

The Messenger's

Tale

Part One

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## Daar as Salaam - Palabo Payam

**T**he abode of peace was the fairest city in the world, or so thought Palabo. It had problems--like the ignorant pagan currently holding a knife under Palabo's throat.

He contemplated mortality. He was well trained to do so, as a slave of the city's foremost legal theologian. he knew the limits that might be imposed on eternity, and he knew the law.

Neither seemed especially useful, just at the moment.

Luckily, theology was not Palabo's strongest suit. At a very young age, his physicality had been seen by the Devşirme--the inspectors of children. He was a Follower of the Dance of the Sword, and he knew fifty ways to kill a man. Sadly, he also knew what the dance master said about this situation.

*There is no power on earth that will defeat a dagger at your throat or a crossbow pointed at your head.* He contemplated the words of his teacher, and found them wise.

'I have nothing,' he said.

'You lie,' said the pagan, but he said it with a bored resignation that gave the boy some room for hope.

'I cannot lie,' said the young scholar. 'I am a slave. I have nothing.'

The knife fell away, and the pagan stepped back--overwhelming monster to beaten stranger in a single movement of the knife. 'Fuck this,' the pagan said. Palabo could smell the pork on him--an infidel, perhaps even a barbarian.

Palabo's heart pounded, and his hands shook slightly. His master studied this effect, and had a theory that the elevated feeling and strength that accompanied fear and strong emotion was a cosmic fluid generated by violence.

*Why do I think of these things?*

'What's in your pouch, then?' asked the barbarian. Palabo thought it odd--he'd relinquished his advantage and still thought that the boy would give in to him.

*I could kill him.*

*But I'm pretty sure I shouldn't.*

In fact, Allah, his master, and his dance teacher were all much in accord about this.

'I am a messenger,' he said to the pagan. 'The pouch contains my master's message to--' he caught himself. The mere fact that his master might send a message to the leader of the heretical Taşawwufis might be worth money to this desperate man--and might bring shame or discredit on his master.

'Give it here, then,' said the infidel.

'I can take you to a ghahve khaneh and get you food and ghahve,' Palabo said. 'But if you try to take my pouch, I will have to try to kill you.' He said this with all the seriousness a twelve-year-old can muster.

The pagan looked him over. 'Pah--I'm not much of a thief,' he admitted. His mastery of the Avarse was beyond good, for a foreigner. 'But I won't beg.'

Palabo tapped a foot impatiently. 'I am commanded to deliver my message quickly,' he said. 'If you will await me here, I will return before the next summons to prayer and I will share my food with you--as a guest.'

The man leaned back against the white-washed wall, and Palabo winced, because another man had so obviously urinated there not long before, and the brilliant sun hadn't had time to make the body-water vanish.

*Another thing which fascinated his master--the vanishing of liquids in the sun.*

'I suspect this is the best offer I'll have all day,' said the foreigner. He sighed. 'I will slowly starve while I wait.'

'Contemplate Allah,' Palabo said. And he ran.

# # #

The Taşawwufi'am lived in a caravan sara by the Great Gate. They had their own mosque and their own teaching hall and their own kitchens where their food was prepared--in common--by the members of the sect. While they were terrible heretics who believed that mere men could directly contact the very soul of Allah and experience it for themselves--a contemptible thought, really, and

steeped in the sort of ignorant illogic that Palabo had been taught to distrust and despise--despite this, their relentless and cheerful good works, coupled with their fearsome reputation as warriors, caused the rest of the city to view them with a benevolent tolerance. And truly, as Palabo considered their beautiful walls with verses of the Holy Koran painted in magnificent calligraphy, an endless tracery of devotion--truly, the abode of peace was a haven of tolerance for all men. Every sect of al-Islam had a home here; Jews disputed openly the origins of the cosmos with learned men of the university; there had even, once, been a pair of Christian friars in coarse brown robes, preaching about the prophet Jesus in the souk, and they had been taken to the palace--for dinner. The Sultan of sultans insisted on tolerance.

And taxation.

There was an elderly dervish ion the gateway of the karavan sara. He bowed to Palabo. 'Welcome, mighty warrior, friend of the prophets, protector of the weak!' he said.

