Suleiman, Rawi of Córdoba

By Abdel-Gabbar Adwan

Assalam Alaikum

I was extremely reluctant to pen this story as this action represents a clear departure from the manner in which my family was wont to recount history, and it exposes secrets that could well prevent my children and their successors from continuing in the family line. Nonetheless, I managed to persuade myself to this undertaking, in the full knowledge of how different my circumstances are from those of my predecessors. Since the Islamic conquest of Iberia, my forefathers and I have all lived in Al-Andalus, and we were all engaged in making a secret record of its history, but now, it seems that what I am witnessing is the end of the Umayyad era.

I was born in the golden days of the Caliphate, at the time of the ninth Emir, the second Caliph of Al-Andalus, Al-Hakim Al-Mustansir Billah son of the Caliph Al-Nasir, may Allah have mercy on them and on all other deceased Muslims. It was by the will of Allah that I befriended Hisham al-Mu'ayyad Billah from childhood, and it was by Allah's will that I lived through the collapse of the Caliphate after it was extorted, its glorious cities destroyed, and injustice and chaos prevailed among its people. For this reason, I have decided that my own circumstances and that of Al-Andalus, its people, and the world around it, make it imperative on me to speak from my own knowledge of those things that our traditions have prevented being exposed. I pray to Allah to remedy the situation so that my children and grandchildren can return to a safe life and continue recording events in the manner of our family and that the Creator will guide them in the most suitable path to record the events of the times to come.

My name is Suleiman, tenth grandson of Abu Qareeb As'aad ibn Baher ibn Abdul Rahman Al-Qalai who came here together with the first Muslim warriors. The origins of my eighth great-grandfather can be traced back to the Emperor of the Himyarite Kingdom in Yemen, where he was born in the year 58 AH, corresponding to 678 of the Christian calendar. He was a proficient narrator and recorder of history, and we inherited this profession and its secrets from him, one generation after the other. As'aad left Yemen as a jihadist and reached Africa with Hasan ibn al-Nu'man before participating in the conquest of Al-Andalus with Musa ibn Nusayr. He saw

King Solomon's table, which was carried from Toledo to Damascus by Musa ibn Nusayr and Tariq ibn Ziyad. My great-grandfather was among the conquerors of the Kingdom of the Franks, and he participated in the Battle of the Highway of the Martyrs with the martyr, Emir Abdul Rahman Al-Ghafiqi, in Ramadan of the year 114 AH, corresponding to October and November of the year 732 AD. My great-grandfather was fifty-six years old at that time, and he brought his son Baher, who was then only fifteen years old, to the Kingdom of the Franks. Praise be to Allah that they were destined to survive that crushing defeat which they recorded in detail.

Three and a quarter centuries after our forefathers conquered Al-Andalus and brought it to the pinnacle of glory, here I stand among the ruins of Medinat Al-Zahra, recording in ink what I am seeing with my own eyes, as these scoundrels sell the lead and copper which they tore from the sewage pipes and doors and carry off the stones, columns, and decorations to increase the treasury of Al-Mustakfi Billah, by even so little. Al-Zahra, the construction of which lasted more than four decades during the reign of the Caliph Al-Nasir and his son Al-Hakim, the charm and beauty of which delighted my soul, a city that welcomed within it kings, ambassadors and princes who came from all over the world to appeal to its royal rulers: Al-Zahra which I have seen turned into a prison for Caliph Hisham, son of the Caliph Al-Hakim, is being plundered and pillaged as I stand here, after being wrecked by civil war and set on fire by the Berbers, a mere thirty years after its completion.

We learned how to record and recount history from experience and by the command of our grandfather, As'aad. We compound the official narrative, compiled to suit the Emirs and Caliphs. If we did not follow this method, we would never have been able to gain access to the source of news in the courts of the Emirs and rulers, and if we had followed another method, the most lenient punishment we could have expected would have been a severed tongue. Today, I am following another method and may Allah save both my tongue and my neck.

There is also the semi-official way of writing, in the form of folktales, epic or romantic narratives, myths about genies, treasure, wise men, or scientists, where one has to read between the lines and only the intelligent are able to

decipher them, and there is no harm if imbeciles find amusement in them. What is important is that our family's heads remain upon our necks.

We record and bequeath the official and semi-official oral narratives, however, only true stories are written down. For the most part, the true stories were not a secret at the time, and people speak of them, but the emirs, viziers, Caliphs, and hajibs do not want to hear them unless they are aimed at their enemies. So, after the first civil war that occurred between the Arabs from the North, the Arabs from the South, and the Berbers, my great-grandfather resolved to make a secret record of the truth, which each one of us passes down to his children when they reach adulthood, and we have ensured their full comprehension, their ability to conceal the secret, and their mastery of the profession of storytelling. Each one of us recorded what we saw, heard, and were forbidden from telling or feared to speak of. It is always the truth, but it is the truth as we witness it; the truth of my great-grandfather, who was born in Yemen, which had his loyalty, as was shown in the first civil war between Yemenis, Mudhars, and Berbers, and the truth as I saw it, as the childhood friend of Caliph Hisham who fell into the claws of Al-Amri, the hajib Almanzor, who some believed to be a hero and conqueror. The irrefutable truth is that civil war is returning to all Al-Andalus, and I am reminded of what I read about the events of the first civil war as recorded by my great-grandfather, As'aad, may Allah have mercy on him and bless his grave.

I hope that my forefathers will forgive me departing from our tradition and for exposing some of the pages of their true, hidden record, and I hope that Allah will protect our records and protect our lineage from being lost, destroyed, or reduced to ashes.

1

The Hammam of the Caliph

On the morning of the last Friday of the month of Sha'ban of the year 360 AH, I called to my mother, asking her if she would wash me before the prayer or afterwards.

"Neither, your grandfather told me this morning that he intends to take you with him to pray at the Great Mosque, and he will take you to the Caliph's bathhouse afterwards."

I just performed the ritual cleansing, the wudu, and sat in the library of our home, writing out pages from the Qur'an to show my father once he returned from Seville. Before leaving, he had promised to bring me a valuable gift from there, but he said I would receive nothing unless my handwriting improved while he was away.

When my grandfather came to take me to prayers, I thought to seek his counsel on whether I was worthy of the gift or not. He glanced at the new lines, comparing them with a page that I had written before my father left, at the beginning of the month of Sha'ban. He combed his fingers through his beard and pointed to the paper: "This is close to duck scratch." Then he pointed to the other paper while avoiding looking into my eyes: "And this is better than chicken scratch." Before I could run to my room crying, he grabbed me by the waist and hugged me to his chest, not letting me go until I calmed down, and he assured me that I would receive my gift. To my delight, he informed me that if I retained my passion for learning, I could become scribe to the Caliph, like my father's grandfather, Abdullah.

Our house in Córdoba is a thousand cubits distance from the mosque, the palace, and the bathhouse of the Caliph and the Guadalquivir Bridge is five hundred cubits further away. It is closer to the Seville Gate than to the Jew's Gate, and our house is located at the end of the Jewish Quarter, close to the Synagogue. My grandfather and uncles built new, spacious

houses on the road between Córdoba and Medinat Al-Zahra while my father retained our house in the middle of the city, adjacent to the original Roman wall which was rebuilt by the Arabs after the conquest, and they constructed another wall around Córdoba's endless expansions.

On the way to the mosque, my grandfather reminded me that his father Abdullah ibn Badr had worked as a scribe for Caliph Al-Nasir, may Allah have mercy on him, throughout the first two years of his rule, which started in the year 300 AH, corresponding to 912 AD. My father's grandfather passed away a few days after Caliph Al-Nasir, in the year 350 AH, four years before I was born.

"What about you grandfather? Did you work for the Caliph as well?"

"Not in the same position as my father, but I organized the library of Al-Hakim, may Allah lengthen his life, before he became Caliph, and I supervised the copying of some of its books for five years after that. I am now sixty-one, and I have only been occupied with reviewing the books and stories of the family for years so they will not be hard for you to manage in the future."

"Who replaced your father as scribe to Caliph Al-Nasir?"

"Muzna, she was well-versed in calligraphy, and she wrote some poetry. The quality of calligraphy is very important, Suleiman, and it opens up opportunities for everyone, whether man or woman. Do you know who the Caliph's scribe is now?"

"No, is it another woman?"

"Yes, it is, well done. It's Lubna the Grammarian. She is very proficient in poetry and calculation, but she is most skilled in calligraphy."

I did not understand what my grandfather meant then when he said that he was revising the family's books so they would not present a challenge to me later. No one had informed me then of the inherited family secret, but I recalled my grandfather's words clearly despite the constant interruptions to greet the shop owners on the way from our house to the mosque.

I also recall that on that day, after prayers, and before we made our way from the mosque to the bathhouse, we heard the call for Ibn Omar, also known as ‘the fraudulent’. He was accompanied by a herald and a guard who held him in front of the mosque for the thousands of worshipers, residents, and market shoppers to hear the accusations against him and to let them see him, so they would recognize him and avoid his tricks and scams on the merchants and also so that those who had been tricked could claim their rights. Usually, those circumambulations were carried out over two days, so that all the people of Córdoba could see the accused, and then they were placed in al-Mutabbaq prison for a period in accordance with the judge’s ruling.

My grandfather carried me on his back to prevent me from being trodden on by passers-by, and I heard him mumble that: “They smear the money thieves and keep the home thieves near.”

“Will they cut off his hand, grandfather?”

“No he did not steal with his hand - he used his mouth to defraud people. If some of his limbs were cut off, he would not be able to work and make money to compensate his victims. He would become a burden on the Diwan of the Needy which the Caliph established to help the needy and to rid Córdoba of the rest of the beggars.”

“Are there still many beggars in the countries you visited?”

“Al-Udwa in the Magreb, Egypt, the Levant, Hijaz, and even Yemen are all filled with beggars in the roads, in front of mosques, and in the markets. The Christian lands that I visited, like Barcelona, are also filled with beggars. Córdoba is unique in its prosperity, wealth, cleanliness, education, and safety by day and night, may Allah protect it and keep it.”

In his youth, my grandfather left Córdoba to perform the Hajj, which is obligatory for every Muslim who is financially and physically able to go on pilgrimage. He used the chance to visit Yemen, the land of our ancestors, from Mecca, and then he visited Baghdad and the Levant, staying for some time in each place, before returning by ship from Alexandria to Almería, a journey of twenty-five days. His tour lasted for two years, and if he had not returned by ship it would have lasted even longer.

My grandfather crossed from the northern gate of the Great Mosque and headed west, towards the palace, then circled around the palace to the south. It has been turned into a guest residence since the Caliph took up residence in Medinat Al-Zahra. Once we left the crowd behind, I got off his back, and we walked together for the few remaining cubits to the Caliph's bathhouse.

The guard greeted us with great respect as he had known my grandfather when he visited the bathhouse in the entourage of Emir Al-Hakim, while he was still the Crown Prince. My grandfather asked who was inside, and I didn't recognize any of the names mentioned by the guard. While we were taking off our clothes and replacing them with towels, my grandfather told me that Emir Hisham, son of the Caliph Al-Hakim, was inside with his chancellor Muhammad ibn Abi Amir Al-Amri who was an acquaintance of my father, as they had studied together under some scholars. "If Hisham is nice to you then there would be no harm in befriending him as he is also six years old."

It seemed the Emir and his chancellor had only entered a short time before us as the chancellor and my grandfather greeted one another in the steam room and exchanged pleasantries from one room to another for a full hour until we reached the restroom, where we had some warm drinks. They talked about the crowd in Córdoba, which is inhabited by a million people so that the expansions and new neighbourhoods, of which there are twenty-one, are encroaching on the outer walls of the old city. My grandfather told Al-Amri that if it were not for me living inside the wall, he would not visit Córdoba regularly, and he would be satisfied to stay in Medinat Al-Zahra.

I did not hear what else my grandfather and the Emir's chancellor talked about as they encouraged me to talk to Hisham. I told him that I had just seen the herald going around with a thief, and that I lived near the mosque and visited the bridge and the mills on the Guadalquivir River whenever I wanted. A flash of longing and sadness showed on his face; he couldn't go anywhere without guards or his chancellor who was assigned to accompany him, after having been chancellor to his brother Abdul Rahman who had passed away.

The image of the young Emir on that day is still vivid in my memory. Hisham's legs were relatively short, compared to his upper body, his hair was a shade between blond and red, his skin was pale, his eyes were light blue, and my shoulders were wider than his. When I asked my grandfather later about these differences in our features, he told me that it is because Hisham's mother, Subh, is not Arab. She is a Basque from the north. "The Caliph Al-Hakim called her Jaafar, and it would be wise not to talk about the difference in your features the next time you see Hisham," my grandfather said, and he reminded me that our family too contained members from different races. Like many others, our grandfather As'aad had married an Andalusian woman after the conquest since the warriors did not bring any Arab women with them, and his son Baher married a Berber woman, while his grandson married an Arab woman of Levant origin.

"Jaafar is a masculine name, grandfather. Why did the Caliph not call Subh by her own name?"

"Because he preferred her to the rest of his harem and concubines and, as he did not want them to be jealous when he called for her, sometimes he would claim that he couldn't see any of the harem women that evening and would spend most of it discussing work with Jaafar. In this way, the harem would think that he meant Jaafar al-Mus'hafi while Subh would understand that he wanted to see her that night. Of course, this did not remain a secret for long."

Apart from the trick between the Caliph and his harem, none of this information was new. I waited until my grandfather had finished telling the story before I asked him why he predicted that I would see Hisham again. That was the first time that I had been to such a luxurious bathhouse, one that had been built for the Caliph behind the palace and which the public was not allowed to use, even though the Caliph and his entourage had left for Medinat Al-Zahra. I had visited a small bathhouse in our street with my father once before, but it was always crowded, although there are four hundred baths in Córdoba and its suburbs, so I avoided going to the bathhouse and preferred to wash weekly at home. Now, after seeing the bathhouse of the Caliph, I wished I could visit it at least once a week. From the inside, it is similar to the Great Mosque, except that it is much smaller,

of course. The pillars are of marble, and the arches above them are in the shape of horseshoes and resemble the arches that Caliph al-Nasir added to the Great Mosque. The walls are covered in floral patterns and the lower half is painted red. After the spacious first room, which is for reception, resting, and departure, the rooms are connected by wooden doors, and their tiled floors contain channels for hot and cold water, connected to the basins.

Why did my grandfather say that I would see Emir Hisham again? Would we return to that bathhouse? My grandfather told me later that the chancellor noticed that Hisham talked to me openly, and he suggested that my grandfather tutor Hisham in Umayyad history once a week, and that he should take me with him to the palace in Al-Zahra. Later, I learned that my grandfather did not agree immediately, and he promised to give a response after Ramadan, depending on circumstances. In fact, he wanted to obtain his son's approval, after his return from Seville, as he knew that my father could not stand any mention of Muhammad Al-Amri.

Now, my longing for my father's return doubled, I wanted the gift and I wanted the weekly visit with my grandfather to the Caliph’s palace in Al-Zahra.

What beautiful days we lived through fifty-four years ago, and how right my late father was, may Allah have mercy on him, with his negative opinion of Al-Amri. The six years that followed meeting Hisham in the bathhouse were the happiest for both of us. My friend’s appointment as Caliph, when he was only eleven years and eight months old, signalled the start of his personal catastrophe and the end of his dynasty, the Umayyad. At this point, no one knows if he is alive or dead, and for ten years rumours have been circulating that he is a prisoner, while some claim that he was strangled to death.

On the day of Eid Al-Fitr of the year 360 AH, I was the happiest child in the world: I received both gifts, but not before I spent the entire month of Ramadan fearing for my father’s life.

2

The Viking Ghouls

On the last day of Sha'ban, people gathered around the mosque in the garden within the walls, and some even climbed up the wide minaret that connected the northern wall with the western one and the one overlooking the garden. I found that the reason for this rampage was the arrival of thirty Muslim prisoners, made up of both men and women, together with the ambassador of the state of Barcelona who had arrived in Córdoba to sign a peace treaty. He had collected these prisoners from the Christian lands as a gift to the Caliph in order to gain his favour. Al-Hakim had no need of gifts of money and jewellery, and the Christians knew how much he liked to free Muslim prisoners of war, which is why they started buying them from all over to accompany the embassy, but they found no more than thirty. The ambassador also brought furs, tin, and Slav boys with him as gifts.

Of itself, this was good news, but the neighbourhood boys, or rather the gang of Abdul Issa Al- Fihri, claimed that the prisoners had been tortured by the Christians and therefore the ambassador and the delegation that accompanied him deserved to be stoned. They gathered about fifteen boys and crossed the bridge. Driven by curiosity, I followed them towards the Nasir district, along the bank of the river to where the embassy was lodged in the palace that had been built by Emir Abdullah, the grandfather of Caliph al-Nasir, and where Al-Hakim had resided as Crown Prince before he moved to Al-Zahra.

Abdul Issa and his gang saw a group of Christian and Caliphal guards watching the sidewalk and walls of Córdoba from across the river. They retreated to the Raval cemetery, took cover behind the headstones and started throwing stones. The Caliphal guards ran after them and yelled at the pedestrians to cut them off and catch them. Al- Fihri escaped, and the

guards arrested around half of the gang and beat their buttocks with canes until the Christian guards permitted them to stop.

I later found out from the records of my grandfather Khalid that the embassy was led by Enneco Bonfill Sinderedo, as representative of the governor of Barcelona, Borerell Suner. The embassy was accompanied by twenty soldiers and thirty prisoners to appease the Caliph, in hopes of obtaining a treaty. Al-Hakim had commanded Hisham ibn Muhammad, the governor of Tortosa and Valencia, to ensure their comfort. Hisham accompanied them as mediator after they visited him in nearby Valencia.

On Saturday, the fourth of Ramadan, the Caliph greeted them and sat with them in the eastern hall, which overlooked the gardens of Al-Zahra, with predetermined and opulent display, as was his usual custom. The viziers arrived and each sat on his cushion; to the right of the Caliph sat his commander, Ghalib ibn Abdul Rahman, under him sat the Vizier of the Servants, to the left sat the Sahib Al-Medina, or Administrator, of Córdoba, Jaafar ibn Othman, and, under him, the Sahib Al-Medina of Al-Zahra, Mohammed ibn Aflah. Then, Jamhour ibn Al-Sheikh entered with a group of soldiers and the highest officials in the Christian delegation, accompanied by five of Córdoba's interpreters. Upon reaching the seating, they bowed and crawled on their knees until they arrived before the Caliph and kissed his hand. Al-Hakim invited them to rise and they stayed like that while delivering the books they had brought with them. The Caliph looked at them then started asking about the whereabouts of the sender, about their countries, and he granted their request for a treaty. My grandfather wrote other details of what occurred in the session before Jamhour ibn Al-Sheikh escorted them back to the Nasir district, where they stayed to be hosted for a while before returning home.

In that year, the Caliph welcomed many other embassies most of which were from Al-Udwa of the Maghreb. However, on the same day that the Caliph met with the embassy from Barcelona, Viking invaders arrived in Seville on their second raid during the reign of Al-Hakim. They had previously raided Al-Andalus many times and terrorized the coastal cities, such as Lisbon, and the cities overlooking the river, especially Seville, where my father was finishing some business.

News of the invasion reached the Caliph, and the people of Córdoba, on the following day. My grandfather's face was filled with concern, while my mother's actions betrayed her panic as she hid the news from us to avoid worrying us. Ever since the first Viking invasion of Al-Andalus there had been stories about them and the atrocities they committed, and mothers had taken to using them as a way to scare children into obedience. The ghouls were no longer scary; instead, it was the Vikings, due to their actions during their first raid in the year 229 AH at the time of Emir Abdul Rahman II. At that time, history books record that the heathen Vikings, denominated Majus, came in eighty boats. They disembarked on the eastern coast and attacked Niebla and Cádiz in the south then made their way to Seville, reached Córdoba on horses, and then returned to Seville, Niebla, Baja, and Lisbon. They pillaged, killed, burned, captured, and raped. They moved rapidly, and the reinforcements from Córdoba were unable to catch up with them as the Andalusian soldiers were unused to this kind of fighting. Usually, their enemies fought to take over the land and not to capture and plunder at night then move elsewhere in the morning. This tragedy continued for two weeks and, in the beginning, the Muslims faced defeat and many of them were killed. In the later days of the invasion, the Muslim mangonel catapults succeeded in hitting their ships, burning four of them, and ibn Rustam seized them, after killing five hundred of the brutes. During the next battle in Seville, before they could escape, he burned thirty of their boats and hanged many of the Majus from the date trees there.

Subsequent to these horrors, Emir Abdul Rahman II ordered the construction of a great wall surrounding Seville so it would no longer be exposed. The wall was built in the shape of a crescent that encompassed the city and met at the junction of the rivers. Defenses and towers were also erected on the two banks, linked to each other by chains designed to close the river in front of the invaders' boats when required. The Andalusians then started to build fleets, the first of which was the fleet of Seville, followed by the construction of the city and fleet of Almería. However, on their fourth raid on Al-Andalus, the first during the reign of Caliph Al-Hakim, the Majus arrived on the coast of Al-Andalus in twenty-eight boats. They were met by the Seville fleet, led by the Prince of the Sea, Abdul Rahman ibn Ramahs, who pushed them back and destroyed

some of their ships in a battle where Muslims were martyred and many infidels killed. At that time, the soldiers and the people shot burning arrows from the shore.

At the time of this fifth battle, Abdul Rahman ibn Ramahs happened to be in Córdoba, so the Caliph ordered him immediately to Almería, to prepare to sail westwards towards Seville to cut off the Majus in case they were thinking of entering the sea from Cádiz and Gibraltar. On Monday, Ramahs set out for Almería. The Commander, and Vizier, Ghalib ibn Abdul Rahman, was also in Córdoba, accompanying the Barcelonan embassy. The Caliph asked for him, talked to him, and gave him instructions for the pursuit of the campaign on land and at sea.

I read the following in my grandfather's description of the preparations: "The Caliph entrusted Commander Ghalib to Allah the Almighty, and he commanded him to rise. He then bid him farewell, and he set out with supplication to Allah that he and the other Muslims would meet with good actions and a successful outcome."

When Thursday arrived and preparations had been completed, weapons and equipment stores were opened in Al-Zahra Palace, and a white and pink package that contained cloth banners was carried to Commander Ghalib. It was brought by the Vizier of Horse and Servants, Ziyad ibn Aflah. When the cloth was unfolded, they found three pieces, including a banner, a flag, and bunting, and the head tailor hung them from their masts. Muhammad ibn Yusuf Al-Qadi was also present, accompanied by two muezzins who started reciting from the Qur'an: "Indeed, we have granted you a clear triumph, O Prophet." And voices were raised with praise to Allah and cheering until the Commander had taken the banners, climbed on his horse, and set out on his conquest, with weapons in his hands, and rows of soldiers filling the road. Off they set to Seville to repel the Majus.

My grandfather and my mother were able to hide the news from me for four days but, on Thursday, the soldiers started preparing to leave Córdoba, and on Friday the topic of the sermon by Qadi Saeed ibn Mundhir in the mosque was the raising of morale to expel the Vikings from Seville and he prayed for the triumph of the Caliph and the Muslim soldiers, and I found out like everyone else that our land was under attack.

When my father returned from Seville, he told me how the people and the soldiers had fought off the boats. In the beginning, half of the boats managed to sail into the river before the chains were pulled up between the two towers, trapping half of them in the upper reaches, where they were unable to sail further towards Córdoba and unable to retreat defeated, while the other half remained at sea. The spears and arrows of the soldiers rained down on them from the tops of the towers, the people threw stones at them from the banks of the river, and they were hit by flaming catapults. The fighters from the boats trapped behind the chains abandoned them and swam to the other boats, which were retreating defeated with their decks and sails on fire. Those who were not lucky enough to reach these boats turned towards the shore, and they were slaughtered and thrown into the Guadalquivir River while some were hanged from date trees.

The month of Ramadan of that year was incredibly eventful. Before my father's return to Córdoba, on Saturday the eighth of the month, news broke from Al-Udwa that Ziri ibn Manad Al-Sanhajai was dead. Ziri was the Commander-General of the Ruler of Africa, Ma'ad ibn Ismail al-Shi'i, the opponent of Caliph Al-Hakim. He was killed by Jaafar and Yahya, the sons of Ali, known as Ibn Al-Andalusi, who opposed Ma'ad and the Shias, and rallied the tribes in Morocco against him in support of the Umayyad Caliphs in Al-Andalus. Ziri was killed in a war that included the chiefs of the Berbers who stood against him, encouraged and aided by Caliph Al-Hakim. Al-Baghdadi, Jaafar's imam, arrived with a message to the Caliph bringing him the good news that Jaafar and Yahya, the chiefs of the Berbers, would be arriving later on a visit to the Caliph, bringing the head of Ziri and that of other nobles with them.

Eight months prior to this news, in the month of Muharram of the year 360 AH, the Caliph had welcomed Issa ibn Muhammad, Muhammad ibn Ali and Hassan ibn Ali, messengers of Bani Muhammad al-Hasanin, the Emir of the West, to the palace of Córdoba. They presented the message sent to the Caliph by their overlord, assuring him of loyalty and requesting archers as reinforcement against a predicted attack by the Ma'ad al-Shi'i. They sought the Caliph's agreement by gifting him horses and camels, and he provided the archers required to reinforce them in the war. Three months later, in Rabiʿ al-Thani, the Zenata tribes were surrounded by Ziri, and

when Emir Muhammad realized that his enemies had him cornered, he leaned on his sword, killing himself with his own blade. In Ramadan, the Zenata tribes took their revenge on Ziri and, two months later, they brought his head to Córdoba. Prior to their arrival, Al-Hakim called on his generals and enforcers in all of Al-Andalus to attend with dignitaries and notables to witness the entry of Yahya ibn Ali and the Bani Khazar, the Emirs of Zenata, with Ziri's head.

