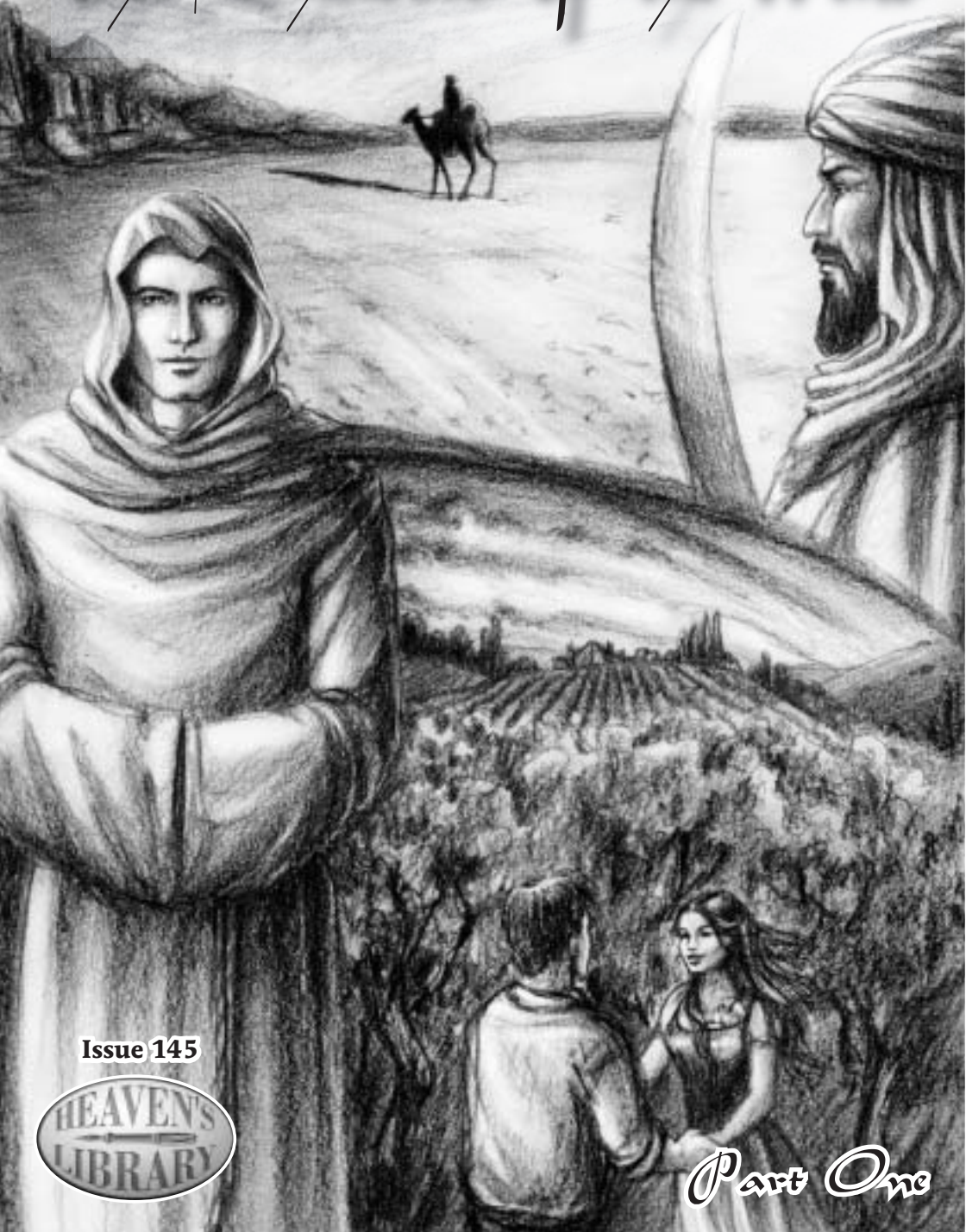


# The Shadow of the Wind



Issue 145



Part One

## Preface

This is not a story that you will find inscribed in the annals of man's history, though some of the historical and geographical details are similar to the reality of the times about which it was written—the Spanish conquest of Morocco.

This story is written from the realm of possibilities, what *could* have happened, and perhaps what *should* have happened, had only more of the children of Jesus gone forth with the same measure of love, courage, humility, and compassion as this man. How different history would have been if that had been the case; but sadly, it was not to be. However, it is still not too late. The sands of history have not yet fully passed through the hourglass of the present. There is still time, albeit short, for those who will heed the call in their hearts to go forth unto the despised and forgotten.

## Chapter One

Across the vast expanse of the Moroccan desert plains a lone rider came. The setting sun at his rear cast a long shadow in the sands ahead of him. At his left, the imposing monolith\* of the Atlas Mountains rose steeply out of the plains, dwarfing the lonely traveler. Far across the interminable waste to his right, small whirls of wind-whipped sand spiraled in conical funnels that dissolved into clouds of sun-reddened dust. But the arid mystique that would have enticed a pioneer or adventurer held no attraction to the rider.

He huddled low on the back of his camel as one wounded, not only in body but also in spirit. Great and sore had been the battle he had wit-

nessed over the past days, and tragic the defeat. Gingerly he felt beneath his tunic, touching the open wound on his left arm. It had been inflicted by the bayonet of a Spanish soldier, who had fallen by his own sword.

Sheik Abdul Aziz, for that was the traveler's name, had fought bravely, but the odds were too great and the enemy had been superior in strength and weaponry. In the end, he had no recourse but to call the decimated remnants of his men to a retreat. Martyrdom is a fine subject for Friday sermons in the mosque and elegies\* in honor of the dead, but Abdul Aziz knew

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\***monolith:** pillar of rock

\***elegy:** a mournful poem, or musical lament written for someone who has died

Cover art by Sabine

For ages 9–11. May be read to younger children at their parents' or teachers' discretion.

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of the realities that had to be dealt with, the widows and fatherless children that were war's unfortunate progeny\*. Retreat was always a hard choice to make. But, he had reasoned in the split second of decision, the Spanish army would soon move on to conquer other towns, and his services would be more useful if he returned to his own city and tried to organize some defense against the coming onslaught. After he'd sent his army home, he headed towards his home—the journey he was now undertaking.

The thought of what was to come suddenly engulfed him and he turned his eyes despairingly up to the lone star that appeared above the eastern horizon.

“*Allahum-ma*, hear the humble prayers of Thy servant, and deliver us from the hands of these who come against our people.”

With this prayer still on his lips, he came opposite a *wadi*\* which led up into steep rocky hills to his left. The route was a familiar one. He would take the wadi up until it came to a narrow winding mountain path that led through the hills into the valley beyond, where his hometown of Jerada was nestled. He would camp in the wadi at night and take the path home in the morning, hoping to arrive sometime before the searing heat of the noonday desert sun.

A few hundred yards into the wadi, Abdul Aziz alighted from his camel and set about gathering some sticks of brushwood, cast offs of the scanty

shrubs which owed their existence to deeply concealed waters. The camel sank down gratefully into the desert sand and began gazing wistfully off into space, as if pining for a long-lost oasis, seemingly forgetful of the past days' barbarities.

Abdul Aziz suddenly froze in the act of picking up a dry branch. Had he heard the faint sound of a bell? Unlikely, as the grass was so scarce in the region that the Bedouin rarely brought their herds there, and desert travelers were few and far between. Only a seasoned traveler would risk such a perilous journey. But there it was again, a distant but unmistakable ringing.

As he gazed towards the opening of the wadi an almost imperceptible movement caught his attention. As he strained his eyes in the gathering dusk he could make out a figure turning up the wadi towards him. It was difficult at the distance to see details, but it appeared to be a man leading a donkey laden with saddlebags.

Something in the humble bearing of the approaching figure seemed to portend no fear. Nevertheless, it wasn't worth taking chances. Abdul Aziz guessed that he had not yet been seen by the stranger. His camel was nestled down behind a boulder, and he himself stood in the shadow of overhanging rocks.

Carefully he withdrew further into the shadows, and with the sure-footedness of a veteran desert warrior, he made his way stealthily up onto some overhanging rocks that formed a natu-

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\**progeny*: offspring

\**wadi*: a steep-sided water course, through

which water flows only after heavy rain-falls

ral platform along one side of the wadi. Keeping low he moved noiselessly down the platform until he came above where he judged the approaching figure to be. He lay on his stomach, slid to the edge and peered over to assess the nature of his potential adversary.

Suddenly the man's donkey began braying noisily, dug its heels into the sand and refused to walk any further. It was a welcome distraction, for Abdul Aziz could now watch with ease as the man was so taken up trying to control his frantic beast that he would scarcely have noticed if a company of Saracens\* came upon him.

With an amused twinkle in his eye and a smile that played around his lips, Abdul Aziz spoke softly to himself, "When will the infidel learn to listen to the wisdom of his donkey?"

By now, he had taken in a good measure of the man's appearance. He wore a rough long tunic, bound with rope around the waist and his head shaved in the middle, which gave the appearance of belonging to some kind of a religious order. He was well built, swarthy, and handsome, without a trace of cloistered asceticism\*. Abdul Aziz guessed the man to be in his late twenties, and assumed him to be Spanish from his complexion and features, which was borne out by the words he was shouting at his donkey, some of which Abdul Aziz recognized.

In addition to being a warrior, as sheik of his village Abdul Aziz was also a poet and a scholar. He spoke, and could

read and write English passably well, as well as a smattering of Spanish. It was in English that he spoke his first words to the newcomer.

With a nimble leap that was worthy of one much younger than his forty-eight years, he cast himself down the seven- or eight-foot drop onto the sand. Landing upright on his feet, he pulled his scimitar from its scabbard and pointed it straight at the astonished man's neck.

"On your knees, infidel!" he cried.

With no need for coercion, the man sank to his knees, looking up in wide-eyed terror. The donkey immediately became calm, as if there was no further need for protest now that the reason for his intuitive agitation was discovered. For a long, delicious moment Abdul Aziz kept his sword at the man's throat. A Spaniard indeed, and what a perfect opportunity for revenge!

"Submit to Islam, infidel, so that I may be persuaded not to take off your head and send you to Hell where you belong!" he growled.

The man looked up at him and there was a sudden strange absence of fear in his eyes that troubled Abdul Aziz.

"*Salaam aleykum*," he managed to gurgle.

Years of tradition overcame Abdul Aziz, and he could not resist answering,

"*Wa aleykum salaam*." He found himself unable to suppress a smile. "So, the infidel attempts to speak in Arabic?"

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\***Saracen:** an Arab

\***asceticism:** self-denying way of life

\***Salaam aleykum:** Peace be unto you

\***Wa aleykum salaam:** And peace be upon you

“It is a humble attempt,” said the foreigner.

“Yet not altogether displeasing. Your accent is intelligible.” The sword remained pointed at the throat.

The man opened his mouth to speak again. “If you would send a humble pilgrim to his meager reward, before attaining his goal, I pray that you would do it speedily.”

“A pilgrim?” replied Abdul Aziz. The sword left the throat. He thrust it to the northeast. “Rome is that way.” He swung it around to the east. “And Jerusalem is that way.” Then a little further south. “And Mecca is that way. So, if you are indeed a pilgrim, you are hopelessly lost. You are not only on the wrong road, you are on the wrong continent.” The sword did not return to the throat.

“My pilgrimage is different from that which you have envisioned. I do not count myself worthy to attain the rank of pilgrims to such holy places as you speak of. I come as a simple beggar seeking only to worship my Creator in the temple of God which is enshrined within every human heart.”

“Ah! So you have come to convert us.”

“Convert you?” the man laughed. “To what?—To the blood-soaked Catholicism that condones, sanctifies and blesses the murder of the innocents of your land and the oppression of your people? I think not.”

“Then what? What is this pilgrimage?” Abdul Aziz’s voice betrayed a flicker of interest.

“If you will grant me stay of execution for one hour, I will tell you of it.”

Abdul Aziz thought for a moment.

“Well, in my great mercy I have a mind to allow you to live a little longer that you may practice your Arabic more perfectly, so that when you are indeed dispatched, should God have mercy on you and grant you entry to Paradise, you will be more familiar with the language spoken there.”

“May I humbly request the kind name of him I wish to thank for such benevolence?”

“I am Abdul Aziz Suleiman Mohammed Ali, Sheik of Jerada,” he said with defined dignity. “And what is the name of my guest?” His own courtesy surprised him.

The Spaniard swallowed deeply, and a hopeful tear sprung involuntarily into his eye. *Guest?* That certainly sounded like an improvement on decapitation.

“Francisco,” he said simply. Something had gradually melted between the two men. Both of them knew, but neither could understand. It was as if some long accrued\* glacier of mistrust was being touched and thawed by the balmy desert air. Francisco sensed that he may now be permitted to stand up, and did so.

“Come,” said Abdul Aziz. “My camel is just up ahead and I have been gathering sticks to make a fire. Let us do so before the last light leaves us. When we sit, you can tell me your tale.”

Soon a cheerful fire was blazing, casting enormous dancing shadows across the imposing walls of the canyon-like wadi around them. Abdul Aziz produced a pot into which he poured water from a flask hanging by his camel’s

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\**accrue*: to gather together

saddle, and proceeded to brew coffee. Francisco produced some bread and cheese and the two men sat down one on either side of the fire, both warily appreciative of the other's company.

"Before I begin my tale," said Francisco, "may I ask you one question?"

"Yes."

"May I tend to the wound on your left arm?"

Abdul Aziz's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "I did not tell you I was wounded."

"I see how you have tried to hide this thing from me, but I saw how you winced as you threw the last sticks on the fire and I saw the bloodstains on your garments. I pray that you will allow me to cleanse and dress your wound.

"My Lord instructed me as I came forth on this mission, to be ready to cleanse and heal the wounds inflicted upon your people by my countrymen, both in the body and in the soul, and I have supplies to do so, if you will allow me."

Abdul Aziz seemed to struggle for a few moments with this. Francisco could tell that his pride was not used to accepting the charity of others—especially strangers, and most of all, Spaniards.

"If you do not wish me to do so, that is your choice," continued Francisco gently. "But I would guess that by tomorrow its state will be worse than today."

Abdul Aziz thought a moment longer and then slowly nodded his head. At this cue Francisco jumped up and went to his donkey, now contentedly nibbling on some tufts of grass by the side of the wadi. From the saddlebag

he drew out a leather pouch. Abdul Aziz complied with as much dignity as he could muster, stretching forth his arm as Francisco rolled back the sleeve to reveal a long cut in the forearm.

"This will hurt a little," said Francisco, pulling out a bottle of alcohol from the pouch. As gently as he could, he cleaned the wound with the alcohol and some soft gauze cloth. Abdul Aziz remained stoic throughout; obviously unwilling to show any signs of pain or weakness, although Francisco noticed in sympathy that he drew his breath in sharply a few times, and observed a tear trickling from his left eye. The wound cleansed, Francisco took out of the pouch a long strip of bandage and gently wound it around the wounded man's arm, ripping the two ends and affixing it in place with a knot.

The procedure complete, Abdul Aziz withdrew his arm stiffly. "Thank you," he said, emotionlessly.

Francisco, realizing that he was still closer to a prisoner than a guest, quietly packed away his medical supplies, returned them to his saddlebag, and meekly resumed his seat by the fire.

At this point the coffee began to boil. Abdul Aziz produced two small clay cups, into which he poured the thick, black fragrant liquid. He offered the first to Francisco who received it with thanks, and then proceeded to place his own on a flat stone by his elbow, to be enjoyed at leisure. Francisco timidly offered bread and cheese, which Abdul Aziz accepted with considerably less hesitation than the medical treatment.

For a little while the two sat in silence, entranced by the dancing

flames, the aroma of the coffee and the silence of the vast canopy of stars above them. It was Abdul Aziz who spoke first.

“Señor Francisco, now tell me your story.”

Francisco drew a deep breath and then began with a chuckle. “I never would have dreamed I was going to spend ten years of my life in a monastery. That was the furthest thing from my thoughts and far removed from my strangest dreams. It was Lucia who changed all that. But I must not give her more credit than is due, for I believe it was my Lord who had a hand in it all, looking back. Ah, but I get ahead of myself.

“I was born the son of a poor but honest olive farmer. I say poor, but at least we had our own plot of land, and our olive groves which we harvested each autumn and sold to make enough to keep us through the winter. We had a few cows and sheep and chickens, and of course, our faithful donkey.” He smiled and cast an eye in the direction of the placid beast.

“So, I thought I was destined for the life of a farmer, like my father, that I would marry a good farmer’s daughter, raise seven or ten children, twenty or thirty grandchildren, and live to a ripe old age. That was until the day I fell in love with Lucia.

“Lucia was the daughter of a land-owner across the valley. They weren’t that much richer than us, just enough to make her father, arrogant as he was, look down his nose on us. But Lucia, ah, what a gem she was! Long, raven-black hair, enticing brown eyes, a smile like an Easter sunrise, laughter like a lark in

spring, and when she sang those wild, sweet Andalusian\* melodies, it transported me to Heaven.

“One day we both found ourselves in an orange grove at the bottom of the valley, far away from her parents’ watchful gaze. That was the first time we kissed. Her lips were sweeter to my taste than the best honey, her kisses made me drunker than the finest wine, and I had never felt any softness like the balm of her hands caressing my face.

“I told her that day that I would be hers and only hers and she said she would be mine. We arranged another meeting and continued to see each other clandestinely, but somehow her father found out, for the next thing I knew she was forbidden from seeing me. Not long afterwards she was engaged to marry a rich, pompous landowner’s son from the valley. A pretty girl like Lucia could fetch an excellent dowry, one that an olive-picker like myself would never be able to afford.

“I’ll never forget the last time that I saw her. It was the day of her wedding. I sneaked up the side of the valley, close to her father’s house, to catch one last glimpse of her. As she came out of the house, dressed in her bridal gown, I was hiding in some bushes. I called her name in a loud whisper. She turned and saw me there for an instant. I never forgot the look of passion and longing in her eyes and the tears that welled up. Then out came her sisters who took her by the arm and escorted her to her father’s carriage.

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\**Andalusia*: autonomous region of southern Spain

“I felt as if my heart had been broken into a thousand pieces, which the wind scattered far and wide across the valley. I went home and I didn’t eat or sleep for three days. My mama and papa were so worried about me, kind souls that they are. They called the doctor, who could do nothing for me, for I was not sick. They called the priest, who could not help me, for I would not talk.

“Afterwards, I took a little bag of belongings and went up into the mountains for a week. I stayed up there, drinking from the streams, foraging what food I could from the orchards. I began to pray. I prayed like I never prayed in church before. I talked to God in Heaven like I would to a beloved father. I talked to Jesus like I would to my closest friend. I told Him all about my broken heart. I told Him of my longing, my shattered dream. Finally, in the stillness I began to hear a whispering deep within my soul. It was Jesus’ voice speaking to me. I listened carefully. And do you know what He said to me?”

Abdul raised a questioning eyebrow at the thought of God speaking to one such as this Spaniard. But something kept the questions back. Looking into Francisco’s eyes, he could tell the man was sincere.

Francesco continued. “He said, ‘Did you see that look of longing in Lucia’s eyes as she left you? My eyes look upon you with a love and longing that is one thousand times greater. Yes, and I look upon all My unborn children with such longing.’

“These words stuck fast in my heart like an arrow. I could not remove them. Something about these words cemented

the broken pieces of my heart back together, and I saw that there was a reason for it all. At least I knew what it had been like to love and be loved, even though it had been for such a short, tragic time.

