

## 2. *the Silk Market*

### *the cat*

*Tabita came to understand that Elias and Eva, for all their size, were only juveniles like herself. But they grew much slower. She had already caught her first bird, while Eva could not catch so much as a lizard.*

*Of course, she had never needed to. Even the biggest of the hind-walkers let Eva eat first. She always shared with Tabita, as pride-mates should. Because Eva's fare lacked the important pre-digested vegetables to be found in mouse-guts, Tabita shared her own prey. But despite the delicious flavor, Eva never tried them.*

*It was because she was not hungry. Which was also why she learned so slowly. Hunger was the key to learning.*

*On the other paw, Elias learned quickly. Some kind of hunger, surely. Tabita recognized an unsatisfied urge that motivated his constant hunting. But he had enough food. Tabita wondered what he was hunting for.*

### *the Old Silk Market, Granada, May 1506*

Eva was not exactly forbidden to be there. But she and Blanca were definitely *not* supposed to be out alone and unaccompanied by Doña Teresa, the poor but genteel relation who served as Blanca's duenna. It was scandalous for the daughter of Granada's regent to be without a constant shadow.

Not that Blanca's duenna had any idea they were not obediently waiting for her in the Cathedral nearby, saying prayers for the souls of Blanca's dead brothers and sisters.

"Are you sure that Doña Teresa will be gone for another hour?" Eva whispered as they hid behind the wall that surrounded the flat roof of her father's warehouse in the old Silk Market.

"Don't be so worried, you silly goose!" Blanca giggled. "Even if she's not, she won't say anything. She'd be the one in trouble, leaving us like that."

Blanca Mendoza would not get in trouble, but Eva surely would, if her father found out. Still, he would not restrict Eva's visits with her friend; Yacov was flattered that the daughter of Count Tendilla should be willing to spend time with a merchant's daughter, even a very rich one.

"When do you think he will come?" Blanca asked again. The girls

shielded their faces from the summer brightness with dark silk mantillas, the scarf-like head covering which the Spanish upper classes had adopted from the Moorish custom of veiling women.

"I can't say for sure." Eva was hot. On visits to the Mendoza family her father insisted she wear her nicest clothing. Her dark blue brocaded gown was smothering, its rigid bodice pinched, and the stiff leather of her best shoes pressed on her extra toe. "I must have been wrong about the day. Blanca, let's go back."

"No, look! Here he comes!"

The clop of hooves in the street below announced Elias, riding Fez, the new Arabian stallion that was part of the de Pazia shipment. The horse was groomed until his red-bay coat shone. He held his black tail high and arched his neck, tossing his head against the bit. Elias appeared to sit him with perfect ease.

"Oh, Eva, your brother is sooo handsome," Blanca sighed. "Look, your father and his customer haven't come out yet, couldn't you just wave at him so he would look up at us?"

Eva knew the intent expression of concentration on Elias' face. The horse was barely under control. "No, it's risky. There are too many eyes in the silk market today and we don't want to attract attention."

"Maybe I could talk my father into buying me a new mount. Then Elias could come and show me all your father's stock, one at a time!"

Eva was alarmed. "Don't buy any of the horses Elias shows!"

"Why not?"

"Those are the ones that aren't really well-trained," Eva mumbled, ashamed of her father's sales practices. "It's just when my brother rides them, he makes them behave. But with anybody else, they could be dangerous."

This information only served to increase Blanca's admiration. "He's as brave as El Cid!"

"Shh! There's my father and the man who wants to see the horse." The two girls ducked down below the parapet, listening to the bargaining going on below with typical loudness.

"We need to get back," Blanca whispered. "I thought you said that Elias never showed them for long."

"I've never really watched this before," Eva admitted. "But usually, when he rides one of the new stallions out the gate, he's back with it in under an hour."

"What are they arguing about?" The conversation below was in Arabic, which Blanca did not speak well.

"It sounds like the buyer wants his man to take the horse right now," Eva said, peering over the opposite edge of the roof. "That's what they are

arguing about. Father wants to deliver the horse to his estate tomorrow.”