Two months after the news of Ziri's death broke, Muhammad ibn Abi Amir went to welcome Jaafar and his brother Yahya in the port of Málaga, taking four of the best horses with Caliphal saddles and reins with him as a gift for the sons of Al-Andalusi. This was followed by other animals, howdahs, clothes, and carriages for the women, to transport the family of Jaafar and his brother, and they arrived in Córdoba five days later with great display until, finally, they reached the Caliph who was surrounded by soldiers and the notables of Al-Andalus.

At the end of the month of Ramadan, a messenger from the town administrator arrived from the city of Lystra in the neighboring Christian kingdom of Galicia, north of Al-Andalus, carrying a message dated Sunday the twelfth of Ramadan, with news of a raid and defeat of the Majus, may Allah smite them, after they raided and plundered the city of Santaver, and its surroundings, on the northern coast of Al-Andalus. The messenger made a quick journey of thirteen days to cross two-thirds of the length of the country from the north to Córdoba, to warn the Caliph and request his aid against the Majus who did not distinguish between race, religion, and countries in their conquests. They attacked the rich coastal cities wherever they found them and sailed up the rivers in search of all that was light and valuable.

It was also the day my father arrived home, unusually invoking several ululations from my mother to express her delight and to announce to the entire neighbourhood that her husband had made it safely home from Seville. On recognizing their sister's voice, my uncles left their open shops on the other side of the street, and ran to our house, which was filled with well-wishers from our Muslim, Christian, and Jewish neighbours. Despite the sweltering summer heat, we did not offer any beverages or sweets as it

was a time of fast, and people did not stay long after they had satisfied themselves and congratulated us on my father's safe return.

At sunset, we broke our fast at home, and I then went with my father and grandfather to the evening prayer in the Great Mosque. Ever since the news about the attack on Seville had broken, my grandfather had not left our house at night as he used to. All my father's friends who met him after the prayer insisted on hearing the news from Seville and the stories of what had happened there, as for me, I kept pulling on my father's cloak, time and time again, urging him to return home. I sent my grandfather a pleading look to do something to withdraw my father from the circle. After some time, that felt like the entire evening, my grandfather asked the crowd to leave Abu Suleiman so he could go home to rest, and my father promised that he would give them more details in the nights to come.

"My grandfather said that my handwriting improved greatly, and that I deserve the gift, right grandfather?" My father laughed a lot with my grandfather on the way home, and he assured me that the gift would be to my liking but he was keeping it until the day of Eid, so I did not get it that night.

"If your handwriting has improved then this pen will make it even better, but do not carry it outside the house as there is no other like it in all of Córdoba. This is the newest invention from Seville." My father handed me a reed, enclosed in another reed that was wider at each end. The front end of the reed was sharpened, like the normal pen that we dip in ink. In the cavity on the other side, was a crystal tube, open at both ends, with a wide rear opening for pouring in ink and a narrow front opening on the pointy part, out of which the ink dripped.

"When you want to write with it, put some silk or cotton cloth in first to prevent drips, then fill the crystal with ink, and you can write for hours without needing to dip the tip in the inkwell every two seconds."

My grandfather listened carefully to my father's instructions about the pen and how to add ink to the crystal tube and how to close it, and he wished that this invention had been discovered long ago. My father told him that he had brought more than fifty pens with him, some to use and others go give

as gifts before the invention became more common and its use widespread. Weeks later, my father had his own workshop that produced and developed the use of these pens, and I inherited the task of managing this shop.

My mother put some qatayef, made from filled pancakes, and awameh, a type of doughnut soaked in syrup, brought by her brother Mohammed after he had broken his fast, on the table. My sister Fatima sat with us, looking at the dress and shawls that my father had brought as a gift for her. Suddenly, my father's expression changed, drawing my attention to the conversation between my grandfather and his son. It was about our visit to the bathhouse and Al-Amri asking my grandfather to teach Hisham the history of his ancestors, bringing me with him for those lessons. My father agreed to his father's request with great displeasure, but he did not discuss it in front of me. For the next three years, my father did disclose to me the reason why he hated Mohammed Al-Amri, who was a judge in Seville, chancellor to Emir Hisham, and had almost the status of a Vizier at that time.

Before sleeping, I insisted that my father tell me stories about the Vikings, who we call the Majus, but he opted out by saying that he was tired, and then he passed me to my grandfather and left the reception room with his wife. I went with my grandfather to the main area in the house where we laid mats and pillows. My sister Fatima came too, and she lay down on the bed where my grandfather covered her with a thin sheet after promising to fulfill her request: She wanted us to wake her up for the pre-fasting meal, the suhoor, so she could eat before the morning prayer. She claimed that she would be able to fast until midday if she ate suhoor with us.

"Pray for Allah's blessing on the prophet."

"Peace and the blessings of Allah be upon him," Fatima and I said, in response to my grandfather.

"The Majus are a people of war, plunder, and invasion. Their leader is the strongest fighter and wrestler, meaning if Ali Al-Attal, the porter, were to travel to their lands in Denmark, he could wrestle with them and become king. Their lands are cold and they are in the north-east of Frankish Gaul,

farther than the lands of the Germanic tribes, and they are covered in snow for most of the year."

"Their fast in summer must be easier then as they don't feel as much thirst as we do in Ramadan," Fatima said as she tried to fight off sleep and her dreams of suhoor food. My grandfather laughed and told Fatima to keep quiet and not to interrupt him.

"The Majus are not Muslim like us, they are not Jewish or Christian either like our neighbours in Córdoba, which is why they neither fast nor pray, Fatima. They sail in their long, fast boats and invade cities and villages wherever they can anchor. They load up the treasures of the churches, pillage everything in sight, take women and children captives to sell them, and kill whoever stands in their way. They are really courageous and mighty when it comes to hitting and stabbing, and no land is spared their actions. They live on what they plunder in the summer, and they have cows and sheep in their lands from the milk of which they produce their famous cheese, and they also dry fish."

My grandfather lowered his voice, noticing that Fatima had fallen fast asleep. He took one of the sweets, and I took one as well even though I felt stuffed from the great quantity of food my mother had prepared to celebrate her husband's safe return from Seville and the Majus.

"After their raid on us in the time of Emir Abdul Rahman II, may Allah have mercy on him, when they killed many of us, we destroyed some of their ships and took prisoners. The Emir wanted to protect the land by building walls, increasing the marine fleet, and increasing the number of watchtowers overlooking the shore, to transfer news quickly by sending signals and horses to and from Córdoba, from where it was then spread to the other regions.

It is likely that the king of the Majus assumed that we would want to invade his lands in revenge, but that was not the case, we only wished to improve our posts and armies to keep the country secure. Their king, Hårik, sent an embassy to Córdoba to seek a peace treaty, which was welcomed by Emir Abdul Rahman II, and he sent an embassy of his own to their land, headed

by the vizier and famous poet, Yahya ibn Hakim Al-Bakri, known as Al-Ghazal, the gazelle. You might know some of his poems."

I had indeed memorized some of the verses of Al-Ghazal's poems. I hummed in agreement, but I was starting to feel the first urgings of sleep. My grandfather asked me to go quietly to the kitchen to fetch two glasses of Qamar al-Din juice, which my mother made every day from dried apricots. It seemed my grandfather wanted to help me drive away the sleepiness so I would not fall into slumber quickly, leaving him to stay awake on his own.

"Al-Ghazal remained in Denmark for an entire year to improve relations there. My grandfather's grandfather, meaning the fifth grandson of our first grandfather, As'aad, met with Al-Ghazal upon his return from the embassy, and he wrote some of what he heard from him about those people and how they behave. You will find this in our history records when you learn how to read better. Some of the strange things they do are to burn the dead. They kill the wife to bury her with her husband, but do not kill the husband to bury him with his wife. They only wash once or twice a year. Most of them keep their clothes on until they wear out on their bodies. At banquets, they mix all of their food, eat roast meat with fruit and any available dessert, and they eat everything with their hands. They consume lots of deranging and dementing liquor to keep the warmth inside their bodies when they are cold. Paganism and witchcraft are common and many stories and details were recorded in the books after the return of the embassy."

I asked my grandfather about how Al-Ghazal travelled to such a cold, far land? He replied that he took a boat that sailed close beside a Viking boat until they reached their land. Al-Ghazal was with a group that assisted him and which included his friend Yahya ibn Habib. "If you search through Al-Ghazal's poems you will find a description of the storms that they witnessed when at sea which were so severe that they feared death.

He wrote:

Yahya said: We are among waves that are mountains high

The wind thrashing us backwards and forwards as we sigh

Tearing at the sails and ripping the ropes from their ties

Death was approaching, before our very eyes

The angel of death boastfully followed our track

My friend, we had nothing of worth to hand back

Al-Ghazal was brave indeed, as he refused to bow down before the king of the Majus, who took a liking to him, and his queen, Theodora, who also adored him, and he spoke with her many times. When he returned to Al-Andalus, he stopped in the north to visit the Christian Princes in Santiago and Castile and brief them on the outcome of his journey: The Majus attacks had been stopped all over peninsula. He then passed through Toledo on his way to Córdoba."

"How did he speak with the Majus, grandfather?"

"He was accompanied by interpreters from Córdoba, and he was also fluent in Latin, like many of Córdoba's residents. This was not his first journey either, he was included previously in an embassy to the king of Constantinople, and he was experienced in these matters."

My grandfather continued to recount the story as if these events had taken place long before his era: "The Majus made no further attacks on Al-Andalus until their king, Hårik, and our Emir, Abdul Rahman II, had both passed away, may Allah have mercy on them. Only then was the treaty abandoned with another attack that we were able to fight off with less loss on our side than on theirs. Subsequent to this raid, some captives remained in our lands and settled down, and their grandchildren live to this day in the town of Jerez, which has now become popular for cheese-making. The Majus were the source of other raids against many countries. They invaded the Kingdom of the Franks repeatedly, throughout an entire century, by sailing up the Seine River. They reached Paris with seven hundred boats and besieged it for a year. They plundered the city of Tours, which Abdul Rahman al-Ghafiqi reached, where the Battle of the Highway of the Martyrs that I told you about took place in which our grandfather As'aad and his son participated.

If you wish to hear the rest of the story then don't fall sleep. I will ask you for the details of what I told you in a few days, and you must not forget them."

I assured my grandfather that I was awake and alert, and he continued the tale, most likely abbreviating it.

"They caused trouble for our neighbours in the Kingdom of the Franks for a long time, and when the king, Charles III, grew too despondent to resist them, he agreed a treaty to lessen the evil they bring and to secure himself protection against the other Franks who were competing with him for the crown. In return for protection, he ceded part of his country, located in the northwest, to the Vikings, and his people called him Charles the Simple. This foolish king, Suleiman, was the son of Charles the Fat, son of Charles the Bald, son of Louis the Pious, son of Charlemagne, who attempted to invade Al-Andalus and attacked Zaragoza at the time of Abdul Rahman Al-Dakhil, may Allah have mercy on him. Charlemagne is the grandson of Charles the Hammer, who defeated us in the Battle of the Highway of the Martyrs. You can say that the Majus succeeded where we failed, they now live in Frankish Normandy, which was named after them following the signing of the agreement between Charles the Simple and the Norman Rollo, king of the Majus, sixty years ago. In this way, they were located a month and a half's journey by land from Córdoba, and they can reach our shores faster by boat, and most likely the invasion of Seville this month will not be the last. Our country is very wealthy, our people live in prosperity, and we pray to Allah that it will be long before our neighbours, who only care for murder, destruction, and wounding, become too avaricious."

I do not know whether my grandfather talked for a short time afterwards or not, but I was awoken by my mother's voice, telling me that suhoor was ready. I tried to awaken Fatima from her slumber, but she carried on unwaveringly sleeping like the dead.

I immediately agreed to my grandfather's request that we should go to make our sunrise prayer at the Great Mosque. I quickly performed the ritual cleansing before we went outside early to observe the scene in the city while it was still dark. Throughout the month of Ramadan, all the lights of Córdoba, on both sides of the streets, remained lit, and young people and

boys went out before suhoor, carrying lanterns with lighted candles made from copper and coloured glass, and they beat on drums to wake up the Muslims, Jews and Christians. When the call to the sunrise prayer, the fajr, is heard, one must abstain from food and drink immediately, and anyone who wants to go back to sleep may do so. But most people go out to work after suhoor, before the heat intensifies, and then return early for a siesta, waiting for the time to break their fast.

In that month, and due to my father's absence, my mother did not allow me to participate in the Córdovan nightlife. Now, here she was with her husband, while I and my grandfather passed over the threshold on our way to the mosque and the noisy life in Ramadan - vendors of hot sweets, such as fried churros and many other types of freshly made sweets, sweet syrup and ice-cold sherbet, sold from shops or vendors at the side of the roads, others carrying lupin seeds or beansprouts in clay pots, and some offering hot almonds and chestnuts, which they sell freshly roasted over skillets filled with coal and fire, or roasted corn cobs. Those who craved meat before the call to prayer could also buy sparrows fried in olive oil.

While performing the ritual cleansing under the tap of running water in the courtyard of the mosque, my grandfather started to carry on with the story about the Majus in a good humor and with a wide grin on his face. He said: "The Simple king stipulated that King Rollo should kiss his foot when they met to sign the agreement for the assignment of Normandy. Rollo said that he could not kiss a human foot, but he would ask one of his subsidiaries to kiss King Charles's foot. On the day of the meeting, after the treaty was signed, the subsidiary bent down towards the king's foot, but instead of kissing it in that position, he pulled it up, dangling Charles from his heel, and that is how the subsidiary kissed his foot."

3

Eid al-Fitr

Eid al-Fitr fell on Friday, the eighteenth of July 971. After my uncles had visited their sister in the morning, I went out with my father to visit my aunts, to fulfill Allah's command to foster good relations with our kin. My father gave each of his three sisters five dinars as an Eid gift, in addition to the perfume bottles he had brought them from Seville. He gave my cousins a less substantial Eid present and told them that my uncles and grandfather would come to Córdoba the following day. My mother received beautiful perfume in a crystal bottle, around the middle of which she could wrap her fingers, and which had a decorative pattern of leaves on the bottom half. The bottle was sealed with a copper cap that preserved the yellow fragrance which smelt predominantly of jasmine. My aunts' perfume, on the other hand was green, and I did not get to smell it.

We returned home after visiting our aunts then, together with my mother and Fatima, we made our way to my grandfather's house and the houses of my uncles Abbas and Issa near Al-Zahra, in a carriage pulled by a horse, hired by my father.

The carts drawn by one or two mules, and sometimes by donkeys, that roam the streets on the outskirts of Córdoba are intended for transporting goods. They are flat wagons with four wheels of wood, covered with iron, and hundreds of them were used to transport stones and white marble from near Fort Frisch to Al-Zahra during its construction.

Since the streets of Córdoba within the walls are narrow and crowded with people, carts gather near the gates to carry or unload goods and transport them from there on horseback, or in light carts pulled by strong porters. They run in front of them in the paths and alleys of Córdoba if the load is light, and they pant and run over people if the load is so heavy that they find it hard to direct the carts.

The carriage that my father rented from in front of the Jewish gate was not like those others, it was quite unusual. It looked like a small room carried on four wheels, and contained two seats of wood facing each other, covered in leather, and a door with a window on each side. It was pulled by a horse and driven by a coachman who sat on the outside. Half way along the stone-paved road to Medinat Al-Zahra, Aminah asked her husband to let them return on horseback. My father immediately agreed to her request as our bodies were being shaken liberally in this carriage.

My mother and Fatima got down, and my grandfather got in after some hesitancy. The carriage made its way to Al-Zahra palace, which was nearby, so we could greet the Caliph who made a habit of sitting after the prayer to receive Eid greetings. This year, he had chosen to sit east of Al-Zahra palace, in the upper part of the city. First, the brothers of Al-Hakim, Abu Al-Asbagh Abdul Aziz, Abu Al-Mutref Al-Mughirah, and Abu Al-Asbagh Al-Qasim entered and sat to his right and left. The Caliph had ten brothers and half-brothers, but these three were the ones who attended on that occasion, and I saw Abdul Aziz on the right of the Caliph and Al-Mughirah and Abu Al-Qasim on his left, as my father explained to me later. The viziers entered with greetings then sat on a level under the Caliph and around him. Then the high and intermediate heads of security, the warehouse owners, and the rest of the service classes working in the Caliphate management entered, followed by the judges, and the notables of Quraysh and Mawali; then came our turn as we belonged to the notable families and after us came the governors and the judges of the districts and provinces, the jurists, the counselors, the trusted, and the notables of Córdoba. They flocked in, one group after another, and the soldiers followed them in the order of their rank. Everyone greeted those sitting and the Caliph, without shaking hands and without delaying for long.

Al-Hakim was forty-seven when he took the throne and he was fifty-seven on that day, with his white skin that seemed to contain a bit of redness. He returned the greetings of the people in a strong voice. His build was large and his legs seemed rather short as he was sitting, and I confirmed this later after seeing him many times. His neck was stocky, his upper arm bulky, and his eyes were wide and of a deep shade of black.

Before we stepped out of the gate separating the palaces from the soldiers' barracks, Mohammed Al-Amri caught up with my father and grandfather who both gave Eid greetings. He stood there, shaking hands with those leaving and taking the petitions, requests, and wishes designed for the Caliph. In this way, he was wont to enhance his position and the people's need of him. Al-Amri criticized my father for not visiting him to which my grandfather responded that opportunities present themselves, and he then informed him that he would be coming once a week to teach Emir Hisham Umayyad history, every Thursday in the afternoon, adding that he would be bringing me as well. As for my father, he ensured Al-Amri that he had not visited due to much travelling, and he then informed him that he had brought him a gift from Seville which my grandfather would deliver on his next visit.

In the afternoon, we went to the house of my uncle Abbas for lunch. That Eid, my grandfather, or rather my uncle Issa, had slaughtered two sheep, one for us to eat together and the other to be distributed to the needy, and we had to take the meat back with us to Córdoba so that my father could distribute it there, as neither the Al-Zahra district nor the nearby the houses contained any poor people that we could give the meat to.

We sat in the middle of my uncle's house on cushions, around several tables with tablecloths that were aligned side by side. My mother and my uncle's wife first brought out the cups, wooden spoons of many sizes, wooden plates with black and green olives, small pickled eggplants stuffed with nuts and aged in olive oil, then glazed pottery plates, decorated in green and white and filled with stuffed, roasted squabs. After that, they brought in three bronze, medium-sized trays with the rice on top of thin, hard bread, then three clay pots, sealed with banana leaves. These pots had been placed in the oven from the morning, filled with meat, onions, water, spices and left to cook on medium heat.

My grandfather sat up, leaning on his knees, opened the pots one after another, and then started to remove the contents of the first one with a long ladle. He placed the pieces of meat on the trays then poured the gravy over the rice and the bread under it. The smell of meat and spices took over the whole area once the covers were removed. My grandfather wished us a great meal, announcing that we could start eating and telling the younger

ones that we would be eating an entire sheep so there was no need for them to eat too fast. There were six adults - my grandfather and his three sons, my mother Aminah, and my uncle's wife Khadija, along with five children, me, Fatima, my cousin Sayed and his sisters Aisha and Halima, who were all younger than me.

After lunch, we all ate special Eid pastries, stuffed with dates, figs, and a mixture of crushed almonds and hazelnuts. When I told Sayed about the riches I had seen in Al-Zahra and about seeing the Caliph, he asked his father to tell me the story about the ambassadors who came to their door. My uncle laughed and stood to give a helping hand to Khadija and Aminah who were reorganizing the plates, so we young ones quickly turned our eyes to our grandfather, while my father and his bachelor brother Issa started discussing the prospects for establishing a silk farm near Málaga.

"We pray for Allah's blessing on the prophet." my grandfather said.

"Peace and the blessings of Allah be upon him," we all answered with one voice while sitting comfortably, readying ourselves to listen.

My grandfather continued: "Once upon a time, not long ago but only a mere ten years ago, at the time of our Caliph Al-Nasir al-Din Allah, may Allah have mercy on him." My grandfather paused and tilted his head, awaiting our response.

We muttered a disorganized: "May Allah have mercy on him."

My grandfather insisted on hearing us repeat such phrases, so every time we heard the name of the Prophet Mohammed or another prophet, we would say: 'Peace be upon him', and if someone that had passed away was mentioned, we had to repeat: 'May Allah have mercy on him.' This was the etiquette of manners, and respect, that no one in our family was permitted to opt-out of.

"You know that the Caliph ordered the construction of Al-Zahra in the year 325 AH, and it continued for forty years, and the city was only completed ten years ago. When construction began, the herald roamed, announcing that the Caliph would gift four hundred dirhams to anyone who became his neighbour in Al-Zahra. So, some of us sold our houses in Córdoba, and we

built three houses here that we pray to Allah to keep flourishing to the end of time. After Al-Zahra had been filled with palaces and houses, most of the road to Córdoba started to be inhabited, with beautiful houses like castles with vast gardens."

My grandfather was not exaggerating; some of the houses outside the walls of Al-Zahra are indeed big and some of them have private farms, while the sophisticated gardens in Al-Zahra were allocated to the palaces of the Caliph and the viziers. All of the houses on the lower part, inside the walls of Al-Zahra, had no private gardens, even if plants, flowers, and water fountains decorated their inner courtyards.

"To impress his foreign guests, Caliph Al-Nasir used to keep them in Córdoba for few days before ordering that they be brought to Al-Zahra as his guests, after he made some arrangements that we, his neighbours, took part in as well. On the day of the visit, soldiers stood in rows on both sides of our street, raising their swords and flags high while we, the residents, sat on lavish cushions and chairs to the side, between the soldiers. We used to lay out mats, spray perfume around us and sit in the street. When the ambassador arrived, he would bow to us in greeting, assuming that we were viziers or advisors to the Caliph. Once, my sons Abbas and Qareeb and I, placed a red velvet sofa at the side of the street, among Sudanese soldiers with shiny swords and bright clothes. I wore a red cloak to match these colors and wrapped a big turban, woven with golden threads, on my head, and then sat with my children who also were wearing splendid garments." My grandfather spoke while reenacting the situation with gestures of both his body and his hands. It seemed as if we were watching the story unfold before our eyes, since he was wearing new clothes for Eid and talking about something that had happened in front of my uncle's house where we were sitting.

"Once the embassy drew near, the delegation started bowing to us from the waist while we paid them no attention, and when they reached us they threw themselves at our feet kissing the carpet between them. They saw my magnificent turban and assumed that I was the Caliph. Only then were they told that we were merely some of the Caliph's people, and there was still a long way to go before they reached Al-Zahra."

We all broke into a burst of loud laughter while my grandfather restrained himself to continue the story. “You are surely familiar with the courtyard in front of Medinat Al-Zahra? Are you not?”

“Of course, the city entrance with the fourteen arches,” most of us said. I had only left it a short while ago, and my cousins saw it whenever they wished. They went to the city to shop or to pray at Al-Zahra Mosque, which we could see from the roof of my uncle’s house, and we could hear the call to prayer from there clearly.

“When the ambassador reached the courtyard,” my grandfather said, “The soldiers would say: ‘This is the Caliph’ while pointing at Al-Nasir, who would be sitting on the ground, wearing a garment that could not be worth more than two dirhams, the Qur’an and a sword in front of him. At that, the Caliph would exclaim in a wise tone: ‘Allah has commanded us that this should be our ruler,’ while pointing at the Qur’an. This was quite confusing for the members of the embassy to see the public acting like kings, while the Caliph sat in beggars’ clothes. To finish things off nicely in the ambassadors’ minds, the Caliph would return to welcome them in his reception hall, which overlooks the gardens, with the notables on levels under him and his eleven children at his side, looking like the most splendid things in the whole world.”

I asked my grandfather: “Why does Caliph Al-Hakim not do the same as his father so we can sit in the street for the viziers too?” To which my grandfather replied: “Al-Hakim is incredibly humble, and one should not raise oneself above his situation. He is a man of knowledge and religion, and he is known across all countries for valuing scholars and his care for books and writers.” He then asked me: “Have you memorized some of Caliph Al-Nasir’s poems about his love for architecture, Suleiman?” At which I recited:

Kings who desire fame beyond the veil should know

Only by what they have built, will they still be known

Look upon the pyramids, how long they have stood

Yet how many kings have gone for good?

A great building speaks long of its great designer

Truly, there can be nothing finer

“And you, Sayed, tell us when Caliph Al-Nasir passed away and how many books there are in Caliph Al-Hakim’s library?”

“The Caliph, may Allah have mercy on him, passed away on the eighth of Ramadan of the year three hundred and fifty AH, in other words, ten years and twenty-two days ago. As for Caliph Al-Hakim’s library; it includes forty thousand books. The librarian of the Caliphal library is Abdul Aziz, the brother of the Caliph, and his brother al-Mundhir supervises education in Córdoba, may Allah protect it.”

My grandfather praised us both and prayed for our long life as well as that of our three siblings and our parents. He then raised his voice as he prayed that Allah would reward my uncle Issa with a nice girl. We all tried to hold back our laughter, for our uncle, who claimed that he did not want to marry, would be angry with us, but we knew that he loved a Christian girl who lived in the Secunda district, on the other side of the Guadalquivir, and he would have to convince her to convert to Islam before he could officially request my grandfather to go and ask for her hand in marriage. The reason this was funny was because of the name of his beloved, María Jesús. This is a compound name, common among Christian girls, and it combines the names of Miriam and Issa, peace be upon them, and while Issa was absent for a while from my uncle’s house today, Khadija had wondered whether, when his beloved converted to Islam, she would choose the name Miriam, or Mother of Issa, Umm Issa, as a woman cannot be called Issa, which is Jesus in Arabic, and everyone laughed at the way she asked the question with a droll mixture of kindness and seriousness, but my uncle Abbas asked her not to speak of this matter anymore.

After the afternoon prayer, my father excused himself and asked for two mules from Al-Zahra Market to carry us to the walls of Córdoba. My mother rode on a mule with a double saddle, specifically for women. This saddle had a short back with two stirrups on one side, one of them shorter than the other, for the female rider to put her feet in. This design was made so women do not sit on the animal the same way men do. I always looked at

my mother and wondered how she survived sitting on the mule's back without her legs to help to maintain her balance. I never once saw her fall, even when the animal went fast. My father placed Fatima behind my mother on the mule's back, and I rode behind him on the other mule. We sauntered, side by side, while the mules' owner rode behind us on a donkey so he could return with his animals after dropping us off. My father had given him the burlap bag with rolls of meat, preserved in banana leaves, to carry, and he was given a roll when we reached the door of our house.