“I went home and told my astonished father and mother that I had decided to follow Jesus. I did not know where or how, but soon circumstances led me to the order of the monks of Saint Francis, and I joined a monastery. I had not had much education up till then, though I could read and write, but I was a dedicated student and soon began to prosper in my studies.

“All the loneliness that engulfed me, I struggled to transform into prayers, study, and absorbing of the Holy Scriptures, but in my deepest and most secret confessions I could not fail to admit that barely a day went by when I did not wonder what it would have been like to have been held again in Lucia’s loving arms, to have had another look into her ravishing eyes and to have felt her warm, tender body against mine.”

Francisco paused. “Forgive me if my honesty embarrasses you.”

Abdul Aziz nodded. “Continue. I too am a man. I understand such things.”

“Although my love and passion for Lucia never changed, in time was born a greater love and passion for my beloved Lord, whose words I drank as the honey I had once tasted on the lips of my fair beloved. After long and arduous years of study, I was ready to take the full vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience, which I did without so much as a second thought, for I could not bear to return to the valley where images of Lucia’s face gazed out at



me from behind every orange tree, where every rippling wheat field was her hair blown in the wind, and where her laughter echoed from every brook.

“So, I was set for a life of abstinence, fasting, prayer, and service to my God. But God knows my heart. I am a passionate, adventurous soul. Though I loved in some sense the cloistered life, yet I felt the call within to do more, to go forth and share this love that I had found in my Lord with others. But I suppressed these thoughts and feelings as desires of my own flesh, contrary to what I felt was the will of God—solitude, abstinence, and silence.

“But something else was happening to me. As I grew more familiar with the mother church, I became increasingly disenchanted with the hierarchy and self-satisfaction, the power plays and cliques. I saw how men who had once dedicated their lives to serve God now spent most of their time serving their own ends. I wondered what had become of the example of our poor founder, Francis of Assisi, who stripped himself of those things and walked out into the hills. I chose the name Francisco for myself, for I wanted to be more like him, more humble and simple in my love for my Lord.

“Then I heard news of what my countrymen were doing to your people. It shocked and disgusted me that we should behave in so barbaric a manner towards our neighbors. And that is when in my heart I began to formulate a desire. After much prayer I went to my father superior and begged him grant me leave to come to these countries to help your people.

“He told me there was no need, and that I was not fitted for such a task as I had no knowledge of the culture or language of the land. So I purposed myself to study Arabic, which as you see I have attempted to do with hitherto not outstanding success. I even studied the Holy Koran, although my father superior warned me that it might draw me into apostasy. But I found much beauty and truth and sincere praise to God in the writings of the Prophet, peace be upon him. After studying Arabic for some time and learning as much as I could about your people, I again asked and was once again denied.

“By this time I began to see that the motives were political. The government did not want to send people to help a country that they wanted to suppress and enslave. My government wanted to impose domination, ignorance, and subjection.

“In despair, I threw myself down again and again before my God and asked Him what to do with these desires that raged in my heart. I thought it was my own sinful self-will trying to impose itself upon His high and holy will for my life. Yet finally, having tried in every way to pour water upon the fire that burned within my soul, after fastings and prayers, confessions, more fastings, more prayers, long hours of communion with my God, I found that the fire that raged inside could not be extinguished.

“So I went to my father superior and requested to be defrocked, to leave the order of the Franciscans. He looked at me gravely, perhaps fearing eternal damnation for my soul, but I only felt the Spirit of my living Lord moving

within me, moving me out from those cold stone walls, into the land of living people, who needed to feel the Master's healing touch.

"One night, after much prayer, I saw a vision of my master, St. Francis. I know not how I knew it was him, but I knew. He came with tears in his eyes, asking me to go forth, as he once went forth to these lands. He spoke to me deep and moving words, which I attempted to write down, and which I carry with me to this day. I could not tell my superiors of the vision lest I be condemned of heresy, but I pleaded more earnestly with the father superior, who finally let me go with a reluctant blessing.

"I went back to my parents' farm and stayed there for a short while, letting them know how much I loved them. I bade farewell to my brothers and sisters and told them of my plan. Of course they all remonstrated with me not to go, but I could not be dissuaded. I had poured water upon the fire of sacrifice long enough, and it had all been burnt up and the fire still raged. I only requested one thing from my father: Sanchito, our family's donkey. That he willingly gave me.

"My father and mother's sad eyes, the day I walked away from the farm, tore my heart almost as much as that last longing gaze from Lucia on her wedding day, but I prayed for strength as I led Sanchito up the hill. And as I turned to wave at them from the top of the hill, with tears streaming down my face, I asked the Lord that the next time we meet, whether it be on this earth or in Paradise, that they would look upon me as a son to be proud of."

Francisco wiped a tear from his eye on the rough sleeve of his cloak.

"And so I set forth on my mission. To me, my Master's call was clear, to go forth unto the very people that my countrymen were now oppressing, to do whatever I could to heal the wounds they had caused and to let them know that perhaps not all Spaniards are devils and not all Christians infidels."

Abdul Aziz stared into the fire for a few long minutes, sipping his coffee meditatively. "I cannot say that I fully understand everything of which you have spoken, as some is contrary to my religion and beliefs," he said at length. "But I feel in my bones that you wish no ill will towards my people. You will be welcome as my honored guest, as long as God wills for you to stay in our land.

"But tell me, and I ask you this with no sword pointed at your throat"—Abdul Aziz chuckled—"will you not now submit to Islam? You have seen so much hypocrisy as you said, amongst the Christians, and you found much truth and beauty, as you said, in the reading of the Holy Koran."

Francisco turned his eyes from the fire into which he had been gazing as he spoke, and looked fully into the face of Abdul Aziz. "My friend, I would gladly forsake the trappings and theological prattle of Mother Church, as a butterfly escapes into the sky and leaves behind the empty husk of its cocoon."

"But?" questioned Abdul Aziz, his eyebrows raised in anticipation.

Francisco looked at him deeply.

"One thing I can never leave, and that is the precious knowledge, friendship and fellowship of my Jesus Who

loved me and gave His life for me. As long as I live, I will never leave Him, as He has promised to never leave me.”

Abdul Aziz was silent, realizing that it would not be well to pursue the issue in the face of such conviction. “So be it,” he replied. “These things cannot be forced. Perhaps you will reconsider tomorrow. And now, I suggest that we pray our prayers and turn in for the night, for our journeys have been long and there is much traveling to be done on the morrow.”

“Amen to that, my good friend,” said Francisco with a warm smile.

Abdul Aziz pulled a mat from his camel’s saddlebag, pointed it in the direction of Mecca and began his ritual prayers. Francisco withdrew himself a little way from the fire and also began to pray. He had no idea what effect his testimony had had on the impervious Abdul Aziz, but committed the matter to his Heavenly Father. At least it appeared that his life had been preserved to serve his God for one more day.

## Chapter Two

Magnificent orange shafts of light were bathing the top of the canyon walls as Francisco awoke. He paused for a moment before rising, to admire the rugged grandeur around him. Abdul Aziz was already awake and stirring the embers of the previous night’s fire, intent on producing some more of the sweet, mud-like coffee. Francisco rose, gathered up his simple bedding and withdrew behind some rocks at the side of the wadi for some moments

of solitude with his God. He emerged fifteen minutes later looking considerably more awake, and joined his host who was now completing the morning coffee-making ritual.

The two exchanged polite but cursory greetings in Arabic. Abdul Aziz once again offered coffee to Francisco, who accepted it gratefully. They sat sipping the thick brew, words momentarily made irrelevant by the vast silence engulfing them, which was punctuated only by occasional snorts from the camel and donkey. At length Abdul Aziz spoke.

“We must begin our journey if we want to arrive before being scorched by the noonday sun.”

Francisco nodded in agreement, having undergone such an arduous experience the previous day and not wishing to repeat it. Within minutes their belongings were packed and the two unlikely companions began their ascent up the path into the mountains. The towering walls on either side seemed to unite them in smallness, as if reverence for such a manifestation of the hand of the God, Whom they both revered, somehow made differences of nationality and religion of little importance. It was with reluctance, therefore, that Abdul Aziz broached a subject that he had apparently been pondering.

“Señor Francisco, I told you last night that you would be my guest, and so it is to be. However, I must explain to you that the mood of my people is less than benevolent towards your countrymen.”

“And with good reason,” added Francisco sympathetically.

“I am the sheik of my tribe, but there are others in authority. The Imam, who is the head of the Islamic council in our village and preaches weekly in the mosque, will not take kindly to your presence as a guest amongst us, nor will many others. Life will be difficult for me and no less for you, and you risk being attacked or imprisoned by others who I may not be able to restrain. Therefore, since I wish to entertain you as my guest, I feel it is best for both of us that you appear, initially at least, to be my prisoner. This may be grievous to you, but as my prisoner I am bound to treat you honorably and cause no harm to come unto you. You shall be well fed and cared for, and we shall have the opportunity to consult further in private concerning the matters of which you have spoken. If such a plan does not please you, you may continue on your own without my assistance, but I doubt that you will receive such a hospitable reception as that which I can afford you.”

Francisco smiled as he remembered the details of their first conversation, and then shuddered slightly to imagine what would be a less hospitable reception.

“Within the hour we shall reach the top of the wadi,” Abdul Aziz continued. “The trail will take us through a gap between two mountains and we will come into view of my town. By that time you must let me know your decision. If you come with me I will bind you with ropes and take you in as my prisoner. If you choose not to then you will wait, concealed from view, and let me proceed on for half an hour and then make the rest of your journey.”

Francisco silently grappled with the choices ahead of him. He was still a free man, and he knew that Abdul Aziz would not prevent him even if he turned and headed back down the way he came. The prospect of being bound and led into confinement agitated him, as he passionately loved his freedom. He continued for half an hour in anguish of spirit; the decision loomed as large before him as the surrounding mountains. On the outer fringes of his consciousness, however, came a soft voice.

*You have been prepared for this.*

Suddenly there came back into Francisco’s mind a passage of Scripture, one that he had claimed as his theme when he’d set out on his pilgrimage.

“I, therefore the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called with all lowliness and meekness, longsuffering, forbearing one another in love. Endeavoring to keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace\*.”

*Prisoner of the Lord. Lowliness and meekness. Longsuffering. The bond of peace.* The anguished question seemed to surge up from the depths of his soul and echo around the unfathomable heights of Heaven: “Lord is this the path You have chosen for me?”

By the time the crevice between the hills before them widened into a large peninsula of blue sky, Francisco needed no further assurance. Meekly he turned to Abdul Aziz and presented his hands to be bound. Francisco had known Abdul Aziz for less than twenty hours,

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\*Eph. 4:1-3

but he recognized that his hands were being bound with an uncharacteristic gentleness. At last the dark Moroccan eyes met his, and Abdul Aziz said softly, as if from the depths of his being. "I will not forget what you are doing for my people."

Having spoken thus he grabbed the reins of the donkey and the cord with which he had bound Francisco's wrists, wrapping them firmly about his own wrist. With a flourish he mounted his camel and set off through the pass that led into the valley beyond.

It was not long before a vastly different terrain greeted Francisco's eyes. Jerada was an oasis watered by springs from the mountains that caused what would have been desert to be transformed into a dusty green valley. It would not have been called lush by the standards that Francisco was used to, but it was well irrigated and the signs and sounds of life abounded. At times they were enveloped by the thick, sweet aroma of figs from trees on either side of their descending pathway. From an unseen source emanated the sound of running water, a rippling echo that seemed to cascade around the valley, accompanied by the low drone of flies and bees. Olive groves were nestled along the hills on either side, and bunches of wild grapes hung untidily from unkempt vines beside the path.

Abdul Aziz reached down and with the point of his sword he deftly cut one of these bunches, motioning for Francisco to pick it up. Francisco did so and offered it to his host who accepted and then cut another bunch and motioned for Francisco to take

it. Rather messily on account of his bound wrists, Francisco began to eat the grapes as they proceeded along the path, enjoying their sweet nectar. Captivity so far was not unpleasant.

The whole scene around them had an air of idyllic laziness, which seemed to belie both the impending danger and the suffering that had already been inflicted on the people. Francisco thought the scene was not entirely unlike the valley of his childhood. In the center of the valley ahead of them he could see the squat white buildings of Abdul Aziz's hometown. A minaret\* capped by a crescent moon reached up into the sky above the roofs of the houses. The valley opened out into a wide plain, which was framed by mountains to the north, their silhouette dimly visible in the morning haze. The mountains to their rear through which the narrow path had taken them formed a natural barrier to the south and west.

Before long they drew near to the town. As they approached, shouts of recognition began to greet Abdul Aziz from the fields by either side of the road. It wasn't long before he was approached by horsemen from the city. Francisco understood a few of the initial greetings. However, although an occasional familiar word appeared, he was mostly lost in the dialect spoken by the men, which was different from the classic Arabic he had studied. The riders paid scant attention to Francisco, whose presence Abdul Aziz explained dismissively. The two riders drew their horses up on either side of Abdul Aziz's camel and they

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\**minaret*: mosque tower

proceeded on into the city, Francisco and his donkey trailing behind. From what he could gather the conversation was about the most recent battles and the state of affairs in the northern part of the country. There was concern on the men's faces and in their voices; their mood was far from festive.

As they entered the city a bearded *muezzin*<sup>\*</sup>, clad in a long white robe with a dark red *fez*<sup>\*</sup> on his head, was giving the call to midday prayers from the minaret to their right. The three men ahead of Francisco continued their earnest conversation, seemingly unaware. A small group of mostly barefoot boys wearing miniature versions of their fathers' robes thronged about the travelers, as if eager to catch any snippet of news about the progress of the war as well as to welcome the local hero Abdul Aziz back from his conflicts. Some looked with curiosity, but welcome absence of animosity at the strangely-clad prisoner.

At length Abdul Aziz halted his camel outside a square stone building that resembled the others in the town but was slightly larger and graced by two large date palms overhanging the front courtyard. He descended from his camel and led it through an ornate arched gate into the courtyard. Francisco followed meekly behind.

The house was similar in design to the Spanish haciendas that Francisco was familiar with. He could see through into an inner courtyard, which was bor-

dered on all four sides by rooms. He could just see the doorways, hung with brightly colored beaded curtains. There was a flurry of activity from inside the house. A black servant dressed in a white robe emerged and took the reins of the camel, followed by a bevy of children of various ages—at least ten that Francisco could count—who all enthusiastically attacked their father, competing for his hugs like a swarm of bees.

Francisco noticed some of the bead curtains rippling slightly, as shadowy figures from within perused the arrival of the man of the house and his unexpected companion. He guessed them to be the womenfolk, wives, and older daughters. One of the curtains opened wider than the others and the head and torso of a young woman appeared. Probably one of the sheik's daughters, thought Francisco. In spite of the veil she wore, Francisco could sense femininity and poise, and felt himself the subject of a bold, curious, but not altogether unfriendly look from a pair of dark, flashing eyes. Francisco flushed slightly at finding himself so closely observed in his humbled state, and stared in embarrassment at a spot on the ground a few feet in front of him, hoping that his blush was not noticed.

The effusive<sup>\*</sup> round of greetings now completed, Abdul Aziz motioned to one of the men who had accompanied him into the town, both obviously some kind of deputies or aides. He gave some brief instructions, nodding in Francisco's

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<sup>\*</sup>**muezzin:** man who calls Muslims to pray  
<sup>\*</sup>**fez:** a brimless felt hat shaped like a cone with a flat top

<sup>\*</sup>**effusive:** unrestrained in expressing feelings

direction. The deputy took the rope which bound Francisco's wrists and jerked it cursorily.

"Follow me," he said gruffly in Arabic.

He led Francisco to a low white stone building on the other side of the outer courtyard, and motioned for him to go inside. Francisco found himself in a clean but simple room, with a narrow opening for a window. The room with its earthen floors and thick stone walls was surprisingly cool in spite of the fervent midday heat outside.

The deputy motioned for Francisco to kneel on the earthen floor, then withdrew his scimitar from its scabbard to the left of his belt. Francisco's heart missed a beat. He had taken Abdul Aziz's word for his safety, but sudden apprehension flooded his mind. *What if Abdul Aziz's desire to appear strong before his subordinates has overcome his initial professions of hospitality and good will? What was the subject of the long and serious conversation between the men? Has my fate been decided in their secret counsels?*

Without a word the deputy seized Francisco's left hand and with one deft stroke of his sword sliced through the cords that bound his wrists. The ropes fell to the floor.

"Welcome," said the man in Arabic. "You are now the guest of Abdul Aziz Suleiman Mohammed Ali. Please remain within your quarters. Refreshments will be served to you in due course."

A mixture of adrenaline and relief flooded through Francisco's veins and he broke out into a cold sweat.

"Thank you," he whispered hoarsely.

As the man turned to go, Francisco asked in the best stumbling Arabic he could muster whether he could be permitted access to the saddlebags of his donkey. The man nodded and led him out to where the donkey was tethered under an awning next to the room. Francisco retrieved some books and writing implements from the saddlebag under the watchful gaze of the deputy, then returned meekly to his room. The door closed shut behind him and a bolt slid into place.

It was to Francisco's benefit that he was no stranger to the monastic life, as the room in which he found himself was not dissimilar in dimensions or furnishings to his room in the Franciscan monastery. A simple, low wooden cot adorned one side of the room, and to his joy there was a rough-hewn wooden table and chair underneath the vertical oblong window. It was there that he almost immediately settled down to his writing and study, having spent a few moments in praise to his heavenly Father for yet more mercies. Francisco had determined to keep a journal of his pilgrimage, which needed a considerable amount of filling in since he'd been in constant travel.

Far from monastic, however, was the sight presented to him approximately an hour later when the door to his room swung open suddenly, and two servants appeared carrying dishes laden with food. It was a meal Francisco had not seen the likes of for many long days. Large pieces of round flat bread were adorned with generously sized kebabs of lamb and chicken, accompanied by

a steaming bowl of couscous heaped with pieces of lamb and vegetables. There was also a platter bearing a large assortment of dates, figs, and apricots.

Francisco hastily cleared the books that he was writing in from the table, as the servants carefully arranged the dishes. As they turned to go, the same graceful form that he had glimpsed through the beaded curtain appeared in the doorway. Her hair was covered with a veil, but her face was not and Francisco could not help noticing that her features were strikingly beautiful.

"Peace be upon you," she began confidently in surprisingly good English. "I am Fatima, eldest daughter of Abdul Aziz Suleiman Mohammed Ali. My father has instructed me to inquire whether everything is to your liking,"

Francisco smiled broadly. "I am but a humble beggar," he began, "but your father treats me like a prince."

"Such is the hospitality of our people," she replied with a quiet intensity and no trace of a smile.

"Even to an enemy, a Spaniard such as myself?" ventured Francisco.

"If you were our enemy," said Fatima with undiminished intensity, "I do not think that my father would treat you this way. But is it not even written in your Holy Book, love your enemies?"

"Yes indeed," replied Francisco, "and your father lives these words better than many of my countrymen who profess themselves to be followers of the Bible. Please convey my sincerest thanks to him."

"I will," said Fatima with an air of authority, which indicated she was well able to answer in her father's stead. Once more she cast the deep black pearls of her eyes towards Francisco's in a brief but searching gaze. Then with a wave of her hand to the servants and a swirl of her long flowing garments she turned on her heel and left the room, the servants following. Once more the bolt slid shut.

Francisco turned to the banquet laid before him.

"Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies," he said to himself with a smile. After a brief but heartfelt benediction he began to attack the contents of the platters with relish.

