

3. Fairy Tale

the cat

It was in the year of few mice that Tabita first began hunting beyond the stone boundary where her pride lived. Over the back wall, in the place called the Albaicin, she discovered that there were hind-walkers who were not well fed. Tabita would never have let the big cats in her own pride get so hungry as these poor, thin specimens.

The best time to hunt in the Albaicin was during the time when all the hind-walkers would stop what they were doing, turn to face the sunrise-side, and begin a series of prostrations accompanied by a kind of ritual miaowing. While that happened, the mice would come out, thinking they were safe. It was very convenient for Tabita.

Another good place to hunt was an underground room of the casa. The servants did not clean that room, and the leftover crumbs attracted mice. Once a week Elias would gather with the boss-male and eight other men and boys. They did something there that felt similar, although the motions and the noises they made were different.

She came to associate this peculiar human behavior with the vocalization 'prayer', because in some way they smelled and sounded the same way Eva did when she began fingering her bead-string and making the miaowing that began with 'Pater noster' or "Sanbaseel." This activity seemed to bring the hind-walkers comfort, much like stroking a cat did. Tabita concluded that prayer was their way of purring.

Camino Sylvestre, Granada, July 1507

"Eva, sit straight. And face forward. It's a horse, not a couch!" Elias eyed his sister critically.

Eva tried to assume the position her brother wanted. She shifted on the side-saddle, trying to hold herself in position by the right leg hooked around the saddle horn. Her thigh muscles ached from the unaccustomed effort, and she was sure a blister was forming at the back of her knee.

"You should try this horrible saddle, Elias!" she complained. "Side-ways is a stupid way to control an animal."

"I know. But that's how gentlewomen are supposed to ride. You don't want to look like a peasant, do you?"

"Why can't I just ride behind you on a pillion-saddle? Lots of gentlewomen do. It was easier for us to talk that way."

"You know this stallion isn't that trained yet," Elias held in the prancing steed he was riding. "I can only take you on pillion when I'm riding a

safe horse. But if you can ride on your own, we can go out together more often. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Eva would like that. Riding out beyond the listening ears and prying eyes was the only way they could discuss things that must not be overheard. Her heart was burdened with so many things that must be kept secret.

Elias' horse startled, and in response Eva's old mule shifted into a trot. Caught off-guard, her foot slipped out of the stirrup and her knee bounced off the saddle-horn. With a despairing yank at the reins that only made the poor beast throw its head back, Eva tumbled off her unsteady seat. She landed hard on her outflung wrist. Pain shot up her arm, pain like she had never felt before. At first it took her breath away. Then she burst into loud wails.

Elias stopped and dismounted. He caught the mule, tied his stallion to a tree some distance down the trail and came back to her. "Eva, stop that noise! You're not hurt that bad. It's scaring the horses."

Her wrist did hurt that bad; it hurt terribly. Eva cried harder, cradling the injured joint against her body and rocking. She didn't care what the horse thought. She hated horses. She hated mules. She hated sidesaddles!

"Let me see." Elias was more sympathetic now. He knelt beside her, gently taking her scraped wrist in his hands. "It's not broken, Eva, only sprained. But that hurts worse, I know."

She let herself be pulled to her feet, and her brother freed her gown from the thorn-bush and beat dust out of the skirt. "Come on, *hermanita*, that's enough crying. You're ten now, a big girl. Get yourself under control."

She managed to choke her sobs back into whimpers. "But it hurts awful, Elias."

Her brother became stern. "Pain happens to everybody sooner or later. You have to learn to shut up and bear it. There's nothing else that can be done anyway."

Eva tried to bend her wrist, and another stab of agony made her burst into fresh wails. "Eva, I can't bring the horse and the mule back if you're going to keep making that racket." Elias put an arm around her shoulders. "Listen, if you will be quiet, I will tell you a wonderful new secret!"

Eva grew quiet at once. Elias was full of secrets, and sparing about telling her any of them. She did not forget the pain in her wrist, but she did not want to miss whatever her brother might reveal. "What, Elias?"

"I'm going into the church!"

"Can't you just tell me the secret here?"

Elias rolled his eyes in exasperation. "I mean, I'm going to become a priest."

Eva looked around to make sure that no one was nearby. "Can the son of a secret Jew become a priest?"

Elias frowned. "I'm not a secret Jew. Father is a secret Jew. I won't believe anything he does."

Eva thought how sad her friend was going to be. "What about Blanca? You won't be able to marry Blanca if you become a priest."