My father went to the sunset prayer, carrying the bag that contained most of the mutton to distribute it to the needy who, on such occasions, would gather around the mosque. He made me carry four rolls to our Jewish neighbours, and he reminded me to say to them: "You are always giving. This is some Eid mutton for you to share our joy with us." They were not poor, but my father had business relationships and friendships with them that allowed us to send them fresh meat, without them being offended by this. I remember that on non-ceremonial occasions, we used to share the slaughter of sheep or goats with Jewish neighbours, and we shared the costs by paying according to the distribution of rations. At times, a Muslim neighbour would do the slaughtering, skinning, cutting, distributing, and collecting the money paid for the animal, while at other times a Jewish one would do it. My mother also delivered a roll of meat to our next-door neighbours, María and Jesús.

The days of Eid passed by comfortably, delightfully, and also rapidly. The days I went to the shops to buy sweets and nuts became fewer. Bit by bit, the activities around the mosque, and the areas surrounding it, returned to their usual pace.

My uncle Ramadan gave me some dried, smoked, salted fish to take home whenever I passed by his store in Bab Al-Jawz, one of the city gates. My maternal uncle, Ramadan, owned a fish warehouse in Málaga. From there, his workers would buy fish from Christian fishermen and preserve it, according to type and season, then transport it by mule to the cities of Al-Andalus, to the villages between the cities, and of course to my uncle's store in Córdoba, where the public and shop owners in the districts could buy it at the same price. I tolerated smoked fish, but my favourite was river

fish, dipped in flour and fried in oil. My mother used to add salted fish to salads and used dried fish to make soups, or she would cook it with spinach, chickpeas, and saffron. Sometimes, my mother would send me with some of these fish to the home of our Christian neighbours María and her husband Jesús, from whom we are separated by a common wall. Jesús works in the egg trade, and he supplies us with some fresh eggs from time to time. My father respected Jesús greatly as he is engaged in active work, which takes up most of his time, yet he is an avid reader and well-versed in much general and historical information. He was fluent in Arabic and Latin as well as in his own local tongue. His wife was also well respected by all of us, despite the fact that she stayed away from the world of books, preferring the realms of astronomy, but she was kind-hearted and always delighted all who spoke with her.

Like my uncle Ramadan, my paternal uncle Abbas also owned a large warehouse for dried figs, located in the Secunda area, south of Córdoba and the river. My uncle went there seldom, as he traveled frequently to Málaga, whether to supervise our farm there, which contains the best figs in Al-Andalus, or to overlook the lands of others near the farm, or supervise the growth and watering of the trees, and for the fruit-picking which occurs in a short season that requires a big harvesting effort by day and by night. The figs are dried, throughout the summer weeks, in stone basins with light layers of wood placed on top to press them. They are threaded onto thin ropes and re-packed into burlap bags, and well-ventilated boxes, to be carried by boat and camel caravan to Morocco, Kairouan, Egypt, the Levant, Iraq, the Hijaz, Yemen, and Khorasan. Even the countries of India and China bought uncle Abbas's dried figs, through agents, caravan merchants and ship captains. At times, they would buy the dried figs and pay for them in Málaga, and at other times the dried figs would be exchanged for fabric from China and spices from India.

I did not venture to go to Secunda often, unless I knew that my uncle was there, or I went with my grandfather who got tired of answering my questions every time we visited.

“Why don’t we make wine from figs, like the Christian people of Secunda make wine from dates and grapes?” He answered by talking about what is and isn’t permissible in Islam, where some of the jurists make an exception

for dates while others disagree with the fermentation of grapes, but he would conclude the matter by saying that drinking wine is harmful, and the benefits to our family from the fig trade are more profitable financially, and more acceptable religiously, than making alcohol.

4

An Ambassador for My Uncle

On the morning of the fifth day of Eid, I went with my father to the courtyard and garden of the mosque, where the Caliph had had underground pipelines installed. They provided the complex with water for the wudu, the ritual cleansing, and for drinking, and irrigating the plants. In the inner corners of the covered mosque, three classes were held where the poor were taught for free. This had started after the Caliph granted teachers a monthly salary, paid by the Diwan of Sadaqah, or House of Charity, which had been built to the west of the mosque. The total number of classes offering free education to the poor had then reached twenty-seven, three here at the mosque, and one in every mosque in all the districts of Córdoba so that the students are not burdened by travel.

Around the inner courtyard and the garden of the mosque, which is planted with orange trees, there is a covered building with its back adjacent to the wall, facing the garden and the mosque, and on its eastern side, dozens of female scribes work in the shade to transcribe the Holy Qur'an, as well as the scribes who work from their homes, of which there are seventy. According to my father, their only work is to make copies of the Holy Qur'an. These women were the reason my father was there that day, he wanted to find out how much they earned, to discover whose calligraphy was best, and to ask them about other copyists they might know.

At a later time, I learned gradually that this visit and the conversations that he held were the beginning of the expansion of my father's work in the book transcription business, as the demand for all kinds of books had increased while the supply had decreased. Now, after the invention of a pen with no inkwell and its manufacture by my father, and with the availability of white paper production in Córdoba, and the quality of the different inks being created, my father saw a good opportunity to increase the production of copying and binding of books imported from the East as well as others composed by the scholars, writers, doctors, and poets of Al-

Andalus, binding them in high-quality covers to raise their monetary value in the eyes of those who desired to beautify their homes with private libraries.

On their last visit, his three sisters had agreed to become partners in the project by transcribing at home and by teaching this profession to some girls in order to expand production someday. He also asked them to seek the counsel of their husbands. My father also informed the teachers who taught orphans, and the sheikhs in the mosque, that he was looking for calligraphers and would soon open his shop in Córdoba as a place for this profession to grow.

Along the inner northern part of the mosque wall, the sheikhs and educators, clothed in white, sat with their students in circles, distributed according to age, scientific ability, and specialization. I queried my father about the reason why some of the young men here looked different, at which he informed me that they were foreign, some from the east, but most from the northern Christian kingdoms, Constantinople, Rome, the Kingdom of the Franks, and Britannia. “Soon, you will have a broader knowledge of the life of this university from which famous Andalusians have graduated; soon you will start your education here,” my father said, and he started to recount the different stages of education, from memorizing the Qur’an, learning how to write, quality of calligraphy, then choosing between the arts, philosophical sciences, or delving into mathematics and engineering or pharmacy and medicine.

“Your grandfather’s neighbour, the physician Al-Zahrawi, is well-known for his surgical operations and he is visited by the princes and kings of the world. He studied here, and so did Jewish and Christian physicians who were taught in the mosque and served the Emirs and Caliphs. Even Abbas ibn Firnas, whose attempt at flying you admired, learned chemistry and glass-making here. It is a great honour and a great opportunity for you Suleiman, to live near this mosque and to be taught here, if Allah wills.”

I did not wish to ask my father anything that he could interpret as hesitation, but I was excited at the idea of visiting Hisham with my grandfather and being taught in the middle of the Al-Zahra palace. I hoped that my father’s

decision to send me to the mosque would not disturb my weekly visits to Al-Zahra.

My father and I returned at noon, only to find my grandfather and my uncle Issa present. They had made an inspection visit to the dried fig warehouse in Secunda. I discovered that my grandfather would be spending the night at our house so we could head out in the morning from here to Al-Zahra for our first Thursday visit to Emir Hisham. My uncle announced that he would need my help after taking a siesta, and he then asked my mother to dress me in new clothes. He did not specify why he needed me or what task he was giving me, nor did my father, my grandfather or my mother question him about anything, but Fatima heard, and she would not sit still, demanding that she go with me, until my grandfather promised to take her on a visit to the hotel owned by my aunt's husband to watch the strangers and their animals.

On the way to Secunda, before we crossed the bridge, my uncle explained my task: I was to carry a small basket filled with the fresh baked semolina soaked in syrup, known as namoura, to deliver it at the home of María Jesús, before it cooled, and to tell whoever opened the door that it was a gift from my uncle, Issa, to María and her family, and I must mention that he will travel to Málaga soon. If I was invited inside, I should insist that I could go not inside without my uncle, who was waiting for me at the warehouse, and if I was not invited inside, then I should ask them if the inside of their house is like ours, prompting them to invite me to enter, which I should object to doing without my uncle. My uncle Issa assured me that he would be right behind me and would not move far from the door until I was there, and he kept repeating how I should act, what I should say, and that I should not make any mistakes when it came to saying that 'my uncle said so and so'. Despite him being known for his courage and indifference to adversity and challenges, it seemed to me that my uncle Issa was quite nervous. I assumed that he was scared that I would reveal his secret and that María's family would learn that he fabricated the story of me not being allowed inside without him. I told him not to worry, and I promised to carry out my mission competently.

I knocked on the door, after my uncle had hidden at the street corner. The door opened to reveal a blonde man with wide shoulders and strong arms, wearing a sleeveless abaya. His blue eyes looked down at me.

“Welcome, whose house are you looking for?”

“That of María Jesús’s family. I am Suleiman, my uncle Issa sent you this gift since he will be traveling to Málaga soon.”

“Did you come alone, Suleiman? Where’s your uncle?”

I looked towards the street corner in fear or rather in hope of seeing my uncle Issa, who had not warned me how bulky this man was or even hinted that he would be there, but he remained hidden. “My uncle is waiting for me at the warehouse.” Before the conversation could continue, a voice behind the man came to my rescue, a voice in the shape of an angel dressed in a white jalabiyah that concealed a beautiful, big, extremely fit, body beneath it. It appeared that she had heard what I said.

“Come inside Suleiman, what are you carrying, is it for me?”

“If you are María Jesús then it is for you from my uncle Issa, but I cannot enter unless my uncle is with me.”

At that moment, the man picked me up, with what I held in my hands, and went inside to the courtyard in middle of the house where there was a water fountain and marble seats.

“So, you are the son of Qareeb Al-Qalai, your uncle is Issa and your grandfather is Khalid.” He did not wait for my answer, and María sat next to me opening the gift, expressing her admiration for my clothes, thanking me for the visit, and then she informed me that the man was her father, that she had seen me once before near my house, and that she buys things from my uncle’s store. So, this meant she knew the entire family and that I was not a stranger here, but that did not prevent me from being worried as my uncle was waiting for me in the street, and I was scared to misspeak if they kept questioning me. I encouragingly told myself: ‘I am like the Vizier Al-Ghazal on a mission to the Christians, tasked to me by a Muslim Emir. I must have courage and patience to succeed in my mission.’

“I will tell you a story to test your intelligence,” María’s father said. “Your family knows that I own a copper mine in El Cerro Moreno. I rented it from the Caliph’s scribe, may Allah lengthen his life, and I pay with a tenth of its production. During the past week, the foreman asked me to solve a trivial problem that occurred between four of the workers. Do you follow what I am saying, Suleiman?” I nodded my head and looked at María Jesús as she got up to make something to drink. I gathered then that I would not be leaving any time soon.

“The story they told is that the four of them live near the mine in a small house that had only one open area and one bedroom. They share all the work and bear the costs equally. Three of them agreed to buy lamps for light, to make it easier to work and move in the house after nightfall, however, the fourth did not agree, and he refuses to pay his share of the lamps’ cost or for oil. He says that this was not in the original agreement. Now you solve this problem.”

This problem was just like one that my grandfather told me before. Did this man know it as well I pondered? I hoped that he didn’t know the story so I could provide him with a solution that only men like Al-Ghazal could come up with. I fidgeted for a bit then straightened my back and smoothed the front of my garment, which was woven with golden threads, and then I remembered that he was Christian and said: “Peace be upon the Messiah.” He let out a boisterous laugh and repeated: “Peace be upon him”.

“There are many solutions. They could kick the fourth man out and look for another one to reside with them, or the three of them must leave and let him be, but this would also be contradictory to the original agreement. The other three can pay for the cost of the lamps and oil alone, but then this would mean that he would benefit for free, and he would gain an advantage over them. The optimal solution would be to wrap a blindfold around the eyes of the fourth man at nightfall so he cannot benefit from their light and they don’t feel resentful and disadvantaged.” As soon as I had finished talking, the man had his arms wrapped around his stomach from laughing so hard that he almost fell into the fountain.

Once he had recovered, and María had come to discover the cause of her father's delight, I came to the conclusion that this was not the same story I

had heard from my grandfather, if that had been the case then he would have had a less extreme reaction. “I want a smart grandson like you. Before María finishes preparing the drink, go and get your uncle so you can visit us as you requested at the door.”

María Jesús blushed when she heard her father wish for a grandson like me, and from my uncle Issa, of course. With the speed of light, I was out of their house and turning at the corner where my uncle Issa was waiting for me, then suddenly I was being held up in the air in his hands, and his face was in front of mine.

“You owe me sweets, her father agreed to the marriage so long as you have a grandson like me,” I told my uncle, whose face flushed and displayed many conflicted emotions.

“What did you say and do, you idiot? I told you to deliver the gift, not to ask for her hand in marriage from her father or agree on the offspring.” I reassured my uncle and quickly explained to him what had happened, and then I told him that they were waiting with something to drink already prepared.

“Oh, so it was a stroke of luck, and you were saved by one of the stories you heard from your grandfather. You will get the sweets you want. If I am able to reach an agreement with her father, and he agrees that she convert to Islam, I promise you that we will rejoice and celebrate together, me with my beloved and you with your circumcision.” I did not expect that my uncle would repay the favour with such a threat and asked him about my chances of converting to Christianity. “Are you so scared about having a small piece of flesh cut, an experience that all Muslims and Jews go through?”

“Yes, I am, because our neighbour Samuel told me about the torment and pain he went through, how they grabbed his shoulders, placed the pincer on his penis then cut with the blade. He said he could not urinate for days because of the swelling.”

“Think of celebrating by my side, of the Muslims and Christians singing for you, of the gifts you will get and how you will become a man in the eyes of the girls and how they will look at you differently.” We reached the door while I was still thinking about how the girls would perceive me in a different

way; there must be a chance for me to talk with Issa about how he can achieve his goal.

The five of us sat in the lounge, María, who had a red robe around her garment, her mother, father, my uncle, and me. I later found out that she was an only child and her love for my uncle, and their plans, had not gone unre ple d you say and do ehind r40404040404040404040404040404040 404040404040404040404040404040404040404040404040404040404040 404040404040404040404040404040404040404040404040404040404040 4040404040404040404040404040404040404040noticed by her parents. My uncle had never visited their house before, as he used to meet Mary for picnics outside the house. Her father spoke for a long time about how much he loved his daughter and how he wished for her happiness, about how he knew of us and the position our family held, about how all his money would go to his daughter someday, and how he was ready to participate through her with my uncle and his brothers in any project. Issa thanked him and assured him that he would treat her well and that she would not be in need of money since we have plenty, praise be to Allah, and that if he needed anything in the future, he would not hesitate to ask. The big surprise, one that brought my uncle to tears in their home, was the father and mother’s decision not to let their daughter convert to Islam alone, rather they had all decided to convert together. This was not very unusual as a wave of Christians had converted to Islam in the middle of the reign of the Caliph Al-Nasir, but, to my uncle, this showed how greatly her parents loved her, and he felt as if he had gained a whole family.

On Friday noon, after the prayer, our family made its way to the Secunda district. My grandfather, six of his children, fifteen grandchildren, his sons-in-law, his daughters-in-law, my three maternal uncles, and the maternal uncles of the children of my uncle Abbas, all marched to the house of our new in-laws. We all wore our formal attire of gilt robes, with jubbahs draped underneath them, white headscarves, affixed to our heads with cloth belts, and shiny leather shoes. The women wore white gowns, embroidered at the breast, and some of them wore headscarves of green silk. Similarly to Sayed, I wore a white jubbah with a golden ribbon around the sleeves and at the hem, with our name, our father's name, and the names of our nine forefathers who had lived in Al-Andalus since the conquest, woven into it.

In the morning, before heading for Secunda, we had sent ten sheep with bags of rice and thin bread and everything else necessary for making fatteh, including milk and spices, and three cooks to prepare the food as instructed by María's father, in the appropriate area designated for them in the garden. The rest of the food would be distributed after the guests had eaten, however, the bride's family would wish to distribute it in their street. My uncle Issa had previously informed María's father of this and that the family of the groom usually was the one to prepare the meal, and he asked him to invite all those he wished from his side to the engagement party and to the lunch after it, telling him that my grandfather would handle the conversion of the family to Islam whenever they choose, after the engagement; as for the marriage they would decide on a date after his return from Málaga.

The engagement celebrations ended speedily and easily without any talk about conversion or the money that the groom's family would be required to pay as a dowry, whether up front or deferred. "We will not drink our coffee before you fulfill our request," my grandfather said, before drinking from the cup of bitter, black coffee and none of us drank. My grandfather was the first to be served coffee, followed by my father and my uncle Abbas.

"Drink up, your request will be fulfilled," María's father replied, which prompted ululations from my mother, my aunts, my uncle's wife, and María's mother, and they started to chant some short verses. Every time one of them finished, the others responded with ululations until someone started a new verse. Of course, the verses were all spontaneous, instantaneous words that spoke of the handsomeness, courage, and origins of my uncle, the beauty of María, the generosity of her family, the goodness of her upbringing, and to welcome her into our family. My mother mentioned my name in one of her chants, and I quickly looked at my uncle, almost rubbing between my inner thighs. While the women openly demonstrated joy and relief at this happy ending in the open lounge that overlooked the middle of the house where we sat, the men started to recite Al-Fatiha, the first surah in the Qur'an.

My uncle Issa and María Jesús hadn't left the parents on either side any opportunity for dialogue or argument that might sabotage their plans through coincidence, mistakes, or misunderstandings. They had long

arranged the matter, as it seems, and had agreed all the details on Thursday, leaving the family nothing to do but to agree on Friday.

5

In Dar Al-Mulk

Of course, when I was a child, I was not able to memorize all the details of any events as they happened on the day they occurred but, with the help of my grandfather before Allah in his mercy took him, I started recording my memories at ten years of age, after my handwriting had improved. My grandfather reformulated what we recalled, and he repeated it for me to write it down. My grandfather then gradually informed me of the family secret, regarding the several versions of our historical records; the official, public one, and our own account of what was happening which we could not speak of to anyone but those trusted in the family, so as not to bring doom or exile on ourselves and misery on those we loved.

Looking back at the events of the year 360 AH, the one which I would say changed me was that of the Thursday of the weekend following Eid, in others words, my meeting with Emir Hisham in Al-Zahra. We left our house in Córdoba and headed to my grandfather's house in the morning since he had taken to staying there for hours, reviewing the many books in his library and jotting down notes with one of the new pens my father brought him from Seville. We performed the midday prayer in Al-Zahra Mosque then my grandfather and I headed to Dar Al-Mulk, the House of the King, designated by the Caliph for his son's education, to meet with his educators. For many years, the Dar Al-Mulk provided a meeting-place for scholars.

My grandfather started speaking as we slowly ascended the stairs, saying; "In the Dar Al-Mulk, every Thursday, sheikh Abu-Ali Al-Qali meets his students, who include the Qadi ibn Al-Mundhir, Ahmed ibn Aban, Al-Qazzaz, and the Qadi Ibn Mughaith, and he recites from his Kitab Al-Amali for them, the book of research and quotations which he wrote originally for Caliph Al-Hakim and has been adding to ever since so that it has reached twenty volumes. When Al-Qali came to Córdoba from Baghdad in 330, he

brought many book collections with him that were not available to us. Here we also host Abu Suleiman al-Hawari, an immigrant from the East, who has been supported by the Caliph to facilitate his learning. In the Dar Al-Mulk, sessions are also held by the most famous scholars of Al-Andalus to translate and compare books."

After climbing the stairs at the beginning of the path to Dar Al-Mulk, my grandfather stopped beside the garden. He needed to catch his breath before he continued speaking as we went on our way towards our goal.

"When Al-Hakim left to fight in a battle eight years ago, Ibn al-Saffar declined to accompany him with the excuse that his body was weak: The Caliph gave him a choice, either he could head to battle or he could stay in Córdoba, provided that he compiled a book that included all the poetry written by Umayyad poets in the East and in Al-Andalus. Ibn al-Saffar agreed, and then the Caliph asked him whether he preferred to stay at home or to move into the Dar Al-Mulk to complete the book. He chose to stay here to take advantage of the library, collect the poems it contained and to ensure that he would be isolated and completely free of the distraction of visitors to his home in Córdoba."

In front of the door of Dar Al-Mulk stood two Slav soldiers from the Caliph's guard, holding spears decorated in the middle and the front, and wearing red hats surrounded by green turbans and, to protect them from the heat of the sun, there was a cloth arbour erected on wooden poles in front of the door. Immediately, another Slav appeared and accompanied us inside, then excused himself to fetch Emir Hisham. The room seemed extremely vast, despite being filled with furniture; luxurious sofas, cushions, leather seats, and small and large heavy, round tables, the legs of which were carved into flowers and foliage. The open space appeared to be divided into several seating areas between the columns and arches, each section with chairs, tables, and a wooden cupboard with several shelves dedicated to books. What took up the biggest space was the library, which covered the entire northern wall and half of the eastern one. The engravings from the Qur'an on the walls and ceiling gave the space an atmosphere imbued with science, learning, etiquette, and reading.

My grandfather suddenly stood, and I was brought back from my imaginings as I stared at my feet, only to find Hisham approaching us, next to his father the Caliph, with the Slav behind them. My grandfather moved to greet them, as did I. If I had been on my own, I would not have recognized Al-Hakim at first glance, even though I had seen him at Eid, but now he was dressed in casual attire that showed his huge, bare arms. His voice was strong and loud, as he asked after my grandfather's health in a reproachful tone for he had reduced his visits after finishing his work in the library while Al-Hakim was still the Crown Prince. My grandfather argued his increasing age and the expansion of the library, and he told the Caliph that he would be seeing the Emir weekly.

The meeting ended with the Caliph requiring my grandfather to write a book for him about the personages of Al-Andalus, and he committed him to the weekly session with Emir Hisham and to my visits to the Emir whether with my grandfather or not. The Caliph left suddenly, without taking the time for greetings or farewell, leaving the three of us in the northern-eastern corner, with a Slav nearby to watch over the Emir and to offer any assistance we might require.

"Your Highness, I would be happy to tell you the history of Al-Andalus and of your ancestors. There are many books written on this specific subject in the library of your father, may Allah protect him, including the book that the famous Eastern scholar, Abu Faraj Al-Isfahani, wrote for your father and sent from Baghdad to Córdoba together with the first version of his book of songs, Al-Aghani. These books will soon be available to you once you learn how to read them, if Allah wills. I will give you a brief account of the origins and deeds of your ancestors in Al-Andalus. I will, of course, recount whatever you wish to know about your ancestors' achievements in literature, poetry, wars, conquests, embassies, or your family history, and the relationship between Christians and Muslims. Hopefully, if Allah wills, what I have to tell you will be useful and agreeable to you."

"I also have many tales to recount to you and Suleiman. I would like to hear tales about my mother's side of the family as well," Hisham said, and my grandfather smiled and then told him that we would be happy to listen to his stories and that they would be added to the stories of the Caliphs and Emirs.

“I will also recount tales from the lives of the Basques for you, this being the origin of your Honorable Mother, may Allah lengthen her life.” My grandfather continued to speak, abiding by Emir Hisham’s request:

“The Basques are a people of great strength and loyalty, but they have harsh traditions. Throughout history, and at the time of the Romans and Goths, the Basques refused to submit to a central authority. When the Islamic conquest reached them, some of them converted and those converts took charge of managing the mountainous areas of the Pyrenees. Some of them participated with the Arabs in the campaigns against the Kingdom of the Franks, at the time of the governors Al-Samh and Al Ghafiqi, may Allah have mercy on them, which was two hundred and fifty years ago. Fifty years later, at the time of your grandfather Abdul Rahman I, who was the first of the Levantine Emirs of the Umayyad dynasty to enter Al-Andalus, the king of the Franks, Charlemagne, attacked Zaragoza, may Allah protect it, but he was unable to enter it, and his armies retreated before your grandfather reached there from Córdoba. However, your grandfather, the Emir, sent the Basques arms and aid before he departed from Córdoba, and when King Charlemagne retreated over the Roncesvalles trail in the Pyrenees, the Basques, who are the grandfathers of your Honorable Mother, attacked Charlemagne’s soldiers in the valley from the rear, assisted by Arabs descended from Suleiman ibn Yaqzan, and they killed many Franks, including the famous general Roland.”

“I never heard that before, however, the lands of the Basques are now Christian and not Muslim.”

My grandfather confirmed what Hisham said and briefed him that Islamic control had receded from the north of Iberia and that the areas from Barcelona, on the eastern sea, to Santiago and the ocean on the west, were now ruled by many Christian kings, and the Basque territories now formed part of Galicia.

“Thanks to the battles fought by your grandfather Abdul Rahman Al-Nasir, may Allah have mercy on him, and the conquests of your father, may Allah lengthen his life, throughout the past sixty years, the northern kingdoms and emirates, such as León and Navarre, have all returned to their authority, and the attacks on Muslim lands have ceased. Perhaps your

Highness saw the Barcelonan ambassador here as your father welcomed him in the month of Ramadan, when he came with a request for renewal of the peace treaty."

"When did Barcelona cease to be under our control, and how?"

"During the reign of Emir Al-Hakim I, disagreements occurred between him and his uncles, Suleiman and Abdullah, and revolts broke out in some parts of Al-Andalus. So, at the end of his reign, Charlemagne took advantage of these internal Andalusian preoccupations and sent forces to occupy Barcelona in 190 AH, which corresponds to 806 AD. At that time, the governor, Sa'dun al Ruayni, maintained resistance, but reinforcements never reached him from Córdoba or elsewhere, due to the disagreements. This led to the fall of Barcelona, and Charlemagne established the province of the Marca Hispanica there and added it to the Kingdom of the Franks. It became a buffer zone, but against Al-Andalus this time, after having been part of our land for a hundred years. Some historians also say that Caliph Harun al-Rashid in Baghdad conspired with Emperor Charlemagne to attack Al-Andalus, and Allah knows best."