'I'm not yet thirteen years of age, and you can keep your flattery for a better man,' Palabo replied. 'I have a message for your lord.'

The old man grinned, and revealed a full set of teeth. Palabo was well enough trained to note that the old man was past sixty, and yet had the muscles of a well-trained man. 'We have no lords here,' he said. 'Worldly power is often useful, but the titles are empty and vain.'

Palabo gestured in frustration. 'Yet you have a leader?' he asked. 'I have a message to deliver, and I do not seek debate.'

'A pity, as I have no where else I must be, and I love to debate with an intelligent youth like you,' said the old man. 'Who knows, I might yet learn something.'

'Who is your leader?' Palabo asked.

'Allah is our leader,' the man said.

Palabo sighed. 'Yes, I might have known that,' he said. He shrugged. 'To whom would my master address himself?' he asked.

'Very good!' said the gatekeeper. 'Now if we might establish who your master is, we might easily send you on your way. But you know,' and the man's mahogany face creased in a broad smile, 'that Allah is your only true master.'

The boy smiled back. 'That being the case,' he said, 'As he is my master and your leader, there is no need for me to deliver my message.' He turned to go.

The man slapped his thigh. 'Ah, my pearl of contentment. My master of the thousand and one names! You are the very paragon of *reason*.' He snapped his fingers and held out his hand. 'I will take the message.'

Palabo looked at him a moment. 'Are you Sheikh Muhammed ibn Fahd?' he asked.

The man wagged his head from side to side like an especially intelligent cat. 'I might be.'

'You might not be, in which case I would be punished.' Palabo tapped his foot with impatience. How would his dance teacher deal with this wooly old man? 'Haji, may I enter?' he asked.

'This gate is open to all,' the old man said.

Palabo walked in through the magnificent tall gate, with further Koranic verses written in cursive all along the walls and ceiling--here, the script had been placed on ceramic tiles, deep blue on shining white, and yet the gatehouse was cool and pleasant after the streets. In the courtyard, there were lemon and citrus trees, and the courtyard was dominated by a fountain. All around the edge of the court, save only at the graveled end where there was a stable, was a deep colonnade of arched openings, each pointed at the top and tiled in white and blue. The court was full of men, and even a few women--most of them talking, but a few in prayer or meditation. At the opposite end from the stable a man in a black wool kaftan and boots lectured to a dozen students in light linen robes and sandals.

The teacher wore a sword, and looked, to Palabo, like a leader. The boy crossed the yard--and heard more heresy in fifteen paces than he'd heard in his whole life.

The man in the black kaftan raised his eyes from his pupils and smiled. 'Yes?' he asked.

'Are you Muhammed ibn Fahd? Palabo asked.

The man shrugged. 'I beg leave to doubt it,' he said.

'Are you the leader here?' Palabo insisted.

'Allah is the only leader here,' the man said. 'I am a poor Commander of Ten-a mere Ghulam in the service of the Sultan. A slave, like you.' He nodded at the other boys. 'I have seen something of the world, and I am teaching. Geography.'

'Where is ibn Fahd?' Palabo asked with less courtesy than he usually managed.

'Wherever you find him,' said the soldier.

Palabo wandered the courtyard for the better part of a quarter of an hour, and heard many things that might have delighted or annoyed his master, but no one would admit to being the lord of the house, or to being the notorious dervish, ibn Fahd.

He felt he was being made game of. After some time, everyone smiled at him. They were so friendly he wanted to scream, and he was sure they were hiding their lord, or teacher, or *imam* or whatever title would, like the opening of 'Alā' ad-Dīn's cave, cause the residents to tell him where to go.

But it also had the atmosphere of a test, and he knew one of his master's tests when he came to one. So eventually he returned to the gate keeper.

'May I try again?' he asked.

The gate keeper smiled. 'Always,' he said.

'May we reason together?' Palabo said.

'If we must,' said the old man. 'Myself, I find Aristotelian logic unsuited the actual lives of human beings.'



'You are ibn Fahd!' Palabo said, accusingly.

The old man shrugged, bored. 'That was intuitive, and not at all reasonable.'

Palabo nodded, more sure of himself. 'Very well,' he said. 'My master has sent me with a message for Muhammed ibn Fahd. I am to deliver it to the man in person, and I believe that he is here in this karavan sara. Can you help me?'

