid plans?

Blanca would have thought of three more plans for escape by now. But then she was clever, like Elias. Eva knelt by the open window and tried to think like her friend. The only thing that would come to her stubborn brain was the stories Blanca used to weave. Especially the one about Baseel. If this were Blanca's fairy-tale, they were at the place where the evil wizard won.

Tabita's small form hurried across the snow where the guard's footprints were beginning to show brown in the thin snow. Beyond the stables was the wall that closed the Casa from the Albaicin slum that abutted its rear portion. Eva sat up with sudden inspiration. There were footholds in that wall! Elias had showed them to her once, when they were young. She could get out that way; they would think twice before following her into the Albaicin the day after a revolt.

Gathering her coarse robe and the skirts beneath, Eva ran down the two flights of stairs. The guards had left the gate between the family patio and the gardens and stables open. Even better, she could see a confusion of footprints she could walk in without leaving her own. The bright morning sun was already melting the thin blanket of snow. Once she was clear of the patio, she would soon find bare patches where her tracks would not stand out.

She followed the guards' path until she reached the stables. Along the back wall of the building the grooms piled old hay and manure to warm the stalls when winter came. There was no snow on the steaming piles. Running along the springy, earth-smelling mass close to the wall, Eva was able to go

as far as the small garden-shed.

From here there was an unbroken stretch of snow sloping up toward the wall that led into the Albaicin. This bare place could be seen clearly from the second story windows of the main house. She would have to wait until there were more brown patches of exposed earth.

As she settled herself against the back wall of the stables on the warm composting heap of straw, Eva saw Tabita coming back towards her. She dropped a huge mouse at Eva's feet.

"Miaow." The cat had thoughtfully provided breakfast.

"Thank you, Tabita!" Eva praised and stroked the cat as she always did. The creature was doing her best to provide for Eva as she did for her kittens, and could not know that to the humans, an abundance of vermin was a curse rather than a blessing.

When Tabita left to continue her hunting, Eva got a stick and scraped a hole to bury the offering. If she went deep enough, Tabita would think that her prey, caught with such hard work and patience, had been eaten instead of wasted by her finicky mistress.

Her stick brought up a rotten scrap of cloth covered with garnets in a rose pattern. Why, this must be the place where she had buried Mother's ball-gown! At the time such things had not mattered, but now the value of the gemstones on it loomed large in her mind. Eva began to dig deeper. She would take some back with her. The women of Casa Cerra would love to have them.

At last she had gathered a little heap of muddy garnets on a scrap of rotten silk beside her digging stick. She would not have time to retrieve more. The hole was more than deep enough to give the breakfast mouse a proper burial.

Eva cleaned her chilled hands on a bit of melting snow and folded the fragile fabric over her small treasure. This bit of silk was not too soiled; layers of skirt had protected it from the enclosing earth. But it was still quite damp. If she was to carry it in her pocket-bag, she would have to put her mother's precious letter into one of the scrolls' waterproof steel canisters.

Eva lifted the nun's robe and reached into the slot of her full skirt for the bag hidden beneath. Taking it out and opening the drawstring, she removed the papers and one of the scroll tubes. Unfolding her mother's letter and the paper with Baseel's writing so that they could be rolled together, her eyes fell on the last line.

It was not the Arabic lesson sample she had wanted for a keepsake, but the most recent of the many farewell notes she had written Baseel.

It couldn't be, Eva thought, panicked. She had left that one in his room, rolled in the Muslim prayer rug where he would be sure to find it first thing

in the morning!

She must have left the other letter by mistake, the one she had penned on the back of his lesson so many weeks ago. It had been a preachy little note written before she knew how wrong she had been about him. Before he knew how wrong he had been about her.

Frantically she tried to remember what it contained. All that would come to mind was her prim lecture on sexual purity and the evils of harlots. Baseel would read that in the light of his new knowledge, about how dishonest *she* was. Eva wished she were in the hole with the dead mouse.