Elias laughed. "Eva, I wouldn't be able to marry Blanca anyway. That's just a pretend game your friend likes to play. The daughters of nobles don't marry the sons of merchants." He started back up the riding-track to where the horse and mule were tied.

"Then why am I always having to learn stupid things like riding half-sideways?" Eva trudged after her brother, dreading getting back on the miserable ladies' saddle.

"Because the sons of nobles, especially second sons or ones in need of money, do marry the *daughters* of rich merchants. Father plans to gain influence through your marriage." Elias boosted her onto the mule so she did not need to use her sprained wrist. "I'll take him on a leading-rein, so he doesn't go off like that again."

"The Alhambra is closer than home," Eva sniffled to keep the tears back. Her wrist was beginning to swell so that the sleeve of her gown added to the pain. "Can we go there? Blanca's mama will do something to fix my hand."

"We can't go there uninvited. That would be presumptuous." The track widened a little as they skirted the Alhambra hill that towered over all Granada.

"Why not? I spend a lot of time there anyway. What's pre-sump-tias?"

"Presumptuous is when you make demands on your betters when you ought to wait for them to offer." Elias pulled her mule alongside and lowered his voice. "Stop blubbering. You ought to know how unusual it is that a family like the Mendozas would even associate with us."

"Mother and the Countess were friends," Eva said in a small teary voice. In the two years since she had left, Elias had hardly mentioned their mother. "And Blanca and I have always been friends. We played together when we were babies. Like you played with Pablo Mendoza, before he died."

"They cultivate our company because Count Tendilla owes father a lot of money. Look at all these soldiers: with the crops bad two years out of five, how do you think the Regent pays their wages?"

"Blanca doesn't care about that," Eva declared staunchly. "I don't either!"

"But her parents may. If King Ferdinand ever reimburses his government, you may find the Mendozas get a little colder towards the likes of the de Pazias. I just want you to be prepared."

They were almost to the fork in the track when they heard another party

of horsemen coming. Pulling Eva's leading rein, Elias turned his mount to the side to let them pass.

The party burst out of the trees at a brisk trot, and Eva gave a cry of recognition. "Doña Mariana! Blanca!"

The lady riding in front pulled up. "Eva, *cariña*! What is the matter with your arm?"



As the party rode up towards the gates of the Alhambra, others on the broad highway fell back for the Countess and her company. Elias' eyes fell on a churchman richly dressed in black, carried in a litter. He pointed him out to his sister with animation. "See that man? That's Abbe Matias!" The priest in question noticed Elias and raised a hand in recognition, smiling benignly. "He's the head of Holy Cross, and he says I should go study there!"

Eva looked at her brother's shining face, feeling a stab of jealousy. Elias had not been this excited for a long time. "But if you go there to study, you'll be leaving me."

"Oh, Eva, Holy Cross is just on the other side of the River Genil. Look, you can see it from here." Elias pointed down at an imposing building visible between a gap in the trees on the banks of the silver ribbon of water. A large square built around a cloistered courtyard lay behind the steeple of a newly-built church. "Even you could walk there in an hour. We'll still see each other all the time."

"It won't be the same. You'll leave me alone with Father," Eva started sniffing again. Her wrist still throbbed painfully. Elias did not seem to realize that his 'wonderful news' was the worst possible thing that could happen to her.

"Father's temper will be better when I am gone. And you won't be alone. You'll still have nurse and the servants. The whole household loves you."

They had reached the courtyard in front of the hall. As they waited for the grooms to come take the ladies' horses, the litter carrying Abbe Matias arrived. He alighted and came over to them, all smiles. "Ah, young Elias! What a delight to find you here!"

Elias practically glowed with the recognition. "My sister was injured in a fall, and Doña Mendoza insists on caring for her," he said. Eva was surprised at her brother's self-important tone. He swung off his horse and kissed the Abbe's hand. The Abbe briefly touched Elias' hair in benediction.

"Then while the good lady is ministering to your sister, perhaps you will attend me." The Abbe began to stroll off, and Elias handed his horse to the groom and tagged after the churchman without so much as a by-your-leave to her and Blanca, not to mention Doña Mariana!

Eva scowled at the Abbe's retreating back, her brother following like

an adoring puppy. There was something about that man she did not like. But the groom came to lift her down from the sidesaddle, and her sprained wrist was jostled again. She cried out at the stab of red-hot pain. Doña Mariana embraced her.