For the next three days Francisco remained thus in his cell, spending much time with his books, and in meditation and prayer. Benefiting from three bountiful meals a day made fasting out of the question for the moment. Still, his soul burned within him to be free to go forth and minister to the people, but as the solid wooden door and stone walls prevented any thought of escape, as well as an invisible force seemed to be binding him spiritually, even testing him. In prayer he was dimly aware of a desperate contest taking place for his future ministry, in which he was for some reason disallowed from being an active participant, except through prayer. He would only find out later from Abdul Aziz how fiercely the battle for his life had raged.

*To be continued.*



# *The Shadow of the Wind*



Issue 147



*Part Two*

## The story so far:

In the dusty, hot North African desert, two travelers' paths have crossed: Abdul, a sheik, wounded after battle with the Spanish, and Francisco, a former Spanish Franciscan monk on a pilgrimage to counter the atrocities inflicted by his countrymen on the Moroccans in the name of God.

An unlikely friendship begins to develop between the two men, but Francisco, being a Spaniard, must enter Jerada, the city where Abdul resides, bound as a prisoner. Though treated hospitably in Abdul's house, he is kept in a small room for three days. Meanwhile, Abdul goes before the city council and the Imam on behalf of the life of his newfound friend.

## Chapter Three

On the afternoon of his arrival to Jerada with the prisoner, Abdul Aziz met to confer together with the elders of the city. The meeting took place in the house of the Imam. A group of gray-bearded, white-robed men were reclining on cushions in a large, oblong-shaped room festooned with colorful tapestries and ornate Arabic inscriptions from the Koran. As Abdul Aziz entered, all rose to greet him. The Imam kissed him warmly on the shoulder and both cheeks, and then all resumed their seats. Sheik Abdul Aziz took a seat at the head of the long low table next to the Imam. The muttering of voices in the room died away to silence.

*"Bismallah Rahman a Rahim (in the name of God, the merciful and compassionate)," Abdul Aziz began solemnly, then looked at the floor for a moment before continuing. "Casablanca has fallen to the infidels," he said heavily, as quiet expressions of despair and anger against the enemy ran through the room. "There were many martyrs, but there was nothing we could do but to pull back, regroup, and continue the jihad" from towns further out. But we fear that the armies of the infidels will not stop there, but will continue their campaign until they have subjugated our entire land. By the grace of Allah we must fight and not submit to this tyranny."*

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**jihad:** *a campaign waged by Muslims in defense of their faith*

Cover art by Sabine

For ages 9–11. May be read to younger children at their parents' or teachers' discretion.

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A slightly more animated murmur of assent ran around the room.

“I propose that we again gather all trained fighting men from our town and prepare them to do battle with the infidels, wherever and whenever we confront them.”

“A worthy proposal indeed,” echoed the Imam. “This should start right away.”

“We cannot defeat the Spaniards by force of numbers,” continued Abdul Aziz, his voice rising as he spoke. “We must use our minds, for they outnumber us in both soldiers and weapons. But there are those in our government, may Allah judge them, who seek to compromise with the infidel in order to line their own pockets. Miserable puppets of the Spaniards they are, making themselves rich and powerful while selling our poor into slavery. That is our greatest weakness: our people are divided. Only if the people see us taking a stand against them will they be inspired to rise up.”

The room erupted into a chorus of agreement and shouts of “*Allahu Akbar*.”

When it had subsided, the Imam cleared his throat.

“We have heard that you have captured an infidel prisoner. What of him?”

“From what I’ve gathered he is a wandering monk, a religious man who comes out into the desert to do penance for the sins of his people.”

“This is what he told you,” retorted the Imam, “and you believed him? Isn’t it obvious that he is an infidel spy dis-

guised as a monk, sent to spy out the lay of the land, identify our positions and take back information to his own people that they may plan their attack against our cities?”

“By the prophet, peace be upon him,” replied Abdul Aziz, “I have talked long with this man and I do not find in him the guile belonging to a spy.”

“Then he has bewitched you,” barked the Imam. “Let us bring him forth and torture him, that we may find out the truth of his mission and at the same time obtain information about our enemies’ movements.”

“I do not think that would be wise,” demurred Abdul Aziz. “If he is indeed a spy, his training will cause him to close his mouth more firmly the more we press him. Yet should we treat him with greater liberty, if his heart is indeed deceptive and he means evil towards our people, then surely he will trap himself in his own words and doings.”

“Abdul Aziz, you are too soft and too merciful!” The Imam raised his voice angrily. “These are not times for mercy! We are dealing with the rapacious infidel who would steal and subjugate our land.”

“Truly I had my sword against his throat and was about to send him to an early grave,” Abdul Aziz responded, also raising his voice. “But Allah would not permit my hand to do this. I believe that his mission holds within it a blessing from Allah, although I cannot see what that is at this present time. Give me three days to deal with him, and I will keep close watch on his every

movement. If there is iniquity found in him we shall deal with him according to the justice of Allah.”

The Imam remained unconvinced, but a chorus of assent ran round the council and it appeared that Abdul Aziz’s word had prevailed for the present. At that point the meeting concluded and Abdul Aziz assigned some of his trusted men to search out able-bodied young men to join the fighting force.

Upon returning to his house, Abdul Aziz appointed one of his deputies, a young man by the name of Ali Abdul Khader, to keep a close watch on Francisco at all times, even secretly observing him at his writings and devotions.

There were several concealed openings in the walls of the room in which Francisco stayed, from which he could be watched. Thus it was that, unbeknownst to Francisco, Ali Abdul Khader spent most of his waking hours over the next three days observing all of Francisco’s conduct. Ali Abdul Khader had grown up in Casablanca and spoke fluent Spanish, and thus was able to overhear and interpret even some of Francisco’s prayers. On the second day he was surprised to hear Francisco praying thus:

“Most merciful God, I pray for Your restraining force to be upon the armies of Spain. Turn back their swords and cause their bullets to go astray into the desert sands, that they wreak no more destruction upon these innocent ones whose only refuge is You, O Lord Most High. Answer the prayers of these humble ones, O God. Be their defense,

for they do cry out to You in their dependence upon Your holy name, O God. Let the munitions of them that say they know Thee, yet curse Thy name with their actions and their example, crumble into dust and fall before the desert wind.”

At a convenient moment the faithful deputy reported this fervent intercession to Abdul Aziz, who nodded gravely as he listened.

“And you are sure there is no way that he could tell that you were listening?”

“I have taken every precaution to conceal the fact that I am observing him,” said Ali, “and I have no reason to believe that he suspects that he is being watched.”

“So be it then. Thank you for your report and continue to keep a close watch on him.”

Meanwhile Francisco’s confinement, as well appointed as it was, was beginning to eat away at him. At times he stared blankly at the stone walls around him, and at times he struggled to concentrate on reading and studying his Bible and his Arabic books, trying to block out thoughts of fear and despair that always threatened to gnaw away at his happiness. Yet there were times when he seemed to soar into the heavens in raptures of intercession, such as that overheard by Ali Abdul Khader. In the middle of one night he found himself on his knees by his cot beseeching God thus:

“Wouldst Thou, wounded Lamb of Calvary, manifest Thy love to these people, that they may understand the

compassion and tenderness You feel towards them? Thou, Gentle Dove of the Holy Spirit, sail forth upon the heavens, pour down Your blessings upon these little ones, upon these children who wait upon You and have yet to know the saving help of Thy Word. Please, Lord, grant unto Thy humble servant an opportunity to show Thy healing power, Thy saving love to these people.”

On the fourth day of Francisco’s confinement, Abdul Aziz once again presided over a council gathering of the elders. News had come that the Spanish army was on the move, having established a beachhead, and was marching in the southwest, probably with intent to subjugate the central city of Meknès.

“Let us now call on every able-bodied fighting man,” said Abdul Aziz, “to stand against this tyranny. For whether we fight or fight not, the Spaniards will come, capture our cities, plunder our fields, and rape our women. Let us now stand, every man, and defend that which is ours.”

The council was unanimous in its support.

“And tell us of this infidel spy,” said the Imam. “What information have you from him?”

“My deputy, Ali Abdul Khader, has watched him closely for the last three days. He reports how the monk prays to God to overthrow his own Spanish forces and defend the innocent ones of this land against their oppression.”

The Imam shook his head. “Is this not deception woven around you by

one who comes to bring curses from Allah into our midst?”

“What do you mean?”

The Imam spoke heavily. “My beloved daughter, the delight of my eyes, is deathly sick of a fever these last two days. I have besought Allah for her healing, but as yet His mercy has not been shown.”

Abdul Aziz looked at the Imam intently. “Then let the Spaniard come to her and pray and use his curative\* arts, for he is skilled in such things.”

“An infidel, defile my daughter with his prayers?” snapped the Imam.

“Does not the Holy Koran speak of Jesus, son of Miriam, as the prophet of healing? Then let this Nazarene prove Himself as to whether God hears His prayers or not.”

The Imam looked around the council in desperation. Silence reigned, no man being willing to take sides in such a controversial matter. After a few moments, something in his countenance softened.

“I suppose it is worth a try,” he said, nodding gravely. “Bring the Spaniard and let him pray.”

Francisco was surprised and gladdened by the appearance of Abdul Aziz at the door of what he had come to call his cell. There had been no communication between them since the first day, and apart from Fatima’s brief introduction, his only visitors had been servants.

“Abdul Aziz, my good friend,” he began, “let me thank you again for your

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\***curative:** *able to heal*

overwhelming hospitality, which has exceeded all my expectations.”

“Ah, God is more gracious,” said Abdul Aziz warmly in a traditional Arabic response. “But, Señor Francisco, we must make haste. As I told you, there is in this city an Imam, chief of the religious council. He is a man of great influence and he knows of your presence here and deeply distrusts you. However, his daughter, who is but twelve years old, is sick with a fever, to the point of death. If you could come to her and pray in the name of Christ, peace be upon Him, for her healing, this would stand very well with you and with me also, for I am hard pressed to justify keeping you alive in the face of the onslaught of the Spaniards against my people.”

Francisco’s heart leapt. This was the moment he had been praying for, the situation that he had besought God to provide in order to show His love to the people.

“I will come right away,” he answered without hesitation.

Francisco was a man of prayer and a man of faith, but it would not be true to say that he was without misgivings. As he rode behind Abdul Aziz on the horse provided for him, he knew that failure on his part could mean death for him and severe loss of face for Abdul Aziz. With these thoughts flooding his mind he appealed to the strong and never-failing mercy of his Lord and Savior.

Upon arriving at the house, they were met at the door by the Imam. He greeted Abdul Aziz with all the traditional warmth, then turned and indifferently acknowledged Francisco,

although Francisco thought he sensed a keen interest beneath the Imam’s stern exterior. Francisco and Abdul Aziz were led through a sitting room, whose walls were covered with ornately inscribed Koran verses, and shown into a room at the back of the house.

The little dark-haired girl lay, softly moaning on a simple wooden bed, her face almost as pale as the sheet that was covering her. Francisco could immediately tell by the expression of the plump, puffy-eyed woman who sat holding the girl’s hand that the situation was grave. As Francisco entered, the woman stood and withdrew herself.

The Imam extended his hand towards the girl and said simply, “My daughter, Rula.”

Francisco looked to the Imam for some gesture of approval and was granted a cursory nod. He went forward and laid his hand on the girl’s forehead, which was burning with fever.

Deferentially he knelt down beside the bed, gently took the girl’s hand and began praying. He prayed as he had never remembered praying before. Somewhere in his consciousness was the knowledge that this was a pivotal moment in his ministry, but as he prayed he was only dimly aware of the implications of what would transpire.

Foremost in his mind was the pathos\* of the situation before him: The deathly white little girl, the red pleading eyes of her mother, and even the grave concern of the father who Francisco guessed had gone against many of his principles in a

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\**pathos*: feelings of pity, sadness

final attempt to obtain healing for his daughter. After some minutes of fervent intercession Francisco turned to a servant who was standing nearby and asked in simple Arabic accompanied with sign language for some water in a bowl and a cloth, which he brought. Francisco dipped the cloth in the water and gently bathed the girl's forehead and cheeks, accompanied by further whispered prayer.

After fifteen minutes or so, the Imam shifted uncomfortably. Francisco, sensing that his time was up, laid his hand once more on the girl's forehead and prayed a final prayer. She appeared to sigh deeply and relax into a restful sleep, although there was no sign yet of any recovery. Francisco rose to go, with a word of thanks and farewell to the servant.

Without another word the Imam led them back out to the front door. With Abdul Aziz once more taking the lead, the two men rode wordlessly back through the streets to his home. They entered the courtyard of the house, dismounted and tethered their horses.

Abdul Aziz turned to Francisco with his palms skyward and said with a note of sympathy in his voice, "It is all in the hands of Allah."

Francisco nodded and returned to his cell, where he washed himself with water from the basin in the corner of the room and cast himself down headlong on his bunk in prayer.

The evening call to prayer was ringing out over the town when the door to Francisco's room was flung open. Abdul Aziz stood there, his countenance grave and stone-like.

"The will of Allah has been done," he said soberly.

Francisco's heart sank. "The girl..."

"The Imam's daughter"—at these words Francisco's stomach felt like it was sinking through into the floor—"has recovered!"

Abdul Aziz's face suddenly broke into wreaths of smiles and he laughed loudly. He pointed a long bony finger at Francisco, who was now blubbering a jumbled prayer to Jesus and Allah for His mercy.

"Do not tell me," said Abdul Aziz with mock sternness, "O infidel, that your faith faltered!"

Francisco laughed. "Oh, I freely admit that my faith was blown about like the sand in a desert storm! It is because of the mercies of God, and not any righteousness of mine, that the little girl is healed!"

"And may God be praised," said Abdul Aziz. "For the Imam in his joy has decided to host a banquet tonight, and you, my friend, are invited."

Tears of gratitude fell from Francisco's eyes as he sent a silent prayer to his Heavenly Father. Although his answered prayers seemed to indicate that a major test had been passed in him being accepted by these people, the prevailing thought in his mind was joy that the pale, drawn little girl would now be happy, full of life, and reunited with her family—and that perhaps some sparkling fatherly tenderness would return to the eyes of the grave Imam.

"But I must tell you one thing," said Abdul Aziz, casting a critical

eye towards Francisco's garments, "I would advise you to dress after the custom of my people. It will gain you much greater acceptance in their eyes. I would be happy to provide you with some garments."

Francisco stammered a noncommittal reply. He did not want to offend his host, but such a change of garments seemed to hold for him a rather frightening symbolic significance.

"You do not wish to be clad in the garments of a Muslim, an Arab, one you consider a heathen?" questioned Abdul Aziz a little caustically, sensing his hesitation.

"It is not that," answered Francisco. "It is merely that the humble robes I wear represent my calling to be separate from the things of the world. They are to me a badge of dedication to my faith. Please understand, at least give me some time to meditate on this."

Abdul Aziz looked at him quizzically before breaking out into a chuckle. "Well, make your meditation speedy, for we must leave for the Imam's house within the hour." So saying he left the room.

Immediately Francisco was on his knees beside his cot.

"O my heavenly Father! O my beloved Jesus, show me Your will in this matter. Why is it that this change of garments seems to me as difficult a step as consenting to be the prisoner of Abdul Aziz?"

For long moments he held his soul in agonized prayer seeking his Father's will. Slowly and with inexplicable clarity the impression began to form in his

mind that he must comply with Abdul Aziz's wishes. Some strangely evocative\* but frightening words formed in his mind: *cultural crucifixion*.

"Cultural crucifixion?" he whispered aloud. "What can this mean?"

Slowly but clearly the answer came again: *It is one thing to be physically bound in order to carry My message, but how much more to relinquish one's own culture in favor of another, in order to win him for Me?*

A Scripture passage echoed in his mind. *To the Greek as a Greek, to the Jew as a Jew, to the Roman as a Roman.*

"To the Arab as an Arab ... but where will it end?" His eyes were turned upwards as a beseeching child looking into his father's face.

Benevolent eyes seemed to smile back down upon him, but the answer was a question that struck a deep and vibrant chord within his soul.

*How far was I willing to go for you?*

With a long sigh that served as a final act of submission, Francisco's lips formed the words: "My Lord, I have ever loved and trusted Thee. Why should I not trust Thee now?"

He arose from his kneeling position and went to the door. As he laid his hand upon the handle there was a knock and he opened it. Two of Abdul Aziz's servants stood in front of him, carrying a white garment and a head-dress. Without hesitation he beckoned

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\***evocative:** *prompting memories of the past*



them to enter the room and began to remove his monk's vesture. The servants helped him to don the traditional garments, paying particular attention to fixing the headdress correctly. As they stepped back to admire their work, Abdul Aziz appeared in the doorway.

*"Mabrook!"*

Francisco understood the congratulatory greeting.

*"Allah yi barak feek,"* he responded with the traditional reply.

Abdul Aziz chuckled gleefully. "As fine an Arab as ever walked the Moroccan desert! We will make a good Muslim out of you yet."

Francisco smiled and restrained himself from retorting.

*"Yalla,* let us depart. The horses are waiting." Abdul Aziz waved for Francisco to follow him.

Francisco stepped gingerly out of the room behind Abdul Aziz. He felt somewhat uncomfortable, as he knew his appearance would invite a volley of comments, questions, and stares. It was the sort of superficial attention he detested drawing to himself, but he determined that if such be given, he would greet it with a smile.

His first test came seconds later as he walked past the front door of the house and turned for a moment to meet the curious gaze of Fatima who was standing in the doorway. She smiled before coyly dropping her eyes, obviously pleased at the sight she beheld. Francisco quickly turned his eyes away, mentally castigating\* himself for the

flush of pleasure he felt. All he knew of the Arabic culture had taught him that fathers guarded their daughters with an iron hand and often a drawn sword, and there was immense danger in showing even the slightest hint of attraction. This was to say nothing of the vow of chastity he had embraced upon joining the Franciscans, although he had not seriously examined the current state of his vows since the father superior's reluctant blessing on his departure from the order. Now a tiny flame of passion began to flicker in his heart, and he concentrated with all his might on quenching it.

He and Abdul Aziz passed out through the gate, Francisco ever conscious of Fatima's penetrating gaze upon his back. With vigor he swung boldly up on his mount. The two spurred their horses down the street, with Abdul Aziz's servants following close behind.

They were welcomed at the Imam's house by servants who escorted them graciously into a large sitting room. There were no chairs, but rather long mats on either side of the room with a copious\* supply of pillows. The walls were decorated with elegantly woven tapestries in bright colors, which seemed to dance at the flickering of the oil lamps that lit the room. A long low table ran almost the entire length of the center of the room and was spread with a bountiful quantity of flat bread and numerous bowls containing various sauces and other foods, some of

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\***castigate:** to rebuke or punish severely

\***copious:** abundant

which Francisco recognized. The flickering lights, the colored tapestries, and the exotic aroma of spices emanating from the food gave the entire room a delightful mystique, which enticed Francisco's spirit away from his worries about his appearance, and he began to be glad that he was not wearing his coarse brown monk's garment. The Imam entered from a door at the other end of the room and greeted Abdul Aziz warmly with a kiss on both cheeks and the shoulder. He turned to Francisco, held out both hands and did the same.

"Welcome, welcome, welcome," he said retaining his gravity and dignity, but with considerably more warmth than on their last encounter.

"May one thousand welcomes return upon you," said Francisco in Arabic.

The Imam turned with a half smile to Abdul Aziz. "The foreigner speaks Arabic," he said with a hint of surprise.

"He is learning," replied Abdul Aziz benevolently.

"Please, please make yourself at home," the Imam continued. "My home is your home."

