

The silver of the Phoenicians

Albox Mystery Thriller

- Sample text -

Diego Marquéz

2026

Copyright © Diego Marquéz

Corner Shop, Camino de Aljambra 04800 Albox, Almeria,
España

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be
reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever
without the express written permission of the
author.

Published in Spain

ISBN: 9798184839677

table of contents

The Sacrifice of Baria.....	4
The Hole in the Tower.....	6
The Call to Granada.....	15
The Trace of Red Earth.....	19
The Shadow from Alicante.....	24
The Hunters Awaken.....	28
The False Official and the Awakening.....	32
The Interrogation at Dawn.....	39
The Cauldron of Albox.....	47
The Hour of Politics.....	54
The Naked Facts.....	59
The Heritage of Baria.....	63
The Noose Tightens.....	68
The Countdown is Running.....	72
The Trail of the Three Peaks.....	76
The Masquerade of the Hunted.....	83
The Empty Cage.....	89
The Geometric Cryptogram.....	94
The Lost Bearing.....	98
The Pact of Shadows.....	102
The Changed Bed.....	106
The Breath of the Phantom.....	111
The Shadows of Albox.....	116
The Breaking of the Silence.....	120
The Triumph of the Thieves.....	125

The Legacy of the Healers.....	129
Das digitale Labyrinth.....	134
Die Geister der Vergangenheit.....	140
Die Scherben des Puzzels.....	144
The Eye of the Land.....	148
The Nautical Science of the Desert.....	155
The Helmsman's Legacy.....	159
The Code of the Piedra Labrá.....	164
The Deserters of the Rambla.....	168
Reckoning in No Man's Land.....	172
The Signal at Dawn.....	177
Into the Web of the Phantom.....	180
The Shadow of Doubt.....	185
The Bonds of Nerves.....	193
The Legacy of Melkart and Astarte.....	199
When the Mountains Bleed.....	204
The Ride Through the Red Deluge.....	211
The Wrath of the Sky.....	216
In the Hunter's Crosshairs.....	221
The Hunter's Eye.....	225
The Phantom's Panic.....	228
The Legacy of Astarte.....	232
Some Treasures Do Not Want to Be Found....	236

The Sacrifice of Baria

Just under 3,000 years ago, at the mouth of the Almanzora.

The stench of molten lead, charred wood, and salty sea air hung heavy over the coast. At the quay of the Phoenician port city of Baria, torchlight reflected in the dark water of the river, which was deep and navigable at that time. The mighty Tarsis ships stood ready. Their bellies were already filled to the brim with the riches that Phoenician merchants had struck from the mountains deep inland, in what is now the Almanzora Valley near Albox. Tons of raw silver ingots. Exchanged for fine glass, purple cloth, and precious ceramics from the East.

But this evening was not about an ordinary trade. In the shadow of a makeshift altar for the god Melkart, the mighty patron saint of seafarers and the silver trade, stood Hanno, a Phoenician smelter. His hands were stained black by the soot of the Albox smelters. Before him on the altar lay no ordinary ingot. It was a ritual object, cast from the purest silver of the region, decorated with the face of the god Melkart and the symbol of the tuna, the sacred sign of Baria.

A scream tore through the night. Betrayal. Iberian warriors had attacked the smelters in the hinterland, greedy for the metal they had mined themselves. The mining settlement was burning. Hanno knew that this sacred silver object, dedicated to the god, must never fall into the hands of the looters. It was cursed with an inexorable spell: whoever desecrated the sacred silver of Baria or stole it out of greed, Melkart would take their life.

With a few loyal followers, Hanno fled from the burning beach into the interior, following the river course upstream, to where the potters burned the large clay jars for metal transport... into the valley of Albox. In a deep cave, hidden under damp clay mud, they buried the cursed silver. Hanno swore by the eternal fire of Gadir that the god's treasure would rest here forever.