My grandfather was quick to correct his story because, as he later told me, he did not wish to start speaking with Emir Hisham about the Umayyad-Abbasid or Sunni-Shi'a differences at the beginning of his lessons. He preferred to leave this aspect until the Emir asked him about it, so he returned to his original topic on the mixed nature of Al-Andalus.

"We, as Arabs, are proud of our origins, but we are also proud of our religion's tolerance, respect for others, and our desire to mix with them. Arabs have married Andalusian women and mingled with the locals since the first Islamic conquest of Al-Andalus. The conqueror of the land, Abd Al-Aziz ibn Musa ibn Nusayr, married Egilon, named Umm Asim, who was originally the wife of Roderic, the defeated Goth king. Halul was the mother of Emir Hisham I, the son of your first grandfather, Abdul Rahman I, called Al-Dakhil, the Incomer, and she came from the land known now as Galicia. Emir Abdul Rahman II, son of Al-Hakim I, son of Hisham I, ibn Abdul Rahman Al-Dakhil, had many children, one of whom was born to Tarub, of whom he was greatly enamoured, and Tarub was Basque. Also, your immediate grandfather, Caliph Abdul Rahman III, Al-Nasir, may Allah have

mercy on him, had a mother named Marie, and Caliph al-Nasir's aunt was Queen Toda, the mother of King Sancho I. During your grandfather's reign, the Queen and her son visited Córdoba, and her son was treated by Córdoba doctors. He was suffering from obesity and had difficulty riding a horse, so his throne was under threat until your grandfather Al-Nasir rescued him with medicine and political aid to secure him on the throne."

My grandfather did not elaborate on this subject, as Hisham was not the heir apparent at the time, and it was then unknown whether Caliph Al-Hakim would appoint one of his brothers as heir after him, or if he would give the mandate to Hisham. If he were to appoint one of his ten brothers, it would not be surprising, as Emir Abdullah had taken over after the death of his brother Al-Mundhir while they were besieging the rebels in Barbastro. At the time, Abdullah took the bay'ah, the pledge of allegiance, from the soldiers and returned with his brother's body to Córdoba, completing the bay'ah and then burying him.

My grandfather avoided telling the whole truth about Tarub: He did not lie, but he shortened it in order not to offend Emir Hisham, as Tarub was a Basque concubine with the status of an Umm Walad, the mother of a son. To sum up her story; Emir Abdul Rahman II adored her for her beauty and coquettishness. It was said that she quarreled with him one day and closed her door to him, so he ordered that the door be covered with valuable gifts and jewels, so that when she opened it, she would be weighed down by these gifts. During the invasions, she was always on his mind and he wrote poetry to her. Tarub gave birth to the Emir's son, Abdullah, and the Emir had one hundred and fifty sons and fifty daughters from various women and female concubines, including Muddathras, who he also loved, freed, and married, and Al-Shifa, and his concubine, Qalm the Cultured, who was a good calligrapher and narrator of poetry.

Tarub wanted to ensure that her son Abdullah would rule, as she could see that the Emir, and those around him, would prefer to appoint his elder brother Muhammad, son of his wife Bahir, to be next in line. Indeed, Tarub obtained the Emir's approval, but she was afraid he would retract his words under pressure from others, especially as her son chased after fun and pleasure. The Emir had lived for a long time, and his death was expected. She conspired with her servant, Naser the Eunuch, to poison the Emir

before he could change his mind. Abdul Rahman discovered this in time, and he ordered Naser to drink the poison, which he did, and he then ran back to his house, where he asked for goat's milk as this was an antidote to the poison, but the milk did not arrive until after his soul had left his body. Many of those who were constantly being harmed by him rejoiced as he was bound by service and obedience to Tarub. That all happened in the year 236 AH. The Emir died two years later, and all mention of Tarub disappeared after her attempt.

My grandfather undoubtedly noticed the Emir's desire to learn about his mother's land and origins, and that he had captured his attention, so he went back to discussing the results of mixed relationships, this time in terms of language. He told the Emir that Arabic is the official language and that every student must master it in writing and speaking, as it is the language of knowledge, science, and books.

“However, in their private lives and in the markets, the common people speak Mozarabic, which is a mix of Arabic, Berber, and the Iberian-Roman, known as Romance. Mozarabic, together with Frankish, Germanic, Latin, and Basque, forms part of the language mixture of the small Christian kingdoms of the north. There is one language in Barcelona, one in the Basque country, and another in Galicia. Our linguistic mixture in Al-Andalus is more successful. Everyone speaks Mozarabic, and the vast majority is fluent in Arabic, including the Christians and the Jews, who also speak Hebrew. There are also those who understand and translate from other languages, such as Greek or Classical Latin, as well as the languages of the northern kingdoms.”

“Yes, the Slavs and the guards here speak colloquially among themselves, as do the scholars and sheikhs in my father's councils, and they speak Arabic in the mosque. I am fluent in both languages, my mother does not speak classical Arabic, but she also speaks Basque.”

“Your grandfather, Al-Dakhil, may Allah have mercy on him, was born in the Levant, and his father was Mu'awiya ibn Caliph Hisham ibn Caliph Abd al-Malik, may Allah have mercy on them. The mother of Emir al-Dakhil, Rah, was a Berber from the Nefzaoua tribe. It was this Emir who encouraged intermarriage, and he always consulted the men of Arab households, which

also became mixed with Andalusians and Berbers and vice versa. All of the houses that have given birth to viziers and leaders are Arab in origin, and they became Andalusian through mixed marriages, including that of Abi Abdu, Banu Abd Al-Raouf, Banu Mughaith, Banu Shahid, and many others. According to the books, at the beginning of his rule your grandfather, Al-Dakhil, requested Umayyad men from the East, and he handed them positions and responsibilities, but they were envious of him, coveted his position and showed ingratitude, and he turned to loyalists and the men of Al-Andalus and established the Slav forces who were bought young from slave traders, learned Arabic, converted to Islam, and joined the army and the guards. This tradition has continued until now, during the reign of the Caliph your father, may Allah protect him."

My grandfather ended that day's lesson by speaking about the contents of the coming Thursday lessons, and he asked Hisham about the other subjects he was currently taking. We discovered that he was receiving instruction in the Qur'an, in poetry, and in horse riding. My grandfather gave him one of the new pens, remarking that it would come in handy soon, when he began learning Arabic and calligraphy, and he told him that I would show him how to fill it with ink and how to avoid staining his clothes while carrying it. I did not wait for permission to explain and went straight to Emir Hisham, while my grandfather went off to another corner of the Dar Al-Mulk where some writers had gathered to debate.

After a short time, we moved to the garden, passing by the swimming pool and two fish ponds. I found myself in front of iron cages containing predators that I had only heard about in stories and had never seen or even knew that they existed in our land. Emir Hisham did not have to look at me to see my surprise and astonishment at seeing the predators in the garden, as everyone who came here was fascinated by the presence of these creatures and enchanted by their form, their properties, and their behaviour. In Córdoba, we are accustomed to seeing many domestic and wild birds, as well as donkeys, horses, mules, dogs in the street, sheep, goats, and various types of cows in farms and on the banks of the Guadalquivir River. Adults also scare us with tales of wolves, hyenas, and wild boars that roam at night. Lions, elephants, giraffes, and tigers, on the other hand, we only know from stories from faraway lands. Hisham

explained about the different types of elephants and the differences between the smaller African elephants, like the ones in Al-Zahra, and the massive Indian elephants. He said that the majority of these predators were brought from Africa as gifts for his grandfather and father and that some of them had been hunted in Al-Andalus. The predators were in cages next to each other, with walls between them so they could not see each other, and I saw two elephants behind a high iron fence, but what struck me the most was the giraffe, which looked like a huge insect to me.

We did not finish the tour of the horse stables, camel stables, and bird towers and returned instead to the swimming pool. When the Emir discovered that I had never learned to swim, he compared me to Qadi Al-Mundhir Al-Balluti and proceeded to tell me a story about him. He said that his father had told his mother at the start of his Caliphate that the Qadi of Córdoba had ambushed his father, Caliph Al-Nasir, may Allah have mercy on him, criticizing him for wasting time and money on the building of Medinat Al-Zahra, and that Caliph Al-Hakim feared that the Qadi would continue to criticize him. “My mother told me that she advised my father to grant the Qadi the enjoyment of all the privileges that Al-Zahra has to offer, so he would hold his tongue and stop criticizing. Once, my father invited him to swim with him in the pool and persuaded him to take off his clothes and get into the water, where he splashed around with my father and the servant in front of some viziers who laughed at the Qadi's inability to swim and testified that he enjoyed his time at Al-Zahra”. This had happened before Hisham was born, and the Qadi's criticism had since ceased, and he no longer wrote poems or wove sentences into the Friday sermon opposing the construction of Al-Zahra.

6

The Cruelty of the Emirs

On our way home, before we had gone far from the palace and the pool, my grandfather asked me to be careful to respect two conditions. The first condition was not to discuss the historical stories I knew with Hisham. I must be mindful of what I tell the Emir as he could repeat it to his mother or father, and the consequences of telling a story that had not been carefully selected could be disastrous. The second, was that I should not speak to others of what Hisham tells me, for the story could be distorted by the time it came back to the palace and this would harm us as well.

“Hold your tongue as you bridle your horse, Suleiman.”

My grandfather then told me the story of Emir Hisham I, who was cross-eyed, so I would not forget what might happen if I had a slip of the tongue in front of Hisham.

Hisham I, the son of Abdul Rahman Al-Dakhil, heard poetry verses, written in praise of his older brother Suleiman, the governor of Toledo, by Abu Al-Makhshi Asim ibn Zayd, known as Al-Ansari, the Companion, and Hisham speculated that the verses were intended to mock him with reference to his eyes. Despite the poet’s denial and the explanation he offered to Hisham when he called for him in Mérida, the son of Emir Abdul Rahman immediately ordered the eyes of the poet, who had come to Al-Andalus from Al-Hirah in Iraq, to be subjected to a punishment known as the samal, and he spent the rest of his life composing poetry about blindness. Of course, Abdul Rahman reprimanded his son for his behaviour, and he paid the poet twice the regular blood money for his eyes but that could never restore his sight. My grandfather said that the ill-fated verse was:

Be not like those led by tradition

Turn your eye away from it

“What exactly is the samal, grandfather?”

“I wish that you had not asked, Suleiman, but now that you have; the eyes are stabbed with a red-hot iron poker, and please don’t ask for any more details.”

“This is haram. Is this permitted in Islam?” I was not asking about the actual procedure, but about the religious stance to it.

“At the time of the Prophet, peace be upon him, divine revelations were unclosed gradually.” My grandfather paused to hear me repeat ‘peace be upon him’ then continued talking, leaning on my shoulder. “Before the Qur’an verse about penalties that forbad retaliation by the same action, a group of people apostatized from Islam, and some shepherds disagreed with them and their eyes were subjected to samal. When news of this reached the Prophet, he ordered the perpetrators’ eyes to suffer the same, not because of their apostasy, but to punish them in the same manner. The story of the poet is different, he did not burn the eyes of Hisham I, at worst he mocked them, and he was punished by samal, which is why he was paid twice the required blood money for his eyes.”

After my grandfather had finished his cautionary tale, which I have abbreviated, as well as his objective definition of samal and what follows from it, we had still two levels to descend; the first housed the palaces and the area in the middle where the buildings and houses of the viziers were located, and the mosque and the markets were on the lower level of Medinat Al-Zahra. We still had a long way to go on foot before we reached my uncles’ houses.

I asked my grandfather how the Emirs could be so cruel to poets.

“Not just to poets, but to most of those would live by beguiling them with lavish flattery to spend their lives in luxury. When Abu Al-Makhshi went to Mérida, he was expecting to receive a reward. The cruelty of the rulers extends to the viziers and it can be harmful to scholars if a perceived need, such as satisfying the public, presents itself. In fact, at times the Emirs will be cruel to their siblings and children if they feel that their position on the throne is threatened or disputed.”

My grandfather noticed my dumbfounded expression at his words, and I noticed that he hesitated to elaborate. I assured him that I understood his two conditions: I would be mindful of what I said, and I would take great care what stories I told the Emir or what stories of his I repeated. However, my grandfather only mentioned partially abbreviated accounts of some events surrounding some of the successive disputes between Emirs, which motivated me to pay attention to this aspect and led to me uncovering many details recorded by my ancestors in their private narratives, and I, as well, later recorded comprehensive details about the civil war and disagreements that ended in the Emirs of the Umayyad dynasty proving unable to unite, which in turn led to the loss of both their power and their souls.

I can state briefly that all reigns from Abdul Rahman I until Abdul Rahman III, the father of our Caliph Al-Hakim, were subject to intense disagreements, some of which were even bloody, among the Emirs of the Umayyad dynasty as they sought to take the throne from one another. This wasted much effort and money, at times putting the country at risk, which also contributed to the fall of the northern regions into the hands of Christian rulers. But most definitely, one should not forget that the state of Al-Andalus at the time of the Emirs and Caliphs of the Umayyad dynasty was the best in the entire world, as was evidenced by those fleeing the rest of the world to live in Al-Andalus and confirmed by scholars, merchants, ambassadors and those like them, who were able to compare what they saw and read about with the conditions in other places.

According to our records, and this was not originally a secret, Abdul Rahman Al-Dakhil ibn Mu'awiya son of Caliph Hisham ibn Abd al-Malik had miraculously survived the continuous exterminations organized by the Abbasid in Iraq, the Levant, and the rest of the Arab countries to eliminate the Umayyad dynasty and their supporters after June of 749 AD, at which time Islamic history had yet to reach one and a third of a century. The Abbasid ruler had slaughtered his siblings, and Abdul Rahman escaped with his younger brother who was unable to cross the Euphrates. When the young boy heard the soldiers urging them to return, he went to them on the bank of the river, but they slaughtered him while Al-Dakhil was screaming on the other bank of the river and refusing to give himself up. After a long

journey into exile, he passed through the Levant, Egypt, and Libya, until he reached the Maghreb. He was then hidden by his Berber uncles for some time before he moved to Al-Andalus as the first Umayyad Emir to enter the lands, forty-two years after its conquest. Umayyad supporters helped eliminate the governor in Córdoba and, once his rule was stable, other fugitives from the Umayyad dynasty arrived in Al-Andalus, who Al-Dakhil made sure to honour. As usual, some coveted rule, considering themselves more worthy of it and presuming that it would be easy for them to take the reins in Córdoba. Al-Dakhil, however, was able to rely on an effective system of espionage: He knew of every conspiracy plotted against him and ordered the execution of those involved, including Al-Mughirah, the son of his brother Al-Waleed.

Al-Dakhil ruled for thirty-three years of tireless work, and he established a distinguished culture. Before he passed away, he requested the presence of his sons, Suleiman of Toledo and Hisham of Mérida, and then tasked his youngest son Abdullah with giving the ring of the Emir to whichever of his brothers arrived first. Suleiman was Al-Dakhil's eldest son, and he was born in Damascus then followed his father to Al-Andalus, while Hisham was the son of a Galician woman, called Hallal, from the Emir’s harem.

Some of those present said that the instructions to his son Abdullah stated: “If Hisham is the first to arrive then toss him the ring, as he is favoured by virtue of his faith and has been agreed to. If Suleiman arrives, then he is the preferred by virtue of his age, courage, and the favour of the Levantines.” It was obvious that Hisham would be the first to arrive, as Córdoba was closer to Mérida, but Suleiman had already taken a pledge of allegiance to himself in Toledo, and then he headed to Córdoba, only to find that Hisham had already been appointed. The rivalry between the two brothers had been long known to their father, but it is unlikely that he ever anticipated a war breaking out between them at his death. The first round of the war ended temporarily with the defeat of Suleiman, and he accepted money and exile to the Maghreb.

Following the death of Hisham, seven years after his rule had commenced, Suleiman returned to the north of Al-Andalus where he had old acquaintances. He persuaded his brother Abdullah to support him, and they both fought Al-Hakim I, son of their brother Hisham. This tempted

Charlemagne to invade in 797 AD, but his soldiers were defeated, and they retreated. These incursions revealed to Charlemagne and the Franks just how weak the Islamic northern front was, and they led another campaign in 806 AD, crossed the mountains and then besieged Barcelona, which put up a struggle and waited a long time for aid from Córdoba before it fell. Charlemagne then established the province of El Marca Hispanica, which still stands and has relations with the other northern Christian provinces that were also cut from Al-Andalus. The province of Barcelona had relations and exchanged embassies with Córdoba in the reigns of both Caliph Al-Nasir and his son Al-Hakim Al-Mustansir Billah.

One day, following the fall of Barcelona, Al-Hakim I was returning from a hunt when some of the residents of Córdoba subjected him to insults and humiliation, as he was known among them to be shameless and ill-mannered and most of the preachers in the mosques criticized him and called him a drunk. After this public humiliation, Al-Hakim sought to uncover the cause, and he unveiled a plot by his own household and some of the mute Slav mercenaries, so he eliminated them cruelly and had them hanged. Subsequently, there was an increase in the numbers of soldiers and guards of mute Slav mercenaries, who took upon themselves to humiliate the public in Córdoba in their turn. As for Toledo, which is closer to Barcelona and the dangers from the north, the anxiety of the population, which included Arabs, Muwallad of mixed race, Christians, and Jews, grew, and they fortified themselves behind the walls of their impregnable city until their requests for protection and less domination were met. It should be noted that the city's residents had been accustomed to a certain level of privilege ever since Toledo was the capital of the Goths. However, the Emir did not respect this, and he resorted to cunning and malice in dealing with the residents. He wrote a decree, appointing a governor of Toledo from among the Muwallad, Amrus ibn Yusuf, and wrote to the people about this, which reassured them because their new governor was one of themselves.

Shortly afterwards, Amrus invited the notables to a celebration in a castle erected outside the walls. He spoke to them, praising the Emir, and concluded his speech by asking his guests to speak out and say whether they believed in the Emir with their whole hearts and minds or if they still had some apprehensions. It seemed from their speeches that some of

them agreed that their minds were at one with the Emir and the unification and strength of the country but, in their hearts, they wanted to pursue their own interests. It seemed that Amrus had ill-intentions, regardless of how they answered, as he stood up and yelled: “Then your hearts and minds must be separated.” He then signaled to the band, which started to play the drums and flutes, and the soldiers commenced decapitating the guests while the people of Toledo were unable to hear their screams. He threw the bodies into a trench and covered them with earth.

When the details reached Córdoba, people started cursing the Emir, clapping behind him in the streets, and some of them were arrested and crucified. This was in the year 806, and the rebellion was diminished by these onslaughts until the thirteen of Ramadan of the year 202 AH, corresponding to the twenty-fifth of March of the year 818 AD, when the people of the Secunda district south of the river revolted. Secunda was where the workers, craftsmen, students, and young jurists resided.

The trouble started when one of the smiths in the district was slow in mending a sword for one the Emir’s guards, their disagreement escalated, and the guard severed the head of the smith. The news spread quickly among the residents, and they advanced across the bridge to the palace where they were joined by senior jurists, calling for justice and retribution. Instead, the Emir sent his mercenaries to Secunda with orders to set the district on fire. When the demonstrators tried to return to rescue their families from the fire, the soldiers killed many of them after blocking the bridge. Once again, Al-Hakim, the disgraced Emir, won against people who were not demanding his throne: They wanted more justice and for the soldiers to stop assaulting the common people and protect the peripheries of the country. The Emir crowned his victory by expelling all the inhabitants of Secunda from Al-Andalus. Some of them went north, and another group sailed to the Maghreb, where they created Al-Udwa of the Andalusians in Fez, while a third group sailed to Alexandria, and resided there for a while before leaving for the island of Crete in the Mediterranean. They gained control of the island from the Byzantines and established a state, based on piracy, which was defeated only a few years ago, specifically in the last year of the reign of Al-Nasir.

In our records, I did not find any fights or murders between the members of the household of Emir Abdul Rahman II, son of Al-Hakim I, who acted contrary to his father's policy. His reign saw freedom, prosperity, and the development of the sciences, paving the way for the rejuvenation of Al-Andalus. On the other hand, there were many arguments between his women and concubines in the palace, as he had hundreds of them, and they birthed him hundreds of sons and daughters.

Emir Abdullah had at least fifteen women and concubines who bore him eleven sons and thirteen daughters. Some of his children competed with one another to the point where Al-Mutarrif, son of his wife Ghazlan, caused the death of his brother, Muhammad, son of his wife Durr. This led the Emir to execute the murderer and to remove his nine sons from the succession. Instead, he appointed his grandson Abdul Rahman III, the son of his murdered son Muhammad, and he took power, undisputed by his uncles or aunts, in the year 912 AD, and was known as Al-Nasir li-Din Allah.

Once Al-Hakim II, son of Al-Nasir, grew up, he was appointed over twelve of his brothers as Crown Prince. This ignited jealousy in the one called Abdullah. He conspired with a group to murder his brother. However, the plot was exposed and they were eliminated by Al-Nasir, who ordered that his son Abdullah be brought out on the second day of Eid Al-Adha, and he slaughtered him by his own hand.

Does picking such tragic anecdotes mean that I despise those of the Umayyad dynasty who ruled over us? May Allah be my witness that I neither despise nor envy them. I am aware of the consequences of ruling over a vast land with multiple ethnicities, languages, and religions, among other difficulties. Whether they provided the public with freedom and equality or were cruel rulers, the people were relentless, especially the people of Córdoba with their rebellious spirit. My criticism of the Umayyad dynasty stems from my grievance and the tears in my heart for what befell Al-Zahra, Córdoba, and Al-Andalus in the reign of Hisham II, while he was a child. I wish the Caliph had appointed one of his brothers to be Crown Prince, instead of giving in to the request of his concubine Subh and appointing his child Hisham. One could say that my eloquence and farsightedness is nothing more than the result of witnessing the outcome and seeing the devastation, destruction, war, the fall of the Caliphate, the

dispersal of the Umayyad, and the division of Al-Andalus. This may be so, but it does not change the fact that the Caliph Al-Hakim Al-Mustansir Billah, the scholar, the intellectual, the enlightened, he who maintained his father's legacy, made a mistake with his unprecedented action in appointing a child after he suffered a stroke that left half of his body paralyzed.

I will gather myself and continue my story: If Allah wills, I will unfold the details and hidden secrets that I witnessed and lived through till now and the devastation that caused the hearts of the faithful to bleed.

7

Severed Heads

On Tuesday the twenty-fifth of Dhu'l-Qi'dah of the current year of 360 AH, corresponding to the year 971 AD, the Head of Security, Ahmed Al-Jaafari, left Al-Zahra to inspect the pavilion set south of the river in Córdoba to welcome Jaafar and Yahya, and those who accompanied them, after they had been escorted by Muhammad Al-Amri from the port of Málaga to Córdoba as previously mentioned. Al-Jaafari rode with ranks of soldiers and guards, fully armed, as well as delegations from the six divisions that the Caliph had requested to attend from their districts and provinces to witness the reception. When the procession reached the canopy and the tents of the guests, they saw what we had seen the day before, the head of Ziri ibn Manad on a high spike, surrounded by a hundred heads of his companions on other stakes.

The mute knights, who did not speak Arabic, and the Caliph's guard, carried the stakes with the heads impaled on them and walked ahead of the delegations, accompanying the guests to the retreat of Abdul Aziz, which was located between Córdoba and Al-Zahra. This was a large farm with many houses, gardens, animals, and birds. It was possible for the delegations to reach their goal by crossing the bridge, then circling the wall, but it had been decided they should pass through the middle of Córdoba.

I had seen the heads the previous day, against my father's command. After the forces passed through Córdoba, I climbed up the wall around our house to watch from a place far from the dust of the horses. The black heads advanced in the procession, the first of which was the head of Ziri, whose hair drooped around the base of his severed neck, followed by the armies, one after another, then the procession of Jaafar, Yahya and those with them from the Banu Khazer, followed by the men of Córdoba and everybody who wanted to show off on his horse.

They found the guards, corporals in armour, and men from the suburbs of Córdoba, awaiting them with all their weapons at the Bab Al-Sudda, the main entrance to the Córdoba Palace, so that the area was too narrow to accommodate them all. Hisham ibn Othman, the Commander of Valencia, sat at the palace door as representative of his uncle, Vizier Jaafar ibn Othman, Administrator of Córdoba, who was occupied with another order of the Caliph's, as will come up later. The procession continued along the road, passing through the garden of the Caliphs, where Caliph Al-Nasir, may Allah have mercy on him, is buried. They passed beneath me, in front of the wall, past the Jewish Quarter and the Gate of the Jews, heading towards the Kasbah, the ancient city. They passed the mosque of the Hajib Issa Abi Abdo on their way to the Al-Shifa neighborhood and the Hammam Al-Labadi neighborhood. In a word, they crossed Córdoba from south to north, in order to ensure that all the people saw the severed heads that had been soaked in salt for two months to retain their owners' features. After this, they exited from the Gate of Amer and passed Quraysh Cemetery on their way the retreat of Abdul Aziz, where they hung the heads on the gate to be seen by all who come and go between Córdoba and Al-Zahra.

According to our records, the next scene in this dramatic production was played by Vizier Jaafar, the Administrator of Córdoba, who prepared all Córdoba's men, youngsters, and boys who were skilled at carrying arms, including some of the boys of the Abdul Issa Al-Fihri gang. The vizier opened the armories to them and registered their names, allowing them to carry shields and swords, and he lined them up on the way between Al-Zahra and Córdoba on the following day. The soldiers and boys spent the entire night polishing weapons, saddles and embellishing Al-Zahra. In the morning, Hisham ibn Othman moved to the retreat of Abdul Aziz with the soldiers, and he found the guests ready to ride with him to Al-Zahra in a grand procession with various huge banners, including Levantine checked bunting and legions of dignitaries and slaves to walk among those in full armour and shiny helmets, with the severed heads at the front of the procession, of course, and all surrounded by sixteen thousand armed infanterists, Tangierian knights in armour, slave knights, and archers wearing white cloaks and caps, holding crossbows and red quivers

decorated in gilt. Near Al-Zahra, the procession passed through four squadrons of cavalry, each with one hundred knights dressed in different uniforms and armed with various weapons, before it arrived between the magnificent statues of lions, tigers, eagles, and snakes. The path lined with statues led them to the Caliph’s stable in Al-Zahra, where they passed between two rows of Caliphate-clad horses, accoutered with Caliphal saddles and bridles. When they reached the southern gate of Al-Zahra, they found two neat rows of slave knights and corporals in armour, followed by spear-bearers and archers, and craftsmen dressed in colourful, shiny garments, with turbans on their heads.