The brown man nodded. 'Yes,' he said.

'Will you help me?' asked the boy.

'Yes. Where does the reason come into this?' he asked Palabo.

'I thought that you might make me prove my assertion that he was here,' Palabo said.

The man cocked his head to one side. 'This is what they teach in the Kalam?' He shook his hand. 'But enough games, my young friend.' He extended his hand. 'I am ibn Fahd, and you have faithfully discharged you mission, although perhaps not as quickly as some--still, more quickly than others.'

'I knew it was you,' said the boy.

'No,' said the brown man. 'You had a feeling it was me. But you distrusted it as you distrust all things of the heart--the more so as my presence here is so much a storybook solution. Something from as-Sindibād al-Baḥri, eh? Not very likely in real life.' He smiled.

Palabo sighed. It was as if the man could read his thoughts.

'I *can* read your thoughts,' said the man.

Palabo nearly jumped out of his skin.

'Run along home to your master and tell him that the answer is yes.' The brown man tossed the scroll tube behind him, unopened.

Palabo didn't pause. He turned and ran.

# # #

Palabo's master was a great man--famous throughout the world, and revered in his city. He had written three great books--a monumental commentary on the law, a book on the foolishness of the study of ancient philosophy, and another on the foolishness of failing to study the ancient philosophy. All three books were internally coherent, and the each of them conflicted at some level with the other two--a paradox which most educated men found delightful rather than heretical. He had a great name to go with his greatness--'Abū l-Walīd Muḥammad bin 'Aḥmad bin Rušd. Men called him *Rushid*, and his followers, 'Rushidi'

He was also a mighty worker of miracles, and some men thought he was a prophet.

When Palabo returned from his errand, there were a dozen other slaves waiting in an antechamber outside the master's Chamber of Secrets. The house was laid out, like most houses of the rich and powerful in Daar, in three sides of an open court filled with trees and fountains; one side was the barracks for servants and slaves, and the second side was the Master's private home, with many rooms, and the third side was the workshop--the Chamber of Secrets. The truth was complicated, as it always was--the truth was that most of the slaves

were allowed in the Chamber, and some, like Palabo, were even allowed to train there and to use some of the simpler devices. There was very little in the Chamber that Palabo hadn't seen in action, and yet the place was redolent with secrets.

Palabo bowed to Boscar Effendi, the chamberlain. 'I have received an answer from the heretic ibn Fahd,' he said. It was relaxing to report to the chamberlain, as it relieved Palabo of responsibility for reporting to the master.

Boscar fingered his beard with a fat and heavily ringed hand. 'To the Karavan Sara?' he asked.

'Yes, Effendi,' Palabo answered. Boscar knew everything about his household--who was on what errand, how long that errand should take, where one's lessons took place and when a slave should be working and when learning, when a boy filched sweets or stared too long at a girl.

Boscar wore a heavy patchouli scent that Palabo tolerated because he loved the man. Otherwise, it was horrid. He leaned over and his scent was overpowering. 'Go and eat,' he said.

'Effendi, I met a pagan in the souk and promised to share food with him.' Palabo bowed.

'Go with god,' Boscar said, and smiled, obviously pleased. 'Here is a silver dinar to share with this man. Invite him to dinner if he is suitable--the master loves foreigners, as you know. And do not proselytize, young Lightning Bolt. It

is enough to feed him. You needn't teach him, as well. You must make your own way to your dance master after you eat--the message will keep until dinner.'

The chamberlain exchanged bows with the slave, and the boy hurried back out into the sun.

To his amazement, the pagan man was standing almost exactly where the boy had left him. He went and took the man's hand. 'Come,' he said.

'Sorry, I starved to death,' said the foreigner.

'Truly, you stink like the dead,' said the boy. Dead men appeared in his life frequently enough. Beggars died on the streets and lay where they died until someone came and took the corpse for burial--usually a man with something on his conscience--or the Taşawwufis, come to think of it. They buried many of the poor.

The beggar smiled. 'Where can a poor man bathe?' he asked.

'Can you read?' asked the boy.

'Many languages,' said the beggar. 'Many scripts.'

