

Preview from
The White Camel of Fez by K. L. Vivian
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Chapter 9

A few days later, over six weeks into the journey, the sun rose revealing the outline of a city wall and several large towers to the south near a large mountain. Finally they were approaching Awdaghust. They had made good time. Ali rode over close to Samir and pointed. “There you are, my young friend. We have made it to safety. Perhaps I will see you again on the return journey.”

Samir was full of questions. “Ali, is it true that fountains shoot water into the air in Awdaghust? I heard that they have peacocks as big as goats there! Do you know where they keep the racing camels? Will I be able to get close to them?”

“Slow down, my friend!” Ali smiled. “Yes, there are such fountains and peacocks. About the camels I don’t know, but I’m sure there will be many there since they will have a race day. No doubt you will be able to examine them. All will be known to you very soon. We should arrive there by midday tomorrow.”

Ali’s small turban was wrapped loosely around his head and neck in the Almohad style, and hung down in the back to protect his neck from the sun. He pulled the tail around and wiped his dusty face with it. He was looking forward to bathing in the hammams.

“I can’t wait to see this city!” Samir exclaimed. “I wonder if it is like Fez? Are the streets of sand or stone? What kind of wonderful foods are there to eat? Is it a safe place?”

“Insh’allah, all will be known in due course,” Ali said. “Emir Ibn Yasin himself lives here. He rules Awdaghust and doesn’t like the Almohad. We must observe the shari’a laws strictly. Mind your behavior—Awdaghust is a very conservative religious city, even though the entertainments and gold keep everything lively. Keep your hands clean. Take care of your camel and tie your belongings well. Salaam.” Ali bowed slightly with a touch to his forehead and rode away.

Uncle Moosa walked up beside him and said, “There we are at last! Awdaghust. Now we will have some fun! The trading is the best part of all this hard journey. And I will be thankful to sleep in a soft bed for a few nights. My old bones tire of these long, hot treks in the sun. I want you to stay near me while we barter. You may learn a thing or two, okay?”

“I will, Amo. How long will we stay here? When will we go home?”

“You are ready to go home already when we are just arriving? Such a boy!” Moosa laughed. “That reminds me of a Mullah Baba story.” As long as he could remember, Samir remembered Uncle Moosa telling him Mullah Baba stories. He had one for every situation, even if it was impossible to find the sense in it!

“Mullah Baba’s friend asked him, ‘Mullah, which is wiser, camel or man?’ Mullah answered him, ‘Camel.’ ‘Why?’ his friend asked. ‘Because a camel carries loads, but does not ask for more, whereas man, even if he is overwhelmed by responsibility, often chooses to add more.’”

Samir smiled as if he had not heard the story before. “I guess that is true, and I feel the burden of my responsibility. So when do you think we will go home?”

“We will probably be here a week. You were right. There is to be a race day in four days. We will probably leave three or four days after that. I will pay for us to enter the race grounds so you can look around the track. Our friend Walid will be looking for some camels to buy, so I will accompany him and see what the dealers offer. But be careful, even though they can lose their right hands, there are many pickpockets in this city. Keep your belongings out of sight and tightly tied.”

Awdaghust was also an oasis city, but a rich one, built upon sand, and almost barren of vegetation. Its wealth of water was a large, clear underground aquifer and numerous artesian wells located throughout the city. Cucumbers, wheat and millet grew in abundance, but the only crops that grew without hand watering were date palms and henna trees. The citizens appeared to be even wealthier than those in Fez.

Awdaghust was a great crossroads trading city. All the major trade routes from a dozen directions flowed into Awdaghust. Tens of thousands of people lived there, and a large percentage of them were slaves working for rich masters. Slaves far outnumbered the owners.

Salt came from the Muslim countries north and east. All the countries to the south came to Awdaghust to purchase salt, because they had no salt mines of their own. Gold mines lay in the south, however, and everyone desired gold, so Awdaghust was a thriving north-south trade center. Commerce was conducted in gold dinars, and everyone took a percentage from every trade. There were many rich people. Most of the wealthiest lived in great palaces in the lush center of town, with lavish gardens and fountains, supported by thousands of slaves.

Ali was right. They arrived when the sun was high the next day. The city had several caravanserais around its walls—large, walled shelters with an open thatch roof where caravans could unload and house their camels for their stay. Samir’s caravan was so large it had to be split into two groups.

Sayyid Walid went to the other caravanserai, and Samir discovered that he was relieved. He was still bothered by the things Uncle Moosa had said, and seeing how Walid looked at the white camel didn’t make him feel better. He felt uneasy. He intended to stay with her as much as possible, but this night Uncle Moosa had invited him to stay in an inn and sleep on a real bed. It was a temptation he could not resist. He had never slept on a soft bed.

The caravanserai was two levels. The lower level was a large open room with a reed and palm roof. The roof was for protection from the sun, so it was possible to see the sky in places. Air could flow freely and the thatch blanketed the interior in dark shade with small patches of sunlight coming through.

In the back by the wall was a long, deep watering trough for the animals. About thirty at a time could drink. The trough was kept full by a channel that ran from one of the underground springs. Long stone benches ran along each of the side walls. The wide entrance was the only way into the caravanserai, and one or two soldiers were stationed at the entrance day and night.