Before the procession arrived at the Caliph's palace, the Administrator of Al-Zahra, Muhammad ibn Aflah, sat in his chair to greet the delegation, which was, of course, accompanied by Muhammad ibn Abi Amir. They walked past the men on the terraces and in front of the soldiers' barracks, where archers were arranged in colorful clothes with shining, studded caps on their heads. When the Head of Security, Hisham arrived at the southern hall, Caliph Al-Hakim was seated in the reception hall overlooking the gardens, while Muhammad Al-Amri and his companions Jaafar, his brother Yahya, and the Banu Khazer, marched to the soldiers' seating. Some of the Caliph's brothers sat around him, and under them sat people of the kingdom, as was customary at the receptions that were wont to fill several pages with mention of the attendees, their attire, their status, and their seating: Viziers, hajibs, loyalists, scholars, judges, chiefs from Quraysh, and Arabs from the six army divisions, who had come from the Kingdom's various regions, then the eunuchs, servants, nobles, and many more.

Once they were all present, Al-Amri and his companions were permitted to present Jaafar, Yahya, and those with them. They reached the entrance and kissed the carpet several times before Al-Amri led them to the throne, where the Caliph extended his hand for them to kiss. Jaafar was the first to step forward to initiate greetings, followed by the remainder of his people, and the Caliph ordered them to sit, and he listened to Jaafar then spoke to his brother and promised them kindness and honour, at which they proclaimed their gratitude and supplication, and they praised him greatly.

Jaafar was courteous to the degree that once he had heard the Caliph's question, he stood before answering.

After the reception, they returned to their former position in the soldiers' seating, where Muhammad Al-Amri remained with them until their departure, when he escorted them to the place in Córdoba assigned to them by the Caliph. The Caliph awarded each of the two brothers dirhams to the value one thousand dinars a month, as well as seventy bushels of wheat, and the rest of the Khazers

were awarded more dirhams, wheat, and hay than they required, so that they were overjoyed.

My mother's concern, and my father's rage at me, overshadowed the joy of seeing the Banu Khazer in Córdoba. In the night of the third day after seeing the heads on the Córdoba wall, and the procession pass before my eyes, I woke up in terror, screaming and drenched in sweat as if I had just had been pulled from the river. I had had a nightmare in which heads flew through the air and chased after me so as to prevent me from entering Córdoba and returning home, and they then began to approach me while my feet were virtually paralyzed. Waking up from this nightmare was a merciful thing, or so I thought.

My mother and father felt my terror, they calmed me down, and when my mother discovered what had caused this night terror, she summoned our neighbour, María, to bring her a cup of scabiosa. My father was not happy, but he kept quiet about it and left my mother and our neighbour to help me drink from the copper cup, which resembled a plate more than a cup, and which was engraved inside and out with Arabic, Hebrew, and Latin letters and words. María muttered spells and made me drink from the cup over and over again, until I fell asleep once more.

The next morning, after breakfast, my father asked me to hug the pillar in the reception area, and he tied my hands around it. “I told you not to go to see the heads, but you did not listen. You disturbed our sleep, you bothered the neighbours, and now you must bear the unavoidable punishment. I will flog you ten times with the strap, but if you raise your

voice and scream, I will flog you even more.” My mother tried to intervene but my father's expression, and his clear signal to move away, put an end to all my hopes. I do not remember my father ever hitting me this hard. He told me a few years later that he chose to act in this way in order to alleviate my fear of the flying heads by overwhelming it with my fear of flagellation. I also understood that his anger at me stemmed from his annoyance with the overall situation, and his philosophy was that the Berbers will fear us until the moment when they can frighten us and do the same to us as they do to each other.

The splendours of the receptions were communicated in detail to our enemies from all sides, allowing them to plan the best time to plunder us. All methods of killing, skinning, crucifixion, and cutting torsos have been tried and failed here. According to my father, who questioned me as he explained his own philosophy, Islam's progress has been harmed and hampered by religious and sectarian differences since its first inception. “Where is the harm in Shiite belief coexisting with the Sunni in Al-Andalus, when we also have Jewish and Christian sects and are not strict with them? Money has been squandered, and soldiers' lives have been lost in this war, and now the Caliph Al-Hakim is quickly withdrawing the frontier forces from the north to send them south to the Maghreb which is not even capable of invading us, but of course, they will tire us if we go to them as occupiers instead of being satisfied to stay in Ceuta, Melilla, and Tangiers.”

I cannot believe how right my father was then, as I now see it, after living through decades since Caliph Al- Hakim's death and witnessing, with my own eyes, the destruction of Al-Zahra and Córdoba at the hands of the descendants of those who raised Ziri's head in our streets.

I did not see the Caliph during the following weekly visits to Al-Zahra with my grandfather, but I did see him more than once when he came to Córdoba and sat in the upper floor of the palace, above the gate opposite to the waterwheel, to overlook the restoration work on the bridge pillars. With his presence, he hoped to persuade the labourers to finish the work before the rainy season arrived and the level of the Guadalquivir River rose. He observed the erection of a dam of stones, sand, and logs around

the northern pillars, and the redirection the river's water between the southern pillars. They erected massive wooden beams beneath the bridge, then replaced the stones from the pillars which had lost their stability and been degraded by water with new, solid ones. Then, after weeks of hard work and the deployment of hundreds of labourers, they repeated the process on the other half. Al-Hakim was an expert in construction engineering because, as Crown Prince, he had supervised the construction of Medinat Al-Zahra. Of course, he did not want to pass over the reward of restoring and strengthening the bridge as his predecessors had. The bridge was restored during the reign of Hisham I, and it was said that he carried stones in his own hands at the time. The Córdobans believed that he was personally engaged because he used the bridge for his own purposes at that time. When Emir Hisham heard this, he swore that he would not cross the bridge except on official business.

Much earlier, eight years after the conquest of Al-Andalus, the governor, Al-Samh Al-Khawlani, enquired of the Umayyad Caliph Umar ibn Abdul Aziz in Damascus, what he should do about the wall of Córdoba, which had fallen to ruin in the west, and the Roman bridge, part of which had been degraded by the water and was impossible to use. The Caliph sent instructions to his governor in Córdoba to repair the bridge immediately with stones from the wall and to secure the wall with clay bricks until he was able to secure solid stone for it. As is recorded by history, Al-Samh acted on this command.

8

The Ambassadors from the North

The coming of the last month of this year, Dhu‘l-Hijjah, meant that the start of my education in the mosque within the next month was drawing near, and I had conflicted feelings about this. The mosque itself was a familiar sight to me and I was accustomed to the waves of students of varied appearance as I had seen those who frequently attended the sessions, sitting around their sheikhs. But I knew nothing about the method of teaching, the number of assignments the students were given, or the authority of the educators, as none of my relatives had told me anything about their personal experiences, which I found worrisome. Of course, I was scared that I would no longer be able to accompany my grandfather to Al-Zahra every Thursday.

The departure of the ambassador of Barcelona from Córdoba in Dhu‘l-Hijjah of that year, which corresponded to October 971 AD, coincided with the arrival of new ambassadors from the other Christian emirates of the north. It was by the will of Allah that in those days the ongoing debate between my father and grandfather reached its end in favour of my father, so that I was then obligated to accompany my grandfather as much as possible, to learn the intricacies of the recording and storytelling profession. This allowed me to accompany him, during that month, on a visit to the ambassador of Barcelona, prior to his departure, as well as to see the Caliph in Al-Zahra on the sixth of Dhu‘l-Hijjah, when he welcomed four additional embassies. My grandfather had selected my father as the successor to his profession but my father was interested in broader activities, and he gradually persuaded his father to continue to pursue the profession as far as he was able, and to teach it to me instead, from a young age, so I could inherit it directly from my grandfather. They agreed that if my grandfather’s life was cut short or if he fell sick before I was fully competent and able to pursue the profession on my own, my father would then assist me where he could.

Three months had passed since the arrival of Enneco Bonfill Sinderedo in Córdoba, as the representative of the governor of Barcelona, Borerell Suner. As usual, prior to the departure of the ambassador and the twenty soldiers that had accompanied him, a delegation of city notables and some scholars came to bid him farewell at the Nasir retreat, and I accompanied them, together with my grandfather. At the beginning of the month, the delegation left the mosque after the afternoon prayer, and we passed the bridge, which was still undergoing reconstruction. The mills in the southern part of the Guadalquivir had been halted since the water had been diverted to the northern half.

In appearance, the ambassador was a tall, strong, young man with red hair. He welcomed us at the gate of the guest residence, shaking hands with all, then made his way with the delegation to a long hall, where he sat on a divan with four soldiers behind him, while the men comprising the delegation sat on divans to both sides and in front of the ambassador, who had an interpreter next to him, fluent in both Catalan and Arabic. I could neither comprehend nor remember anything that was said throughout the time I spent there. I occupied myself with watching those present, their every move, their reactions, and the manners they displayed. I focused my attention on how the interpreter acted: He would whisper what the crowd was saying to the ambassador then speak loudly in Arabic, translating what the ambassador was saying. The interpreter was young and good-looking, with a shaved beard. I found out later that he was around twenty years old. Before writing my narrative down, I went over what my grandfather had written about this meeting, the focal point of which was the information exchange between the delegation and the ambassador.

The summary of my grandfather conclusions was that they had no coinage of their own in Barcelona, which meant that they used our dinars, dirhams, and old silver and copper coins. Due to the scarcity of coins, each coin equated to certain goods; a dinar equaled a number of sheep and pigs, so when one needed to purchase something that equated to a dinar, one could pay the required number of sheep or pigs. In fact, the price of the land was estimated and paid for in animals and grain, rather than dirhams. Most of the daily exchanges were concluded by trading goods instead of money. They also traded with the land of the Gauls, with Al-Andalus, and

across the sea, but their trade was limited and managed by the Jews. The city had not regrown in population to what it had been in the days of the Islamic era, and there was a large, thriving, Jewish community, expert in foreign trade.

On the sixth day of the month, the Caliph welcomed four embassies. The first of them was from Elvira, daughter of king Ramiro II, who had passed away a short while previously. She was guardian to her younger brother Ordoño III, the king of Galicia. Elvira sent a messenger, who recited her message; it was interpreted to the Caliph, and then he left. After him came Prince Jimeno, who was to remain as a hostage in Córdoba, to guarantee the good behaviour of his brother Sancho Garcés II of Pamplona at the northern frontiers and to prevent a return to betrayal and attacks. Jimeno was free to move around Córdoba, and the Caliph had decided to welcome him on that day to obtain news of his brother and to forward the Caliph's assurances through him. The third ambassador who met with the Caliph was Khamis Ibn Abi Sulait, sent by the governor of Castile, Garcia Ferdinand. He conveyed the governor’s message, received a reply from the Caliph, and left. The final ambassador of that day was Dedeqa ibn Shaprut, ambassador of Ansur Fernández, governor of Monzón.

As usual, senior Christians from Córdoba attended the reception of these embassies, in anticipation of the need for translation. Among those present were Qadi Asbagh Ibn Nabil, the Archbishop of Córdoba, Issa Ibn Al-Mansur, the priest, Muawiyah Ibn Lab, and the Bishop of Seville, Obaid Allah Ibn Qasim. No translation was required, except in the case of the hostage, Jimeno. As for the rest, they were Arabs or fluent in Arabic, such as Dedeqa ibn Shaprut, who was also fluent in Hebrew, and it appeared from his name that he was related to the doctor and ambassador of Caliph Al-Nasir, may Allah have mercy on him, Hasdai ibn Shaprut, who was well-known in Córdoba.

9

Water and Fire

Our neighbour María loves many of Allah's blessings but detests others. In fact, prompted by her absolute distaste for rain, I overheard her yelling that she was willing to trade anything for the cessation of the heavy rain or at least a reduction in its intensity. She actually expressed this on the evening of the last day of the year 361 AH. The wind, lightning, and thunder intensified before dark, so she went out into her courtyard, and all the neighbors heard her raising her voice to her God, offering that trade. In fact, she was not the only one to feel terrified that evening, as our country was in the grip of a wild and unstable winter. Sometimes it rained gently and softly, with cold, rainy days alternating with warm, sunny days, while in other years it rained and snowed for days, pelting us with frigid hailstone as hard as baked clay. Of course, we should not forget the years of drought that resulted in death, famine, and price inflation.

Our Emirs and Caliphs attempted, and frequently succeeded, in mitigating the effects of drought by stockpiling foodstuffs in the good years and distributing them to the needy during famines. They reconstructed the Roman aqueducts, increased their number, and transported water between the mountains to farms, cities, and villages. However, flash floods and unending torrential rain were things that everyone saw as of irrevocable divine origin.

María's fears were realized, and her bargain failed as the dreadful pounding of thunder continued and torrential rain poured down at night, and she was convinced that the house would be submerged. Water accumulated in the yard of the house, and the small area of land that was not tiled was unable to absorb the great quantity of rain. We were not asleep, but our next-door neighbour's screams drew my father from his bedroom to the covered canopy overlooking the yard. I could hear our neighbour's voice, attempting to reassure his wife, but to no avail. My father

moved to open the door of the house, and instead of the water draining from our courtyard into the street, the water from the street entered as it flowed south towards the mosque and the river, so he quickly closed the door. I told my father that the water level had risen above the level of the outdoor stone bench that separated the courtyard from the arbours in front of the rooms, thereby overcoming our first line of defense which was supplemented by the thresholds in front of the rooms that housed our beds and all our furniture and necessities. “Put pillows and blankets on the thresholds and put weights on them,” my father ordered without hesitation. All of his clothes had become wet, and he had removed some of them. He then said to my mother: “Pick up everything that is on the floor of the rooms and put it on the tables and beds. Where is Fatima?”

“Don’t worry; she's asleep in her bed,” I told my father, who began scooping up water and hurling it over the wall into the street, and when he got tired of doing that, he poured water into the well in the corner of the courtyard. After hours of exhausting resistance, the rain subsided, the level of flooding decreased in our narrow street, and the water ran out of our courtyard leaving no loss behind, apart from wetting what we had piled on the thresholds of the house. “The cause of the flooding is the narrow streets and the excessive paving. I will ask the Imam to make an appeal to the people tomorrow to make narrow, wide holes in the upper part of their wells.” My father said this while drying himself, after stripping off his clothes, and he stood naked as the day he was born before his wife gave him a woolen blanket and led him to bed.

In the morning, before the roosters crowed or the birds sang, we heard the wails of María, overcome by her husband's attempts to save their belongings on the ground. After the sun came up, my mother reassured her that these disasters did not occur twice in the same year, and that the losses were not serious. “What matters is that you and Jesús survived any harm, and soon we will celebrate the birth of Jesus, and you will forget about this incident.”

“Winter is only getting started, Umm Suleiman, and I will insist on Jesús moving to the farm to spend the winter days with the chickens; floods do not occur there.” María was serious in what she was saying, and I knew she would be able to persuade her good and loving husband to move to their egg-laying farm near Al-Rusafa, east of Córdoba. If she succeeded in her request and implemented it quickly, the result would be the loss of the joy of Christmas that I shared every year, together with Fatima, in the house of María and Jesús, who had no children.

Over the following days, gentle rain continued to fall, Christmas was approaching, and Jesús had persuaded María not to flee from our street. On Tuesday, December 19th, five days before Christmas Eve, the earth beneath us shook and then quickly settled. It was four hours before dawn, and I didn’t feel anything, but my father woke me up and picked up Fatima, and we all stood in the yard, shivering from the cold despite the blankets on our backs. My father refused to give any explanation for this situation, which did not last long but, in the morning, he told me that he heard the clanking of pots hanging in the kitchen and felt the bed move beneath him, so he knew it was an earthquake, and he was afraid that the house would collapse on us. Fortunately, our neighbour was not awakened by the clanking, and if an earthquake were to occur at another time, when María could feel it, she would probably die of fear immediately. Anyway, Christmas was stolen from me. María learnt of the disaster in the morning and went out to the farm with her husband that day with a few belongings, and we did not see her for weeks, but I thought about her over the next few days and sometimes wished that we had gone with the neighbours. On Thursday, heavy rain fell in Córdoba and its surroundings all night and most of the next day, and severe winds blew. My father took advantage of the calmness between the storms and rain to stack stones and sandbags against our street wall, just in front of the door, preventing water from entering our yard, and allowing us to open the door to let the water out of the house into the street. My father had implemented the idea of opening a hole at the bottom of the neck of the well so that the rainwater could run into it and it could absorb whatever accumulated in the yard. The rain did not stop for the next ten days, the wind raged, snow fell in Córdoba and the

region, and the river rose, but my father's defenses of the house were completely successful, and we did not have to go through the crisis of rescuing the contents of the rooms.

Of course, my lessons did not begin during that time, and I was unable to visit Al-Zahra to see Emir Hisham, but my conversations with my father increased during our seclusion in the house and, fortunately, we had plenty of firewood and coal for heating, as well as fresh and dried food, eggs, olives, and oil.

The church bells rang on Christmas Eve, but I am not sure if anyone went to midnight mass. During that time, we did not attend any prayers at the mosque.

A madman wandered the streets of Córdoba on the first day of the new Gregorian year 972, calling for: “Only one thousand, not two.” I knew from my father that the caller meant to say that while life in this world might last until the year 1000 AD, the resurrection would take place before the year 2000. “This means that we still have a long time until the Day of Judgment,” my father said, in one of his rare comments.

“Why are people afraid of the Day of Judgment?”

“Because it marks the beginning of judgment, punishment, and reward, and the signs of its coming terrify people. Our paths will be divided on the Day of Judgment, and some of us will go to hell, while a few will go to paradise.”

“But on the Day of Judgment, the Holy Prophet, blessings and peace be upon him, will intercede for us, and we will all go to paradise.”

My father laughed at my exaggerated praise of the Prophet and he said. “If I were you, I would not rely so much on intercession as most of our misfortunes are the result of our own actions as Muslims, so why would the Holy Prophet intercede for saboteurs? Furthermore, the Resurrection Surah made no mention of intercession. Recite it for me so we can analyze it.”

I had not memorized it by heart, as it is one of the last surahs in the Qur'an, and I told my father that I had not reached that stage yet, so he recited it:

In the name of Allah, The Most Gracious and The Most Merciful“

I swear by the Day of Judgment. And I swear by the reproaching soul. Does man think that we will not assemble his bones? Yes, [We are] Able [even] to proportion his fingertips. But man desires to continue in sin. He asks, “When is the Day of Judgment?” So when vision is dazzled, and the moon darkens, and the sun and the moon are joined, Man will say on that Day, “Where is the [place of] escape?” No! There is no refuge. To your Lord, that Day is the [place of] permanence. Man will be informed that Day of what he sent ahead and kept back. Rather, man, against himself, will be a witness, even if he presents his excuses. Move not your tongue with it, [O Muhammad], to hasten with recitation of the Qur’an. Indeed, upon Us is its collection [in your heart] and [to make possible] its recitation. So when We have recited it [through Gabriel], then follow its recitation. Then upon Us is its clarification [to you]. No! But you love the immediate. And leave the Hereafter. [Some] faces, that Day, will be radiant, Looking at their Lord. And [some] faces, that Day, will be contorted, expecting that there will be done to them [something] backbreaking.”

My father did not finish the surah so I would remember the first half of it and the lesson it contained, as he said, and he assured me that the rest of it did not include any mention of intercession either.

“When will the Day of Judgment occur?”

“The knowledge of that, Suleiman, is with Allah. Have you made so many mistakes and committed so many offenses that you are afraid of hell?”

“Not so much, but isn't there an in-between punishment between the pleasures and houris of paradise and being boiled and burned in the fire of hell?”

“Perhaps the difference is in the duration of time spent in hell, the degree of heat, the length of the pleasures in paradise, and the number of houris.”

It was clear that the atmosphere of rain, cold, and the fire on the hearth in front of us, did not frighten my father or limit his comments, which are still

difficult for me to evaluate, and when I mentioned the houris in paradise, he looked at me with a vague laugh.

“Father, in paradise, according to what I heard more than once from the Imam during the Friday prayer, people are equal in the pleasures they receive, and the number, shape, and age of the houris.” Suddenly, a thought flashed through my mind and popped out of my mouth with no hesitation. “What if Fatima does good and enters paradise? Will she have houris or will she be a houri in the service of one of the righteous men?” My father laughed so hard that he rolled onto his back and grabbed at his stomach from laughing too much. Other questions came to my mind: How would we get to know each other if we were all alike? How long would we be able to live in that environment? What size is the paradise that will house all the righteous dead from the beginning of creation?

My father pulled himself together, and before I could ask him another question, he began to exhort me to be patient and to acquire knowledge gradually. “You will find answers in others and in your own mind to everything. The important thing now is not to be afraid of the Day of Judgment and hell and not to be tempted by paradise to the point of blind obedience and literal implementation of other people's interpretations of the Holy Qur'an. There is no reason to be afraid as long as your actions are consistent with your upbringing and knowledge of things and do not contradict your conscience. Allah is All-Knowing and Omnipotent, and He judges people based on their knowledge. A wrongdoer who premeditates his wrongdoing is different from a wrongdoer without knowledge. One will be able to enter paradise, while the other will not be able to cross the threshold.”

“And how many houris are there for the righteous, or let’s say for a martyr?”

“Since you insist on this, I prefer that you look for the answer yourself in the verses of the Qur'an and inform me once you have found it. In this way, you can be certain of the information, and you will teach yourself a lesson about what you can believe of what those obsessives are saying, as well as learn how to distinguish between the words of Allah and of those who claim knowledge.”

After memorizing the Qur'an by heart over the next few months, I decided to look for the answers. I discovered that in some of their verses the two surahs, the Resurrection and the Earthquake, speak about what some might consider signs of Judgment Day, and they all relate to the occurrence of natural disasters preceding that day. Concerning what is said about the houris, I found no trace of this. The word "Jannah", or paradise, was repeated a hundred and forty-one times, and it was associated with descriptions of pleasures, rivers, silk clothes, and the access of those who go to paradise to whatever they desire. When it speaks of females, it refers to them by stating that righteous men will be accompanied by righteous women, and there will be ‘pure spouses’, and “Enter Paradise, you and your spouses, rejoicing.” The verses frequently mention gardens, and it is clear that these are on Earth. The Surah ‘Muhammad’ mentions the accounts of the pleasures to be obtained in paradise, and speaks of rivers of water, milk, honey, and wine, but the promises do not include houris who return to their virgin state every night.

10

Muhammad Al-Amri

That was my first religious, philosophical, and scientific discussion with my father. I wish we could have finished it that night, but he wanted to change the topic so I shifted the conversation to another topic by asking a direct question about why my grandfather's conversation with Muhammad Al-Amri had made him uncomfortable. “Your perceptions are rapidly expanding, my son, and there is no harm in telling you a story that seems neither important nor dangerous, nonetheless, I want you to swear to keep it secret until the situation changes and Al-Amri is no longer a threat.”

“I swear to Allah, even if I were to be cut to pieces, I will not reveal the secret.”

Now, fifty-three years since that night, and twenty-two years after the death of Al-Amri, who became the Hajib of Emir Hisham and was known as Almanzor after the death of Caliph Al-Hakim II, I can reveal my father's story, which was not kept secret as he was not a direct participant in it.

“He is an arrogant, depraved, opportunist, as is shown by his current behaviour, and as was indicated by his behaviour when he was young,” my father said, and he then he explained the reason for his opinion by saying that one of those affected by Al-Amri, named Musa ibn Azron, told him the following story:

“We met one day in a meadow we used to visit at the side of the Nória in Córdoba, and with us was Ibn Abi Amir, who was still young, his cousin Amro ibn Abdullah, the writer Ibn Al-Marazi, and a man known as Ibn Al-Hasan from Málaga, and we had food for our outing with us.

“I am determined take hold of Al-Andalus, lead the army, and be the final authority here,” Al-Amri said, and we started laughing and mocking him. He said: “Wish for whatever you want when I take control of Al-Andalus.”

His cousin wished to take over the city, Ibn Al-Marazi wished to take over the market, and Ibn Al-Hassan expressed his desire to be a judge in Málaga, where he lives, because he loves figs, and Málaga figs are the best, and, as a Qadi there, he could eat them as much as he pleased."

My father continued telling the story from the perspective of Musa ibn Azron, who persisted in throwing disparaging words at Al-Amri and declined to wish for anything when Ibn Abi Amir asked him. "After he rose through ranks from Qadi to supervising the sons of the Caliph, and then obtained authority over the mint and city security, he fulfilled the wishes of those who had asked him for a post, and he is still clamping down on Musa and making him pay."

My father, of course, did not approve of these morals, and his interpretation of the story was that Al-Amri was a self-absorbed man who would do anything to achieve his goals.

"But he is only one of many, my father, and the Caliph is powerful and has an heir, as well as ten older brothers and a large family."

"Yes, but Al-Amri is depraved, egoistical, and manages to get promoted quickly. Unlike all of his Umayyad predecessors, the Caliph is elderly and has only one young son. We must pray to Allah that everything goes well."

Al-Amri was one of those who were promoted again that year, and for the next five years he became close to the Berbers, taking over the judiciary and expenses of Al-Udwa of the Maghreb and distributing money to the tribes to gain their support for the Caliphate, and of course, he established special relations with them. At that time, my father did not tell me about Al-Amri's closeness to the wife of the Caliph, the mother of Hisham. On every occasion, my father kept reminding me of the accuracy of his judgment of Al-Amri, not only from the standpoint he adopts that the end justifies the means but from the premise that his actions and selfish goals would destroy Al-Andalus, something which I have witnessed with my own eyes.