The Hole in the Tower

The Andalusian summer sun burned like molten lead down on the barren hill above Albox. It was the kind of heat that literally paralyzed the Almanzora Valley during the midday hours. The air shimmered over the parched ground, and the gentle wind that occasionally blew over from the coast brought no cooling, but only carried the fine, light dust of the region with it. High on the ridge stood the ruin of the Torre de la Aljambra. Locals reverently called the 13th-century Moorish watchtower "The Red One" because of the reddish coloring of its ancient stones. For centuries it had defied wind and weather, but time and erosion had left deep scars in its foundation.

Paco cursed quietly as a surge of sweat ran into his eyes. He wiped his face with the dirty sleeve of his work shirt and gripped the heavy iron bar tighter. He and his two colleagues from the municipal building yard had been tasked with securing the dilapidated base walls of the tower before the next winter rain caused the slope to slip completely. It was laborious, dusty backbreaking work. The concrete mixer a few meters away droned monotonously, a sound that

gave Paco a headache after four hours in the scorching sun.

"Come on, Paco, hurry up!" called Juan, who was standing by the mixer, stirring new cement. "If we don't finish the base before the midday heat, the mortar will dry out before it even touches the stones!"

"I'm doing what I can," Paco grumbled to himself. He placed the massive iron bar at the very bottom of the foundation, where the centuries-old blocks carved by the Moors transitioned directly into the solid rock. A large, square stone seemed loose. It had shifted slightly outward over time. Paco just wanted to pry it out to thoroughly fill the cavity behind it with fresh cement.

He pressed his entire body weight against the iron bar. The metal crunched against the ancient stone. Paco felt the resistance, took a deep breath, and pushed against it with all his might again.

A dull, grinding rumble echoed from inside the masonry. Suddenly, the resistance gave way. The heavy chunk of stone loosened completely from the bond, slid out with a loud crash, and whirled up a dense cloud of crusted, red dust. Paco coughed, stepped back, and waved his

hand in front of his face to see again.

As the dust settled, Paco looked at the spot where the stone had been. He was just about to reach for the trowel to mix the mortar when he froze. This was not a normal gap in the foundation. Behind it lay no loose rubble or bare earth. The broken-out stone had revealed a deliberate, artificially created niche. It had been hidden deep inside the foundation, so deep that the Moorish master builders in the Middle Ages had apparently erected the tower directly over this hiding place without ever suspecting what lay beneath their feet.

Paco knelt in the hot dust. Curiosity was stronger than fatigue. He pushed his head close to the opening and squinted. In the pale half-light of the chamber, a roundish shape shimmered. It looked unnaturally smooth for a simple stone.

Cautiously, almost fearfully, he reached his arm into the cavity. His fingertips touched a rough, cool surface. It was clearly fired clay. He gripped the object with both hands. It was surprisingly heavy. Centimeter by centimeter, he pulled it out of the darkness of the tower into the glaring daylight.

As the object lay completely on the dusty ground,

Paco held his breath. Before him stood a bulbous, perfectly preserved clay pot. It was covered in a thick layer of dried, red mud, but the shape was undamaged. The jug had a narrow neck and two small, elegantly curved handles. But the real thing that made Paco's heart beat like crazy was the broken seal of the jug. The shock of the lever had caused the seal to crack.

Paco barely dared to breathe as he tilted the jug slightly. A metallic clink sounded. Inside the clay vessel, countless heavy, tarnished dark coins glittered.

With trembling fingers, he reached inside and pulled out one of the metal pieces. The coin was thick, irregularly shaped, but possessed the unmistakable weight of solid silver. He rubbed the millennia-old dirt off with his thumb. The glaring sunlight hit the metal and revealed a relief. It showed the striking, powerful profile of a bearded man with an almost Egyptian-looking headdress. Paco stared at it. He was not a historian, but as a child of the region, he had once seen pictures of it in the local museum of Almería. That was the face of Melkart, the ancient god of the Phoenicians! He turned the heavy silver coin over. On the back, the fine, sharp-edged engraving of a fish could be clearly

seen. It was a tuna, the ancient symbol of the Phoenician-Punic merchants on this coast.