“Come *cariña*, I know it hurts. We’ll go to my chambers and my maid will bring cold compresses. We must get that sleeve off; see how your arm is swelling!” Eva leaned against the wide skirts of Blanca’s mother, and while her friend patted her on the other side, she let herself bawl unrestrainedly.



By the time they arrived in the private rooms of Blanca’s mother, Eva’s wrist was so swollen that her sleeve had to be split at the seam to get it off. Blanca tried to distract her. “Tell me about Tabita. Did she have her kittens yet?”

Eva went teary again. “Yes, but they all died. Elias said that she didn’t know how to care for them because she was too young when she lost her mother.” At Doña Mariana’s orders, a basin of cold water steeped with yellow arnica petals was brought for Eva to soak her arm.

“Well never mind, you are lucky to have such a devoted pet. I wish I had a cat of my very own! Don’t cry Eva, I’ll tell you a story about Tabita.” Blanca switched to her story-teller voice. “Once upon a time there was a poor girl whose father died and left her nothing to her name but a cat...”

Blanca made the story personal, even though Eva had heard Puss & Boots before. She basked in the Mendoza’s kindness and thought about what Elias had said. Was it true that Doña Mariana was nice to her only because her husband, Inigo de Mendoza, Count Tendilla, was indebted to Casa de Pazia? Everything in her denied it.

But then, like Blanca’s story, things were not always what they seemed. Who would guess that the devout Yacov de Pazia, generous supporter of the church, was really a secret Jew?

“—and the king married Tabita’s mistress, and they lived happily ever after. Does your arm feel better now, Evita?” Blanca asked. “Mama, can she stay with us tonight?”

“Of course she must stay. We can’t send her home in her chemise, and her dress won’t fit until her arm goes down.” Doña Mariana was firm. “I’ll send a servant to tell her brother that he need not wait for her. And to request her father’s permission, of course. Did you see where he went?”

“He’s with Abbe Matias,” Eva volunteered.

The name brought a frown to her hostess’ brow. “Oh, yes, I saw him coming up to the gates. Inigo will be in a bad mood tonight after another interview with that dreadful man. He keeps urging my husband to allow the Inquisition in Granada.”

Blanca was eager to share her knowledge with Eva. “Papa says that

Bishop Talavera is against it. And so was my uncle, Diego Hurtado de Mendoza, Archbishop of Seville.”

Doña Mariana nodded approvingly. “His brother told Inigo that God would have him uphold his sworn word in the treaty for the surrender of Granada, which gave the Muslims freedom to practice their faith.” She sighed and rose. “I will leave you with Blanca to amuse you, Evita dear. My duties must not be neglected.”



The breeze that often cooled Granada’s summer evenings did not come that night. Eva lay smothering in Blanca’s four-poster feather bed. Wrapped and poulticed with more arnica her sprain was less painful, but the annoying pulsing ache conspired with the heat to keep her sleepless.

A rustling on the other side of the bed told her Blanca had the same problem. “Eva! Are you still awake?”

“It’s so hot, Blanca,” she whispered.

“I’m hot, too.” Moonlight filtered through the latticed window of Blanca’s chamber. “Isn’t the night romantic? Let’s pretend we’re planning our weddings!”

Eva could not pretend at her friend’s expense. She had not told Blanca Elias’ news about wanting to become a priest. Was Blanca’s attachment really one of her flights of fancy, or would she be hurt? “I have some bad news for you. But you have to promise not to tell, it’s a secret.”

“What?” Blanca was more excited than apprehensive.

“You can’t marry Elias. He’s going to be a priest.”

“That’s wonderful!” Eva was startled at Blanca’s reaction. “Don’t you see, Eva, if I can’t marry him, nobody else will either. Maybe he did it because he loves me and knows that we can never marry, so this way he can be faithful to me always!”

Eva felt foolish, the only one who hadn’t known it was all pretend.

“I have an idea. Let’s go out to the roof. I’ll show you a place I found and tell you something that happened there!”

Eva hesitated, remembering how often Blanca had gotten them both in trouble. But her friend had already scrambled out of bed and was holding out a robe. “Here put this one over your chemise, I have another. Shh, don’t wake Doña Teresa.”

The girls crept by the snoring chaperone on noiseless feet, through the door opened to catch the non-existent breeze. Hugging the wall of the patio of the lions, Blanca led the way to the other side where a tiny staircase wound up from an arched doorway.

They came out onto the second story balcony. Blanca pointed to a place where they could climb over the protecting rail to the wide roof beyond.