Muhammad ibn Abdullah ibn Abi Amir Al-Ma'afari was born in 328 AH, which corresponds to 940 AD. Al-Ma'afari's family, like ours, was of Yemeni origin, and his grandfather, Abd Al-Malik, entered Al-Andalus with Tariq's forces, like my grandfather, As'aad Al-Qalai, who arrived in Africa with Commander Hasan and entered Al-Andalus with Musa ibn Nusayr's forces.

Al-Ma'afari's family lived in Torrox, a town on the southern coast between Málaga and Almuñécar. His father, Abdullah, was a man of knowledge who died in Tripoli on his way back from pilgrimage. His mother, Burayha, was from Banu Al-Partal in Córdoba. Everyone now knows that Muhammad studied at the Mosque of Córdoba, that he asked for the help of his uncle in Seville and married his daughter there, and that his uncle helped him get a job in the court administration. He left Seville and opened a bureau at the Caliph's palace gate, near the Mosque, to write requests, petitions, and demands for people. It is said that he started moving up the ladder as a result of mediation by Qadi Muhammad ibn Ashaq ibn Al-Saleem with the Caliph's Hajib, Jaafar Al-Mushafi, who nominated him on a list of people being considered to supervise Abdul Rahman, the Caliph's son, and Subh chose Muhammad Al-Amri. He succeeded in winning the admiration and sympathy of Aurora, Subh's Spanish name, as his upper back was slightly hunched, and he seemed to be modest and polite when he talked to people while looking down at them. Since Subh was the only one to bear the Caliph children, and he granted her everything she asked for, he agreed that Al-Amri should supervise the management of the money of the first of his sons with Subh in 356 AH, and he gave him a monthly salary of fifteen dinars. From 359AH, after the death of Abdul Rahman, he took over the same task with regard to the Caliph's son, Hisham. With the help of Subh, who had become Umm Walad, the mother of a son, Muhammad Al-Amri was promoted to the Head of the Dar As-Sikkah, the treasury, then he was appointed Qadi of Rayya, a large district in the South, and supervisor of the annually paid zakat funds and inheritances in Seville as well as head of the security authorities there. He settled in Córdoba, and, he participated in the administration and receptions like the viziers. Indeed, he wielded more power than some viziers, but he still paid court to Jaafar Al-Mushafi, who oversaw government affairs for Caliph Al-Hakim.

The people of Córdoba, from both near and far, talked imprudently about the relationship between Al-Amri and Subh. The way in which he lavished gifts on the lady of the palace was intended to give people to understand that Al-Amri was determined to keep his positions and to persuade Subh to obtain others for him or, at the very least, one could gather from his actions that he was planning for the future. But people continued to talk imprudently and to spread false rumours, insinuating that the Caliph knew

about the relationship. Indeed, the people of Córdoba spread words claiming he said: “What did our spouses, who had the whole world’s beauty in their hands, find charming about that boy to the point that he owned their hearts, his gifts alone were mentioned, and they were only satisfied with what he gave them? I'm afraid of his allure; he is either a skilled sorcerer or a very wise servant.”

The Caliph’s concern for the state funds that Al-Amri had at his disposal after taking over the treasury was justified: He had a silver palace built and delivered it in front of the public, carried on the shoulders of men from his home to the palace in Córdoba, where he presented it to lady Subh. I saw this palace after it had been moved to Al-Zahra. It was a meter or less long, and, in construction, it resembled a church rather than a palace. Al-Amri's deception was uncovered when some of the people presented a claim against him to the Caliph concerning embezzled money. The Caliph and the Hajib Jaafar had him brought before them, and they found that he had been neglectful, but Al-Amri claimed that the missing amount had been borrowed by Vizier Ahmad ibn Hudayr. This vizier was a friend of Al-Amri, and he saved him from trouble by paying the shortfall, thus increasing the Caliph's admiration for his treasury chief and he left him in office until 361 AH, when he was appointed to the Shurta al-Wusta, the Central Security Forces, of Córdoba.

The Caliph ordered several administrative changes that year, some of which would have an impact on Al-Andalus' future. Caliph Al-Hakim decided to hand over the rank of Al-Qiada Al-Eulya, Supreme Commander, to the vizier, Ghalib ibn Abd Al-Rahman, and he wrote to him with his own hand: “We have decided to grant the rank of Al-Qiada Al-Eulya to Ghalib, who we trust due to his wealth and his honourable position, thus he shall only be addressed with honour, Allah willing, and may Allah aid us.”

In the same year, the Hajib, Vizier Jaafar, fell sick of an illness and was sure that death was approaching, so he wrote to the Caliph asking him to care for his home and his family once he had died. The Caliph responded by writing on the back of his letter, with reassurances and promises, and wishing him a good end. Among other things he said: “If this calamity is certain, then indeed we belong to Allah, and to Him we will return, and if it is followed by a return to health, then all praise be for Allah, Lord of all

worlds, for renewing His grace, His goodness, and all that He bestows upon us. Peace be upon you, and Allah's mercy and blessings.” Jaafar did not die on that occasion, and he returned to his work, awaiting his fate.

The latest decision by the Caliph was to take away Vizier Al-Amri's position in the treasury and hand him the authority of Head of the Central Security Forces, while keeping him as Emir Hisham's chancellor, as well as leaving him in charge of inheritance affairs, and the judiciary in Seville. The treasury was entrusted to Ahmad ibn Hudayr, the Vizier of Al-Shurta al-Eulya, the Higher Security Forces. And, on the fifth of Ramadan, the Caliph’s Slav trustee, whose name was Faeq, was appointed to oversee the budget.

Among other official events that took place in Córdoba was the visit of the Ambassador of the Emperor of Byzantium and his warm reception in Al-Zahra. The Caliph then appointed ibn Abi Amrus and his companion Saeed as ambassadors, to tour Galicia and the kingdoms of the North, carrying books and bringing news of what was occurring in those lands. The Caliph also ordered a summer military campaign in the west, in anticipation of attacks from the Majus which did not materialize.

War was once again fueled in the Maghreb as Hassan ibn Qanoon broke his oath of allegiance, so Al-Hakim sent the army from Ceuta to fight him, after his forces had gathered and joined up with the fleet led by Ibn Ramahs. Ibn Qanoon was defeated, and the soldiers looted his money and possessions, secured those in Tangiers who could be trusted, returned the land to Islamic law, and destroyed the Shiite pulpits. This intermittent warfare never subsided throughout the rest of my life.

The arrival of the dissolute Abdul Malik and his son in Córdoba in handcuffs was one of the stories of that year's events. According to them, an Andalusian merchant met them in Al-Udwa and learnt that they were searching for Ma'ad ibn Ismail, who was affiliated with the Banu Abbas in Egypt and was inciting the people of the Maghreb against the Caliph in Córdoba. The merchant agreed with them and pretended to conspire, but he reported them to the commander of the fleet, Ibn Ramahs, and requested that a boat with disguised soldiers be sent to arrest them. This is what happened, and they were led to Córdoba in handcuffs and imprisoned in Al-Zahra prison, where there was a group of poets, including Abu

Junaish, Yusuf ibn Harun, Isa ibn Quzman, and their companions, who had slandered Córdoba in their poetry, derided the honour of the people and disrespected the Caliph, for which he had ordered their imprisonment. Among Yusuf's verses about the Caliph was:

Appoints and dismisses throughout his life

Yet the end result is naught but strife

Yusef fled when he learnt of the campaign unleashed to arrest his companions, but the security forces were closing in on him, leaving him with no option but to come to the gate of Al-Zahra prison in disguise then reveal himself saying, “I came to you on my own and was not welcomed, so take me to the deepest depths and notify the administrator of my arrival.” This eloquent poet was only released from prison during the reign of Hisham II, who pardoned him.

Since Al-Zahra’s prison was small, the Administrator of Al-Zahra, Muhammad ibn Aflah, responded to the Caliph's order that year by converting the unused House of the Water Porters into a prison and transferring Abdul Malik and his son to it in handcuffs.

11

The Earth is Round

I continued to visit Al-Zahra every Wednesday evening and my grandfather continued to spend the night at my uncle Issa's house before we visited the Dar Al-Mulk the following day to meet with Emir Hisham. There had been some new developments; the Caliph had chosen the theologian Ahmed ibn Muhammad ibn Yusuf Al-Qastali to oversee the comprehensive education of the Emir, and he included another ten boys in the daily lessons to prevent Hisham from feeling lonely and to add some elements of friendly competition. I only attended my grandfather's weekly lesson for the Emir and the other boys, while still receiving my education at the Mosque in Córdoba. The first week after these new developments, the Caliph's face was filled with satisfaction at seeing his only son sitting among his peers as he reacted vigorously and with great interest to the education on offer. Gifts were distributed and the Caliph ordered food, and drink for those who answered to all of the boys' needs. Luckily, the food that was served each Thursday was different from that on the preceding one, so that I was able to try many types of foods and treats.

Perhaps the Caliph's delight at Hisham's enthusiasm was somewhat hasty or perhaps misplaced. For some reason, Hisham's interest was focused on magic, the stars, astronomy, as well as on music and instruments. Or at least that is what I gathered from his questions and our talks. One day, he spoke of his desire to collect scattered holy religious antiquities.

"Your father goes on many journeys and trades in strange items, ask him to look for wooden plates from the Ark of Noah, peace be upon him." I resisted asking Hisham about what use these plates would be as something inside me told me to hold my tongue and just respond by nodding my head. Indeed, I asked my father if he could do anything about it, he thought for a while then answered with anxiety clear on his face:

“Maybe they could be found if we knew where exactly the ark docked. Ask him to look in books and question scholars about this and, for my part, I will ask wherever I go.”

On another occasion, Hisham asked my grandfather a question that I found incredibly odd, but my grandfather surprised me with an answer that indicated that the question was not complete nonsense. “Is the earth flat or is it round like the moon, the sun, and the other stars in orbit in the universe?” he asked.

“At the time of your grandfather, Muhammad I, son of Abdul Rahman II, may Allah have mercy on him, some individuals were motivated by a desire for knowledge and studied this question diligently, among them Abu Ubaida the Valencian, known as the Sahib Al-Qibla. ” My grandfather adjusted his turban after he dropped this geographical fact about who had identified the Qibla, the direction of the Kaaba, then carried on, “His name was Muslim ibn Ahmed ibn Abu Ubaida, an astronomer who studied geography, and he said that he had proven that the earth is round, not flat, and that winter in the north is equivalent to summer in the south at the same time. He and his companions were prevented from publishing their findings as the poet Ibn Abd Rabbih accused them of trying to attribute sustenance to the planets. This led to a campaign against the astronomer which prompted him to leave Al-Andalus. Ibn Abd Rabbih was one of the most skilled poets, and he was close to the Emir and his son and successor Al-Mundhir. He lived to see the reigns of both Emir Abdullah and Caliph Al-Nasir as he passed away in the year 328 AH, may Allah have mercy on them all.”

Despite my grandfather’s comment that the poet who denied that the earth is a sphere was close to four successive emirs, all of them Hisham’s forefathers, the latter was euphoric because someone who had proved his theory had existed, and he asked my grandfather if the astronomer had left any books explaining his views. “I am not aware if he did so, your father the Caliph, may Allah lengthen his life, would know more about it than me. I do not recall anything about that when I worked in your father’s library during the reign of your grandfather Al-Nasir, may Allah have mercy on him. However, the poet discussed the matter in famed verses that stated the stance of his enemy, the Valencian.

The poet wrote of the astronomer and his companions;

They claimed Mars and Venus bestow sustenance, while Mercury and Saturn sustain

And we live in a sphere that surrounds us, until our end draws near

The Earth is round, the sky is above and below it forms a point

Ibn Musa is far astray, his mountain nought but a plain made into rugged terrain

Tell Muawiyah, who listens to what they say, that they really should refrain

In the months that followed my grandfather telling this story I kept thinking about whether or not the earth really is round, and if there are people on the lower half of it? Do we live in a sphere, as the Qur'an mentioned, and if that is the case, do we revolve on the sphere or on a flat surface? If the earth is flat why do things not roll off it? If it is flat, then how deep is it, and what is beyond this depth? And what is the meaning of the saying of the Almighty: "He wraps the night around the day, and wraps the day around the night."

At the time, I posed some of these questions to my sheikh at the Mosque, quoting from the poem, without any reference to Emir Hisham. Sheikh Yunis said that these were astronomical and philosophical questions and he insisted: "You are here to learn writing, calligraphy, and memorize the Qur'an before you delve into philosophy, mathematics, and astronomy. Even if I told you that you will find the answers in the books some one of our scholars, you are unable to read easily and have no knowledge of Qur'anic interpretation so you will still not be able to comprehend it." After I had suffered this humiliation by the sheikh in front of the other students, he decided to offer us some knowledge even if as a warning to the curious. He said: "The first person to pursue philosophy in Al-Andalus was Abu Abdullah Muhammad ibn Abd Allah ibn Masarra of Córdoba. This field was an unfortunate choice as people here preferred religious and linguistic sciences, or medicine, mathematics, or astronomy. Which are the useful fields, Suleiman, not ones that just sell talk." The sheikh slapped the cane he held in his right hand on his left with a loud noise as he continued his

explanation: “Philosophy has been denounced from the start of the Umayyad era, as it permits thinking about existence and non-existence and uses terms that make it easy to accuse those who follow it with impiety and heresy, and this leads to them being stoned or murdered by the rulers to satisfy the public.”

“If you, honorable sheikh, will permit me,” one of the older, bigger boys dared to interrupt sheikh Yunis before he had finished his explanation: “I would like to understand whether it is forbidden due to philosophy being heresy or because the rulers wanted to satisfy the public by forbidding it?” Before the sheikh could continue, another voice was heard asserting that: “Our Caliphs now are strong and have no need to appease the public.”

“The public is the community, without it there are no Caliphs or rulers, to satisfy the community is a divine duty.” The sheikh spoke faster so no one would cut him off, while the sound of him hitting his right and left hand rang out as a warning to whoever tried to interrupt him. “Do you see Suleiman what happens when you meddle? During the tenure of Caliph Al-Nasir, before the people followed him after he established order and subdued the rebels, the books of our first philosopher, Ibn Masarra of Córdoba, were burned. He was accused of heresy, and he fled Al-Andalus and travelled around the western and eastern lands, then he returned to Al-Andalus pretending to be an ascetic which divided people into two groups, some saw him as an Imam due to his knowledge and his asceticism while others slandered him and considered his ideology abominable. Some of the scholars of the East and Al-Andalus wrote books criticizing his ideology and others wrote books in support of him. But again, rumors started circulating against him, so Abdul Rahman Al-Nasir ordered his books to be burned outside the eastern door of our Mosque. Ibn Masarra passed away in 314 AH, and his students carried on his ideas after his death and they include Rashid Al-Qurtubi, Elias ibn Youssef Al-Tulitily, Khalil ibn Abdul-Malik, Muhammad ibn Abdullah ibn Omar Al-Qaisi, and several other famous people from the second generation who are still alive and, like others, now enjoy the support of Caliph Al-Hakim, may God lengthen his life, who promotes all scientific fields, including philosophy.”

At that moment, I became aware of the difference between being educated with the son of the Caliph in the largest palaces in the land, in proximity to

the largest library, and learning with sheikh Yunis whose cane rang on his left hand, on our sculls, on the tops of our fingers and the backs of our hands. With sheikh Yunis one had to be highly alert, expecting a sudden blow, and your imagination was restricted, to comply with his desires. However, my father ultimately rejected any hints that I dropped about joining the daily lessons in Al-Zahra and leaving the Mosque. “In the future, you will understand that the education at the mosque is not to be underestimated as all the high scholars and country leaders received their education at the Mosque, as you are doing. You are now seeing the best of the two worlds in both Córdoba and Al-Zahra, so praise Allah and stop being so demanding.”

My father did not want me to be exposed to the influences of Al-Zahra and its residents for too long, and I heard him arguing with my grandfather one night about the merit of me going to Al-Zahra. They discussed Hisham and what my father knew of what I had told him, all while thinking that I was asleep beside them.

“That student of yours, Hisham, does not appear to be sane from what I hear of his behaviour and sayings.”

“Abu Suleiman, this poor child is smart, just like his father, but he is influenced by his mother. She is one of those that practice cowrie-shell divination, read palms and seek advice from charlatans, and she does all this in front of the boy who can see how much his father loves his mother. Which means that he cannot bear any doubt of her actions.”

“May Allah save her; I don't know why the Caliph could only find a Basque singer to birth him a child.”

“He tried with many before her, but Allah only accorded him a child with her, and she is beautiful and has an enchanting voice. Do not forget that he only had a child at an advanced age.”

“Did Hisham’s mother tell him about Noah’s ark and the Table of Solomon, peace be upon them?”

“It seems that he wants to accomplish something like his father has with books and that is the reason why his mind has turned to collecting rare religious antiquities; this is just a phase for him,” my grandfather said to

reassure my father and to maintain my weekly visits to Al-Zahra. His son gave a noncommittal hum, but he also let the justification stand.

12

In the Mosque

The teaching method employed by Sheikh Yunis differed from that of other teachers in the Mosque. Although our group contained some rebels that made him lose his temper from time to time, we were all extremely cooperative and listened intently to the lessons taught by the sheikh, or Al-Jahiz as we called him. The sobriquet hardly upset him, he had indeed protruding eyes, and he deeply adored the books, stories, and lessons of the scholar, Abu Uthman ibn Bahr Al-Jahiz, which he used in our lessons. In our first session, the Al-Jahiz that we knew told our group: “I will tell you stories from the book and you will have to tell a similar or complementary story from your own life or that of your family or your neighbours.” We fell silent as we waited to hear a story from the scholar Al-Jahiz; we were not aware that the sheikh would bring out our various abilities when it was our turn to recount stories.

“I will give you an example of the art of the miserly when feigning hospitality.” We all huddled around the sheikh, and I rested my head on my palm, keeping my elbow on my knees while sitting with crossed legs. “A master asked his cook to take his time roasting the goat whenever they had a guest: “Do not put the goat in the oven until I call for you to hurry up cooking while the guests hear. You should tell me that it will be ready soon, put it in the oven for a short time and come to us as if I have rushed you. In that way, when it is served to them, it will be considered hospitality to have brought the goat even if they can’t eat it. Then you will return it to the oven and bring it the next day for us to eat cold, in this way one goat will take the place of two.” Before the sheikh had finished, a real-life comparison came to my mind, I continued to listen to the story while my mind started to arrange the details of my own tale. “One day the cook brought the goat

properly cooked and the guests ate it. He was rewarded with eighty strokes of the whip."

We all laughed quietly in order not to disturb other study sessions in the Mosque, where everyone had sought warmth on that spring day with a prospect of rain. The peace in the Mosque was a divine grace to us, once you pass through the outer gate, between the street and the courtyard of the Mosque, all voices are silenced, there is no place for the screams of vendors, the braying of donkeys, the arguments between customers and sellers, the clacking of women's shoes or horseshoes; a whisper is the loudest sound to be heard. I removed my hands from my chin and sat up straight. "Does anyone have a similar story that revolves around being miserly or generous?" I raised my hand like some others and the sheikh asked me to tell my story.

"I was with my grandfather and other guests on a visit to a family friend for a happy occasion that I cannot fully recall. We expected to dine there, and at dinner time we started to feel hungry. Once voices started to still and words grew fewer, the host stood and left the hall, asking his family in a loud voice about the food. Immediately afterwards, we saw him grab a goat by the horns and drag it back and forth in front of the hall door as if he was having trouble controlling it and leading it to slaughter. Naturally, the guests started exclaiming that there was no need to go to such trouble and effort as they would happily accept anything already available, while the host swore by his intention to slaughter the goat and offer his guests appropriate hospitality. Eventually, it was settled by us eating the other food available, which was quickly prepared, and the poor goat survived the slash of the knife."

While the sheikh praised my story his eyes were staring at someone behind me, who seemed to have been listening. I turned for a moment then straightened my head recalling that I had seen him before. I turned my head once more, only to find him smiling which prompted my memory; it was the interpreter from the meeting with the Barcelonan ambassador. At that time, he was wearing colourful, embroidered clothes and had shaved his beard, but now his white Jubbah and short beard made him look no

different to any other student in the Mosque. “Sheikh, this is the Catalan translator who works with the ambassador from Barcelona.”

“I am a student here. I came with the ambassador to translate for him and to continue my education in Córdoba.” The response was for me and my fellow students as it seemed that the Sheikh already knew him, and he greeted him by name: “Welcome Gerbert, it appears that you and Suleiman are already acquainted.”

Before the hour ended, Sheikh Yunis informed us that Gerbert was not the only Christian from outside Al-Andalus to be receiving an education at our Mosque at that time, and that Gerbert was a Frank from the land of the Gauls who had studied here before. He had returned with the ambassador of Barcelona and would be staying to continue his studies in astronomy, mathematics, and philosophy.

Gerbert asked me later if the grandfather I mentioned in the story about the host was the same one that I accompanied on the visit to the ambassador, which I confirmed to be the case. Gerbert did not stay long in Córdoba but our friendship deepened, despite the difference in age and perceptions. In fact, I informed my father of this story and how much I admired this person, who was well-versed in multiple languages and sciences, and that he was a Frank who worked with the Barcelonan Count and was studying in our city. At my request, my father met with Gerbert and invited him to dinner at our home, asking him to consider it his second home, and encouraging him to seek him out if he was ever in need of anything. Gerbert was extremely polite, he confirmed that he did need help at times and would not hesitate to ask but, of course, he did not, and he sent greetings to my family whenever we met at the Mosque.

Long months after that day, Gerbert stopped me in the courtyard, after I greeted him, to tell me that the date on which his studies would be concluded was near and that graduation would soon take place. He told me the day, and I assured him that I would be present at the event, which was usually open to all students, as well as to the rest of the scholars, who could attend and ask the graduate about whatever they wanted. He told me

the names of the scholars who would be present, and I didn't recognize any of them. Our conversation diverged after he said: "You and the students here in Córdoba, Seville, and Al-Andalus, in general, are lucky. All methods of education are readily available to you. Do you know that there are entire cities in other parts of the world where no one can read or write except the priests?"

"My father has told me time and again how lucky I am to be educated here; in fact, he said that I am luckier than most because of my weekly lessons with the Emir Hisham in Al-Zahra." I stopped talking immediately and the anxiety and hesitation were clear on my face as Gerbert raised his eyebrows and opened his blue eyes wide. I was not aware if he found my stammering unusual or if he was surprised by the words that had come out of my mouth impulsively. I corrected my mistake by saying: "My grandfather advised me not to speak of my weekly lesson there to anyone, so please keep it between us."

A kind earnestness overtook the face of my older friend, and he sat down on the edge of the water fountain so that we were face to face. "I will also tell you a secret so you can be sure that I will keep yours." I leaned closer to him and put my right foot on the edge of the fountain. I looked straight into his face, following the advice of my grandfather to carefully examine the expressions of those who talk to me. "You receive a weekly lesson with your Emir, and I believe that you accompany your grandfather, while I give lessons to a young emperor who is the son of our emperor, Otto the Great, and I will be returning this year to continue his education. We both have connections with Caliphs and emperors." I was astonished, but not from disbelief. If I was able to see the Caliph, visit his son Hisham, and my grandfather was teacher to an Emir, why should Gerbert, who accompanied the Barcelonan ambassador and was so well-educated, not be connected to an emperor? My curiosity was pushing me to pose many questions, but I knew that his answers would be in exchange for details about the Caliph's life that I was not party to.

"What do you mean by an emperor who is the son of an emperor, did Otto the Great pass away and his son took over from him?"

“He has not died yet but, in case he does, after the Pope appointed him Holy Roman Emperor, as well as king, to reward him for his conquests in central and eastern Europe, Otto I announced that his son Otto II was to be appointed Emperor as well, by his side, to be involved and to learn from him how to rule. This is the first time this has happened in history.”

“How old is Otto II?”

“He was born in 955 AD and was appointed emperor in 967 AD; he is now sixteen years of age, and I started teaching him two years after he was made emperor,” Gerbert whispered his last words in an even lower voice as he brought his face close to mine. I placed my index finger on my lips to signal that I would not tell anyone. It is likely that Gerbert was also of those who read expressions, like my grandfather who was certain that there are at least five hundred different facial expressions and that each of them reflected what was on a person’s mind. Gerbert was holding a silver coin, and he was flicking it between the fingers of one hand. I could not help pretending to be interested in exchange for his story.

“At the beginning of this year, I saw the minting of gold dinars in Al-Zahra that were stamped with the name of the Caliph Al-Hakim. Have you ever seen anything like that?”

“No, I have not. However, the minting of copper, metal, silver, and gold coins has been known since ancient times. Can you describe what you saw, if it is not a secret, of course.”

“It isn’t a secret as these new coins have come within everyone’s reach, and they are easier to make than I thought. The gold is melted in a metal container in the furnace then it is poured into a thinly carved marble mould. Before the gold plate cools, it is transferred to another table where it is struck to extract dinars of the same weight and size. The striking is done with a tube of bronze and a wrought metal hammer.” Gerbert's face continued to show interest, despite the ease of the procedure so far, so I carried on: “The extracted coins are then carried to the Sahib As-Sikkah, the Head of the Treasury, who is currently Mohammed ibn Amir. While we

were watching the coins being extracted, Emir Hisham told me that the Sahib As-Sikkah will weigh and examine them. Each pouch that is returned from examination is given to a worker, who heats the contents then places the coins between two moulds created by the engraver, and then they are struck again, to imprint words on them, after which they are reheated a little, and finally, the workers return them to the treasury."

The words engraved on the dinar were: There is no god but Allah, and He has no partner. This dinar was minted in Medinat Al-Zahra in the year 361. And on the other face was written: Imam Al-Hakim, Amir Al-Mu'minin, Al-Mustansir Billah, Al-Hajib Jaafar, Sahib As-Sikkah Amir.

Gerbert stared at the silver coin in his hand while he read what was on it: "Did you know that the coins created in your country used to be minted in Córdoba before the administration was transferred to Al-Zahra and that the names of the Emirs were not added to coins before the Caliphate."