Palabo led the man to a small aghzieh off the souk, run by a woman who served the Sultan's slave soldiers and their women when they had loot to spend--and had a soft spot for small boys who liked sweets. She was convenient to his dance teacher.

He bowed to her. 'Khanoom,' he said, steeping his fingers. 'This worthy foreigner seeks food. I beg it for him in the name of my master.'

'And nothing for yourself?' she said. She tousled his head. She was short, and very pretty. Palabo had only recently begun to see girls and women as pretty--but it struck him that she was exceptionally pretty and wore no veil.

The pagan bowed and his salaam was elegant. 'Khanoom, I respectfully beg for a crust of bread,' he said.

'By the prophet, dog of a Christian, you stink like a dead mule,' she said. She extended a hand. 'I'll send a slave to bathe you. *Then* I'll feed you.'

'And my master will invite you to dine,' Palabo said to the stranger. The man seemed taller and more confident every minute.

The foreigner sighed. 'Failing to rob you may have restored my fortune,' he said.

The foreigner had something, that was certain. He had charmed Ghazal, the khanoom, before Palabo was out the door. He received a bath, a meal, alms, and a presentable outfit—shalvar that fit loosely on the legs, a plain white gomlek, and a brown kaftan. He made jokes, and he quoted both the Koran and the bible with facility.

He was, in fact, a delight, and Palabo loved him the way a girl might have loved a stray kitten, but he was due to dance, and he left the aghziel with regret and slipped through the very narrow and very smelly alley behind, jumped the high, jagged glass-covered wall behind, dashed across Saliim Fahrsay's yard before the dogs could catch him, went up the far wall, onto Farsay's stable roof, ran three steps and jumped into space--

--and landed on the straw piled against one wall of the next courtyard--the dance teacher's. He had other names, but like Allah, no one used his other names.

Palabo was on time. He took off his street clothes, and donned tough cotton shalvar and a gomlek of the cheapest material. To prepare himself, he danced six of the simpler routines--four alone, and two with a sword in his hand. Around him, fifteen other children did the same--some faster, some slower, some with more routines and some fewer.

The teacher emerged and watched. The boy was immediately aware of the weight of the man's gaze, and he was painfully self-aware for several steps and a thrust, and then he was back on his center, riding through the dance like a man riding a horse.

The teacher clapped his hands once.

Every child stopped. They turned together and bowed in silence, and the man returned their bows.

He gestured, and slaves came in with racks--and the foreigner was utterly forgotten. The racks held real swords, not the wooden ones they had hitherto used.

Everything in the class was rigorously hierarchical--the best performers were always served and trained first. Palabo was surprised--and delighted--to discover that he was the fourth student to receive a sword. It was long, and

straight, and the last fifth toward the point was slightly wider than the rest of the blade before clipping down to a wicked end.

. The sword was single edged and plain steel. The hilt was steel, the pommel was steel, and the grip was wound in steel wire.

The teacher took his own from a slave. 'Today,' he said, 'we begin another essential part of the dance.' He gestured with his sword, and a pair of slaves brought in a tripod that held a melon--of all things. The fruit looked incongruous.

The teacher struck the *First Pose*. 'I cut,' he said, and his sword cut down from his shoulder, passed through the melon without apparent effort, and he continued down to the *Second Pose*.

He looked at the children. 'Do you understand?' he asked.

Ali, the class leader, rose and bowed. 'I understand,' he said.

The teacher nodded. 'Then come and cut,' he said.

Ali cut the melon in a single stroke, and the two halves fell away. The boy beamed with delight.

The teacher stabbed one of the halves with his sword, caught it on the point, and held it up. Then he turned and held it to the class.

'If the cut is true, the blade does not waver. See the curve? See the check--where the blade hesitated?'

Ali blushed and bowed. 'My apologies, teacher.'

The teacher laughed. 'By Allah's ten thousandth name, boy--if you could already cut perfectly, what would I be here for?'

Slaves came in with melons--stacks of melons.

The cutting began.

Palabo found that he could cleave melons with ease--that the cleaving of melons made sense of some of the dance's more esoteric requirements for the motions of cutting. And with the delight of a twelve-year-old, he loved to watch the pieces fly.