She rolled the papers together, slid them in the steel tube and returned it to her pocketbag. Now that Baseel knew her terrible secret, he would be disgusted at the very thought of her. And that she had concealed such important information about herself when her betrothal was arranged. How hypocritical that letter would sound! Who was *she* to lecture him?

She was so overwhelmed by shame that she did not hear the footsteps approaching and jumped at the angry voice of the guard. "So there you are, you little thief! What are you doing?"

All Eva's wits deserted her. "Digging for jewels," she blurted.

Gripping her arm, he jerked her roughly to her feet. "And how would such as you where the de Pazia jewels are? Tell me, everything, lest I beat it out of you!"

"I- I used to work here," she stammered. "This is where I buried a ballgown that had garnets stitched onto it." A small inspiration came to her. "My mistress, Eva de Pazia, ordered it destroyed because there was something bad associated with the dress. But now she's gone, I thought nobody would mind..."

"A likely tale!" But at that moment, Tabita appeared from nowhere and ran to Eva. The guard's suspicion eased. "All right, maybe you did work here. That cat has been hanging around for months, and she won't even come up to me."

"That's Tabita, she's lived here for years. Since the death of Queen Isabella," Eva cast about for small talk, hoping to distract him. "She's a very good hunter. But she doesn't like strangers to touch her."

"Hmmp. So if you were one of the de Pazia servants, why are you wearing a nun's robe?"

"Now that I have no work, I wanted to join the Carmelite sisters, and I thought to bring the gems with me as a dowry."

"Bah! More like you wanted to stow your thievings beneath it! We'll just have to see what is concealed under your clothes."

With a dawning horror, Eva realized that they would not have to torture the information out of her. Right in her bag she carried enough docu-

mentation for the Inquisitors to track down Elias, implicate Baseel, and even perhaps all the people of Casa Cerra by association! "You can have the jewels I dug up." She dropped the packet of silk-wrapped garnets and struggled to break free.

"Ow!" The man jumped as Tabita attacked her captor's leg. The guard tightened his grip on her arm while reaching down with his free hand. He brought up the cat, gripped firmly by the scruff of her neck.

"Let go of my cat!" Eva cried. "She can't hurt you!"

"So she's yours, is she? Well, if you don't want her to come to any harm, you'll do what I say." The rays of the sun struck the place where Eva's packet of garnets had fallen, and a bright crimson twinkle caught his eye. "To start with, I want you to dig out the rest of those jewels for me."

Feeling helpless, Eva knelt down to pick up the gems. Her hand brushed the dead mouse.

"Hurry up!" The guard shook Tabita, who squalled pitifully.

Anger gave her strength. Eva grabbed the dirt-covered mouse carcass by the tail, and rising suddenly, swung it right into the guard's eyes. With a yell, he dropped the cat. Eva ran for the wall that separated Casa de Pazia from the Albaicin quarter.

Tabita streaked past her, running for the same place. With difficulty in her cumbersome clothing, Eva scrambled to the top of the wall that bounded the property. She quailed when she looked over. The drop to the street on the other side was twice as far.

The only other time she had done this, Elias had jumped down first and brought a stack of old rubbish for her to climb on. Eva heard the shout of the second guard and a pounding of running feet. She lowered herself as far as she could by her arms and let go.

She landed in a heap and rolled, all the breath knocked out of her. After a few minutes, she got up, shaken and a little bruised, but otherwise unhurt. More shouts, nearer now, could be heard on the other side of the wall.

Soldiers with the Inquisition badge would have to go in force if they followed here! But it was also dangerous in the Albaicin for a woman alone. In the maze of alleys among the hovels, she could only guess at the way.

It had been six long years since her one visit to this quarter with Fray Talavera. As the first of the men dropped from the wall, Eva hiked up her skirts in a most un-nun-like fashion and ran zigzagging after her cat through the narrow alleys, into the poorest part of the Albaicin.