"Hey! Juan! Carlos! Come here! Right now!" called Paco, and his voice cracked with excitement.

The other two workers turned off the mixer. The sudden silence of the engine left an almost eerie quiet on the hill. They shuffled over, visibly annoyed by the interruption.

"What's wrong, Paco? Did you catch a lizard, or why are you yelling like that?" teased Carlos as he lit a cigarette.

But when the two saw the niche in the tower and noticed Paco's pale face, their laughter got stuck in their throats. Their gaze wandered down to the clay pot, from whose opening the matte silver shimmered in the sunlight.

"Holy Mother of God..." whispered Juan, dropping the shovel, which crashed to the ground with a clattering noise. "Paco... what the hell did you pull out of the wall?"

Paco was just about to grab a second coin from the jug to turn it in the light when Carlos took a quick step forward and roughly slapped his hand. "Hands off, Paco! Are you crazy? Don't touch

that thing anymore!"

"But look at this, it's pure silver!" retorted Paco with wide eyes. "That must be worth a fortune!"

"Exactly why you keep your hands off it," replied Carlos in a stern voice, while looking around nervously as if someone could watch them on the deserted hill. "If we loot this now or even a single coin disappears, we'll have the Guardia Civil and the monument protection authority on our backs tomorrow. Then we'll be out of a job and head behind bars. This is a historical find. We're leaving the thing exactly as it is. I'm calling Matteo. He's down in his workshop in the village. That's his job."

Only fifteen minutes later, the tires of an SUV screeched at the foot of the hill.

Matteo had been sitting in his restoration workshop in the center of Albox. He had been in the process of cleaning the delicate remains of a Moorish document under a magnifying glass, surrounded by brushes, chemical solvents, and the familiar smell of old paper and dry wood. When the phone rang and Carlos told him with a faltering voice about the find at the Torre de la Aljambra, Matteo had dropped everything. He hadn't even locked the workshop door, but had

just run to his car. Since then, he had been driving as if in a trance.

With quick, almost panicked steps, he climbed the steep, parched path up to the tower. His shoulder bag with the precision tools hit his hip mercilessly, and the hot wind cut into his face. He ignored the heat completely. His heart hammered against his chest, not because of the physical exertion, but because of the premonition that had been plaguing him since the phone call.

"Where is it? Show it to me!" he blurted out, even before he had properly greeted the three workers who were waiting in the shadow of the tower ruin.

Paco stepped aside silently and pointed mutely to the flat, broken-out stone on which the clay pot stood in the glaring midday light.

Matteo immediately knelt down. The rough scree pressed painfully through the fabric of his jeans, but he didn't even feel it. He forgot the workers, he forgot the scorching Andalusian sun, he forgot the whole world around him. His trained eyes scanned the shape of the jug, the texture of the clay, and the dark patina of the silver coins in seconds. His hands trembled slightly as he pulled a pair of white cotton gloves out of his bag and pulled them on. With extreme caution, as if

dealing with a newborn child, he leaned over the vessel and clamped the watchmaker's loupe in front of his right eye.

He examined the striking profile on the top coin. He saw the characteristic embossing, the beard of the god Melkart, and the fine lines of the tuna on the back.

"That... that is absolutely impossible," whispered Matteo, and an ice-cold shiver ran down his spine despite the extreme heat. He looked slowly upward, up at the red, dilapidated walls of the Moorish watchtower, which stood out silently against the steel-blue sky. "Here? At the Torre de la Aljambra? In the middle of the hinterland of Albox?"

He stood up slowly, his face ashen. He knew exactly what this find meant. This was no Moorish treasure and also no forgotten hiding place from the Spanish War of Independence. This was the legendary silver of the Phoenicians, suspected for millennia to be in the hinterland. A treasure that was older than the city itself, hidden in a place that would turn the entire history of the Almanzora Valley upside down.