The Imam and Abdul Aziz seated themselves at the head of the table and the Imam motioned for Francisco to sit down next to him.

"I was overjoyed to hear of your daughter's recovery," said Abdul Aziz after they had seated themselves.

"Yes, praise be to Allah," said the Imam, "and thanks also to the prayers of the foreigner. Tell me," he said, turning and looking straight at Francisco,

"from whence do you possess these healing powers?"

"I myself possess no healing powers," replied Francisco. "Your daughter was healed in answer to your prayers and my prayers and through the mercy of God."

"Ah!" The Imam's tone was amused, but skeptical and almost caustic. "The foreigner answers diplomatically. I thought that this miracle, and a miracle it was, would have given you an excellent chance to try to convert me to your faith."

"My Master did not send me to convert," said Francisco gently, "only to serve and to love your people, and perhaps in some small way to atone for the sins of mine against yours."

"I do not understand this doctrine of atonement," said the Imam shaking his head, "for why should one pay for the sins of another? Surely every man should pay for his own sins before Allah, with Whom rests judgment and vengeance."

"And also mercy and compassion," said Francisco quietly, and followed with a verse from the Koran: "In the name of Allah the merciful and compassionate."

The Imam turned to Abdul Aziz, "So the infidel reads the Koran? Perhaps before long he shall submit to Islam."

"We shall see," said Abdul Aziz with a chuckle.

The discussion was broken by the arrival of large dishes heaped with steaming piles of couscous. The Imam waved his hand benignly over the table with a gesture to begin eating. The con-

versation turned to lighter matters. The food was superb and Francisco had to admit to himself that the “cultural crucifixion” at this point was not particularly painful.

After a few minutes the Imam’s daughter entered the room. She immediately threw her arms around her father’s neck and kissed him. Then she looked over at Francisco with a shy smile.

“This is the man who came to pray for your healing,” said the Imam softly.

“Thank you,” she said shyly, before turning once again and burying her face in the Imam’s shoulder. He held her tenderly for some minutes, seemingly oblivious to all that was going on around him, while Francisco began to wonder how the prelates and elders of his church could refer to these people as heathen infidels, damned and cursed of God, and furthermore how his government could look on them as ignorant subjects to be exploited for their own ends.

After one final kiss the girl took her leave. After some more minutes of trivialities the Imam turned once again and looked piercingly at Francisco.

“I suppose you know the Spanish army is but three days’ march away, and heading in this direction?”

“I know nothing of this,” said Francisco, looking anxiously at Abdul Aziz. “Since I arrived here my days have been spent in prayer and study. No news from the outside world has reached me.”

“Their victories in Casablanca and other cities have emboldened them, and I believe they intend to subjugate

our entire country—unless, of course, the French get here first.”

“Perhaps that is why they move so quickly,” said Abdul Aziz cautiously.

“So what do you advise us to do? You know your countrymen. How will they attack?”

“My knowledge of military matters is very slight. I would not dare to advise you in such things. All I can do is to pray that by some miracle God will stop them and spare you.”

“My contention is,” said Abdul Aziz, chewing on a chicken leg, “that they will first try to take Meknès, for it is a strategic city. Later they will turn their attention to smaller towns like ours. I think we should raise whatever army we can and go to the aid of our brothers. What say you of this, Señor Francisco?”

“Is it right?” asked the Imam. “Is it right in the sight of your God for a man to fight? If we submit, the foreigners will come and exploit us and use us. If we fight, we will stir up their wrath even more. They will come destroy our cities, rape our women, plunder our goods, and kill our children. So what is better, to comply or to resist?”

Francisco stared long and thoughtfully at a bowl of couscous on the table in front of him. Finally he answered, weighing each word as he spoke. “I don’t believe there is a way I can answer this question. I have not suffered what you have suffered, I have not passed through the valleys that you have passed through, and I cannot truly walk in your shoes for I have no idea what your people have suffered. This

question must be answered from your own conscience before God.”

“But come,” said the Imam, “what does your Holy Book teach of these things? Should a man fight to defend his home, his land, his wives, and his children? Tell me what would you do if you were in our place?”

Once again slowly, thoughtfully, Francisco replied, “I only know this, that there was a time when my Master instructed His disciples to take no sword with them, and another time He instructed them to carry their swords. So perhaps wisdom is to know the times and the seasons, for the Scriptures also say there is a time for peace and a time for war. As for myself, I have not come to advise you in your strategy, but I will pray for you. I believe that prayer is the most powerful weapon that a man can wield.”

The Imam nodded and grunted, but didn’t seem completely satisfied with Francisco’s answer.

Abdul Aziz, sensing Francisco’s discomfort, came to the rescue.

“So how many men from Jerada do you think we can rally?”

“Hmm, we shall see,” said the Imam vaguely.

Francisco realized once again that for all the hospitality accorded him on that particular evening, he was still a foreigner, and thus under suspicion by default. It was obvious that the Imam no longer wanted to discuss military details in front of him.

*It’s understandable*, he thought to himself, as he tore a piece of flat bread and dipped it in a bowl of *mutabbel*. I

*must learn to live with this suspicion, for it is unavoidable that these men will at first doubt my motives. God only knows what tests I must first pass in order for them to trust me.*

The Imam was suddenly withdrawn and quiet, retreating behind an impenetrable curtain of skeptical detachment. The miracle of his daughter’s healing had been acknowledged, but his complete trust would not be an easy conquest. By comparison, Abdul Aziz, for all his flamboyant bravado on their first meeting, had opened a door to the inner chambers of his life, and Francisco felt much more assured of his protection and continued friendship.

When dinner ended, Abdul Aziz beckoned to one of the servants. The servant left the room and returned a minute later carrying a musical instrument, which Francisco recognized as an *oud*. Its large round body, short neck, and angled head resembled the European lute with which Francisco was familiar.

Arranging the pillows and seating himself with his back to the wall, Abdul Aziz took the *oud* into his lap and began to tune the strings carefully. Another produced a bamboo flute known as a *qasba*, and began warming it up with some softly evocative trills and runs. Some of the other men brought drums, cymbals, and tambourines. The Imam turned to Francisco, a faint tremor of warmth returning to his bearing.

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\***mutabbel:** dish made from mashed eggplant

“You shall enjoy this. Abdul Aziz is quite a poet.”

Abdul Aziz began his song with long, low, sonorous notes. His eyes closed as the song transported him into a rapture of unconcealed emotion. The melody of the oud followed the trills and tremors of his rich voice, which ascended into the heights and then cascaded into depths of passion, which seemed to mingle despair, yearning, and hope. The percussionists listened silently, intently, hands poised above their instruments as the prelude to the song played itself out. Suddenly, with a lift of his head, Abdul Aziz launched into a rousing melody, and the *darbooka*, a local drum resembling the tabla, and the cymbals and tambourine exploded in a cacophony of rhythm. The chorus of male voices in the room joined in with the refrain.

The Imam clapped his hands and signaled to one of the servants as the song continued. “Bring the children,” he said.

Within a minute Abdul Aziz’s and the Imam’s children were filing into the far end of the room, gleefully placing themselves on the cushions and clapping along with the rhythm of the song. Francisco had been unaware up to this point that the women and children had been dining in a separate room. Some of the younger children rose to their feet and began dancing, the Imam’s daughter Rula among them. They swayed gracefully to the pulsing beat, their movements seemingly effortless, as if inborn. The others clapped and egged them on.

Francisco suddenly became conscious of Fatima’s eyes observing him once more. She had been caring for her younger brothers and sisters and was now watching the proceedings as she stood in a doorway at the back of the room.

The song didn’t end but moved to other refrains, which lasted a full fifteen minutes, after which the room broke into a spontaneous outburst of applause.

“And what of you?” said Abdul Aziz to Francisco after the tumult had died down. “Do you sing? Could you sing us one of the songs of Spain?”

Francisco hesitated. “I do sing, but I do not know how to play the *oud*. If I had a guitar I would be happy to give you one of the songs of my country.”

The Imam clapped his hands smartly and motioned to a servant, who returned two minutes later carrying a Spanish guitar.

“So you see,” said the Imam with a smile, “my people are not totally uncivilized.”

“I have never thought so,” said Francisco. “It is indeed to your people that we owe the guitar, for is it not true that it is a descendant of your Arabic *oud*?”

“Indeed, indeed,” said the Imam, seeming pleased with the reply.

The guitar’s strings were intact, although it had obviously not been used for a long time. It took a few moments for Francisco to pull the strings into harmony. Finally he was satisfied and began to strum.

“I will sing you,” he began, “an Andalusian love song. It is of a man longing for his dark-eyed, dark-haired beauty. Circumstances of tradition and family have placed them far apart, but he promises to her that she will always be in his heart even though on the earth he knew they could never be together.

“The black fire of your eyes, has melted the white stone of my heart...”

Francisco looked down at the floor and took a deep breath as his hands began to caress the strings, softly at first and then crescendoing into deep and passionate chords. His voice sounded sweet and mellow, over the guitar’s pulsating harmonies. Although few in the room understood the words, all were swayed by the emotion of the music and captivated by the passion of the singer.

*What sort of monk is this?* thought Abdul Aziz, surprised to sense such passion in one whom he had previously considered an ascetic.

When the soaring, searing melody came to a close there was an almost reverent hush in the room for a few seconds, before applause once more broke out. For one more long, delicious instant Francisco’s eyes met Fatima’s, before they both turned away and busied themselves; Francisco with the menfolk and Fatima with her juvenile charges.

“Well done, well done,” said Abdul Aziz, clapping loudly and then picking up his oud as if to match the passionate love song with one of his own.

Once again the room erupted into a lively symphony of rhythm and lusty singing from the men, and dancing and clapping from the children. Revelry continued in such a fashion for more than an hour, then finally Abdul Aziz stood up and graciously took his leave, Francisco following suit. The children were hustled out by veiled mothers and older sisters, and all prepared to depart.

“Thank you most kindly for your hospitality,” said Francisco to the Imam in his best Arabic.

“You are welcome one thousand times,” said the Imam with some warmth, although Francisco noticed that the Imam’s eyes did not meet his squarely.

As they passed out through the front door of the house, Abdul Aziz turned to Francisco and said, “You should learn some of the songs of our people. Perhaps Fatima can instruct you. She has a lovely voice.” He turned to his daughter who was following behind him. “Fatima, would you instruct our guest in some of the music of our people?”

“Yes, Father,” she replied, feigning as much of an air of dutiful submission as she could muster.

Francisco’s heart skipped a beat, and he wondered why Abdul Aziz would propose such a thing. Surely he would be playing with fire to have his daughter in such close proximity to a stranger, and a foreigner and enemy at that! Quickly he pushed the thoughts from his mind, still wondering at the ways of this mysterious people he had come so far to love.

## Chapter Four

Francisco wasn't sure if it was Rula's healing, the night of socializing at the Imam's house or his decision to wear the Arabic garments, but overnight he found himself much more closely accepted into Abdul Aziz's household.

The next morning as he rose, he decided once again to put aside his monk's robe and wear the Arabic garments. When the servants came to his door, instead of bringing him his customary breakfast they passed on the invitation from Abdul Aziz to join the family inside the house, for the first time. The room into which he was escorted was similar to the Imam's sitting room. Abdul Aziz sat contemplatively drinking his morning cup of thick black coffee. He invited Francisco to sit with him, nodding with approval at his choice of clothes.

Soon they were joined by Ali, Abdul Aziz's deputy, who immediately began to report on the military situation. Francisco, who was by now also partaking of the fragrant coffee, glanced nervously at Abdul Aziz, wondering if he should excuse himself. Ali seemed to sense the hesitation and stopped in mid-sentence.

"Continue, Ali. Francisco may be a Spaniard, but he is loyal to his vows to God, and he has earned my trust."

Ali continued his report. "A division of the Spanish army is moving down the valley toward Meknès. It seems you were right in your prediction."

"How many men?"

"The division looks about three thousand strong."

"How many men can Meknès raise to defend themselves?"

"Maybe one thousand, or one thousand five hundred."

"And how many from our city, Jerada, and the surrounding towns?"

Ali thought for a moment. "Perhaps five hundred fighting men. We are already outnumbered by their soldiers and they are better equipped than we are and far better trained. To meet them head on would be catastrophic."

"You are right," mused Abdul Aziz. "Our only weapon is surprise. We should set a fighting force of five hundred men before the city. They will think that's all we have and complacently invade the city. Then at the crucial moment we shall sweep down on them from the hills on either side, cutting them off from behind and surrounding them. It's our only chance."

Francisco was silently staring into his coffee and nibbling on a piece of flat bread. Abdul Aziz gazed at him thoughtfully for a moment.

"I know better than to ask your advice in such a matter, Señor Francisco, as you are a man of prayer and not a man of war. I ask you to beseech your God for us that we will not fall prey to this tyranny."

Francisco nodded gravely. "You can depend on me for that, *Ya Seeidi*," he said. "Please let me know if there is any way I can help you and your family. I am acquainted with the Arabic custom of three days of hospitality and then going to work for one's host."

“Three days!” Abdul Aziz was indignant. “What poor hospitality that would be? Our custom is forty days, no less.”

“Nevertheless, if you need my help, please ask me. I am skilled in farm work.”

Abdul Aziz chuckled. “Thank you, but now go and work with your God in prayer, for this is the weapon that we must surely avail ourselves of.

“Ali,” he continued, “I will ride today to Meknès and meet the sheik, that we may plan our defense of the city. You gather the fighting men and follow me there. Follow me shortly. Position the men in the hills to the southeast and come yourself into the city by night, lest the Spaniards see you.”

“Señor Francisco,” he said, turning slowly to the Spaniard, “until this time you have been my prisoner, but now you are my guest. Come and go as you please. My house is your house.”

Francisco thanked him profusely in Arabic, then sensing that it was time to take his leave, stood up, as did his host. Abdul Aziz looked at him with gravity and kindness.

“I trust that I shall see you again, if so be it that Allah will grant us victory in this battle.”

“May God bless you and protect you and keep you safe,” said Francisco holding Abdul’s hand firmly and looking into his eyes.

Abdul Aziz kissed him on both cheeks. Francisco noticed a trace of tears in his eyes.

“I will pray for you without ceasing,” said Francisco.

Suddenly the intangible bond that had been growing between the two men seemed palpable, as if they had been long and fast friends. With a final embrace Francisco took his leave and went back to his room, where he set about praying with all the diligence of a craftsman starting on a job, or an artist striving to create a masterpiece. Within half an hour he heard the clatter of hooves and knew that Abdul Aziz had departed.

Long and earnestly he beseeched God for the protection of his friend and the people of the land. When he felt he had exhausted his reserves of strength in prayer, he set about studying an Arabic grammar book, which he had requested from Abdul Aziz to perfect his knowledge of the language.

Thus his day was spent until the afternoon. At three in the afternoon Abdul Aziz’s eldest son Sami came to the door of Francisco’s room. He was about sixteen, thin but muscular in build. He scrutinized Francisco closely for a few moments before speaking.

“My sister is ready for the music lesson,” he said.

Francisco closed the journal he was writing in, and arose from the table a bit more quickly than he had intended. Sami led him into the house, to a sitting room where Fatima was waiting, with another younger brother and a female cousin.

Francisco was secretly glad for the additional company, for he knew that to be left alone with this beauty might be too great a temptation for his Spanish heart. Sami handed Francisco



an oud. Fatima set her oud in her lap and began to explain the fine points of the instrument to him.

Francisco was musical and a quick learner, and soon was able to pluck out a tune with the long, feather-like quill that was used as a plectrum\*. He kept his eyes glued studiously to his instrument, fearing that an exchange of glances with Fatima would either pierce too deeply into his tender heart or alert the ever-watchful brothers to the stirrings of an unacceptable relationship.

The principles of the oud now explained, Fatima proceeded to teach Francisco a folkloric song, an exercise which proved much more difficult, the intricacies of the Arabic tongue in song being particularly hard to master. Fatima could not suppress some giggles at his clumsy attempts to pronounce syllables not found in any other languages. Francisco, however, steadfastly avoided her eyes, looking instead at Sami and the other brothers for help. Many years in the monastery had given him considerable practice at suppressing passion, a skill which he employed to the full extent of his ability in the tantalizingly volatile circumstances in which he now found himself.

After an hour and a half, the lesson was ended. Francisco stood up and thanked Fatima and her brothers for their time and returned to his room. The rest of the afternoon and evening were spent in prayer, further study

and writing his journal. Such activities were not burdensome or sacrificial to Francisco. He enjoyed the spiritual voyages he made in communion with his Savior and best Friend, where he could escape from the problems and desires that vexed him and find solace.

At ten that night he extinguished his lantern and went to bed. He was awoken at midnight by the sound of the door of his room creaking. Quickly he started and turned over, preparing to defend himself against any unwanted intruder. His eyes widened in amazement as he made out a feminine figure, faintly silhouetted in the moonlight.

"Fatima!" he gasped. "What are you doing here?"

"Shhh, Francisco," she said, quietly entering the room and closing the door behind her.

"I am dreaming," said Francisco. "My willful heart has escaped my control in the night seasons." He swung his legs over the side of the bed, scrambled for a moment on the desk to find a flint, and lit the lantern. There stood Fatima, no nocturnal fantasy. For a long moment their eyes met.

If a war could be fought without firing a shot, if a concert could be performed without playing a note, if love could be made without a single kiss or caress, that is what transpired between them as they gazed, mesmerized in each other's eyes. Finally Francisco tore his gaze away.

"Fatima, you should not be here. You must go."

Softly she pulled off the veil which covered her head and shoulders and

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\***plectrum:** device for plucking guitar strings

let it slip down to the floor. Francisco's eyes inadvertently returned to the stunning apparition before him. She was clad in a filmy white nightgown and her black hair cascaded down over her shoulders. Her curved lips smiled expectantly. Francisco drew a deep breath, but Fatima spoke first.

"Since I was thirteen no man, except my father and brothers, has ever seen me with my head uncovered."

"You should not have come."

"I had to come. That song you sang last night, 'The black fire of your eyes melts the white stone of my heart.' I saw you looking at me when you sang. I knew what you were thinking."

"I ... I was not," he stammered.

Fatima laughed softly. "Do you think because of this," she gestured towards the discarded veil, "that I do not know what a man wants, and how to satisfy him?" She took a few seductive steps towards him.

Francisco backed gently away.

"No, Fatima," he said gently but firmly, "we cannot do this. God only knows how I long to hold you and kiss you, but there is something more important. I am here on a mission, a mission of love for my Master. It is most important that I win your father's trust. If we do this he will never trust me again. My mission will be ended if it is ever found out, and you..." He stopped mid-sentence.

Fatima looked down at the floor for a moment. No more needed to be said. Both knew the consequences of a woman having inappropriate relations outside marriage. The brothers would

feel obliged to cleanse the honor of the family by executing the girl. Francisco's life would also be in jeopardy.

Fatima looked up at him, tears forming in the deep pools of her imploring eyes.

"Francisco, I love you. Take me away from here, to your country. I will dwell with you. I will believe as you do. I will be your wife. We can have beautiful children together and I will dedicate them to the service of your God."

Francisco's heart pounded. "Oh Fatima, do not tempt me more than I am able to bear! I have been sent on this mission by my Master, and I cannot depart from it. Please understand."

Fatima's eyes dropped again to the floor. "Then I was wrong. You did not want me, and you do not love me."

"No, you were right. You read the fire of passion in my eyes as I sang that song. You are beautiful to look upon and you are beautiful also in heart. I love you too, but there is One Who I love more."

"The one you loved and could not marry?" Fatima's eyes were wide with curiosity. Obviously Abdul Aziz had related the story to his family.