I did not know that even though Emir Hisham had shown me a collection of coins that he kept as a souvenir, and he said that it contained all the Andalusian coins minted since the conquest. I decided then to request to see them again if another opportunity offered, hopefully I would then be able to examine the differences between them, and perhaps I would discover something else.

Before we separated for the day, I asked Gerbert to write me a list with the names of the ruling Christian kings and the borders of their kingdoms. He promised to write it and indeed he did, and he gave it to me before he traveled. It consisted of three sheets, written in a beautiful Kufic script, and I have it to this day, along with other letters that I received from Gerbert in the three decades following our separation.

The summary of what he wrote for me when I was a child was: "The Holy Roman Empire is now ruled by Emperor Otto the Great, it is the largest and the strongest part of the Roman Empire since its division, the other part being the Byzantine Empire. The extent of the rule of Emperor Otto the Great extends from Barcelona in the south to the North Sea, and it includes

all the Germanic lands and ends near to the city of Rome. As for the Byzantine Empire, it extends to the northern bank of the Roman Sea and all of its islands, and from the east of the Alps to the northeast corner of the Roman Sea, where it is aligned with Antakya and the Muslim lands in the south, and reaches to the Black Sea in the north. The capital city is Constantinople, which is ruled currently by young Basil II, son of Romanos II, who was a rake and surrounded by a corrupt entourage. He married the lovely Theophano, daughter of a tavern-keeper and mother of his son Basil II. Subsequent to the death of Romanos II from insanity, Theophano married Commander Nikephoros and they have been ruling over the country for nine years now as Basil II is not yet old enough to take the throne.

Of the kingdoms north of Al-Andalus Gerbert wrote: León is the largest and the strongest of them as it took over the region which the Arabs did not conquer in the northwest of Iberia, and it is also known as the Kingdom of Galicia. The kingdom is named after the city of León and it does not contain any other major cities worth mentioning. The new King of León, who has been in power for the past five years, is Ramiro III, son of Sancho the Fat, who received treatment in Córdoba at the time of the Caliph Al-Nasir. The country of Navarre is the second by power and size: It gained its independence from León in the year 962 AD and is now ruled by Sancho Garcés II, son of García Sánchez I who passed away last year. The capital of Navarre is the Basque city of Pamplona. The most recent of the kingdoms is Castile, which gained independence from León last year, in 970 AD. Its capital is Burgos, and it is governed by Fernán González.

My love of learning about successive historical eras was greater than my love of recording current events and being well-versed on modern issues and narratives, something which my grandfather has tried to instill in me. He was absolutely correct when he said: “To introduce honest and true accounts of successive historical eras to those who follow you, Suleiman, you will have to keep a keen eye on what is happening around you. The two cannot contradict each other; they are complementary.” The papers sent by Gerbert inspired me and motivated me to seek answers about the

origins of the Roman Empire before its division and decline. Each fact about the past made me long for an even earlier era.

Before the emergence of Islam and the Hegira of the Prophet 360 years ago, the Iberian Peninsula and the lands of Al-Udwa of the Maghreb were ruled by the Goths. As for the rest of the basin of the Roman Sea, to the south, east and north it was under Byzantine rule which inherited the region from the Roman Empire. However, even before the Roman Empire, there were civilizations that affected life on the seashores, like the Phoenicians, who established commercial cities on both shores and sailed with their goods and wine between ports. The Islamic advance ended the Byzantine regime with its religious and linguistic components in the east and south of the sea and also in Al-Andalus, where a new civilization began with a new language and religion in that geographical sphere. It was the Arabs who carried Islam from the south and center of the Arabian Peninsula, but who are those who reside in Mesopotamia, in the lands of the Levant, of Egypt, Cyrenaica, and in the three areas of the Maghreb; who have abandoned their own tongue and now speak in Arabic and most of whom have converted to Islam? In Al-Andalus, we are a mixture of all those peoples with the native people of Al-Andalus.

I also learned from my lessons in the Mosque that language cannot be separated from writing and calligraphy, if it is separated and remains only spoken then it is destined to be lost and forgotten. Before Islam, and at the time of the Prophet Muhammad, the Arabian Peninsula included those who were able to write, and they documented alliances. The most famous of them included seventeen men who excelled in writing and reading, including Umar ibn Al-Khattab, Uthman ibn Affan, Ali Ibn Abi Talib, and Mu'awiya ibn Abi Sufyan. These four successively took over the Caliphate after Abu Bakr as-Siddiq, the first of the Rashidun Caliphs.

Upon asking Sheikh Yunis about the origin of Arab Calligraphy he answered as follows, addressing all the students: “Arab Calligraphy existed before the Qur’an, and it was developed by the Nabataeans. It entered the Arabian Peninsula with the merchants and came to be known as the Mecca and Medina script, in reference to the cities of Mecca and Medina.” The

sheikh glanced at the Mosque's roof then focused his gaze on the pulpit which was heavily decorated with calligraphy in gilt on a blue background. "If you carefully examine the words written in calligraphy on the pulpit and on the top of the domes above the outer gates, and wherever else there is writing, you will notice that some of them have dots added while others do not. Has anyone noticed that?" None of us dared to lie and claim to have noticed. Images of this calligraphy came to my mind and I understood what the sheikh was referring to. "Since none of you ever noticed then you must all be unaware that dots were only added to Arabic script a hundred years after Islam. This was due to the increasing numbers of non-Arab people who converted to Islam. It was difficult for them to read the Qur'an, the letters of which had no dots. This led to the invention of punctuation to distinguish qāf from fā, tā from nūn, Ṯā, and bā, as well as khā from ḥā and ǧīm, along with many others letter that could be confused. Seventy years after the dots were added, diacritics were developed to place on top of letters to make them even easier to read. In each region, people write in a different geometric form, but it remains understandable to others. Here, we use the Kufic script for decoration, with some minor modifications, and we refer to it as the Andalusian script."

That day, the sheikh assigned us two tasks. The first was to write a page containing whatever content and script we chose, one with dots, and the other without. Secondly, we were to carefully examine the words written on the Mosque's gates and inside the Mosque, as he would be asking us random questions. Later, at the request of the sheikh, when we tried to read what the student next to us had written in undotted letters, we failed to comprehend what was written. As for the second task, we became aware of when writing had changed in Al-Andalus, as well as when expansions were made to the Mosque.

Later, I told my grandfather about what Gerbert had mentioned regarding the names of emirs and viziers not having been added to coins prior to the Caliphate. He confirmed this and added that coins were not minted for long years at the time of Al-Nasir, not until after he had overcome the rebels in

Al-Andalus, freed the lands, and retrieved some of the northern regions that had been lost.

“The Caliphal dinar was first minted during the tenure of Al-Nasir, may Allah have mercy on him. He appointed many people to oversee the coinage when the betrayal of someone called Saad was discovered. His name can still be found on some gold dinars, despite him being in prison.” My grandfather rummaged through his coin purse, looking for a dinar from the time of Al-Nasir with Saad named as Sahib As-Sikkah, but he was unable to find any. “This rascal minted fraudulent coins from copper, plated with gold, and he embezzled the difference. Due to his actions, which were exposed to the public, people’s trust in the first Caliphal dinar was shaken, and they looked for older coins. After Al-Nasir passed away, the first action of his son Al-Hakim was to remove all those who held a position in the mint and to hire new people, in the hope of restoring trust.”

13

Bridal Dowry

I wanted to see the inscriptions written on Umayyad coins and to examine the old ones in order to discuss the subject with Gerbert before he left. Two weeks later, I had an opportunity to ask Emir Hisham to show me some of his coins, when I was telling him about the new information relating to dots on Arabic letters and the possibility of knowing the history of the dinars from the dots on the letters. He disappeared for a while and returned saying that his mother would prefer us to see the coins in their salon and not in the Dar Al-Mulk where we took our lessons. We went to their salon, and all I had in my mind was to focus on gathering valuable information about the coins to discuss with Gerbert. Unexpectedly, I found myself standing in front of a very beautiful young woman who smelt of a delightful, wonderful perfume. I was not very surprised to hear Hisham address her with: “Mother, where is the chest?”, as I could instantly see the similarities between them. Her face and what was visible of her skin were fair; she had blonde hair, was of average height with an elegant and graceful body shape, and was neither fat nor skinny. Hisham’s mother was definitely much younger than the Caliph. He may have lain with her at the age of forty-seven, before she turned fifteen, because she now seemed to be in her mid-twenties, while our Caliph was more than fifty-eight years of age. Like all the people of Córdoba, I had heard that she was a singer and Al-Hakim married her after she became an Umm Walad, as well as for her beauty, which distinguished her from the rest of the harem.

In Hisham’s chest, I saw dozens of different types of coins, the oldest of which was from Damascus. It was a gold coin, dating back to the year 77 AH, with a drawing of a sheikh with loose hair, a long beard, and the written sentence: "I bear witness that there is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah". Another coin was a silver dirham dating back to the year 79 AH, on which the same words were written, with a drawing of a king with a short, combed beard, wearing a crown and a necklace. The early coins of Al-Andalus were also round, but with no drawings and they

were inscribed with: "He is Allah, who is One, Allah, the Eternal Refuge. He neither begets nor is born, nor is there to Him any equivalent.” I also saw the Roman Solidus with Latin and Arabic inscriptions, and other coins with Latin writing, and a star in the middle on which was inscribed in Arabic: “Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah”, and “This dinar was minted in Al-Andalus in the year 98 AH” on its other face. I also saw a silver dinar, on which I read: “I bear witness that there is no god but Allah, this dinar was minted in Al-Andalus in the year 135 AH” on the front and: "Say, He is Allah, who is One, Allah, the Eternal Refuge. He neither begets nor is born, nor is there to Him any equivalent - Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah, He sent His Messenger with true guidance and the religion of truth, making it prevail over all others, even to the dismay of the polytheists” on the back. Coins with dotted letters were minted in the era of the Caliph Abdul-Rahman Al-Dakhil, his sons, and grandchildren, as the inscription on each dinar differed from the previous ones, but they remained without pictures or names until the first coins of Caliph Al-Nasir, which displayed both his name and his title.

On our way back to the Dar Al-Mulk, Hisham told me the story of a Cordovan citizen and Muhammad ibn Abi Amir, before the mint was taken away from him. He said: “A man came to ibn Amir to exchange his silver jewels for dinars, after he had spent all his money on completing the marriage preparations of his daughter. He was complaining to ibn Amir about the costs of the marriage.” In such cases, this was a common occurrence, but first the jewels would be examined and refined, then melted to be made into coins and the cost of minting and fees would be deducted. According to Hisham, the Sahib As-Sikkah started laughing while listening to the man, and then he gave him a stack of dinars which were of more value than his jewels and the rest of the metals that he carried to Al-Zahra.

Such a matter constitutes a real mystery to me. I am not talking about what Muhammad ibn Abi Amir did for the Cordovan man, as it was an understandable act, and perhaps he covered the difference from his own pocket, in return for the spread of the story of his generosity and assistance. No, I am talking about the wedding preparations made by parents for their daughters. According to Arab custom, parents ask for a dowry for their daughters, some of which is paid in advance and the rest is

deferred to be paid to her in the case of divorce. These dowries limited the marriage possibilities of middle-income young men and reduced the chances of Arab girls. But, as they say: "Too much of anything is good for nothing", and it became easier for Arab and Muslim youths to marry Christian girls in times of victory, conquest, and captivity, without any dowry or costs worth mentioning, while Arab women remained in their fathers' homes. Hence, temptations to marriage appeared, as the fathers started to bear the costs of the weddings and to provide their daughters with what they needed in their new homes.

This is one of our social problems. Indeed, we have not thought of the problems that captivity brings to the families of captive children, whether boys or girls, as no civil movement has opposed captivity, which is considered the shortest path between the ruler and the heart of the people. However, if I were to talk about our problems during the period of the Al-Nasir and the Al-Hakim Caliphates, in light of what we have witnessed in Al-Andalus and the world, I would have said that we were living in Paradise. Those who died in our country from overeating and full bellies outnumbered the people who died in battle by the edge of the sword. We also had no poverty, as our ruling system took care of needy people before their situation worsened. Education was free and available to all, as there were no differences between scholars, except for their knowledge. Our Arab origins were a source of pride to all Andalusians, including Christians and Jews. Rulers and princes came to seek our physicians from all over the world for treatment and medical consultations. Our university provided education for more than a thousand students from western Christian countries. Every year, any one of us could participate in a summer campaign that lasted a month or two and return with captives, spoils, and rewards. These virtues and advantages were deemed valueless by those experiencing them and invaluable by those who knew what was prevalent in other Muslim countries and the other regions of the world.

Alhamdulillah, in all my long years of life until now, I have traveled much and heard so much praise and compliments from knowledgeable people and merchants about Al-Andalus and its people, and many complaints about their hard living conditions which made them wish to come to Al-Andalus. During my travels, I was surprised by the difference between the beauty of our women and the goodness of our men and what I saw of other

countries’ people, with their frowning faces, jarring expressions and lack of calm and cordiality, so unlike our own people. Even the less beautiful women of Al-Andalus have an inner beauty that is reflected in their movements, style, and the delight on their faces. Perhaps I am biased towards my people, but I am also attached to the rest of the Arabs, and I appreciate Muslims as well, but this difference in beauty and goodness cannot be denied. The reason for this may lie in the racial integration of Al-Andalus, as it includes Arabs, Berbers, Goths, Romans, and Hispanos, or perhaps the source of our beauty is linked to our secure position and economic well-being, which differs from that of other countries. Would we become unsightly if we lost our money or our armies were defeated and our fleets sunk?! I wish I could say "No", but the past ten years of my life have not provided me with any hope.

14

The Sea at Málaga

In the summer of 362 AH my uncle Issa's marriage to María took place. She changed her name to Miriam after her conversion to Islam together with her father, Yusuf, and mother, Sarah. My part of the celebration was my circumcision on the newlyweds' wedding day.

Throughout the previous two years, I had become increasingly anxious as time passed without a final date being set, while my circumcision was poised, like the sword of Damocles, to fall without warning. I reminded my uncle of what I had done for him by making his marriage easier, as well as my dissatisfaction with the outcome, and I even asserted that prolonging the torment was causing me discomfort. We eventually reached an agreement whereby he would take me to Málaga for a quick trip before the celebration in exchange for me forgiving him, being patient, and demonstrating masculinity by not screaming on the day of circumcision.

I yearned to see the sea, the mere mention of which piqued my imagination, while my uncle always found excuses to travel to Málaga to follow-up on the affairs of the fig plantations, as well as the manufacture and export of dried figs. It was expected that the last ten days of the solar month of May 973 AD would usher us into the summer of this year, but the sky became cloudy, rain fell and was accompanied by flashes of lightning for days. In Córdoba and its suburbs, on the night of Monday, the thirteenth of Sha'ban, corresponding to May 25th, even the ground shook again. We could hear the clatter of kitchen utensils. Within the span of a single blink of the eye, the ground moved beneath us, then settled once again. Shortly afterwards, screaming arose in the streets, mixed with supplications to Allah, from the mosque’s minaret which started first with Allāhu ʾakbar, Allah is the greatest, then began reassuring people that it was only a minor earthquake that had passed. This incident, along with a small fire in the

Mosque's interior, five weeks ago, and the preceding Christmas earthquake, together with the disasters of torrential rain and black snow that ravaged Córdoba, all coerced our neighbour, Jesús, to respond to his wife's insistence and determination to make a pilgrimage to the church which houses the remains of Saint James the Apostle, one of the twelve closest apostles of Jesus, peace be upon him, in Sanctus Jacobus, in the far northwest of Al-Andalus. María was convinced that the end of the world was near and that it was therefore preferable to make the pilgrimage now, as long as her bodily strength permitted it.

Two weeks before the date of our trip to Málaga, Issa brought a horse saddle to our house in Córdoba and asked me to sit on it for as long as I could each day, imitating the rapid movement of the horses now and then. "Whatever you do while sitting in a chair or on the floor, do it on the saddle, and for at least three hours every day imitate the speeding horses. Otherwise, our trip to Málaga will be a torment for you, and your behind will be inflamed."

"I'm going to train every day, but do I really need to when I am good at riding, as you know?"

"You can master it for half an hour or an hour on Al-Shahba on the flat ground in Al Zahra, as we will be riding for eight hours a day, for days at a time, and the same when we return, which means, at best, that you will not be able to sit on the saddle the next day if you do not accustom your rear now."

"How many days will it take us to arrive?"

"Allah knows best; we will see, probably not many." I sensed a secret, even my mother stopped knitting for a moment when she heard my question and my uncle's response, but she did not say anything. Why would he not say how many days we would need when he made this trip maybe five times a year?

"Ibn Abi Amir, Emir Hisham's chancellor, needed four days to travel from Córdoba to Málaga. But of course, our journey will not last much longer."

“We are the sons of Abu Qareeb Al-Qalai, our horses go like the wind, and we do not impose on people for food and sleep every few hours. If Allah wills, our journey will be shorter. Only, of course, if your behind and thighs become accustomed to long rides.” A convincing response from my uncle, which my mother approved with a nod of her head, without removing her eyes from her knitting.

The days passed very slowly, as I focused all of my reading on the sea, ships, and the horrors that their passengers faced, and I was convinced that my uncle was right in his request, because I felt pain in my behind and had a sore on my upper thighs after the first days of riding the saddle for long periods. However, by the end of the second week, the situation had been reversed. Instead of swelling and pain, I felt stiff and muscular in those areas. I did not sleep long on the night of the promised day, and I woke up before dawn, performed the wudu, and prayed before my father awoke. I thought that my uncle would come early so that we could take advantage of the morning hours before the sun slowed our progress, but Issa did not show up until after the household had woken up and we had breakfast together, giving Fatima the opportunity to ask me to bring her seashells from Málaga beach to make a necklace out of. One of my ears was attentive to the household and my mother's advice to be cautious and obey my uncle, while the other ear was monitoring the street movement in front of the house waiting for the sound of the hooves of Al-Shahba and Tahboub. Shortly before forenoon, on the verge of despair that Issa, his horse, and my uncle Abbas' mare would appear, I opened the door of the house to them and asked the two animals why my uncle was late. Fatima brought water for Al-Shahba and Tahboub, while my mother carried a bundle of my clothes and another with food, waiting for Issa to fasten the saddle to Al-Shahba.

“Only the bundle of clothes, Umm Suleiman; no need for any additional load.”

“And what are you going to eat for the next four days? This bundle is not very heavy; tie it to Suleiman's mare.”

“Every day, we will pass by three or four villages on a road lined with farms, fruit and vegetables, and springs; there'll be no need to carry cold food. What have you made? Boiled eggs, dried fish, cured meat, and bread that will dry out before noon. We'll eat hot food wherever we go.” My father took the bundle and tied it behind my clothes bundle so it would not sway while riding fast.

“Do not upset Umm Suleiman; if you need it, eat it. Otherwise, throw it in the river.” Issa did not utter a word in response to his older brother; instead, he changed the subject by asking if I had brought any beautiful clothes, suitable for tourism in Málaga. My uncle wore a short yellow kaftan with red sleeves that did not reach his knees, white pants that were tight on his legs and wide above the knees to the waist, and new leather sandals. He had tied a wide leather strap around his waist and attached a sword with an ivory handle and a leather pouch to it. He looked as if he was going into battle. Issa handed me a new dagger, complete with a silver holster with engravings on it.

“This is from your grandfather. He sent it to you today; keep it round your waist.”

“This is in case we meet with thieves; will we meet a lot of them?” In the last two weeks, I had actually thought about what we would do if bandits were to cut off our way and imagined events where we would defeat them, and sometimes my imagination was satisfied with our horses saving us from them.

“We are on a trip to stroll in Málaga and by the sea, not to chase those poor thieves and steal their money. The dagger is just for cutting an apple or skinning a rabbit that might cross our path.” This is how my uncle was; he refused to acknowledge danger, and he was convinced that he could conquer a country and defeat its people on his own. Any criminal who saw him would surely be afraid to approach us. It appeared that the sight of my uncle and his comment, as well as the dagger at my waist, like my Yemeni ancestors, influenced my mother's emotions, and she composed a verse

immediately to suit the situation, likening my uncle to Sayf ibn Dhi Yazan and attributing the heroism of my conqueror ancestors to me. Her ululations brought the neighbours out, caught the attention of those in the market, and encouraged her brothers to strike me on the back while I was sitting on my mare, strutting behind my uncle's horse. My mother and her brothers are from Jund Filastin, one of the six Jund, or military units, that arrived to reinforce the conquest and were distributed over different areas by the governor of Córdoba. The Jund Filastin camped in Medina-Sidonia and Algeciras, while Jund Al-Urdunn camped in the Málaga region. After my mother's marriage, my uncles left Medina-Sidonia and moved to Córdoba.

I was close to my uncle as we passed by the mosque and crossed the bridge to Secunda. As we were passing by our warehouse, we exchanged greetings with my uncle Abbas who asked me to take care of his Shahba. After a short time, we were standing at Miriam's front door. “Please, uncle, I do not want to get down; let us keep going; it's almost noon.”

“It's still early in the morning, I will just take a kiss, be patient, we will sleep in Málaga tomorrow.” I did not hear what Miriam said, after kissing Issa, as I was stunned by what my uncle had said. It sounded like a fantasy to me. I was recalled by a pat of Miriam's palm on my knee as she said goodbye. “Take care of your uncle, Suleiman, and do not let his gaze wander to the women of Málaga,” I reassured her that I would return him to her exactly the same, and we walked away to growing laughter. Miriam and Issa were among those who laughed with their mouths and eyes, which is a sign of genuine heartfelt laughter rather than mere polite laughter. At least, this is what my grandfather had taught me, and it was one of the things he told me to pay attention to when I looked into the faces of those who spoke to me. So far, I have not come across anyone who laughs just with his mouth, but I am still new to the world of observation.

“Did you mean what you said about staying in Málaga tomorrow night? Are we going to fly there on horseback?”

“Say, Inshallah, and ready yourself for the chase.” Issa was talking and fidgeting, while Tahboub was stepping forward and to the sides in a show of energy and a request to gallop, and I felt Al-Shahba respond and shake

her neck. So, we went from walking slowly to trotting to warm up the horses.

“There are three stages on the way to Málaga. Two to Antequera, and the third to Málaga, with a direct line to the south. I expected us to spend two nights on the road and the third at our farm. But, since Umm Suleiman has provided us with food, we will try to cut the way short and stay overnight in Antequera. But if you get tired, tell me because there are plenty of places to stay at along the way.”

“Do not be concerned about my tiredness; my sole fear is for Al-Shahba.” After two weeks of training at home, I could not say no to the challenge of the long ride. Tahboub sped up his pace, and I let Al-Shahba take control of the reins and go free to keep up with her friend, while my uncle's conversation got a little louder.

“The first two legs consist primarily of flat ground that will not tire the horses. The mountains begin after Antequera; we will have to ascend for the majority of the day then descend to the coast.” The ground flattened in front of me, and the wind blew against my face, and I could not tell whether Issa was speaking or whether he was silent and dreaming like me. My hair flew back as I took off my turban and threw it into my lap. Al-Shahba had moved a neck’s length in front of Tahboub, so she pulled back and joined him, leaving more width between them than before. I'm not sure when my uncle awakened me from my trance by suggesting we gradually slow down.

“Do you know that you flew on Al-Shahba and then let go of her rein, raising your arms and moving them like wings?” I thought my uncle was exaggerating, but when he asked me to describe the road we had taken and what I had seen, I was inclined to believe him, even though I knew that my mind was already miles away.

“Get off Al-Shahba without stopping her.” We were walking in front of our horses in a matter of seconds, and I tied my turban once more as the sun rose high into the middle of the sky. “Let us switch horses now to make it easier for them to keep going.” My uncle explained to me that my lighter weight would now be easier for Tahboub, whereas Al-Shahba was more powerful and could handle his weight until the afternoon break. My brain

started to make sense of my uncle's calculations. When the afternoon sun rose, we stopped by a redstone channel that was irrigating an orange farm. The horses drank, then we removed their saddles, tethered them in a grassy area, and gathered more fodder for them. We ate some food from my mother's bundle, and I drank from the waterskin while my uncle drank from one that contained red wine. "I am going to sleep for an hour, while the horses rest. You can pray if you want, but try to sleep as well because we will continue traveling by night." My uncle was already snoring before I even finished cleansing myself, and I joined him right after the midday prayer. For a second I thought about his faith and his respect for customs, and his lack of perseverance in prayer. My grandfather had taught him how to read, write, memorize the Qur'an, and he had studied at the mosque. He was interested in the study of astronomy for two years, but abandoned it at the age of fourteen, and he joined the Caliph Al-Hakim in the Battle of San Esteban de Gormaz in 352 AH, when he was barely sixteen. After that, he joined the family business and began trading with my uncle Abbas.

We continued our journey in the afternoon after wiping Al-Shahba and Tahboub with wet rags. Before we let the horses gallop, we passed in front of the village and castle of Mantalah. We exchanged greetings and a few sentences with the farmers, inquiring about their lives and the road conditions. "This village, Suleiman, is just a quarter of the way, and the day is still long, and the night will be even longer, so come on."

I rode Al-Shahba again after the first stop, but we switched horses every two hours and maintained the top speed of each of the two animals for half an hour. The road was sandy and almost stone-free, which facilitated our progress. We crossed three rivers and passed by four other towns before the sun set completely. The ground was filled with olive trees planted in a precise geometrical pattern as far as the eye could see, and among the olive farms I saw areas planted with wheat that were yet to be harvested and, occasionally, I saw fruit farms such as apricot and plums, and the trees still bore the remnants of what had not been harvested until then. I do not remember seeing any wasteland the whole way from Córdoba until the setting of the sun.

"If we still had sunlight, we would only have two hours to Antequera, but we will ride slowly now, and we will arrive in Antequera when the moon

appears.” I believe I felt secretly for my dagger along the way. My uncle sang some old Mu'allaqat poems, then suggested that each of us begin a verse of poetry with the letter that the verse of the other ended with. I kept up with my uncle without difficulty for about an hour, but he began to choose endings for his verses that had fewer verses beginning with those letters; my stock was not great, and my attempts at spontaneous composition were faltering, so I accepted that my mother was better than me at instantly composing intuitive verses. I was pleased that my uncle had defeated me as I had been unfamiliar with this literary talent of his, and I also felt the sense of fairness in not always allowing me to win. I admitted defeat, and my uncle moved on to talk about the owner of the inn where we were would be staying that night. He said that the man had divorced his ex-wife because she had no children, and he had married another woman, much younger than him, two years ago, but she had yet to have children.