“If we go down the back stairs while they are still bargaining, maybe we can make it back to the Cathedral before Doña Teresa comes back.” Blanca suggested. The tall door of the Royal Chapel was visible just over the colorful awnings that hung in front of the shops and market stalls that ringed the square.

Bunching up their skirts to keep from brushing the whitewashed wall, both girls hurried down the stairs to the alley. Turning away from the loud business transaction, Eva and Blanca ran towards the square in front of the church.

They burst out of the alley and to their dismay Diego Mendoza, Blanca’s brother, was right in front of them. The young man gave a surprised start. “Blanca! Why are you and your little friend alone? Where is Doña Teresa?”

“We went to— to see some merchandise Eva’s father had for sale,” Blanca invented breathlessly. “The de Pazia shop is so close to the Cathedral, and...”

“No matter how close it is, you shouldn’t have left your duenna. You are coming home with me,” Diego said sternly. “There is only room for one on my horse, so I will escort your young friend back to her father’s business where he can see her home.”

Eva cast a despairing look at Blanca. Her father would be furious that she had done anything to displease the Mendoza family. At that moment Elias came around the front of the building. “Oh, here is my brother! You don’t need to bother, sir, he can take me back to the shop, it isn’t very far, really, you won’t have to trouble yourself,” she babbled.

Elias took in the situation and quick as ever, he bowed to Diego. “Señor Mendoza, thank you for your care. I just stepped away for a moment. Please forgive, that I let your sister out of my sight. It was entirely my fault.”

Diego was a little taken aback; eleven-year-old Elias was not really old enough to pass as any kind of guardian. But before he could protest, Elias kissed Blanca’s hand. “Thank you for your patronage of our humble shop, Señorita Mendoza. As it seems you are now leaving with your brother, the items you purchased will be sent to the Alhambra.”

“Eva, what are you doing here?” Elias hissed angrily as soon as Blanca and Diego Mendoza were out of earshot. “Never mind, there isn’t time. I’ll have to find you a place to hide while I run fetch your nurse.”

They had reached the front of the shop next to their father’s and her brother pretended to be interested in one of the lengths of cloth hung out for sale. Eva needed no warning to keep the billowing layers of yardage between herself and their father, now concluding the transaction with the horse buyer. Fez was attracting all the attention in the market square, prancing

and pawing in circles while the buyer's servant held his reins.

Elias pointed to a covered table deep inside the open front of the de Pazia shop. "Hide under there, and make sure to arrange the tablecloth after you," he whispered. "I have a key to the back door. When I come with Nurse Veronica, I'll give our whistle as soon as it's open and you must slip out as quietly as you can."

The horse reared up with a shrill whinny. Eva took advantage of the distraction and quickly moved from behind the neighbor's display of fabrics into the open front of her father's shop. She dived under the richly covered table while everyone was busy with the stallion. One of the items displayed on the top fell off. There was a small divide between the two embroidered cloths that covered the table, and Eva reached a hand through it to pick up the expensive jeweled vase, carefully replacing it on the surface over her head.

There was a crash in the square. Eva put her eye to the crack between the tablecloths and saw her father running outside. Stacks of merchandise partially blocked her view, but between the bales and displays she could see the street. Fez' shrill whinny was followed by a ring of horseshoes on cobbles, the thud of hooves striking baled cloth, the splintering of wooden awning-poles. A flash of polished red-bay hide shot past Eva's restricted view, soon blocked by frantic figures of shopkeepers and assistants trying to divert the frightened stallion.

Father was shouting for Elias. She had gotten him in trouble again: her brother was off getting Nurse Veronica for her while the horse trampled the silk market. Yacov would be furious.