"No. I have long since expelled her memory from my heart. Now I speak of Jesus, Who I serve and Who saved me. To be true to His love and faithful to His calling I would gladly give up anything in this world ... even someone as beautiful and as precious as yourself."

"But surely the God that you love and serve will not deny you the desires of your heart."

“That may be true, but I know that now is neither the time nor the place.” There was a sudden urgency in his voice. “Go, Fatima! Go quickly before you are discovered.”

After one last long, passionate look into his eyes, she stooped and picked up the veil and pulled it once more around her hair and shoulders. As she turned towards the door Francisco spoke once more.

“Fatima...”

Her hand was already resting on the doorknob, but as if exerting a great effort she turned once more and looked at him. Tears were streaming down her cheeks.

“Would you help me on my mission?”

Summoning every reserve of inner strength she nodded slowly.

“I must leave tomorrow to Meknès. I feel God is calling me to go and help your father, but no one must know.”

Fatima involuntarily wiped her cheek and eyes on the sleeve of her gown and nodded once more.

“Can you get me a horse?”

She thought for a moment then nodded again.

“I want to leave at midnight tomorrow. Can you arrange to bring the horse here?”

Again a silent nod.

“I will need clothes, clothes like those your father wears when he rides.”

Again a nod of assent.

“No man must find out that I have left. I will tell the servant that

from tomorrow for three days I will fast and pray for the success of the battle and that I don't want food and don't want to be disturbed. I will tell them to place a jug of water by the door. Can you come when no one is around and empty the water somewhere, so they think I have taken it?”

Fatima nodded slowly. “I will do this for you and for your God and for my people.”

One last searching, searing gaze passed between them. Then Fatima pulled the veil tighter around her flowing hair and turned to leave. In the dimly lit room, neither of them saw the gold earring fall from her left ear and roll under a stool in the corner of the room.

As the door closed behind her, Francisco let out a long, deep sigh. Every part of his body seemed to cry out and crave to touch, to hold, to caress the entrancing vision that had just disappeared from his sight. For a moment he was tempted to run to the door, fling it open and call her to come back into his arms.

“No,” he groaned. “I must not.”

He threw himself headlong on his roughly hewn bunk and pulled a threadbare blanket around him.

“Oh, my Lord Jesus, only for You would I give up such a thing.” His large manly frame broke into convulsive sobs, which only subsided many minutes later when he lapsed into a restless sleep.

The following day Francisco told Abdul Aziz's servants that he would

fast and pray for the next three days for God to intervene and assist the people of Meknès in their battle against the invading forces.

“Only bring me a pitcher of water every evening,” he said, “and leave it outside the door of my room.”

At midnight a soft knock came at his door. He opened it a crack, confirming that it was Fatima. Without a word she handed him a neatly folded pile of garments. He closed the door and quickly dressed himself. He slung a traveling bag over his shoulder, opened the door again and followed Fatima out into the night.

She led him down a path, away from the house, toward an orchard. She carried no lantern, but the moon was full and the two easily found their way through the fig trees and grapevines. At the end of the orchard was a fence, and as they approached it Francisco heard a soft whinny. He could make out the shape of a horse tied to a tree near the fence, silhouetted against the moonlight-bathed fields beyond. Fatima led him towards the tree, purposefully undid the reins of the horse that were tied around it and handed them to Francisco.

Their eyes met, and as she passed him the reins their hands touched. She looked searchingly into Francisco’s eyes.

“May Allah go with you,” she said softly.

Francisco saw a tear trickling down her cheek and instinctively reached up with his hand to dry it. She clasped his hand and placed it to her lips. Francisco could resist no longer. In an instant the two were locked in a passionate kiss. For a long, ecstatic minute their lips and tongues caressed each other until firmly but gently Francisco pulled away.

“We must be strong, Fatima,” he whispered. “Pray for me, that if it is God’s will we shall meet again.”

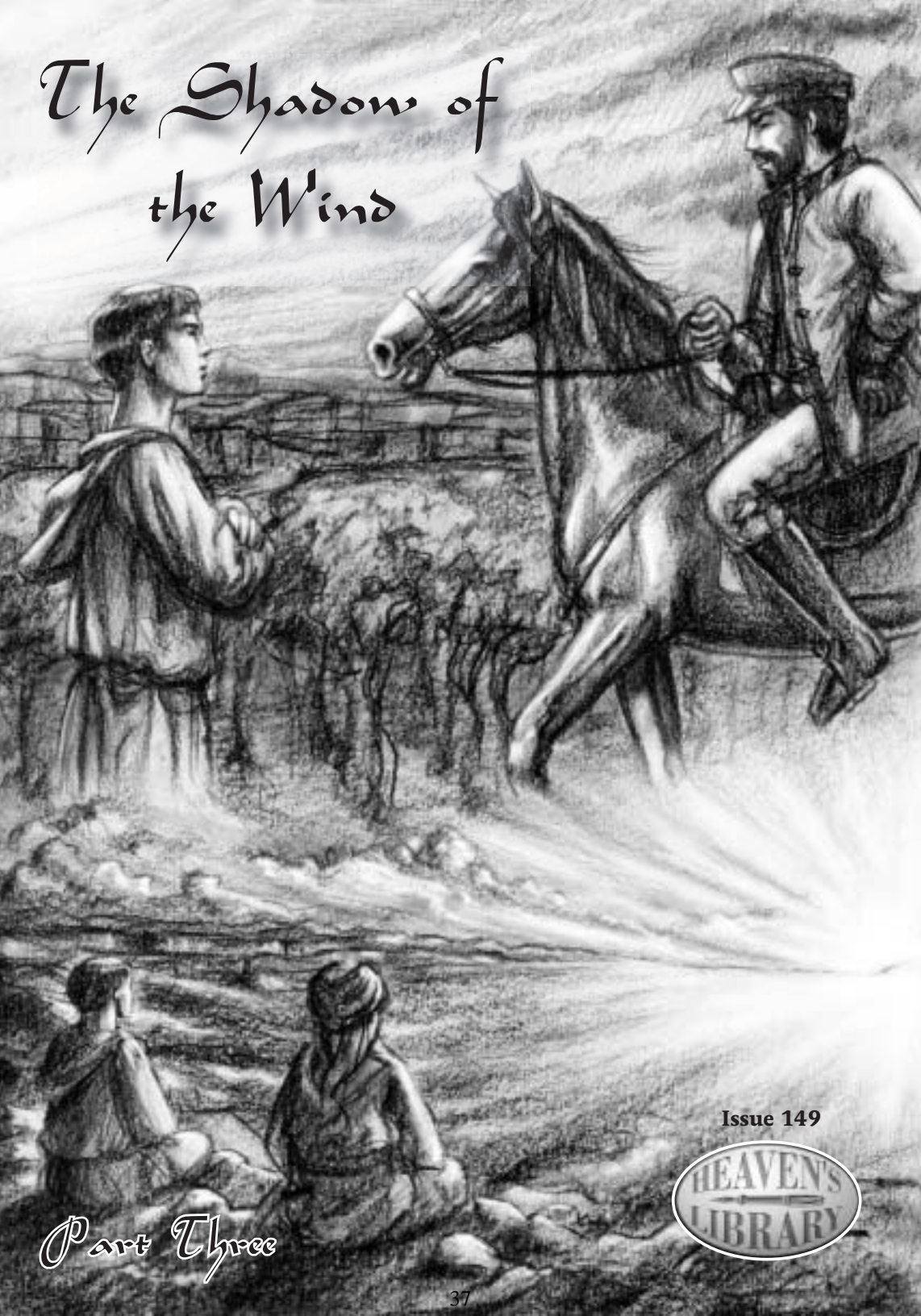
She sobbed and nodded her head in assent. Tearing himself away with all his strength, Francisco mounted the white stallion.

Fatima looked up at him longingly. In his white garments and headdress, astride the magnificent steed, he looked every inch an Arab warrior. She pulled her veil tighter around her face and managed a wave of her hand.

Pulling in the reins, Francisco pressed his hands to his lips in a final farewell, and spurred the horse off into the night. As the moonlit road rose up to meet the horse’s galloping hoofs, the memory of the touch of Fatima’s hair on his face, the fragrance of her perfume, and the softness of her lips enveloped him like an intoxicating shroud.

*To be continued*

# The Shadow of the Wind



Issue 149



Part Three

## *The story so far*

Francisco's faith and prayers are put to the test when the Imam's daughter falls deathly ill, and he is called to pray over her. Miraculously, the little girl is raised to full health, and the Imam, beginning to look more kindly on Francisco, invites him, Abdul, and Abdul's family for a celebration in his house. It is there that Francisco's interest in Abdul's beautiful daughter, Fatima, increases.

Abdul must leave for Meknés to rally troops for the impending attack of the Spanish army. Meanwhile, Francisco remains in Jerada praying for Abdul, when an urge in his heart tells him to leave Jerada and head for Meknés.

## *Chapter Five*

For days Abdul Aziz had been watching the long column of Spanish soldiers moving up the valley towards Meknés. His vantage point was a range of hills that ran southeast to northwest. He and a small group of fighters had been moving stealthily through the trees and bushes on the hills observing the unsuspecting Spaniards as they approached the city. Upon his arrival in Meknés three days earlier, a hastily called council of war had decided to implement Abdul Aziz's plan. A small force would be deployed in front of the city to bear the brunt of the initial attack, and then fall back. At the moment when the Spanish victory would appear imminent, Abdul Aziz and his men would sweep down from the hills and attack their left flank while another party led by the sheik of Meknés would come at them from the hills on the other side.

That morning Abdul Aziz had met up with his deputy, who had informed him that all his forces were at the ready, concealed from the Spanish by a hill. The Spanish battalion was in sight of the city and closing in, and the attack was expected to begin within hours. From a grove of trees at the top of the hill, Abdul Aziz was intently observing the movement of the Spanish with the aid of one of his prized possessions, a telescope captured from a Spanish officer in a battle near Casablanca. His observations were momentarily interrupted by the arrival of the Imam, who had followed him from Jerada in order to aid in councils of war and pray for the resistance forces. One of his deputies had brought him up into the hills from the city.

Customary greetings were waived in deference to the danger of attracting attention. In a few words Abdul Aziz informed the Imam of the situation. A

**Cover art by Sabine**

*For ages 9–11. May be read to younger children at their parents' or teachers' discretion.*

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little reluctantly, he passed the elder man his telescope to allow him a closer look at the infidel forces. The Imam trained the telescope back and forth along the road that led to the city as Abdul Aziz continued to watch the enemy massing for battle, estimating their numbers and sizing up any weaknesses that could be exploited.

Suddenly, the Imam pulled Abdul Aziz's sleeve and pointed to a spot across the valley close to Spanish front lines.

"What is going on down there?" he muttered, passing Abdul Aziz the telescope.

A figure had emerged from the orchards which lined the foothills opposite them and was crossing a field towards the road along which the spearhead of the column of Spanish troops was advancing, the remaining forces fanned out behind them. Quickly Abdul Aziz focused his telescope on the figure. It was the unmistakable brown robe.

"By Allah," he said, "it is the Spaniard, Francisco."

"The infidel!" snapped the Imam. "This proves my suspicions. He knows of our battle plans and is going to inform the army of them."

Abdul Aziz shook his head in disbelief. "Surely it could not be so."

"We were fools to ever trust him and let him into our company," retorted the Imam in an angry whisper. "To think that I entertained a spy and a traitor in my own house!"

"Wait," breathed Abdul Aziz. "Watch what is happening."

By now Francisco had reached the road and turned to face the army. The colonel who was leading the oncoming column of troops reined in his horse and

raised his hand to call a halt as he took in the strange sight before him. Francisco stood barefoot on the road, the hood of his long brown habit flung back, and his arms folded defiantly across his chest. His unflinching gaze was fixed on the colonel, who returned it with steely malevolence.

The colonel nodded to the aide at his right who raised his rifle and pointed it at Francisco's chest.

"Get out of the way," snapped the colonel, "or we shall be forced to get you out of the way."

Francisco stood silent, impassive. The aide cocked his rifle ready to shoot. Some invisible force seemed to check the colonel.

"Hold your fire!" he barked at the aide. For a few moments he glowered at Francisco. "Who are you and what do you want?" he snarled.

"My name is Francisco," came the quiet but unperturbed reply. "I am but a humble monk whom our dear Lord has called to serve in these parts. I come to you in the name of God and in the name of my humble master, Saint Francis. I beg you to have mercy on this city and spare it. There are only a few hundred fighting men between you and its capture. Why should you cause more anguish, create more widows and fatherless children, and cause untold death and destruction as you have done in other cities? These people have done nothing to you."

"These are cursed heathen!" snapped the colonel. "You as a man of God ought to know that. They deserve to be subjugated. My commission is to carry out the orders of the king and not to listen to fanatical dreamers like you. Nevertheless, since

you are a monk of the holy Franciscan order, I will not shoot you. I will have you sent back to Spain and tried as a heretic and a traitor.” Turning to his men he snapped, “Seize him!”

Two soldiers quickly spurred their horses forward, dismounted and grabbed Francisco on either arm. He did not resist but boldly shouted at the commander: “You ought to obey God rather than men. You should obey the commandments of love from your God, rather than the orders of hate and war from the king. Let these poor people live in peace. If you don’t listen to my words, what you have meted to others will come back upon your own head. This very day you shall know it...”

“Silence!” roared the colonel. “Take him and chain him!” he shouted to the soldiers. “We will deal with him after we have taken the city.”

The two soldiers quickly removed Francisco from the road and began escorting him to the back of the column.

“Such insolence,” said the colonel roughly to his aide. “To delay the advance of my entire battalion with such treacherous fallacies. Prepare to take the city!”

“We shall take up an observation position on that hill,” said the colonel to his aide, pointing towards a knoll on the right of the road ahead. “Command the men to await my signal to attack.”

Abdul Aziz had been watching the entire exchange through his telescope. He passed it to the Imam who took a long critical look at the scene before exclaiming triumphantly.

“See how the infidel goes over to the enemy! His loyalty is only to his own

people. We were foolish to ever trust him.”

Abdul Aziz did not reply but slowly shook his head. “Now we must prepare, for I see the army begin to take up its positions,” he said quietly.

“We must change our plans,” urged the Imam, “for surely the infidel has informed against us.”

Abdul Aziz wrinkled his brow as he pondered the Imam’s statement.

“There is not time to change our strategy. Victory or defeat is in the hands of Allah. Let us prepare for battle.”

Abdul Aziz had assembled his men at a place where a long gully ran down into the valley. They thus would be sheltered by trees for as long as possible, before emerging into the flank of the army. The knoll on which the commander had taken up his position was just to the right of the emerging gully, between it and the city.

Abdul Aziz watched as the cavalry fanned out in the fields on either side of the road ready for the attack. He could already see lines of the fighting men of the city preparing to meet the onslaught. A palpable air of fear and tension hung over the valley as those on both sides prepared themselves for the imminent clash. The Spanish had six cannons, transported on horse-drawn carts, which were now arrayed facing the city.

The commander raised his right arm and fired a pistol into the air twice. At the signal the cannons immediately roared into life, and cannon balls began smashing into the city wall and the front line of the Moroccan cavalry, while other cannons fell harmlessly into the fields.

Some of the defending army’s horses reeled in confusion, prancing and



snorting. A few of the soldiers already lay dead or injured beside their slain horses. Before a second round of cannon balls could be fired, however, the Moroccans advanced, rifles raised, swords glinting in the morning sunlight. Abdul Aziz watched in awe as the two- or three-hundred-strong band plunged headlong towards the oncoming force of several thousand.

The commander raised his pistol again and fired three times and the Spanish cavalry charged toward the oncoming Moroccans. The crack of rifle fire rang out across the valley as the two lines approached each other, then clashed in full fury. The Moroccans fought like whirling dervishes\*, but the superiority and sheer force of numbers of the Spanish and their more advanced weaponry began to wear down the Arabs. Although the Spanish sustained heavier losses than the Moroccans in the initial clash, they soon began to advance toward the city while the surviving Moroccans turned to retreat before them.

Abdul Aziz had been waiting for this moment. With a silent signal to his men they began to move almost noiselessly down the gully towards the unsuspecting army. As they reached the last line of trees, Abdul Aziz spurred his horse forward with his sword raised high. Suddenly the several hundred strong band of horsemen charged out into the valley and towards the flank of the advancing army. Abdul Aziz and the party of other horsemen's first objective was the knoll to their right where the commander was watching his army's advance through

binoculars. The Spanish commander's elation at victory turned to horror as the crack of rifle fire and sound of approaching horses behind him alerted him to danger.

For a second he gazed, transfixed in horror at the swiftly approaching hordes of horse-borne, white-clad executors of the vengeance of God, before a bullet entered his heart and the binoculars fell from his lifeless hand onto the turf beside him. Within minutes the command post was overrun by Abdul Aziz's men. Meanwhile, the other Moroccans were sweeping into the flank of the Spanish from the other side. The invaders were suddenly plunged into disarray. Some of Abdul Aziz's men managed to reach the cannons and turned them around to face the bulk of the army that still lay behind. While this was happening, more fighters emerged from the city into the confused front ranks of the Spanish. Caught thus in a three-way crossfire, the enemy vanguard was powerless to withstand, whilst the bulk of the army behind them, like a beheaded behemoth\*, began to torturously inch its way back up the valley with the Moroccans in pursuit.

Finally the Spanish were able to regroup enough to withstand the onslaught of the Arabian horsemen and maintain their position, but the rout\* was complete. At the knoll that had served as the Spanish command post, Abdul Aziz picked up the binoculars that had fallen from the commander's hand. Placing them to his eyes, he looked long and searchingly at the retreating column of

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\***whirling dervish:** someone working very quickly; frenzied

\***behemoth:** something huge  
\***rout:** humiliating and crushing defeat

the Spanish battalions. He saw what he had been looking for, an unmistakable brown-clad figure, bound with chains, being dragged along between two horsemen.

“See that the prisoners are treated mercifully,” he muttered to his deputy.

“Come with me,” he said to four other fighters as he mounted his horse and rode off back towards the hills.

## Chapter Six

After his capture, Francisco had been taken to the rear of the oncoming army and chained. When it had become apparent that the Spanish had suffered a dramatic and unexpected setback, the army had retreated up the valley, fortified its position against further attack, and set up camp for the night. The atmosphere was tense. The commander and his deputy had been killed in the battle, and the command now fell into the hands of a young major.

Francisco had been dragged for several miles between two soldiers on horseback, and had waited all day in the sun without food or water. At evening, after the camp was set up, the major came and stood imperiously\* before Francisco, who was still bound hand and foot and now confined in a tent with two armed soldiers inside and an armed guard outside.

“What is this curse you have brought upon us this day?” he growled. “You are no monk of the church, but a heretic and a witch. It has been reported that you cursed the commander and the army

before the battle. Now look what evil you have brought upon us.”

Francisco stared silently at the dirt-strewn floor beneath him.

“I would kill you now, heretic,” the commander went on, “but that is too good a fate for you. First you must be taken to Casablanca and excommunicated from the church and then you must die, that your soul may burn in Hell.”

Francisco raised his eyes and looked him squarely in the face. “I have done nothing today but speak the words I was instructed to speak by God.”

“Strike the heretic,” ordered the commander, and a soldier at his left struck a fearsome blow with his rifle butt against Francisco’s cheek. “Tomorrow at dawn we shall dispatch you to Casablanca and be rid of your presence as we continue to destroy these heathen, under whose evil powers you have fallen.” With that he turned and after prosaic\* commands to the guards to watch Francisco well, he departed from the tent.