Outside there was a stairway up to a second floor area that contained small, rustic sleeping rooms with string cots. Merchants were assigned a sleeping room by the caravan leader and were charged a small fee by the city for the luxury of privacy. Valuable items could be kept in the sleeping rooms and guarded.

Many merchants opted to save the cost and slept with their animals in the lower area, like they did on the road. Others decided to hire guards to protect their valuables and go into town to sleep more comfortably at one of the many inns. Young men like Samir usually bedded down with the animals.

Samir helped Uncle Moosa unload and tend to his camels, and secure his trade goods. Almohad guards were posted at the one entrance to the caravanserai, and as darkness fell, most of the traders and camel handlers poured into the town with excitement. There would be good food and baths, bubble pipes to smoke and old acquaintances to meet that night.

The ultra-conservative Almoravids didn't allow wine or music, but visitors were welcome and found plenty of other activities to lighten their purses. There were food carts and restaurants, gambling, entertainments, brothels, jugglers, magicians, tumblers and fortune tellers vying to separate a traveler from his gold. Rickety merchant stalls made from spindly poles and reed or palm leaf awnings were set up selling food and drinks throughout the town. Tea sellers strolled through the streets with large, hot vats strapped on their backs, selling tea by the cup.

Piles of dates and fragrant spices could be found on nearly every corner, along with coffee and mint tea. The aromas of cinnamon, garlic, cardamom, peppers and fresh mint swirled through the air near the markets in waves. There were strange items like dried camel heads, monkey paws, ostrich eggs, hand painted pottery, strings of strangely shaped beads, brightly colored leather slippers, and kilims in exotic patterns.

In the squares, acrobats tumbled and animal traders from the south presented exotic, colorful birds and animals in cages. There were baskets of all sizes and shapes piled high everywhere. Samir didn't even know what most of them could be used for.

A much loved feature of every desert town had been introduced by the Romans—the large public bath houses or hammams. The men from the caravans poured into the baths, where they steamed and scraped and scrubbed themselves clean before going for dinner. Moosa went to the hammam immediately, then off to dinner with some acquaintances.

Samir was left on his own. He wandered the streets for a while, taking in all the sights and smells. He found it was easier to get around in this symmetrical city than Fez. Fez had been designed deliberately as a maze of twisting alleys centuries before to confuse marauders and prevent them from pouring rapidly into the town to overwhelm it. Awdaghust had wide paved streets in roughly concentric circles.

Everything cost money, but Samir held on to his. The browsing and people-watching were free. In addition to his caravan, two other large caravans had arrived from the south. They had decided to stay over the week because of the Prophet's birthday holiday.

There were Moors from Spain and black Africans from Ethiopia and Ghana, elaborately tattooed Yoruba artisans from Ile-Ife, nomadic blue men from the south who herded camels, and men of all colors and shapes wearing every imaginable type of dress. Merchants came up to him and waved sheer cotton and wool shirts and pants at him. Many were in vibrant colors. They were disappointed when he said no, and kept walking.

Samir wandered around the streets with wide eyes and amazement for several hours. Even in Fez he had never seen so much diversity.

Throughout the city, the Almoravid soldiers in their fat, spiked turbans and fitted face veils were constantly visible. The *Qur'an* says, "Turbans are the crowns of Muslims, turbans are the dignity of believers," but it was against the law for anyone but an Almoravid to wear this distinctive dress, and they were a notable presence. Awdaghust was one of their major cities.

The Almohad soldiers who rode with Samir's caravan were forced to remain outside the city wall. The Almoravids let them move freely only within their own barracks, except to enter the mosque to pray at appointed hours. Even hated enemies were allowed to pray.

CHAPTER 10

Awdaghost was a town of many thousands of inhabitants, laid out in roughly rings of prominence. The outer wall of the city was near the sandstone escarpment of the single mountain nearby. Soldiers' barracks and the caravanserais were just outside the wall.

The outermost ring of roads was for the artisans, merchants and shopkeepers. The innermost rings were for the aspiring and the wealthy. The houses and citizens became grander the closer he walked to the center of town.

Each residence was surrounded by high walls protecting its grand inner courtyards from prying eyes. The doors into the high walls around courtyards and homes were arched, and often painted in bright colors. Many doorways were framed in glazed tiles or bronze work. The grandest homes had elaborate wrought iron gates surrounded by colorful enameled tile patterns and ornate pendant lanterns hanging from elaborately carved brackets. Samir drank in all the variety and detail.

He passed dozens of wells and fountains, and even though it had been dark for several hours, loud haggling was still underway in the many market squares. There were smaller mosques and craftsman shops of all kinds, with signs indicating where to get a saddle or iron tools or armor and weapons or pottery. Knives and swords and hilts were inlaid with precious agate, amazonite and garnets.

Samir took his time looking at all the wares. In one shop he discovered special saddles and blankets for horse and camel racing, as well as padded straps in bright colors to protect their faces and necks from rough handling.

He asked the saddle shop owner where the races would be. "Over in the track by the west gate. Day after tomorrow," the man said.