The hue and cry moved further down the square and Eva, who had lifted the cloth to see better, quickly dropped it as her father and two of his shopkeepers returned. The fabric hung a little crookedly so that a narrow v-shaped opening gave a view into her hiding place beneath the table. Eva did not dare adjust it with her father looking into the shop, no doubt checking the contents to be sure nothing of value had been snatched during the brief time his attention was outside. Eva quaked when he came to the table and rearranged the vase, but although he looked straight at her he did not seem to see her. She thanked St. Basil, her favorite intercessor, that beneath the table was in shadow and her dress and mantilla were dark.

"The fool! I told him not to take the horse today, but he insisted. On his head be it!" Yacov sat down at his elaborate desk in the rear of the shop. Eva heard his quill scraping on the accounting sheets he kept so carefully. "Where is that useless son of mine? Get back to work."

The shop-boy returned to polishing the expensive merchandise, while the guard lounged outside. It was so quiet in the shop, any movement would

be heard. Elias' whistle would attract her father's attention at once. If only a customer would come!

Cross-legged was not the proper position for prayer, but Eva did not dare to shift into a kneeling position. She folded her hands and prayed earnestly to St. Basil to send a distraction, help her escape notice, help Elias hurry back with Nurse, and get her out the back door without Yacov de Pazia ever being the wiser.

She had been sending up her pleas for only a few minutes when St. Basil answered. There were people at the shop entrance. From the respectful note in the guard's greeting, they must be customers of consequence. Eva heard her father rise and exchange courtesies with the newcomer. It was Baltasar Cerra, a Moorish merchant. Another man was with him, no doubt his servant or scribe.

She prayed that they would remain, keeping her father occupied until she made good her escape. The Saint answered at once. Yacov invited Cerra to take tea with him while they discussed their business.

The merchant and his servant came into the building while the shop boy hurried to roll out a carpet on the tiled floor and place cushions for the guests. Eva got a good view of the decorated edge of Cerra's robe as he moved past her table; plainer than her father's, but still of expensive fabric. He was wearing fashionable hose and soft shoes. The legs were followed by those of his servant, who paused by the table as they waited for the shop-boy to finish his preparations. His robe was shorter, so the bare skin of the man's muscled calves was only five inches from Eva's nose, too close for her to focus through the distorting lace of her veil.

Trying not to even breathe, Eva looked down below the edge of her mantilla. She stared at the big feet before her and saw that the dappled effect on the servant's limbs was not due to the lace; every exposed inch of the man's skin was pitted with scars. The man was a particularly dark Moor, so each speckle stood out white against deep brown. It was the worst case of smallpox scarring she had ever seen, worse than old Blas, the gardener.

He was wearing new sandals of good-quality Cordovan leather – as a merchant's daughter, Eva had been trained to notice such things. But the feet themselves were heavily calloused as though much of the wearer's life had been spent running barefoot over rocks.

The legs in front of her shifted, giving Eva another view. To her astonishment, several scars on the servant's inside ankle ran together to form the shape of a backwards  $\Theta$ ! For years, that was how she had written her name. Eva took comfort from the sign. Perhaps it was St. Basil's way of reassuring her.

"Please, be seated." Yacov waved his guests onto the cushions that had

been spread for them. "Tea will be ready soon."

The scarred feet moved, and Eva discovered to her alarm that the area selected for her father's hospitality was not six feet away from where she sat in her cramped hideout. All three settled themselves on the cushions, which put them at eye level with the divide in the table covering. She suppressed a sigh of relief that her father sat with his back to her facing his guests. Just beyond him she could see half of Baltasar Cerra; a short fat man whose appearance marked him as a Morisco, but lighter than his pockmarked servant. Eva craned her neck as much as she dared to get a better view the man with the  $\Theta$  on his ankle, but all she could see beyond her father's bulk was the servant's shoulder and crossed knee. A writing-case hung at his side. So this must be Cerra's scribe, or possibly his accountant.

Eva hardly heard Baltasar Cerra's reply. Her father had moved a little so the accountant's face was no longer blocked. His features were, if possible, even more pockmarked than his feet, the white of each scar giving him a startling mottled appearance. She stared at him in fascination. It was a strong face, narrow and angular like the rest of his body, with a faintly Arab hooked nose and a generous mouth. Even without the scars he would not have been handsome. But his eyes looked kind.