Despite the miserably uncomfortable night, Francisco’s spirit remained buoyant. He was filled with a strange peace that he had discharged his responsibilities well and that somehow deliverance would come. The fact that the battle had gone against the Spanish was undoubtedly some type of a miracle, and he prayed that somehow Abdul Aziz would recognize the Divine intervention. As the commander had ordered, the next day at dawn a four-man company of soldiers set out with Francisco on the long road back to Casablanca. To make better time, Francisco was given a horse, but had his hands chained together and his

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\**imperiously*: arrogantly

\**prosaic*: straightforward

legs chained under the belly of the horse to prevent his escape. Two soldiers rode on either side of him, one took the lead and the other the rear. The soldiers were tense and expectant, as they knew that even though the army had conquered the territory thus far, there was still ample opportunity for attack from bands of local rebels.

Even Francisco questioned the wisdom of the major's decision, feeling that a more seasoned commander would never have exposed his men to such danger in this small a company. Nevertheless, he suspected that the hand of God was present even in the young officer's over-zealousness. Despite the painful manacles on his hands and ankles, Francisco could not resist admiring the beauty of the majestic mountain range that towered over them on their left, and he worshipped the immortal power Who had created it.

The long day wore on uneventfully, and at nightfall the company of soldiers pitched camp by a stream that ran into the valley from the mountains on their left. The atmosphere became more jovial and relaxed as the soldiers partook of some meager rations and one produced a flagon of wine. Francisco sat meditatively quiet, praying for the souls of these uncouth soldiers who cursed and swore incessantly. They entertained themselves with tales and boasts of ruthless conquest and plunder, which made Francisco boil inwardly. At length their conversation turned to a torrent of ugly slurs and verbal abuse directed at him. Francisco bore their taunts in silence, only interceding more fervently in silent prayer for their salvation. Branded a heretic and traitor as

he was, aside from praying for them, Francisco was uncertain that he could affect much in the conversion of their souls that evening.

Finally the men put out their campfire. Francisco's chains were fixed to a stake in the ground inside the tent. One soldier slept on either side of him, whilst the two remaining stood guard outside. The first two guards were soon snoring loudly, while Francisco remained awake, alternating between prayer and wondering what would become of him.

At what could have been one or two o'clock in the morning, there was a muffled cry outside the tent and a loud thud. The flap of the tent was flung open. Francisco rose to his elbows with a start. Four swift, wraithlike\* presences entered the tent and immediately set upon the guards on either side, who awoke to find themselves with daggers against their throats.

"Undo the chains of the infidel," came Abdul Aziz's unmistakable voice. "We will deal with him after the fashion of our own justice, for he has betrayed our trust."

A shiver of fear ran down Francisco's spine. The Inquisition, excommunication, even execution were fates that he knew, however unpleasant. But what would he be subjected to at the hands of vengeful Moroccans?

Speedily the men disarmed the Spaniards and collected all their weapons. With trembling hands one of the soldiers fished the keys out of his pocket and clumsily undid the shackles on Francisco's hands and wrists by the few beams of moonlight

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\**wraithlike*: ghostlike

that managed to filter their way into the tent. Francisco was roughly pushed out of the tent and the Spanish soldiers followed. They looked down in consternation at the dark forms of their two comrades lying motionless on the moonlit ground.

Abdul Aziz pointed his dagger menacingly at the two soldiers.

“Have mercy on them,” said Francisco quietly. “They are only obeying their orders, and they do not know what they are doing.”

Reluctantly Abdul Aziz sheathed his dagger.

“Chain them to the tree,” he said, pointing to a nearby willow whose branches dipped into a rippling brook.

Quickly Abdul Aziz’s men seized the hapless Spaniards and using Francisco’s chains bound them with their hands behind their back and the chains around the trunk of the tree.

“It is by the mercies of Allah that you do not die tonight,” hissed Abdul Aziz through bared teeth. “And now, infidel,” he said menacingly to Francisco, “we will give you a taste of Allah’s justice.”

So saying, he signaled to the men who had been collecting all the Spaniards’ weapons and corralling their horses. Two of them seized Francisco and with their rifles pointed at his head, ordered him to mount one of the horses. The other dark figures all followed suit, some pulling the remaining horses by their bridles. As a parting gesture, Abdul Aziz threw the keys to the manacles into the stream and the company of horsemen rode off into the night.

The ghostly figures of the horsemen rode for what Francisco judged to be well over two hours through the moonlit and

scrub-brush-studded landscape. They ascended into hilly country. Looking behind him Francisco could vaguely make out the valley that they had traversed spreading like a dark quilt into the distance. Eventually Abdul Aziz raised his hand to signal a halt near a grove of pine trees. He spoke some words in Arabic to his men, which Francisco understood as instructions to set up camp for the night.

Gruffly he ordered Francisco to dismount from his horse. As he did so Abdul Aziz himself dismounted and unsheathed his sword, which glinted threateningly in the moonlight. Francisco’s heart beat furiously, but he stood firm with his hands by his sides staring at the dark figure before him.

After a long silence, Abdul Aziz spoke in low tones. “So, infidel, do you not fall on your knees and beg me for mercy? After all I did for you, you betrayed my trust, and now you refuse to humble yourself before the wrath of Allah and plead for your life?”

Francisco could not speak. Something seemed utterly wrong with this scenario. He had known that he was risking his life to fulfill this mission and had fully prepared his heart for peril at the hands his own countrymen. But something about the circumstances seemed oddly strange. For a reason he could not fathom he was not prepared to die at the hands of those he had been sent to love.

Suddenly Abdul Aziz leaned back, let out a hearty laugh and plunged his sword deep into the ground beside him. Manfully he walked up to Francisco, placed his hands on his shoulders and planted a hearty kiss on each cheek.

“You are a true brother,” he said with undisguised admiration. “You bow before none but God and trust in His mercy alone.”

Francisco, more confused than ever, was still unable to speak, but let out a little gasp. Abdul Aziz placed a hearty arm around his shoulder and led him towards some of his men who were starting to light a fire.

“Come,” he said to them in Arabic, “let us celebrate. For our brother is safe, and rescued from the clutches of the infidel.”

“So how does it feel, my brother,” he said, after they had seated themselves by the infant fire, “to have looked death in the eye twice in one day, once condemned as a heretic by the Spaniards and once as a spy by the Moroccans?”

“It feels good,” managed Francisco, “to be alive.”

Abdul Aziz let out another loud guffaw, obviously delighted with his Spanish friend’s mixture of boldness and humility. Soon the fire was blazing, the coffee was boiling, and thick slices of flat round bread had been produced.

“Fear not for your comrades,” said Abdul Aziz, as he chewed on a slice of bread. “They are not dead, only unconscious. I knew you would not approve of us killing even your captors. They will awake in the morning, pull the key out of the stream, unlock each other and wander disconsolately back to their army, with the report that the heretic Francisco has met the wrath of Allah at the hands of the vicious sword of Islam and will be heard of no more.”

Francisco started, “But how did you know that I would be tried as a heretic?”

“Ah,” said Abdul Aziz, “the bushes of scrub are my eyes and the blades of grass are my ears.”

“And you followed us all the way?”

“Yes, along the ridges, amongst the trees, where your captors could not see us.”

Francisco let out a long sigh. “Forgive me,” he said. “I have caused you to risk your life to come and save me. All through the lust of my desire to feel as if I was accomplishing something for my God.”

Abdul Aziz’s mood suddenly changed to one of solemn gravity.

“My brother, you must not speak thus. I know”—he gestured at the men around him—“and all my men know that the victory we won today was not achieved through our own power. It was through the unmistakable hand of God. I don’t know how or why your prayers prevailed, but what was wrought today was not through human power. Tell us how you did this thing. What possessed you to walk out alone in front of an entire army?”

Francisco drew his breath as if contemplating a deep secret.

“When I was on my knees in Jerada, in your home, I felt the fire burning in my soul again. It was the same fire that brought me to these lands. Again and again I chastised myself and tried to submit myself to prayer and only prayer, but the fire could not be extinguished. With the fire there came a voice, a voice that told me that I must go up and stand before the armies of Spain, and that I must give them a message. The message was that they should turn back, they should not draw their swords against the innocent, and they

## Chapter Seven

should not persecute those who had no power, or unleash their bullets into the hearts of those who fought only to protect their lands and their loved ones. The Lord spoke through the fire and the voice in my heart, that if I would do this thing, He would deliver me.—I knew not how. He also told me that if they would not listen, then defeat and shame would come to them. It was done as God told me. That is why,” Francisco began laughing, “I could not understand when you stood before me and drew out your sword as if to cut off my head, for this was not the deliverance that I was expecting, although a martyr’s death is in its own way a glorious release.”

“You must teach us more,” said Abdul Aziz. “You must come and teach us how to hear the voice of God like this and how to avail ourselves of this power, for surely, although today’s battle was won, the Spaniards will come against us with more force than ever, and we shall be unable to withstand. But now that the Spaniards think you are dead at my hand, you are safe. You shall come and live amongst us and dwell with me as one of my sons.”

Anticipation fluttered through Francisco’s heart. One of his sons? A vision of Fatima’s dark, seductive eyes flashed before him in an instant. Was it too much to hope for?

“But now let us sleep.” Abdul Aziz stifled a yawn. “Tomorrow we must travel far. One battle has been won, but the war is not over.”

The fire was extinguished. A rough assortment of blankets was produced from saddlebags, and the men settled themselves as comfortably as possible on the ground for the night.

The blue-gray wash of dawn that began to paint the sky revealed that the grove of pine trees was situated not far from the summit of a hill. Francisco awoke, rubbed his eyes and rose, quietly, setting off towards the hilltop. After ten minutes of vigorous climbing he reached the top. A breath of wonderment escaped from him as he eyed the scene before him. To the northeast, majestic snowcapped mountains faded into the haze of dawn. To the southwest stretched the vast interminable plain, which eventually dissolved into the expanse of the Sahara Desert. To the east a faint swirl of orange in the sky heralded the coming sun.

Francisco sat himself down on a rock, lost in a silent symphony of praise to the Artist of the haunting masterpiece before him. After a period of time during which fleeting minutes seemed to dissolve into eternity—in fact, all measures of time seemed to disappear into irrelevancy—Francisco was startled by a whisper behind him.

*“As-salamu Aleykum.”*

He turned to see Abdul Aziz standing quietly about fifteen feet behind him.

*“Wa Aleykum is-salam,”* he replied.

“I do not wish to disturb you,” said Abdul Aziz with an uncustomary reverence in his voice, “but I thought I might ask if I could join you in your prayers.”

“You are more welcome than you could possibly know,” said Francisco.

Quietly Abdul Aziz came forward and seated himself on a rock next to Francisco.

“Let us each pray a prayer to our God,” said Abdul Aziz quietly.

Francisco nodded.

“You begin, my brother,” continued Abdul Aziz once again with a gentility that Francisco had not previously noted.

Reverently Francisco prayed the “Our Father.” After a short silence Abdul Aziz began to intone a prayer. Immediately Francisco recognized it as the *shahada*, the Muslim witness of faith.

“God is great, God is great. I witness that there is no God but God and that Mohammed is the prophet of God.”

After he was finished there was another long silence.

“Quote me something from your Holy Book,” said Abdul Aziz at length.

“There is one God,” began Francisco, “and there is none other but He.”

“But this is from the Koran,” stated Abdul Aziz.

“No,” said Francisco, “from the Bible. Mark chapter twelve, verse thirty-two. There is one God and there is none other but He, and to love him with all the heart, with all the understanding, with all the soul, with all the strength, and to love his neighbor as himself, is worth more than all offerings and sacrifices.”

“Spoken like a true Muslim,” said Abdul Aziz, without even a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

A slim crescent of sun on the horizon began to pierce the morning haze. Myriad rays of red and orange scattered across the landscape, illuminating the shadowy trees, boulders, and clumps of scrub, bringing into focus distant mountain peaks.

“With such majesty and glory before us,” said Francisco, “it suddenly seems to

me that the differences in our philosophy and theology are like tiny shadows driven away by the rising sun. Abdul Aziz”—he turned to his friend and spoke with gravity and sincerity—“if I accept Mohammed as a true prophet of God, which I truly believe he was, will you accept Jesus Christ as your Savior and Redeemer, and embrace His Holy Spirit as your comforter and guide?”

A shadow seemed to fall across Abdul Aziz’s face, as he struggled to comprehend the gravity of the question. “My friend,” he said, “I will think about it. I will think about it.”

By now the full orb of the sun had risen into the sky, and the men could hear faint stirrings from the camp below them.

“Come,” said Abdul Aziz. “We must prepare to travel before the heat of the day is upon us. Today we shall return to Jerada. The Spanish have fallen back and will most likely need time to regroup before attacking Meknés again. We must be sure that our own city is safe. But I must warn you,” he continued as they wended their way down the hillside towards the stirring camp, “the Imam is still not convinced of your sincerity. He thought that you were betraying us and revealing our secrets when you stood before the army. There is still much to be done to win his favor. If it is the will of God, this shall be accomplished in time, but you must be careful. But now you are my guest and no longer my prisoner, nay you are no longer my guest but my brother, my son. Speaking of which,” he paused, giving Francisco a quizzical sideways look, “how on earth did you come so quickly to Meknés? Surely

you couldn't have made it there on that aged donkey of yours."

Francisco went a little red and coughed.

Undeterred, Abdul Aziz continued. "Of course! The horse! One of my men found one of my horses wandering in the forest after the battle. So did one of my sons help you with this? Was it Sami? Abdul Khader?"

"One of your children," said Francisco a little uncertainly.

Abdul Aziz eyed him narrowly. "Fatima? Fatima provided you with a horse?"

"Yes," said Francisco.

"That girl," he said shaking his head. "I suspected you had an eye for her."

Francisco remained silent, uncertain of how to respond.

By this time the two men had reached the camp. Once more Abdul Aziz eyed Francisco. "We shall talk more of this," he said.

Francisco heaved a silent sigh of relief mixed with trepidation as he mounted his horse. The protective wrath of Arab fathers was well known, perhaps equaled only by their Spanish counterparts. Within minutes the party was on the move, ascending paths that led over the top of the hills and clung to the range on the southern side so as to avoid the watchful gaze of any Spanish soldiers in the valley.

After several hours, Abdul Aziz, who had been leading the party, slowed his horse down level with Francisco's.

"And so, are you interested in my daughter?" he asked bluntly.

"I ... I ... uh..."

"Well, I can think of worse things," said Abdul Aziz.

"I ... but my vows."

"Vows?" said Abdul Aziz. "Have you not been excommunicated already as a heretic? What vows?"

"My vows are a thing of the heart," said Francisco.

"Well then become a Protestant," said Abdul Aziz. "Their priests are allowed to marry."

"Protestant!" Francisco replied with his eyes raised. "Even if I were to do so, I have no camels to offer you as a dowry—nothing but an aging and stubborn donkey."

At this Abdul Aziz let out a hearty laugh. "I have more camels than I know what to do with," he said. "And as for your donkey, you can keep it, my brother. Think over my proposal," he said, and again breaking into a hearty laugh he spurred his horse back to the front of the party.

Abdul Aziz's words plunged Francisco into unsettling ponderings, which consumed him for the remainder of the journey.

That evening as the men talked and laughed around their fire underneath the unbroken expanse of stars, Francisco was silent and withdrawn, as if fighting an internal battle even more fierce than the defense of Meknés.

Abdul Aziz looked at him sympathetically, chuckling to himself at the strange mentality of this foreigner who seemed to struggle so hard to accept the simple joys of marriage and fatherhood as a gift from Allah.

*To be continued*





*The Shadow of  
the Wind*

Issue 151



*Part Four*

## The story so far

Francisco confronts the captain of the Spanish troops, with a message from God to desist the attacks on the Moroccans or suffer defeat. Instead he is taken as a prisoner. Subsequently the Spanish suffer a crushing defeat.

Accused of being a heretic, Francisco is to be taken by the Spanish to Casablanca to be excommunicated from the church, and thereby executed. Abdul and his men unexpectedly come to his rescue, and the small group begin their journey back to Jerada.

## Chapter Eight

Nightfall had fallen as Abdul, Francisco, and their company reached Jerada. This time the reception was tumultuous. News of the victory at Meknés had obviously reached the town, for Abdul Aziz and his companions were received as heroes. Loud trills ran through the streets from veiled women who excitedly clapped their hands, accompanied by the pulsating beats of *darbooka* drums. Dark swarthy horsemen pranced, waved their swords in the air, and fired rifles in celebration.

When they reached Abdul Aziz's house, however, Francisco immediately sensed that something was amiss. His eyes anxiously scanned the doorway for signs of Fatima, but she was nowhere to be seen. Abdul Aziz's son Sami met him at the gate wearing a somber expression that was in striking contrast with the joyous celebrations on the streets outside.

Casting a suspicious glance at Francisco he immediately touched his father's arm and whispered something. Abdul Aziz immediately accompanied Sami inside, with an expression of consternation.

Brushing aside his bewilderment at the less-than-warm reception, Francisco went to his room. Exhausted from the journey he flung himself down on the bunk and tried to rest. He was on the verge of drifting into a sleep when the door suddenly flung open and Abdul Aziz stood there. His eyes flashed and his whole frame seemed to shake with uncontrollable anger.

"Why have you done this thing?" he shouted.

Francisco, surprised and totally taken aback raised himself up from his bunk and managed to stammer,

"Wh-what?"

"My son Sami told me what you have done."

"What?" said Francisco again.

"He told me that you have seduced my daughter. Was it not enough that I gave you my hospitality, that I extended to you my hand of friendship, and was it not even enough that I would have given you my daughter in marriage, if you had been man enough to ask honorably. But you have come into my house and defiled the honor of my family under my very own roof and all this under the guise of being a holy man?"

### Illustrations by Sabine

For ages 9–11. May be read to younger children at their parents' or teachers' discretion.

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Francisco looked Abdul Aziz straight in the eye. "I tell you the truth before God that I never laid a finger on your daughter."

"And then how do you account for this," barked Abdul Aziz, holding up a small golden earring.

"What is that?"

"When you pretended to be fasting in the room, my son Sami suspected something. After a day he came into the room and found that you were not here. Shocked and surprised, he searched through the room, looking for signs of why you may have left so suddenly. Underneath the stool in the corner of the room he found this, Fatima's earring. He remembered that she had complained of losing it somewhere in the house. Then it became obvious that she had come clandestinely to visit you during the night. In the name of Allah, what have you done?"

Francisco looked at the floor for a moment, and then back up at Abdul Aziz. He spoke quietly and clearly.

"I have told you the truth. I will not lie to you. Yes, Fatima did come to my room the night before I left. She came of her own accord. She is but a girl, subject to the desires and passions of youth. She does not fully understand the consequences of such things. I sent her away as gently as I could, for I well know that I am a recipient of your generosity and hospitality. To commit such an act under your own roof would be a betrayal of everything you have done for me."

"Did you ever touch her, even once?"

Francisco took a deep breath before replying.

"The night I left, when she brought me the horse, we ... we kissed once. Once only, and nothing more than a kiss." Francisco's head fell into his hands. "I thought I might die, I thought I might never see her again. I am but a man and I was momentarily over-

whelmed, but I tell you, I swear to you by all that we both hold sacred that we did nothing more."