He took Samir by the sleeve and pulled him aside, saying in a low voice, "Are you planning to wager? My brother has a real beauty in the second race. The camel's name is Jabbar al-Takruri... 'Strong man from Takrur'. He would be a good bet. A sure winner."

The man winked and poked Samir in the shoulder, then turned away. Samir took note of the information, and planned to tell Uncle Moosa later. The shop owner would probably get a percentage of any bets on that camel.

It was late when he got to the inn where Uncle Moosa had rented a room. The night prayers had just finished. The inn was called The Peacock's Nest, and had turquoise tiles set around the dark blue, arched wooden door. Big, ornate copper lanterns were mounted on the wall on either side of the doorway, making it hard for anyone to slip in or out of the inn secretly. He entered and asked the innkeeper for his uncle's room.

The winding stairway was steep. He knocked on the door. When he entered, Moosa was in a big bed with round wooden columns on each corner. A sheer curtain moving softly in the night breeze surrounded it.

"Oh, Amo! What a bed!" Samir exclaimed. He approached it, and touched the fabrics on the bedding and the curtains cautiously. "It is for an Emir!"

Moosa laughed and said, "Then this night I am an Emir! Bring me pomegranates and a dancing girl!"

Samir laughed.

“There is a bath behind that screen, Samir. Make use of it. You look part camel yourself right now and smell like one. You will sleep on that small bed under the window.”

By the time Samir had bathed in the cool water and soaked his skin for a while, Moosa was fast asleep and snoring. Samir poked his uncle so he would turn over, and then got into his own bed. As he expected, it was like a dream. He was floating on soft clouds, and being blown about by the warm desert wind. He was asleep in minutes, and the next thing he knew, the sun was beating down on his face through the carved wooden window screen.

Moosa was already gone. Samir had missed the morning prayers, and decided to run out to check on Amuna and his salt slabs. With a little effort, he found the caravanserai. His friend Ali was currently standing guard.

“Salaam aleikhum, little brother,” Ali said. “You are late today. And you apparently found the hammam.” He laughed.

“Aleikhum salaam, brother,” said Samir. “Yes, at last I am clean again. What a city! I have seen so many things. I slept on the softest bed of pillows you can imagine this night. I never knew it was possible to sleep in such a way. The rich must sleep like this every night. No wonder they look so happy!”

Ali nodded and smiled at the boy’s enthusiasm. “I remember when I first slept on a real bed. You will never forget it. Are you here to check on your camel? She has been looking for you.”

Samir nodded, and ran inside. Amuna stood out immediately. In the dimly lit shelter, she was a pale spot standing alone. She snorted when she saw him, and tried to come forward, but she was hobbled. She stopped and gurgled loudly at him. He came up and hung from her neck, then stroked her nose and cheeks. He could see the double row of long eyelashes protecting her big brown eyes. She stared intently at him as if trying to tell him something.

“Amuna, Amuna. Little moon. You are upset with me for being gone, aren’t you? I wish you could have seen me. I was lying like a prince on the softest pillows. But now you are hungry, aren’t you? Oh...what? Ouch!” She nipped his arm with her big teeth. “What was that for? Ahhh...you want your treat, eh? Did you think I would forget you?”

He reached into his pouch and pulled out three fresh dates he had found on the streets as he walked along. The trees were fruiting in the parks, and he managed to collect them before the birds and rats did. He gave them to her one by one. It seemed to cheer her up. She was well rested now, and wanted to go for a run. She nudged Samir several times and rumbled in the back of her throat. He decided it would be okay to take her out, so he removed the hobbles, had her kneel and he climbed up on her back. She started walking toward the door before he even had a chance to settle himself.

Ali waved as they went through the door. Samir barely had time to lift his hand back. Amuna immediately took off trotting, then went to a full gallop.

She had not been able to run much for weeks, and it was exhilarating. Amuna thundered across the desert at a breakneck speed that literally took Samir’s breath away. Sand and wind were flung out behind them recklessly in every direction. Amuna had suddenly transformed from a bored-looking teenaged camel to a strong, fiery racing beast.

For a split second, Samir caught the mischievous look in her brown eyes, and knew that any attempt on his part to stop her would be futile. He wrapped his legs tightly around her soft underbelly, grabbed a wad of thick fur in each hand, and held on for dear life.

This was as close to flying as he had ever been in his dreams. At that very moment, nothing else in the world mattered more to him than the thundering sounds of his camel racing like a champion through that stretch of deserted sands in the wilderness and the feel of the wind on his face. He closed his eyes and let the speed wash over him.

Amuna finally slowed down foaming, snorting and breathless. Her whole body quivered as she danced sideways through the sand hills, shaking her head and blowing air loudly out of her nostrils. Samir patted her furry back and smiled. He had been right about this magnificent animal. They would have many exciting races ahead of them. She was amazing.

It had felt good to stretch out her legs, but Samir didn't want to go too far from the city walls, so he turned her back toward town. No telling who or what was out here in this unknown place. He was right to worry. Behind a dune, a small band of Almoravid soldiers were watching him with interest. One was Ibn Yasin himself...

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