Eva followed her with more difficulty, trying not to look down as she inched along the outside wall of the Palacio de Comares. Beyond was a space where the roofs of the two rectangular buildings met. It was surrounded by another railing, and when Eva struggled over it onto the relative safety of the little rooftop patio, she sank down in relief.

“See, this was reached by that door from the Palacio de Comares. But it’s been bricked over,” Blanca said. “Maybe some Moorish Sultan locked up an unfaithful wife until she starved to death!”

“She could have gotten out the same way we did,” Eva said practically.

“Well, I have a real story to tell you about this place,” Blanca lowered her already quiet voice mysteriously. “The day I found it, a man was here!”

“How did he get here, if the door is bricked up?” Eva’s curiosity was piqued. “Did he come through the women’s quarters?”

“No, you can get here from the roof in the other direction. He didn’t see me coming because he was kneeling down, almost on his face. And when he heard me, he got up and turned around like he had been caught. And that’s when I recognized him, just from the description! Do you know who he was?”

“Who?” Eva was caught up in her friend’s story-telling once again. In the hot, jasmine-scented moonlight, if Blanca had told her the man was al-Ud-Din, complete with his magic lamp, she would have almost believed.

“It was your Moor, the one sent by St. Basil last year! He was pock-marked from head to foot.”

“Lots of people have had smallpox,” Eva said reasonably.

“Yes, but Baltasar Cerra was at the palace that day. The kitchen majordomo buys all our spices from his house, I checked. So it had to be him!” Blanca finished triumphantly.

“What was he doing up on the palace roof, then?”

“I asked him that, and he said he was thinking about happy times here, before he was cursed. And then he asked my forgiveness for intruding and climbed over the other side of the railing and vanished.”

“Was he tall, hawk-nosed and kind of stringy?” Eva wanted to believe. Somehow, it made her feel that St. Basil was still watching over her.

“Yes, that was him. You know, he probably lived here before Granada fell. Maybe he was King Boabdil in disguise!”

“Then you’d better tell your father. I think he would want to know if King Boabdil were sneaking around the Alhambra fourteen years after surrendering it.”

“Well, maybe not Boabdil himself,” Blanca conceded. “He looked too young for that. I bet he was a prince! Maybe one of Boabdil’s younger brothers.”

“He’s just Cerra’s slave,” Eva said. “King Boabdil’s old court has settled in the Alpujarra. You know that the Moorish nobles aren’t going to be any merchant’s slave.”

Blanca was not to be discouraged. “So maybe he’s a prince who has been enslaved until he is released from an evil spell. He said he was cursed, remember?”

“He meant smallpox. A lot of people call it the curse.”

“But how many survive a case as bad as that? No, the scars were put on him by an evil wizard.” Inspiration struck. “Baltasar Cerra is really a powerful magician! And Prince Basil wanted some of his power—to do good with, of course—but Cerra caught him and put a spell on him which makes him so ugly that nobody can bear to look on him!”

“I could look at him just fine,” Eva said. “He had kind eyes.”

“That’s because you have the special Gift of Mercy,” Blanca continued, undaunted. “Cerra the wizard put a spell on Prince Basil that he has to serve him faithfully for seven years.”

Eva was interested in spite of herself. “Can the spell be broken?”

“Only if he can find someone who will truly love him in spite of his ugliness,” Blanca replied promptly.

“Hey, that’s a different fairy tale!” Eva objected.

“All fairy tales are part of the same story, that’s why they are so much alike,” Blanca explained seriously. “So Prince Basil has been waiting and searching, but no woman will even look at him because of his scarred face. They are vain and cannot see into his heart.” She sighed and waved her hands dramatically.

“What will happen when the seven years are up?”

“If, in seven long years, he still cannot find a woman who will love him for his true self,” Blanca leaned close for the punch line, “Baltasar Cerra will let him know all his secrets and he will become as evil as Cerra is!”

“Oh, no!”

“But if he finds such a woman, with her first kiss the spell will be broken, and he will turn back into a handsome prince.”

Eva grinned, feeling a little foolish for having become so engrossed in Blanca’s fantasies. “And all of the Spaniards will vanish from Granada, and Prince Basil will resume the throne in the Moorish kingdom of Andalusia!” she poked fun of Blanca’s conclusion. “Which kind of rules out St. Basil, doesn’t it?”

Blanca giggled. “Saints are no fun, Eva. Long faces and prayers. I like stories with talking animals and wizards and kings and beautiful princesses better.”