Abdul Aziz shook his head slowly. "I can only take your word for it, and I am not sure that I believe you," he said, "but even if I do, the matter is out of my hands. Sami has already told the whole matter to the Imam, who returned yesterday from Meknés. This has only confirmed his worst suspicions of you. My only choice is to cleanse the honor of my family, otherwise I will be held up before the entire village as a compromiser, one who tolerates iniquity and lust, one who allows foreigners in to corrupt our morals. Tomorrow morning you must appear before the Imam and the tribunal. The course is already set and I cannot change it. It is too much for me, one man to stand up against centuries of tradition."

Francisco stared silently at the floor, while Abdul Aziz grappled with his thoughts and emotions. Once more Francisco looked directly at Abdul Aziz with a clear, steely gaze.

"I tell you before God that I am not afraid to die. I came forth on this mission not expecting to claim my own life as a ransom, but only that you and your people may know that God truly cares for you and that there are those among my countrymen who do not condone the oppression foisted upon you. If I die, my only sorrow is that my mission has not been complete."

"If you are innocent and it is the will of Allah, somehow He shall deliver you." Abdul Aziz turned to go.

"One more thing," said Francisco.

"Yes?"

"What shall become of Fatima?"

"I do not know," said Abdul Aziz, shaking his head. "That depends largely on the outcome of your trial. If you are condemned, it is likely that she will be also."

“Is there no other way?” Francisco pleaded earnestly. “She’s just a silly girl full of dreams and passions. She does not know what she’s doing. Might I die two deaths, that she might be saved?”

Something in Francisco’s manner and sincerity seemed to touch Abdul Aziz, and he looked back at him with a measure of sympathy in his eyes. He shook his head hopelessly. “Let the will of Allah be done,” he said and left the room.

Heavy bolts fell into place on the door outside, and Francisco once again threw himself down on his bunk, pouring out his soul to God in a tormented supplication. It was not until the cold, gray light of dawn began to seep through the cracks in the window that a measure of peace came over him. After only a few hours of sleep the door opened and Abdul Aziz entered the room.

Francisco raised himself on one elbow, immediately discerning that Abdul Aziz’s countenance, although pained, was softer than the night before.

“I have not slept this night,” he muttered.

“Nor have I,” replied Francisco.

Abdul Aziz paced back and forth with clenched fists before exclaiming, “What have you done to me, infidel? How have you bewitched me that my heart should be so bound to yours? Why does your suffering become my suffering?”

“Tell me what will happen,” Francisco asked.

“We will leave now. The men are waiting outside to take you. We will go before the council.”

“How long will it take?”

“The decision,” Abdul Aziz replied, “will take perhaps an hour at the most. The sentence will be carried out very quickly. You will feel no pain.”

“And what of Fatima?”

“There is only one thing,” said Abdul Aziz, “before you die you will be given the opportunity to say the *shahada*. If you say it, Fatima may be saved, for it could be argued that through her influence you have come to the true faith and perhaps her youthful excesses may be forgiven her in the light of your conversion.”

Francisco was silent. Abdul Aziz suddenly spoke warmly and passionately, and Francisco was surprised to see tears in his eyes.

“Señor Francisco, I know that you came on your mission with all good intentions. I wish that there was more that I could do to help. It’s a bad time. If I am seen as too soft towards you I will lose much. My authority will be challenged, diminished in the community. Whatever influence I can be for peace and humanity amongst my people will be eroded even further. Those who are extreme will gain more influence. Who knows, I may even be executed too. I have my family to think of, my standing, the influence I can be on this community. I am sorry. I am so, so sorry.”

There was nothing to be said. Abdul Aziz hung his head gravely and turned towards the door.

He opened it and gave a signal. In a moment his men were inside, seizing Francisco’s arms and binding him tightly. He submitted meekly but with a wince of pain. Thoughts raced through his mind like wind-footed stallions across the desert sands as he was led through the sun-bleached streets towards the Imam’s house. This was not as he had expected. He had not believed that his mission would end so abruptly. His death seemed to be like a tiny leaf blown by the wind into oblivion. He had hoped at least one life could have been changed, one soul redeemed through his mission, but now it

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*\*shahada: Islamic profession of faith*

all seemed terribly lost, and that thought troubled him.

Up until this point there had seemed to be a higher purpose, a Divine logic to even the difficult things that had befallen him, but this turn of events was beyond his comprehension. The nail-pierced hands of his Lord that seemed to have been cupped around him thus far, seemed suddenly strangely distant and invisible. For the first time in his life he understood the depth of his Master's cry. *My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?*

The atmosphere at the Imam's house was cold, in stark contrast to his previous visit. He was pulled roughly into the same room that had once pulsed with the rhythms of the lively folkloric songs. The Imam sat stiffly. He was surrounded by four or five other elders, their countenances as barren and rigid as the stony cliff faces that Francisco had ridden past the day before. Francisco searched their faces anxiously for even a glimmer of mercy or understanding but saw none.

Abdul Aziz took his seat along with the elders. Francisco shuddered slightly as he caught sight of the large curved scimitar hanging from the belt of the white-clad soldier that stood to the right of the seated elders. Abdul Aziz's three eldest sons, Sami among them, sat over to the left of the council.

With an air of solemn authority the Imam began an incantation of verses from the Koran. Francisco did not understand all of it, but caught some of the meaning about vengeance against the unbelievers and punishment of the wicked.

*Not an auspicious\* beginning*, he thought to himself.

The incantation ended, the Imam looked gravely around the room. "Whoever

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\**auspicious*: promising

has testimony against this infidel let him stand now and speak."

Trembling, Sami rose to his feet. Holding up Fatima's earring he said, "I found my sister's earring in the room of the infidel, the day after he left for Meknés. I discovered that my sister had taken one of my father's horses and given it to the infidel. After this I understood that the infidel had seduced my sister, had lured her to his room in the night and had violated her."

Abdul Aziz was staring disconsolately at the floor.

"Do you have anything to say, infidel?" barked the Imam.

"I tell you the truth," replied Francisco, "that I did not violate the honor of Abdul Aziz's daughter."

"You are calling me a liar," shouted Sami angrily. "You are the liar."

Immediately the room erupted into shouts of "*Allahu Akbar!*" "Purge us from the infidel!" "Vengeance against the adulterer!" Sternly the Imam commanded all to be silent.

"Let the infidel speak," he said.

Francisco spoke with restrained, but deep emotion.

"I tell you in truth that I did not defile Fatima. I have no proof of this but my word and her word. But let me say this. I came unto your people because I was incensed at what my countrymen were doing to you. I had hoped that through my work I could somehow undo some of the wrong that was done to you. I see, however, that your hatred for my people and your anger towards me and my countrymen is too deep, and for this I cannot blame you, for the wounds inflicted on you have been grievous. My only request is if I must die that you would, in the name of Allah the merciful and compassionate have mercy upon Fatima, for she is innocent and not worthy to die."

The Imam looked at him stonily. "Kneel, infidel," he said. He gestured to the swordsman at his right, who came and stood behind Francisco, pulling his long, glittering scimitar from the sheath in his belt and gripping it firmly with both hands.

"Infidel," said the Imam sternly, "you claim that you are innocent and Allah will be the judge of that for He is just. If you are guilty and we let you live, then we sin against Allah. If you are innocent and you die, He will be merciful unto you. Now before you die turn to Islam, if so be that Allah may hear and may be merciful towards Fatima, daughter of Abdul Aziz."

Francisco took a deep breath and looked straight up at the Imam. The swordsman raised his sword high in the air.

"I confess," said Francisco, "that there is no God but God." The Imam nodded. "I confess that Mohammed was a true prophet of God." At these words Abdul Aziz raised his eyes and looked straight at Francisco. Francisco turned to meet his gaze and spoke without flinching. "And I confess also that Jesus Christ, Son of God, is my Savior, Who died for me to atone for my sins. I pray that through my death today He may somehow, in some small way, atone for the sins of my countrymen and that through it some standing here may come to know Him and His loving kindness."

"Execute vengeance on the infidel!" shouted the Imam. The swordsman pulled back his scimitar, ready to begin the downward swing.

"No!" The entire room turned in amazement to look at Abdul Aziz, who had leaped to his feet.

"No!" he bellowed once more. "Put down your sword!" he commanded the swordsman.

"Execute vengeance on the infidel!" thundered the Imam once more.

The swordsman turned in confusion, unsure of whom to obey.

"Wait!" Abdul Aziz said with undiminished authority. "The Spaniard has been my prisoner these past weeks. "Will you not hear my testimony concerning him?"

The Imam was incensed that his authority was being challenged.

"We have heard the testimony of your son," he thundered. "The infidel has defiled your daughter. Why do you now hinder us from executing vengeance on him?"

"But let the judgment of Allah be with truth and righteousness," cried Abdul Aziz, "and not through hearsay and supposition. I have observed this man closely these many weeks. I have had my servant spy upon him day and night and I have found no fault in him. He has not deceived me in any way. Why should I then not believe him when he says that he did not defile my daughter? I saw him walk out alone, trusting only in God, to confront the armies of the infidel. I saw God confound the Spaniards on the field of battle in answer to his prayers. Why should I then not believe that he is a man who walks closely with God, who is righteous before God?"

For a moment the Imam was stunned, unable to speak. The other elders whispered to each other in consternation. This was unprecedented.

"The infidel has defiled the *Shahada!*" shouted the Imam after having spent a moment gathering his composure. "Did you not see how in the same breath he calls Mohammed a prophet and then invokes Jesus, son of Mary, as the Son of God? Away with him to the depths of Hell, and let Allah deal with him as He sees fit. Swordsman, execute judgment!"

Once again the glittering scimitar was raised, but the swordsman looked anxiously at Abdul Aziz.

One of the other council members spoke up. "Let us give the infidel a chance.

He confessed Islam, let him now deny that Jesus, the son of Mary, is the Son of God.”

“Yes,” said another member, “let him deny Christ. Perhaps then he can live.”

All eyes were on the Imam.

“Very well then,” he said. “Infidel, will you deny that Jesus is the Son of God and confess only Islam?”

Francisco took a deep breath, “I can accept Mohammed as a true prophet of God,” he said slowly, “but I cannot deny Jesus as the Son of God and my Savior.”

“Then kill him,” said the Imam quietly, but maliciously.

“Wait.” Abdul Aziz’s tone was more pleading this time. “Do we believe that our religion is the right one, the true one before God?”

Heads nodded in assent.

“Then what have we to fear? Is this truly the way of the prophet, to propagate his teachings by forcing men to believe? Is this what we find written in the Holy Koran, that we cut off the heads of all those who do not confess Islam? Is this doing the work of Allah, the most gracious, merciful, and compassionate? What sort of converts do we hope to make of our religion, those who are cowered into submission by fear of death? How can we expect such converts to love Allah with true hearts and sincere faith? Has not the Holy Koran instructed us to do good to the people of the Book, those who worship the true God? Then why do we not obey its words? *La ikraha fid-deen!* There is no coercion in religion, as says the Holy Koran.”

Gray beards wagged up and down as their owners recognized the Koranic verse and nodded their heads in assent.

The Imam was staring distractedly at the ground, tapping his fingers nervously on the side of his chair and muttering under his breath. Francisco heard him furiously quoting verses from the Koran. Sami was looking

at his father with a mixture of awe and fear. He had never seen him speak this way.

With definite authority Abdul Aziz walked over to the swordsman and took the glittering scimitar out of his hand. Deftly, and a little more quickly than Francisco would have liked, he cut the ropes that bound Francisco’s hands behind him and plunged the sword deep into the floor beside him.

“Bring forth Fatima!” he cried loudly.

Suddenly a curtain, which covered a large arch at the side of the room, was drawn back. Francisco turned in surprise to see Fatima sitting with her mother and sisters and some other women.

“Come forth, my daughter,” said Abdul Aziz gently.

She stood and walked into the midst of the room before the tribunal. Francisco saw that her hands were also bound.

“Tell us,” said Abdul Aziz softly, “did this man ever defile you?”

She shook her head. “Never,” she replied softly.

Once again Abdul Aziz pulled the sword from the floor and much more gently than he had delivered Francisco of his bonds, cut the ropes which bound her wrists.

“Then in the name of Allah, in the name of all that is merciful and compassionate, let us let the Spaniard go free. Let us let him perform his mission of healing to our people.” He turned to the council. “Right now at Meknés many of our soldiers lie dying in need of such a man as this. Let us let him go forth to minister unto them.”

All the council members except the Imam nodded their heads.

“Let him go,” a few of them muttered.

The Imam, however, continued mumbling, angry words spilling from his mouth like bubbles from a seething cauldron. Tenderly Abdul Aziz kissed his daughter on both cheeks, then gently motioned her to go back to her mother, who warmly and

tearfully embraced her daughter. Francisco did not risk so much as a glance in Fatima's direction. Abdul Aziz looked around briefly at the gathering. With all the astuteness of the military commander that he was, he could see that the upper hand was his momentarily, but speedy action needed to be taken. The Imam still muttered and seethed like a volcano about to explode.

"Brothers," he said boldly, "we must move on to more urgent matters. As you know, by the grace of Allah we repelled the infidels in their attack at Meknés. I am sure they will not give up, but will attack again in greater fury. I must leave today to help them. Let us call again for the able-bodied fighting men, leaving only a small force here to defend our town." A murmur of assent ran round the room. "We should depart within the hour."

"And what of the Spaniard?" asked one of the elders. "What will become of him?"

"The Spaniard shall accompany us," said Abdul Aziz. "His healing skills are needed with our wounded soldiers and his prayers are needed for us in battle against the infidels." Without waiting for the consent of the elders he called out to his son, "Sami, take Señor Francisco back to our home. Help him prepare to depart. Find him a fine stallion. I will follow shortly, after we have discussed our strategy."

"It is good, father," said Sami submissively.

Francisco grasped Abdul Aziz's hand warmly with gratitude in his eyes.

Unable to respond with more than a peremptory nod for fear of sacrificing his authority, Abdul Aziz squeezed his hand briefly. Understanding his predicament Francisco quietly took his leave, accompanied by Sami. As they walked towards the horses Sami turned to Francisco.

"My father is a good man," he said, "merciful and righteous. I do not neces-

sarily believe you, but I believe him and for that I must say forgive me for misjudging you."

"I understand your concern," replied Francisco. "I, too, have a sister."

"So you claim that you did not seduce my sister, but tell me honestly. Did something happen between you? I know Fatima and I have seen the way she looks at you."

"Yes, perhaps something did happen between us, but it is as the shadow of the wind and is passed away from us, and I believe it is gone forever."

With that the two reached the horses. Sami handed the bridle of one to Francisco and they both mounted and rode off towards home.

Francisco did not have much to do to prepare his meager possessions. He set his room in order and dressed himself in his local robes. All things being ready he sat down to write in his journal, which he had neglected over the preceding days.

## Chapter Nine

True to his word, Abdul Aziz was back within the hour and preparing to ride out. Francisco joined him at the front of the house and briefly inspected the fine Arabian steed that Sami had chosen for him. As they prepared to mount, Abdul Aziz's wife and daughters entered and passed through the courtyard. For a moment which seemed to freeze into eternity, his gaze locked with Fatima's tear-filled but grateful eyes. An ocean of longing flowed between them for an instant before the wind's shadow passed again, leaving an aching sweet memory that burned in Francisco's soul.

"Yallah," said Abdul Aziz. "Let's go."

Francisco swung himself into the saddle, dug the spurs into the side of the



stallion, and fought back the tears that were welling up in his eyes.

“To have died would have been easier,” he whispered to himself as the horsemen rode out into the dusty streets of the town.

A cloud of tension hung over the city of Meknés when they arrived there about midmorning. The rejoicing at the victory of three days earlier had turned to a strained anticipation of further assault. Reports from silent watchers in the olive groves and pine forests above the valley had noted that the Spanish had drawn up their positions, regrouped, and seemed ready for attack.

Abdul Aziz instructed one of his men to take Francisco to a makeshift hospital where many still lay wounded from the conflict. Francisco had requested that after tending to the Moroccans he also be allowed to minister to the wounded of his own countrymen who were being held as prisoners, to which Abdul Aziz had readily agreed.

Francisco successfully drowned his emptiness in the pain and sorrows of others for the rest of the day, as if nail-pierced healing hands were massaging his own aching heart, even as his hands tended to the wounded. Later in the day he was taken to the prison where many Spaniards had languished for days with little care. Some had died of their wounds and others were sorely in need of treatment. They were surprised at the tall, unusual-looking Arab who spoke excellent Spanish, though Francisco attempted to feign an Arabic accent to conceal his identity.

After doing the best with his makeshift supplies for several hours, he came to the bed of one badly wounded man, who was obviously on the point of death. Understanding that Francisco spoke Spanish, he whispered hoarsely to him asking for a

priest to say the last rites. Francisco knelt by the man's bed and busied himself as if pretending to treat his wounds.

“I am a priest,” he whispered. “I will say the last rites for you.”

Thereupon he proceeded to whisper the Latin incantation into the man's ear. The dying prisoner gripped Francisco's hand as if suddenly released from a burden of fear, and with a long sigh passed away. Francisco gently folded his hands on his chest and was able to restrain himself just in time from performing the sign of the cross.

Unbeknownst to Francisco, the entire exchange had been observed by a man on the next cot, who stared at him suspiciously.

It was late at night by the time he completed his rounds. One of Abdul Aziz's men escorted him to a camp just outside the city where Abdul Aziz and his men were preparing to sleep. Francisco, utterly exhausted, managed a weak smile when he saw Abdul Aziz.

“Peace be upon you, my friend,” said Abdul Aziz, sensing that Francisco was quite spent. “If you have the strength, my brother, ride with me early in the morning. We will go up into the hills and observe the enemy's positions.”

“By the grace of God,” said Francisco with a weak smile.

“God bless your hands and strengthen your health,” said Abdul Aziz.

At dawn the two men left the camp on horseback, and after forty-five minutes they reached a ridge where they could look back over the town. A stiff breeze was blowing out of the west, and as they mounted the ridge it hit them full in the face. Clouds were scattered ominously across the dawn-lit sky. Below in the valley they could see little whirlpools of dust thrust violently into the air by the

wind. A few brave birds swooped and tumbled in the sky, soaring up against the wind, then allowing themselves to be thrust like crumpled paper before its mighty force. Francisco stared long and broodingly at the scene before him, sensing an impending storm although there was no scent of rain in the air.

“Señor Francisco,” said Abdul Aziz quietly, “have you prayed to your God? Has He spoken to you?”

Francisco looked long and intently down into the valley where the lines of the Spanish army could be dimly made out in the morning haze.

“Last time,” he mused aloud, “the words were so clear. My instructions were so simple. This time I grope and I feel for His will, for His words, but it’s not clear to me. Last time we defied history. This time, I’m not sure. God’s will is a mysterious thing. Sometimes it is unfathomable as the depths of the oceans.” He looked intently at his Arabian counterpart.

“I know and I believe His promise that in the end, peace, truth, and righteousness shall prevail. I know He sent me to warn those who I still disdain to call my countrymen, to tell them not to attack. Nevertheless, attack they will and today I know not what the result shall be, but I shall pray, my dear brother Abdul Aziz, I shall pray.”

Abdul Aziz lifted his binoculars to his eyes and began to study the awakening Spanish juggernaut\*.

“I believe they will attack today,” he said quietly at length. “Let us quickly get back to camp. There are preparations to be made.”

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The attack came swiftly and deadly at ten o’clock. With surprise no longer

on their side and the Spaniards guarding their flanks more carefully, the majority of the Moroccan forces were arrayed in front of the city. Although they had captured two cannons from the Spaniards, which they put to some good use, their ammunition soon ran out, while the Spanish availed themselves of plentiful ammunition and artillery. It wasn’t long before the Spanish soldiers were entering the gates of the city and the Arabs were fleeing before them.