He was giving Cerra a roll of writing. His hands were scarred, too. Cerra was saying something about damage caused by the horse. Eva's mouth dropped at his next sentence. "So I have had my slave, Baseel, make you a list."

The man's name was Basil! It was another sign that her favorite saint was watching over her! Of course the good saint, lover of the poor, would choose to appear in the guise of the lowest rung of society. Although Cerra's slave did not seem to be especially downtrodden, Eva had to admit. Anybody who kept his master's accounts was likely to be well-cared-for.

Her father was explaining that the horse had left his possession before it began its rampage. "It was the new owner's groom, you see. A very incompetent churl. If you and the others take up the matter with the Regidores, I am sure your losses will be made good." He scanned the list. "But I must say, I'm impressed that you were able to make up this list so quickly, and in such precise percentages. It will surely be a help when you present your case."

Cerra smiled expansively. "Baseel ciphers very well. I trust him with all my accounts. A treasure."

Her father's back was as stiff as his voice. "Casa de Pazia's accounts are done by myself or my son alone. I would trust no one else with them. I wonder that you allow such an important affair to your slave. I own no slaves; they are not loyal."

Cerra wagged his finger. "You are wrong there, my friend. Loyalty has

less to do with ownership than with gratitude. A slave may rise to whatever height his master is foresighted enough to get out of him. And that is why I prosper: I can see which men have the potential of great value, and which are merely consumers of one's substance."

Cerra smiled smugly. "Take Baseel, here. He was among the goatherds of King Boabdil's household in exile. I noticed that he spoke perfect court Arabic rather than the street dialect of the slaves. On investigation I discovered that he also spoke Spanish, Berber and Portuguese. Talent wasted on menial jobs! So I bought him and improved his circumstances, and no one has a more loyal servant. Is that not so, Baseel?"

"It is as my master says," the scribe agreed gravely. "I live well and enjoy my work, while many free men are starving beggars."

Eva wondered if the young man really did not mind belonging to Cerra. Basil looked well-fed; his clothing was clean and new. And he could work complicated ciphering that even Elias could not do. She stared at his scars in fascination, deciding that they were not worse than Blas', but that the light against the dark skin made them seem so.

Paco the shop boy brought the tea, serving the slave last. As he turned away, he gave the sign against the evil eye. Basil saw it and his lips twisted in a small wry smile.

Eva's ready sympathy was aroused, and she was indignant at Paco. How dare he be so rude! She wondered how long ago Basil had had the disease, how many times he had endured stares, ridicule or avoidance just because of something he could not help. She turned her own eyes away, ashamed. Even though he could not see her, she had been doing the same thing as Paco, gawking at his physical distinction as if it were all that mattered. A man who could cipher better than her father, and speak four languages!

Her leg was going to cramp any minute if she did not move. Eva shifted slightly, and to her horror Basil looked straight at the gap in the table covering. She froze.

His right eye closed, then opened again in what was unmistakably a wink.

Relieved, Eva grinned and winked back before she remembered that in the shadows and behind the veil of her mantilla Basil could not possibly see her face. He merely knew someone was watching from under the table. And he was letting that someone know he would not give them away. She was right; he did have kind eyes.

She heard Elias' whistle in the alley behind the shop. At last, he had returned with Nurse Veronica! Eva tried to change positions so that she could crawl out from under the back of the table. Her head touched the underside, and the whole structure quivered. Yacov started at the sound of the

displayed objects rattling, but at that moment Basil spilled his hot tea on himself and jumped up with an exclamation. “Your pardon, sir, I can be very clumsy,” he apologized.

Eva turned and rapidly crawled out towards the back, but not before she saw, out of the corner of her eye, a scarred foot knocking one of the legs of the tea-tray. In the resulting crash of brass and crockery, she slipped out the door, thanking her patron saint.