Of course, the teacher only had four slaves of his own, so after he had cut until his arms were like lead and his wrists no longer truly controlled the blade--after his feet had danced the patterns until his calves burned--he got to scrub the melon bits and juice off the beautiful ebony floor.

Then he remembered the foreigner.

He ran back to the aghzieh. He scraped a knee on Farsay's glass and had to kick a dog, and then he was bowing to the khanoom's slave.

'Your foreign dog has pleased the mistress,' said the blonde slave, with a simper. 'He is a great flatterer, and he eats like a horse.'

He sat in the mistress's sitting room on an ebony stool. He was dressed like a simple scholar or a man of faith, and he looked so very different with his hair and beard cut that Palabo took a moment to focus on him. In fact, he was quite young.



Palabo took him from the Khanoom, who seemed loath to part with him, and led him through the streets.

'You know,' said the man, 'in the west, some men believe that god pre-ordains all of our actions.'

Palabo laughed. 'Of course he does!' he said. 'What else can a person think? There is no god but god, and god is all. God made the world and the world is as it is.'

The foreigner shrugged. 'I was not proposing to debate the theology of it, however much that might entertain us,' he said. 'I merely meant to say that today has been a revelation to me. When I awoke this morning, I lay where I had fallen when men took my last coppers and struck me on the head last night, and I thought that I was a dead man. Yet--in failing to rob you, I have suddenly come much close to my quest being accomplished than I was last night, before I was robbed.'

'The will of Allah,' said the boy.

# # #

Palabo's master was old--older than god, some of the slaves said when they mocked him--carefully. He had a long white beard and bushy eyebrows and wore the unrelieved black of a religious teacher. His cap was black, and was adorned with tens of thousands of stitches by the women of far-off Lamu. The stitches formed the letters of verses of Holy Koran.

Palabo led the foreigner into the dining hall, and bowed to his master. His master had just entered the hall from the workshop, and two senior apprentices were with him, hands in their sleeves, walking with all the dignity that a twenty-year-old can muster.

His master turned toward him, smiled, and then everything seemed to happen at once.

The foreigner made a gesture--

His master turned and raised an arm--

Both men were suddenly hidden in glowing hemispheres of sparkling light. The master's was the deep green of the true religion, and the stranger's was the sickly golden-yellow of pus. Or the bright colour of new-minted gold.

All of the slaves and students threw themselves flat on their faces or crouched under tables.

'Truly, I mean no harm,' said the stranger.

The Master laughed. 'You are most powerful,' he said. 'Why have you come in this way? You had only to knock on the door and declare yourself.'

'I have had a particularly annoying few days,' said the stranger. 'I had not planned to arrive as a beggar at your door,' he continued.

He lowered his hemispheric shield, and the Master instantly lowered his own.

'Be welcome in my house,' said the Master. 'What is your name?'

The young infidel smiled. 'I'm called Harmodius,' he said. 'I understand you have a copy of Maimonides' *Dalālatul Hā'irīn*?'

'Moreans call it Οδηγός για τον μπερδεμένο. In Galle, no doubt they say *Dirige in Incertique?*' Master Rashid smiled and extended a hand, walking forward.

The foreigner owed deeply, albeit in the Frankish manner. 'You are the very pillar of erudition,' he said. 'I don't know what they say in Galle, because, to be truthful, I don't think anyone there has ever heard of Maimonides. Or you.' He shrugged. 'But that is their loss, not yours, my lord.'

Master Rashid smiled even more broadly. 'And I do have a copy. Would you like to see it?'

The foreigner bowed again. 'Master, in my present circumstances, I cannot decide whether I want your food or your knowledge more.'

'The two need not be mutually exclusive,' said the master. He extended a hand, and a slave readied a chair for the foreigner as if he was the Sultan himself. But the master turned to Palabo. 'Where did you find this paragon of learning, young man?' he asked.

'In an alley,' Palabo said.

*This tale takes place years before the events of 'The Red Knight.' Palabo will appear in much of the series, and his backstory will continue to be published here on the website – so stop by for further additions. How does this slave boy come to be a great*

*warrior? To ride with the Red Knight? To help solve the riddle of the fifty spheres? I  
hope you want to know.*