Abdul Aziz had been fighting valiantly, but saw that the city was a lost cause. Quickly he rode to the camp to warn Francisco before it should be overwhelmed by the oncoming Spaniards. Francisco had confined himself within a tent and had been praying unceasingly, although the ominous feeling had never left him. He knew as soon as he heard Abdul Aziz’s voice outside his tent what the result of the battle was.

“Quickly,” shouted Abdul Aziz, “mount your horse! We must escape to the hills.”

Within seconds, Francisco had quit the tent and the two men were galloping out through the vineyards and olive groves. A company of Spanish cavalry had meanwhile reached the other side of the camp and saw the two riders fleeing towards the hills.

“After them!” shouted the lieutenant, and he and five horsemen immediately charged in pursuit of the fugitives. At a certain point the two had to cross a hundred yards of open fields before reaching the next groves. The lieutenant ordered his men to fire. A volley of shots rang out. Francisco’s horse was slightly in the lead, and he turned in dismay to see Abdul Aziz’s stallion collapse under him, wounded. Quickly Abdul Aziz managed to disentangle himself from the fallen horse as Francisco reigned in.

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\***juggernaut:** relentless, crushing force

“Go on, go on!” shouted Abdul Aziz. “Go on!”

Unheeding, Francisco turned his horse around and galloped back.

“We’ll be too slow, we’ll be too slow!” screamed Abdul Aziz.

The Spaniards were now in hot pursuit, only fifty yards away.

“Take them alive!” barked the commander. “If you can, take them alive.”

“Get up behind me!” shouted Francisco to Abdul Aziz.

“No, go, the horse will be too slow with both of us!” he shouted back angrily.

But Francisco insisted. Abdul Aziz threw himself up behind Francisco and Francisco spurred the horse once again up towards the olive groves ahead of them. The Spaniards were closing fast and once more let loose a volley of shots, this time felling Francisco’s horse. Helplessly the two men pulled themselves from underneath the struggling animal. The Spanish soldiers surrounded them.

“I know this one!” shouted the lieutenant, excitedly pointing towards Abdul Aziz “He’s one of their leaders. We’ve caught one of their commanders!”

“Speak only Arabic,” whispered Abdul Aziz to Francisco, who nodded.

Strong cords bound their hands and the two were marched back towards the Spanish camp. A pall of smoke hung over the city and the sounds of gunshots still rang out as the Spaniards subdued the last pockets of resistance. As they marched past the gates of the city, Francisco’s heart sank as he heard the weeping and shrill wailing of the women.

“Oh God, recompense them as only Thou dost know how,” he whispered.

The two were marched smartly through the smoking remains of the battlefield. Bodies of white-clad Moroccans, a few of whom Francisco recognized, were

strewn everywhere, and amongst them some Spanish soldiers, cruelly and grotesquely united in mortality.

*Strange how their blood is mingled in death,* he thought.

The lieutenant in charge of the company, obviously pleased with his catch, eagerly reported to his commander.

“We have captured one of the ringleaders of the insurrection,” he said, pointing to Abdul Aziz.

The commander acknowledged him with the disdain reserved by commanding officers for lieutenants obviously looking for promotions.

“And what of this one?”

“Another one of their fighters, I suppose,” said the lieutenant officiously.

The commander scrutinized Francisco’s face closely.

“Hmm, this one looks a bit different. Torture them first, then bring them to me for interrogation, one by one. We’ll get all the information we can. Then we will probably execute the ringleader, make him an example. Keep the other one as a prisoner for now.”

Francisco restrained himself from flinching when he heard the words, still believing that feigning lack of knowledge of Spanish could save him some pain and possibly even death.

They were taken to a tent and chained to a stake in the ground while they awaited interrogation. Abdul Aziz breathed deeply.

“It is even as your God showed you,” he said in Arabic. “We cannot always stand against the forces of history.” He paused before continuing gingerly. “What did the commander say?”

“He said they are going to interrogate us, torture us and...”

“And?”

Francisco swallowed; it was not easy to go on.

“They said they were going to execute you as one of the leaders of the insurrection. I don’t know what they will do with me, but if they discover my true identity, I doubt I shall see tonight’s sunset.”

“Let us die bravely,” said Abdul Aziz quietly.

There was a long silence as the each man examined his own heart to see if that would be possible. Finally it was Abdul Aziz who spoke.

“Señor Francisco, may I ask you something?”

“Yes, anything.”

“I have seen you these three or four times look into the face of death and not flinch.”

“I felt fear.” Francisco paused, weighing his words. “But it was not so much fear of death, as perhaps fear of the pain which precedes it.”

“I look at death and I see a dark fearful chasm. I fear ... I fear the wrath of Allah. I have done many wrong things, I know. I have killed men who did not truly deserve to die. I have lied. I have stolen. I have not always been faithful in prayers, in fasting, in *zakat*<sup>\*</sup>. There are so many things for which I deserve punishment. Now I go to face Allah, and though I die in jihad, why do I feel so far from attaining the gardens of Paradise?”

Francisco searched for a suitable answer, but before he could find one, Abdul Aziz continued.

“Yet I have seen you look at death in the eye and greet it like an old friend. Is it because you are without sin?”

Francisco laughed. That was an easier one to answer.

“No, no, my brother—nothing could be further from the truth.”

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<sup>\*</sup>*zakat*: obligatory 2.5 percentage of a Muslim’s annual income given to charity

“Then tell me, is it because of this”—Abdul Aziz seemed to struggle with the word—“atonement? This atonement you believe in?”

“You have answered the question yourself. That is precisely why I do not fear.”

“Then I also need this atonement. Can you help me to attain it?”

“No, I can’t.” Abdul Aziz looked at him in surprise, but Francisco’s tone was warm as he continued, “but only because it cannot be attained, only received.”

“Tell me how to receive it.”

“Confess Jesus as your Savior and Redeemer and receive His Holy Spirit, for His Word says that all who call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

Abdul Aziz was quiet for a long moment, as if struggling with some unseen fear. Finally he spoke with grave deliberation.

“On the mountain that morning you asked me whether if you would accept Mohammed as God’s prophet, would I confess Jesus Christ as my Savior. You have kept your end of the bargain, and now I answer you, yes. Now before you and before God I confess Jesus Christ as my Savior and accept His atonement for my sins.”

After a whispered prayer, Francisco looked up and there were tears in his eyes.

“Abdul Aziz, there is one part of my story that I did not tell you. As I waited in Madrid for the ship that would bring me to Casablanca, I heard news from my hometown. I heard that the cruel and selfish husband of the woman that I loved had been killed in a hunting accident. She was now a widow. I knew it would not be beyond expectation for me to return, to claim her as my bride. The thought haunted me that the heartbreak, the

reason that I had left everything to follow my Jesus was now gone, and I could return and live the life I had always longed to live: husband of a beautiful woman, father of wonderful children in the happy, peaceful valley that I had always loved and now yearned for. But something spurred me on. Something had grown within me that was stronger even than that desire for love. I felt a sense of destiny, perhaps a sense of mission, perhaps a deeper understanding of the love that caused my beloved Savior to leave the gardens of Paradise and come into this tormented world. I consoled myself that perhaps after my mission was complete I could return, but I knew deep in my heart that would not be the case. Many times since I have thought of that happy valley, that beautiful life I could have lived. Many times I wondered whether the sacrifice was worth it. Only today, my brother, only today do I know it was worth it all."

At this point the tent flap swung open. The lieutenant, accompanied by two soldiers, entered the tent and roughly undid Abdul Aziz's chains. Francisco looked up at him. His black eyes shone as they returned Francisco's penetrating gaze.

"Die bravely, my brother," said Francisco in Arabic. "Soon we shall be together again."

The corporal barked a command to his men and they seized Abdul Aziz by the arms and led him out of the tent.

"I'll be back for you, dog," said the lieutenant in Spanish to Francisco, not realizing he understood.

Half an hour and an agonizing stream of prayer for his friend's strength later, Francisco heard a volley of shots and knew they had sent Abdul Aziz to his final resting place. Minutes later the lieutenant was back unlocking his chains. Nervousness ran through Francisco's stomach,

as he was pulled out of the tent into the midday sunlight by the same soldiers. A company of soldiers approached. The lieutenant saluted his counterpart at the head of the column of soldiers and they exchanged greetings.

"I'm taking this one for interrogation," he said, gesturing in Francisco's direction.

"We just liberated these men from their prison, poor dogs," said the other, pointing to about a dozen disheveled, sickly looking men whom the soldiers were escorting. "These were the ones that were well enough to walk, the other ones we'll have to go back and get with stretchers."

"Lieutenant," called out one of the freed prisoners, "do you know who this man is?"

"Come forward, soldier," ordered the lieutenant.

The soldier approached.

"It's him, sir. This is the one, the heretic priest,"

"What do you mean?" snapped the lieutenant.

"I was with the commander at the battle where the Arabs defeated us. This is the heretic priest. I was there at the front of the column. I saw him. He's the one who cast the spell on us and caused us to lose. Then last night I saw him pretending to be an Arab. I wasn't sure it was him because of the headdress and the clothes. But then I saw him whispering to the man next to me who was dying, and I realized he was speaking in Latin, saying the last rites. I still wasn't sure so I said nothing, but now I know. It's him."

The lieutenant turned towards Francisco with a malicious gleam in his eyes.

"You're the one! I must inform the commander! Guard him closely," he commanded the two soldiers. A few minutes later he returned with the commander.

The commander inspected Francisco closely for a minute before pulling the Arabic headdress off his head, "So you're the one, the heretic who cursed us."

"Yes, I am the one," said Francisco, "only I am no heretic, not like the church which condones your butchery of the innocent. Furthermore, it was not I that cursed you that day, but God Himself."

"Silence, dog," snarled the lieutenant, slapping Francisco across the face.

"I will not be silent," replied Francisco steadying himself after the impact, and looking unflinchingly at the commander. "As long as it is not too late for you to repent. Turn away from murder, rape, and pillaging the innocent and turn to the God of your salvation and to Jesus Who died to set you free from your sins."

"Insolent pig," snapped the commander. "Take him to the priest. We'll excommunicate him and send him to hell where he belongs." With a nod to the lieutenant he turned on his heel and walked back towards his command post.

As one of his first orders after the last debacle, he had sent for a priest to accompany the army to pray for them, sanctify them before the battle, hold communion, and say last rites over the dying. It was only a short walk to his tent. The lieutenant walked pompously in front of Francisco and his two guards.

"Father, we have captured the heretic priest," he said.

A gaunt, forlorn-looking man in the robes of priesthood emerged from the tent. He looked Francisco up and down for a moment without comment.

The lieutenant chafed with impatience at his time-consuming perusal.

"The commander gave orders to excommunicate him forthwith that we may execute him. Kneel, dog." The soldiers thrust Francisco into a kneeling position

in front of the priest who looked sternly down at him.

"Are you ordained a priest in the Catholic Church?" he asked looking in disdain at Francisco's Arabic garments.

"I am. In the order of my master, St. Francis," said Francisco.

"Then why have you defiled yourself, wearing heathen garments?"

"I came forth as the holy apostle Paul, 'becoming all things to all men,'" replied Francisco. "I came forth as my master Saint Francis did, to try to heal the wounds that those who call themselves Christian inflicted upon Muslim populations."

"You have been bewitched by these heathen," snapped the priest sharply. "You are a heretic to the church and a traitor to your country."

"So be it," said Francisco. "If in so doing I may be true to my Lord and Master, Jesus Christ."

"Blasphemy," snarled the priest. He crossed himself. "*In nomine Patris et Fillii et Spiritus Sanctus tu excommunicado.* It is finished," he said to the lieutenant, wiping his hands together in a symbolic gesture of finality. "Take him and do with him as you will."

The lieutenant led the way as the two soldiers led Francisco through to the edge of the camp. They climbed a slight incline to a grassy knoll and forced him to kneel down.

"May the good Lord Jesus Who I serve forgive you, for you do not know what you are doing," he said to the lieutenant, who only grimaced in response.

The knoll overlooked a little valley watered by a brook and lined with quaint olive groves. Francisco smiled as he watched the wind dancing playfully through the rippling grass. Suddenly, appearing out of nowhere, he saw a female form clad in a flowing white dress

running towards him, barefoot across the soft grass. She was smiling, her arms outstretched, her dark hair blowing in the wind. Her voice laughed as she called out his name, and his heart leapt in anticipation of her embrace. Entranced by the vision, he never heard or felt the final bullet.

\* \* \*

It was two days later that news reached Jerada of the defeat at Meknés and the death of Abdul Aziz and Francisco. Fatima immediately ran, locked herself in her room and wept until tears came no more. When she had composed herself sufficiently, she went quietly and reverently to Francisco's room. His humble monk's garment lay folded at the end of his rough cot, and a few pens and books lay on the rough wooden table.

His journal lay open at the last entry. Fatima sat down and carefully deciphered the labored scrawl.

"Like the wind, my life has passed briefly over this earth and passed away, invisible. I have been blown before Thee, O my Lord Jesus, I trust whither Thou hast willed. Show me, O Lord, for if I but know that the shadow of the wind has passed over one desolate life, cooled one aching fever, been a balm for one wounded soul, whispered Thy truth into one searching heart, then may I blow content into eternity."

Fatima had thought her tears were all spent, but they now flowed more voluminously than before. Carefully she picked up the journal, kissed it and held it close to her heaving bosom.

Turning her eyes heavenward she sobbed convulsively:

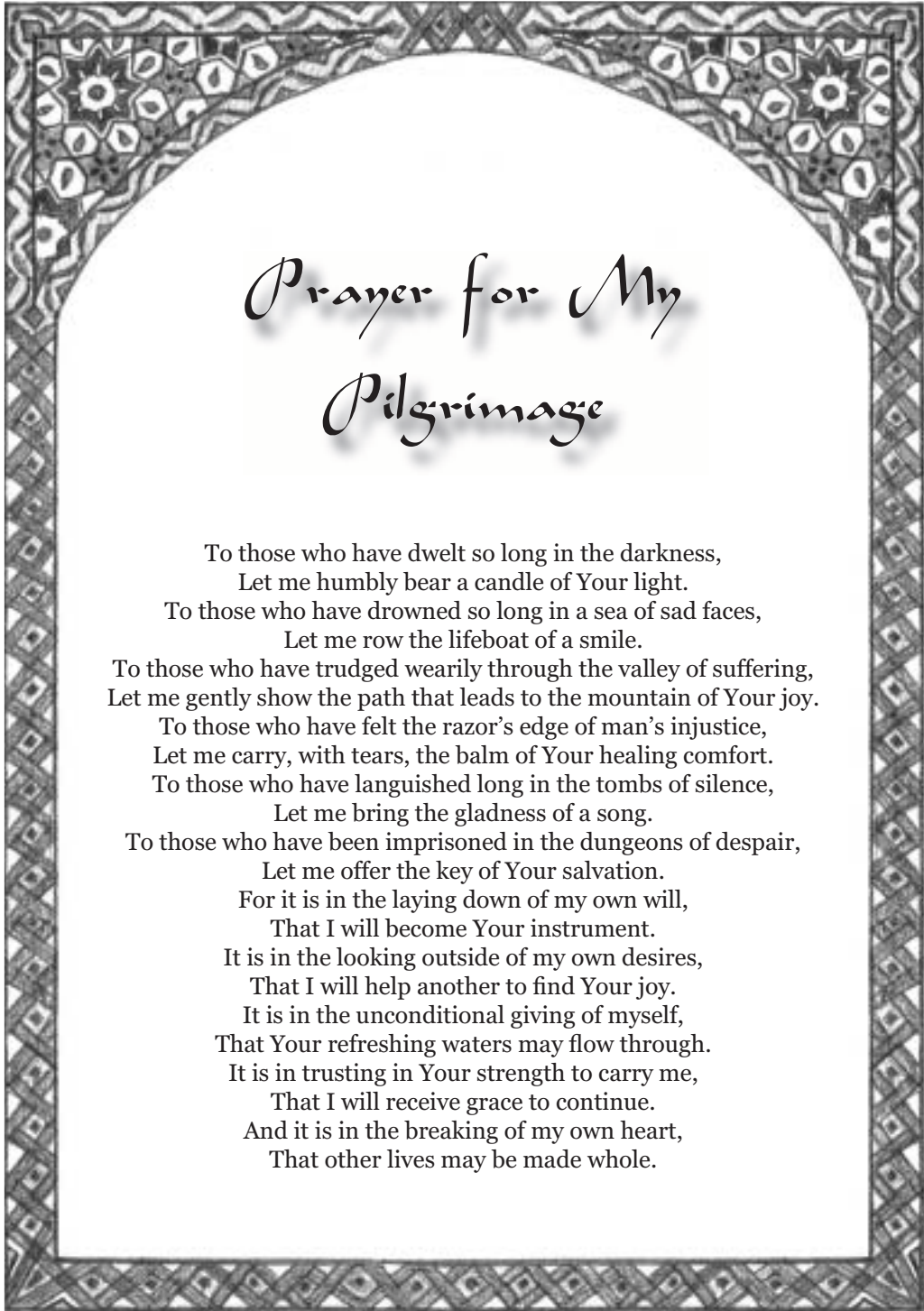
"Farewell, my beloved Francisco. Thank you. Thank you for all that you have given me, even for that which you denied me. For through you and your sacrifice I

have come to know my true Master. O my Lord Jesus, I give myself to You. Show me the way and I will follow You all the days of my life."

## Epilogue

After a long struggle the subjugation of the western half of Morocco by the Spanish army was complete. The east was controlled by the French. To his family's great joy, Abdul Aziz returned after the terms of surrender had been agreed to. He had not died that day, as Francisco had surmised. The volley of shots was a ploy, to make him fear and also to heighten the effect of Francisco's own interrogation. Abdul Aziz's relatively merciful treatment of the prisoners as well as his sparing the lives of Francisco's captors also spoke well for him with the Spanish commander, who decided to spare his life. He returned to Jerada a broken, but gentler, stronger man. Because of the circumstances in the society which surrounded him, he was not open in witnessing of his redemption, but many years later, when persecution threatened local Christians, he was instrumental in protecting them and saving their lives.

As for Fatima, the seed of faith grew within her, and in her quiet way she influenced many lives towards a knowledge of the truth. Her two most prized possessions, which she kept with her for the rest of her earthly life, were Francisco's Bible and his journal, which she read often. Apart from the last entry, her favorite page was the first one, upon which Francisco had written the words he had heard in his heart one night, words that echoed the famous prayer prayed centuries earlier by another humble follower of the Light.



# *Prayer for My Pilgrimage*

To those who have dwelt so long in the darkness,  
Let me humbly bear a candle of Your light.

To those who have drowned so long in a sea of sad faces,  
Let me row the lifeboat of a smile.

To those who have trudged wearily through the valley of suffering,  
Let me gently show the path that leads to the mountain of Your joy.

To those who have felt the razor's edge of man's injustice,  
Let me carry, with tears, the balm of Your healing comfort.

To those who have languished long in the tombs of silence,  
Let me bring the gladness of a song.

To those who have been imprisoned in the dungeons of despair,  
Let me offer the key of Your salvation.

For it is in the laying down of my own will,  
That I will become Your instrument.

It is in the looking outside of my own desires,  
That I will help another to find Your joy.

It is in the unconditional giving of myself,  
That Your refreshing waters may flow through.

It is in trusting in Your strength to carry me,  
That I will receive grace to continue.

And it is in the breaking of my own heart,  
That other lives may be made whole.