While he looked uneasily across the wide, dry valley, he pulled his smartphone out of his pocket

with a trembling hand and dialed a number he knew by heart. It took agonizingly long seconds until the dial tone sounded at the other end.

"Raffael?" said Matteo with a trembling voice when his friend in Granada finally picked up.

"Drop everything. Pack your things. You have to come to Albox immediately. We just dug a damn big puzzle out of the earth here... and I need you here. Immediately."

The Call to Granada

"Coins? Are you absolutely sure, Matteo?"

Raffael's voice on the other end of the line almost cracked, and the loud, monotonous noise of the hands-free system revealed that he was already in the car and had started the engine. "You don't just find Phoenician silver in masonry these days! Most of it was melted down by the Romans two thousand years ago or lies buried deep in the rock tombs of Villaricos on the coast. If this is real, Matteo, if these embossings are authentic, then the air in Albox is currently on fire!"

"Just get here, Raffael. I'm standing right at the ruin of the Torre," replied Matteo, looking nervously at the clay pot that rested heavily on the flat stone. "I know how absurd it sounds. But it's real. I'm holding Melkart in my damn hands."

"I'll be there in two hours. Hold your ground and don't touch anything else without gloves!" shouted Raffael, whipped up, and the abrupt click of the line ended the conversation. He was already on the highway towards Almería, eyes fixed on the speedometer.

Matteo took a deep breath and put the phone in his pocket. Now it was time: keep a cool head,

stay professional, and secure the find before the news made the rounds in the village. The three construction workers watched him with hawk eyes, arms crossed, their faces full of incredulous expectation.

"Well?" Paco finally broke the silence and pointed to the jug. "What are we doing with it now?"

"We're securing it," said Matteo with a firm voice. He tightened his soft, white restorer's gloves and pulled his professional SLR camera out of his shoulder bag. Meticulously, he began to document the site. He photographed the hole in the tower from different angles, the structure of the exposed mortar, and finally the exact position of the jug as it had stood in the niche. Every little detail could be of invaluable worth later to solve the puzzle.

When he had taken enough shots, he knelt down again. With extreme caution, careful not to damage the brittle patina, he lifted the heavy, bulbous jug. The dull, metallic clinking of the silver coins inside sent a shiver down his spine again. He carefully bedded the vessel into a softly padded transport case that he always carried in the trunk for delicate artifacts. He felt

the enormous weight of the silver; it was incomprehensible that this treasure had survived all those centuries, hidden from the eyes of the world.

With slow, deliberate steps, he carried the box to his SUV, placed it carefully on the back seat, and locked the car. He said goodbye to the workers, urged them once more to maintain absolute silence, and drove down the dusty hill at a moderate pace, through the narrow alleys to his workshop in the center of Albox.

When Matteo steered the car into the shady backyard of the workshop only twenty minutes later and turned off the engine, he could hardly believe his eyes. A familiar, dusty car with a Granada license plate was already standing there.

Raffael Moreno was leaning against the driver's door, arms crossed over his chest. He must have covered the winding route through the foothills of the Sierra via the highway in absolute record time. His hair was tousled by the wind, his eyes wide open with adrenaline and excitement. The two friends hadn't seen each other since their last big case, but there was no time for long hugs or pleasantries today. The air was electrified.

"Where is it?" asked Raffael breathlessly and immediately stepped to Matteo's car, even before the latter had really gotten out.

Matteo couldn't suppress a faint smile, got out, and pressed the button on the remote control to open the trunk. "Just as impatient as ever, Raffael. Better help me with this. We'll take the box straight inside onto the lab fleece. Then I'll show you the greatest miracle this valley has ever spat out."

The Trace of Red Earth

In Matteo's workshop, the bright halogen lights hummed tirelessly. The curtain to the courtyard was drawn to keep out prying eyes. The Phoenician clay pot now stood in the center of the room on a clean white fleece, surrounded by brushes, calipers, chemical analysis kits, and high-resolution microscopes. Raffael had carelessly thrown his jacket over a chair, rolled up his sleeves, and stared as if hypnotized at the ancient vessel, while Matteo carefully scraped a tiny sample of the dried earth from the rough bottom of the jug with a fine scalpel.

"And? What does your expert eye tell you, Matteo?" asked Raffael impatiently, drumming his fingers on the edge of the table. "It's not ordinary clay, is it?"

Matteo held the tiny crumb of red earth under the digital microscope, squinted, and adjusted the focus. On the connected screen, the structure appeared in thousandfold magnification. "It is definitely not Moorish clay," muttered Matteo as he analyzed the density of the mineral inclusions. "The Moors used a completely different mixture for their everyday objects and the bricks of the

tower, which was washed finer and fired differently. This here is coarse, extremely rich in iron oxides, and possesses this very typical, bright red coloring." He straightened up, pushed the magnifying glass back, and looked Raffael directly in the eyes. "There is only one place in all of Albox where this specific clay vein has been used for centuries."

Raffael raised his eyebrows, and realization was reflected in his face. "The traditional pottery in Calle San Leonardo."

"Exactly," Matteo nodded and carefully packed the jug back into the transport box. "Family-run since 1726, the people there know every handful of earth in this valley by name. If anyone can tell us where this jug comes from and what composition this earth has, it's them."

A few minutes later, the two friends stepped through the shady wooden gate of the traditional workshop in Calle San Leonardo. The familiar, earthy smell of damp clay, old wooden shelves, and the acrid smoke of the kilns hit them. In the ceiling-high shelves, countless jugs, plates, and traditional vases were lined up, a craft that had hardly changed for generations.

The old master potter, whose hands were deeply

marked by decades of work with the earth of the region and dyed gray by dried clay mud, looked up from his rotating potter's wheel. He recognized Matteo immediately and wiped his hands on his heavy apron as Matteo placed the padded box on the wooden work table.

"Matteo, my friend! What brings you to me at this hour?" asked the master with a smile. But the smile froze on his lips instantly when Matteo pulled away the protective cloth and revealed the find.

The potter stepped closer slowly, almost reverently. His eyes narrowed, he breathed heavily, and in the first moment, he did not dare to touch the vessel at all. "Holy Mary... Where did you get this from?"

"From the foundation of the Torre de la Aljambra," replied Raffael curtly and took a step forward. "The hole in the tower released it this morning."

With incredible gentleness, the master stroked the surface of the jug with his rough fingertips. He examined the striking shape of the neck, the thickness of the walls, and the fine, deeply carved lines on the belly of the vessel. He took a magnifying glass from a drawer and examined

the bond of the clay under the light. By now, the whole family had gathered in the workshop; everyone stared silently and fascinated at the ancient relic.

"The exact age... no, I cannot determine that here in the workshop without laboratory equipment and a thermoluminescence analysis down to the exact decade, of course," the master potter muttered, shaking his head while looking at the jug from below. "But look at this archaic line work. This is not a Moorish technique, and it is not Roman either."

He looked up, and there was a deep, almost eerie astonishment in his eyes. "The shape, this very specific decoration on the belly of the jug... and if you say that silver coins with the face of Melkart and the fish were inside, then there is no doubt for me. This vessel is unimaginably old. It can easily be well over 2,000 years old. It dates from the era when the very first Phoenician merchants took raw silver from our mountains. It is the earth of our valley, formed millennia ago."

Matteo and Raffael exchanged a meaningful, serious look. Well over 2,000 years. That meant they were not just facing a sensational archaeological find; they had just opened

Pandora's box, a millennia-old secret that reached deeper into the forgotten history of Albox than any historian had ever thought possible.