Our goal was an inn, similar to the one my aunt's husband owned in Córdoba. We arrived with the emergence of the full moon, surrounded by silver light that one could read a book in without straining. It was also my uncle’s idea to choose this specific date as it corresponded with the full moon. When Issa called Abi Al-Fadl, he received an immediate response from the house, as if the man had been waiting for us. We exchanged pleasantries with him, and he told us that there was a private room available for us to stay in overnight. “I am sure it goes without saying, take care of the horses, Abu Al-Fadl, I want them ready before dawn.” We gave him Al-Shahba and Tahboub to take to the stable, and I carried a saddle while my uncle carried our bundles and waterskins. The man’s wife led us to the room to put our belongings in and asked if we wanted hot food.

“I still have half a rooster, cooked with onions and peppers, and I can make you some rice on the side.” My uncle looked at me to see how tired I was, but my curiosity for a decent look at the wife made me nod my head in agreement.

“We will have the rest of the rooster, and rice is a good choice. We will see you when Abu Al-Fadl returns from the stable.”

We did not leave before dawn because we were held back by the innkeeper and his wife, who baked bread for us in the oven and prepared a

multi-course breakfast. I took advantage of the opportunity to groom the horses and feed them with my own hand some of the dry almonds that I took from Abi Al- Fadl's storehouse, which contained several large bags of the remains of last year's crop. Before leaving Antequera behind, I observed the city wall and the castle to our right and the bright light of the sun that had still not risen completely to our left. I found myself asking my uncle if the special treatment was for us specifically or if it was due to the nature of the profession.

"The wife is still young, but she is intelligent. My frequent visits to them have given me the impression that her husband likes me and listens to my advice. Since she has yet to be with child, it is natural for her to seek support from her husband's friends, in order to save herself from the fate of his former wife."

Our horses were still drowsy, while the morning breeze was cold. My uncle wrapped a cloak around his body, and I lifted a blanket from behind to put over my shoulders. Al-Shahba and Tahboub continued walking with their heads down, and we had not even started climbing the heights.

"Women are faced with a difficult situation if they do not bear children, and it is even more difficult if they only bear daughters. Maybe on an upcoming trip, we will meet another wife of Abi Al-Fadl."

"I expect them to inform us on the way back about their intention to visit Córdoba in search of a physician to treat the wife, and when they arrive, I will have to facilitate their stay and direct them to a physician. At the very least, that is what I presume will happen." This is another reason why they took such great care of us, and since it would not interfere with my uncle's business in any way, he would help them if they decided to come. However, I had yet to stop thinking about this matter, and the scenery had not changed much to take my mind off the couple's situation.

"Is it certain that wives are responsible for not having children or only having daughters?"

"I was expecting this question; all people believe that it is indeed the wife's responsibility. I am not a physician and I have never taken any interest in this field, not even for a second, but I know of many women who were

divorced due to their inability to bear children, but they then bore children to other men, while the men were not able to get other women pregnant. Pregnancy is a matter of masculinity and virility; you will never find a man who admits to his own impotency, especially if his reproductive organs are working fine." My uncle paused for a moment before asking if my father had told me about procreation or if they had taught me anything about it at the Mosque.

"Yes, whenever we come across a Qur'anic surah that mentions marriage, intercourse, or sperm, the sheikh explains it to us."

"Let me know whenever you feel the need for any additional explanation. Even before you reach the age of ten, I will explain to you what you have not learned up to that point, and if you remind me on the way back from Málaga, I will explain the benefits of circumcision to you and the link to procreation." I am not sure if my uncle said that offhandedly or if he had finally recovered and was resuming his teasing comments, reminding me of what awaited me upon my return; the cost I would pay for this trip. I knew my uncle did not like talking about his sole participation in the summer raids, or even why he stopped his education early, but I decided to respond to his needling with a remark of my own.

"Why did you not study medicine or continue your studies in astronomy?"

"I despise physicians and their patients, and my astronomy studies would have led to me enlisting in the fleet or becoming a hunted sorcerer." After spitting out this quick and well-rehearsed response, Issa regained his composure and continued talking, his gaze shifting between me and the gradually ascending road. "We had an excellent physician on the summer raid that I participated in. He believed in the Qur'anic wisdom that an ounce of prevention is better than a pound of treatment. That is why he kept an eye on the kitchens and ordered that no food from the previous day be eaten, and if he found any cook with dirty hands or clothes, he ordered that he be flogged immediately. If a sick person came to him with a disease acquired as a result of overeating or consuming poisoned foods, he received his fair share of insults and bad names as well. He treated emergency fractures and wounds and informed everyone about his

methods and punishments that the Caliph had approved prior to the start of the raid. I liked that physician, but I despise many others."

"And why do you despise patients as well?"

"Because most diseases are caused by the stomach, self-indulgence and non-compliance with hygiene rules and physical and spiritual sports that the Qur'an commands and that everyone is aware of. Perhaps I exaggerated in saying that I despise all patients; I was actually referring to the most prevalent type of patient." My uncle's words about general hygiene rules reminded me of the instructions given to foreign students when they first came to Córdoba, and one of the older students from their people was tasked with informing the newcomers of the rules: Bathe once or more a week, change your clothes on a regular basis, do not burp or fart while eating or in public places, wash your behind with water using your left hand and then wash it, eat with your right hand only, and leave the toilets as clean as when you entered them. When it comes to food, they are told: If there are different types of food together, start with soup, then the other food, and finally the sweets. Do not rush while eating, and avoid making chewing sounds. Practice using forks, knives, and wooden spoons, and it is preferable to chat when the mouth is empty.

It is well known that these guidelines are given to new students because they are not common in their home countries. When I asked Issa about it, he told me that in some western Christian countries, people defecate wherever their stomachs press them, in gardens, on stairs, and beside walls, and they urinate at night in jars, throwing the contents out of the window in the morning.

"These are your kin, uncle," I said jokingly and in a provocative manner, but Issa gave me some valuable advice without getting angry at my comment.

"I learnt this information from Yusuf, Miriam's father, who learned it through his travels and from what he heard from Christian pilgrims to Compostela. You must make sense of what you hear, not what you presume. I said that this happens in some northern Christian countries and islands, not all. If we assume that some Muslims in Khorasan are badly behaved, does this mean that all Khorasanians or all Muslims, including the people of Al-

Andalus, are like that group of people? You have to get used to not making generalized assumptions and avoid jumping to quick conclusions."

We did not exhaust the horses all day; the road was winding but not exhausting for them, with long ascents and shorter descents as we crossed the hills, but it required our full attention. The ground was red, as far as the eye could see, with grass and wild flowers, mostly yellow and orange, covering the spaces between the olive and almond trees that lined the green mountains. Suddenly, I saw the water, the sea. We had reached the peak of the mountain range, and below us were forests and valleys, and behind them was the sea, with blue water meeting the sky at the end of the horizon. All the descriptions of the sea I had previously heard, from those who had seen it, sailed on it, or bathed in it, painted only a sliver of the magnificence of the sea that was before me. What had been in my mind was not even close to that level of greatness, and I wished we had flown from the foot of the mountains to the shore, but my uncle's voice, as he shook my shoulder, brought me back to reality. "This is a good place for the horses to rest and graze, and for us to eat." I got off and stood at the roadside while my uncle led the two animals to the other end, where a spring was gushing from among the rocks and running down the roadside before flowing down inside the deep valley.

"Suleiman, the descent will be more difficult for the horses than the climb, we have not galloped yet and will not be galloping for the rest of the day. Maybe we will arrive at the farm before dark. You must remain vigilant at all times, as the road is crooked, the ground is strewn with stones, and we will have to walk in the valley at times and along narrow banks at others." We did not stay long at the first rest stop because the rest of the way descended more than it ascended, and we continued on our normal path. Gradually, it became clearer to me that my uncle was not exaggerating the dangers, and he would periodically remind me that the animal might see a snake or another animal that would startle it. "Always be prepared to control Al-Shahba; do not let her lead you, instead, make her understand that you are in charge, and she will recognize the dangers and take care." On the rare occasions, when the turn of the road allowed us to see the sea, my uncle would switch from whatever we were talking about to alert me once more: "Do not let your mind roam in the water right now; you will get

enough of it tomorrow. Concentrate your mind and eyes on the road. You are now responsible for both yourself and Al-Shahba. If you arrive safely, it will mean you've become a real horseman." Issa continued with constant warnings and exhortations, along with instructions on how to position my body while descending or the mare was jumping over a barrier or crossing the potholes that littered the road, or how to walk over smooth rocks while crossing wet valleys. All these dangers were present, but we did not succumb to any of them; we did not slip, and no stones or trees fell on us, as they sometimes do. We were not surprised by any animals, no wild boars, and not even rabbits or a goat. Now and again, we heard animal sounds and movements over the dry leaves and twigs on the ground, but nothing got in our way. The valley was to our left throughout the descent, and we crossed it for the first time a mile beyond the town of Al-Muji, where a castle overlooked the road and there was a small lake in the middle of the valley, the waters of which gathered from the mountains.

"This castle was a focal point of the Umar ibn Hafsun revolution, which Caliph Abdul Rahman Al-Nasir put down sixty years ago. Did they teach you anything about the revolution at the Mosque?"

"He was a Christian who caused civil unrest and chaos for forty years, beginning with Emir Muhammad I, his son Emir Al-Mundhir, and his brother Emir Abdullah, and Al-Nasir put an end to it with intelligence and by force." I knew about Ibn Hafsun from a lecture on the history of civil war and revolutions in Al-Andalus, which had been numerous and varied in influence and danger, so the lecture had not gone into detail about any of them. Some of them were struggles to take over the state between the children of an Emir, while others were caused by Shiite revolutionaries seeking to place the country under their authority in the name of the Abbasid Caliphate in the East. There was also a period of suicide attacks by priests in Córdoba, who attempted to incite the Christians but were unsuccessful.

"Umar was not a Christian, and his revolution had nothing to do with religion. The majority of his supporters were Muslims who were protesting the mistreatment and excessive taxes imposed by the rulers of the provinces in the Rayya regions. At a time when people's souls were filled

with rage, Umar Ibn Hafsun appeared in front of them. Count Alfonso, his fourth forefather, was a Christian prince who converted to Islam at the beginning of the conquest. Following the first wave of rebellion, Umar was persuaded to return and join the Emir's forces for five years, then he left Córdoba for the mountains and rebelled, and Al-Mundhir Ibn Muhammad I fought him. Umar had been inciting farmers in Málaga and throughout the Rayya district to refuse to pay taxes, and he had written to the Abbasid Caliph, requesting that he be given control of Rayya and the areas controlled by his revolutionaries. His revolution devolved into civil war as the residents of other southern regions became fearful of him and began to force him out, and Emir Abdullah's forces joined them until they expelled him from his bastions and besieged him in Bobastro. There, he declared his Christian faith in order to gain the support of the kingdoms of the north, but his children refused to follow in his footsteps and convert to Christianity. In the end, during the first ten years of his reign, Al-Nasir was able to impose Córdoba's authority on the entire south, subjugate the revolutionaries, kill Ibn Hafsun, and push back the northern kingdoms' expansion until everyone came back under the rule of Córdoba, where they have stayed to this time."

We crossed the valley, returning to our left after seeing Ibn Hafsun's castle, with the Roman design and the lake beneath it. Before afternoon, we crossed the valley again to the east, through grain-planted land of moderate height, until we reached another valley, which we placed on our left and travelled alongside, heading south, until the land leveled in front of us. Trees covered the entire area, with adjacent fields of figs, almond, pine, and vineyards, as well as water wells strewn about in the middle of stone irrigation channels.

"This is the Medinah valley, where water runs most of the year and provides cooling in the summer weeks when it gets too hot. During the summer, the water comes from springs, some of which we saw in the hills. From here, our farm is on the right bank of the river, and Málaga is on the left." My uncle said this while Tahboub sped up as if he knew the rest of the road and that it was nearing the stable and rest.

“With the exception of farmers, we have not seen many travelers between Málaga and Antequera, at most we have only seen five small groups on horses and some on mules, dragging donkeys behind them, have you any idea why?”

“Because this is the shortest route, but the terrain is too rugged for caravans carrying goods, and there are not many villages or towns to stop in. The inhabited road begins in Bezliana, east of Málaga, and gradually ascends through seven towns until it reaches Archidona, then descends to Lucena and to Córdoba through dozens of villages and cities. That is also the same route Al-Amri took last year, when he met with the Berbers of Al-Udwa.”

My uncle's explanation appeared to have reminded him of another matter involving Muhammad al-Amri, the Sahib Al-Shurta and chancellor to Emir Hisham.

“Last week, the Caliph dispatched him to Asilah in Al-Udwa, along with the Qadi of the Marca Superior, to supervise the work of the leaders there, and carry money to win over the Berber chiefs. This journey began in Córdoba and continued through Écija and Seville to Cádiz and Algeciras, along the ancient Roman road.”

When we arrived at the farm, the sky looked red as if a quiet fire had been lit behind the mountain in the west, radiating its light across a wide area. I had never seen such a sunset before, and it all came together when we looked to the east, where the walls of Málaga reflected light, reminding us of the walls of Córdoba, and in front of us, the red colour mixed with blue, and the sea appeared to be full of bright stars. Al-Shahba was then startled by the barking of a dog, running from the side towards us, and in a flash, the dog jumped into the arms of my uncle, who calmed him down and introduced me to him. “Jarrah, this is Suleiman”. More than a dozen people, men, women, and children, had gathered around to greet us before we dismounted in front of the buildings. One of them took the horses to the stable, and we all entered a spacious hall, the corners of which were still illuminated by the sun and which had colourful drawings of plants on its northern wall. In the middle of the wall was a door leading to the rest of the

rooms, while the outer door and the hallway windows were all on the western wall, from where the sea was easily visible. It was our private house, and there were other stone-built houses nearby, inhabited by workers who lived there all the time. In fact, they were not wageworkers, but working partners who did not contribute to the capital used to purchase the farm, the running costs, the price of figs purchased from other farms each season, or the cost of land and sea export. All these matters were the responsibility of my uncles, and all that the workers had to contribute was their labour, for which they received a third of the profits, distributed among them, taking into account their age and the type of work each of them contributed.

After washing, we dined on a young roast goat, and I got to know all of the farm's inhabitants. The next day, I was taken aback by the size and contents of our farm, the details of which had been unknown to me. It has about a mile-long in circumference and contained fig trees, dates, oranges, olives, bananas, and sugarcane, and a portion of it was planted with vegetables as well as wheat and barley. The land was bisected by red stone channels that met at a well with a waterwheel, powered by mules. There was also a goat house with over fifty animals, some of which produced milk, and a chicken house, with numerous chickens. The farm supplied the needs of its inhabitants and to spare, but the main focus of the work was the fig-drying beds, which were laid out in three rows along the farm's northern perimeter.

I decided to go to the sea right away, before the farm tour or even breakfast. With me, my uncle sent a young man called Ahmad, who knew how to swim, and Issa held him responsible for returning me safely before noon, and he asked me to obey Ahmad. “The sea is treacherous for someone like you who does not know how to swim. It must be learned gradually and over months. Do not stray too far from the shore, and do not go into the water deeper than your waist.” He said this while staring at us both with serious and threatening eyes. With Jarrah behind us, we ran half a mile nonstop, and I found the water to be lukewarm but refreshing and exhilarating. The sand at Málaga is black but clean, and the gentle waves sway a slew of seashells back and forth. Pinching crabs sprint ahead of the

waves and curl up in the sand until the water recedes, when they return to their sandy dens. Jarrah stopped chasing them after one of them pinched his nose and clung to it. Ahmad told me to stand quietly in the water and watch, and there were fish of many colours swimming around my legs, as well as swarms of thousands of sardines, leaping through the air. On Ahmad's advice, I had not taken off my sandals as he had warned me of the presence of creatures like small balls, surrounded by poisonous thorns on all sides that injured those who stepped on them. Durra, Ahmad's sister, came in the forenoon, carrying breakfast food, and she sat with us. She was my age or younger, tidy and neatly dressed, with a plain but attractive, symmetrical face with no sharp features. When I asked if she could read and write, she said that Sa'id taught the farm's children to read, write, and recite the Qur'an during the winter and spring seasons.

The heat of the sand at the time made us sit where it was wet, and from there we could see the southern city walls, adjacent to the beach, sea gate, and the western wall adjacent to the river, where the bridge connected to the valley gate. From Ahmad, I knew that the city wall had five gates, and I saw the minaret of the Great Mosque, towering over other minarets and overlooking all the white houses and towers. I even saw the Alcazaba and behind it a castle on the mountain representing the city's easternmost site. Ahmad said that the view from here and from the farm was even better in the afternoon, when the sun rose over the city behind us. "And if you want to see the farm and Málaga clearly, I can take you tomorrow morning to see it from the castle on top of Mount Gibralfaro." Before noon, the four of us returned to the farm, and then Ahmad poured two pots of well water over my body to remove the salt.

I performed the midday prayer at the Great Mosque and observed the entire area from the minaret. Our farm in the west lies two miles outside the walls, which can be seen surrounding the city on all four sides in a semi-circle, while the wall next to the sea contains two adjacent horseshoes, one of which forms the Alcazaba gate and the other the sea gate. The majority of the houses in the city are of two floors, but some have three or have tiled terraces for taking siestas and enjoying the sea breezes. It is impossible to find a vantage point in Córdoba from which to see the entire city and its

outskirts. After seeing my interest in his city, the imam told me that it was two thousand years old and had been inhabited by the Phoenicians and the Romans and that when the Goths took it from the Byzantines, they demolished the original wall. After it was conquered by Tariq's soldiers, and the conquest was strengthened by Abd Al-Aziz ibn Musa ibn Nusayr, and the soldiers of the Goths expelled, it was then inhabited by the best of the Arabs, Hispanics, Jews, and Christians, some of whom converted to Islam and equality, and others who preferred to pay the tribute and to continue following their own religion and dealing with their own regulations. "The majority accepted Islam and were Arabized quickly, but there is a Christian Bishop's headquarters that serves the Christian residents and visitors." The imam also told me that Málaga had been under the authority of the Qadi of Rayya, together with the city of Archidona, until Emir Muhammad I granted it the title of a city. The imam was speaking in a gathering to the right of the mihrab, in the presence of a few people who were resting between the afternoon and evening prayers. Silver chandeliers hung in the mosque's five corridors, and I noticed the differences between the Great Mosque of Córdoba, which is several times the size of the Mosque of Málaga, which again is slightly larger than the Al-Zahra Mosque. The arches here are supported by wide legs rather than marble columns, as in Córdoba and Al-Zahra. The garden, which is similar to the gardens of some of Córdoba's mosques, contains orange trees, a water fountain, and places for ablution.

Before the prayer, we passed through the Al-Bahr gate and bought different kinds of fish from the fishermen, which two of the farm workers took back to the farm to prepare for dinner. There was no comparison between the dried and salted fish that my uncle Ramadan sold and gave to us from time to time, and the same species sold fresh in this market, as they, of course, are not available in the Guadalquivir River. That is how I became conflicted between my desire to continue walking in the alleyways of the city and returning to the farm, where I was due to eat what I expected to be the most delicious food of my life to date. Wherever you walked in the city center to the north of the Mosque, you found different markets for blacksmiths, clothes, and perfumes. I found out from my uncle that there were other markets outside the wall, such as those of the tanners and carpet weavers, who were located between our farm and the bridge. There

was also a bigger market called the Souq Al-Ghubbar, located in the north, outside the Fentaleh gate, where a scribe sat to conclude the terms of sales deals and transactions or to write petitions and letters for illiterate people as I saw the next day after Ahmad and I visited the castle. A few blocks away from the Fentaleh gate, there is a prayer-room, at the entrance to a vast cemetery, the beauty of which is unmatched in my experience, as it is full of flowers and low trees, with tiny streets that give it the appearance of a small, low city. There are cemeteries for Jews and Christians in its western corner, as well.

My uncle bought some red wine, claiming that Málaga grapes are the best in the world. "Everything here seems to be better than in other countries and cities," I said, torn between questioning and disapproval, or perhaps in search of confirmation or denial of what was in my mind about Málaga.

“You must trust your eyes and judge with your senses, based on your own experiences. If you want to be sure, you should see what others have written about it. You will find that some people consider its figs and grapes to be the best, because they can be stored for a long time, others consider their days here to have been the happiest, and some are called to compose poetry when they see the sea, vineyards, and orchards connected around the city as far as the eye can see, with no space between them. Then ask yourself, how would you describe the terracing of the mountains and their cultivation with vineyards, and black, green, and honey-coloured figs?"

"It would be better if you lived here with Miriam so I could visit you at least twice yearly.” We laughed together and continued to walk to the Al-Wadi gate. The streets were paved, flowers peeked over the walls of the houses, and at sunset, the scent of jasmine filled the air. Before we crossed the Al-Wadi gate, we also heard the music of strumming on strings or playing on drums coming from some of the houses.

While we were waiting for the fire to die down at the farm to grill the fish, our people started playing on musical instruments that they held in their hands, and the singing of the farmers rose, one after the other, while some of them danced with their wives as they circled around each other with pride. It was just the “dance of the singing farmer” or Flamenco, as it was called in the Mozarab dialect.

During the four days that I stayed in Málaga, I visited Al-Shahba and Tahboub to feed and clean them after every daily ride, which was often a bareback gallop on the sands of the beach. Ahmed and Durra sometimes rode the horses with me. On the morning of the third day, from the shore we saw a boat docked in the port, and I decided to go with Ahmed on foot to see the boat and visit the port. We did not pass over the bridge, but crossed the mouth of the semi-arid Guadalmedina at the shore-line, walking all the way on the sandy area between the water and the wall, where we encountered two strangers who were talking in an unaccustomed Arab dialect to the owner of the house in front of the entrance to the shipyard. I had not seen anything like their tunics and turbans before either.

“Those two are from Alexandria, and it seems they want something from the shipyard.” After a moment of listening, it became clear that Ahmed was correct. After the two men had left for the city, he informed the owner that my name was Suleiman, my uncle Issa and my maternal uncle Ramadan. I learned afterwards that he had introduced me like that because the owner knew my uncles personally.

“Your uncle Ramadan financed the construction of five fishing boats that were built in this shipyard. Please, give him the regards of Abdul Rahman when you return to Córdoba, and tell Issa to come to see me before he travels, I want to speak to him about something regarding Córdoba.”

“Inshallah. Is this boat from Alexandria?”

“Yes, it is, and the ship’s captain and the merchant have gone to meet the owner of the market in the Alcazaba. Probably, they will stay until they sell all of their cargo and buy merchandise before returning.” I remained quiet and listened to Abdul Rahman, who noticed my complete lack of comprehension when it came to sailing conditions, trade, and markets, unlike the people of Málaga. “That is what I presume they will do, as they carry some merchandise such as sugar, Indian spices, and bales of cotton.”

“How long does a ship take to travel between Málaga and Alexandria?”

“Warships like those we built here can take up to ten days to travel such a distance if the wind is blowing in their sails. This journey takes two months by road, but most of the merchant and commercial ships stop at different

ports and sail near the coast in search of safety and trading opportunities, and they often sail in convoy to avoid pirates. This Alexandrian ship traveled along the southern coast until it arrived at Ceuta, then sailed to our city, and it has stopped only once during its journey." The information given by Abdul Rahman about maritime traffic was not all new to me, but the fact that ships of our fleet were built here attracted both my attention and my curiosity.

"I heard from the sheikhs that the ships of our fleet were built in Almería and Seville."

"It is true that both cities have a larger role in building the fleet as they are considered the anchors of the Andalusian fleets. However, the Caliph Al-Nasir, may Allah have mercy on him, came here to this shipyard, and went out on the bridge to inspect and examine the ships that we had built according to his request. He inspected their quality and ordered us to sail them to Algeciras to join some ships that were built in other shipyards in Al-Andalus to compare them. Indeed, the Caliph ordered us to build other ten ships." This fifty-year-old man seemed very familiar to me, in appearance; he had the features of my grandfather, Sheikh Yunis, with Gerbert's hair. "Have you visited the castle, Suleiman?" he asked me.

I answered: "Yes, yesterday with Ahmed."

"The Caliph ordered the building of a wall, which was still under construction between the castle and the Alcazaba when he visited us that time. During his trip, he also visited Almería before coming to our city, as well as Salobreña and Almuñécar, and he ordered the construction of castles and towers in both of them, along the coast, connected by horse patrols and in sight of each other. From Málaga, the Caliph continued his journey to the city of Sohail until he reached Gibraltar and Algeciras, where he ordered the building of the castles and towers which are still under construction at this time."

"Would it not be better to eliminate the pirates at sea at once, instead of building these castles and towers which require thousands of workers and cost a lot of dinars?"

"These fortifications are not being built to protect us from the pirates but to deter the danger from the Fatimid Caliphate in Al-Udwa, as the Fatimid

have marched to Tripoli, Alexandria, and Egypt and occupied them, and we would have fallen victim to them as well if we had not built these fortifications," Abdul Rahman said, as he was about to return to his work. We thanked him, and I told him that I would immediately tell my uncle of his request to see him before his return to Córdoba.

I relayed the message to my uncle on his return from the city before siesta time, when he told me that we were going to travel back the following morning, and he would therefore visit Abdul Rahman at sunset. I was not surprised by his decision, as we had agreed on a quick, short trip, especially as he was arranging his wedding, which would take place after Eid Al-Fitr. In the evening, Issa delivered work instructions for the next two months until he returned from Córdoba during the fig harvest and the start of the drying process. He informed Ismail that he had made agreements with suppliers to provide the farm with the additional workers required during the harvest, and for the transfer of figs from the other farms to ours. Issa also asked him to have the house repainted now, before the harvest season, and to maintain it in a new condition during his absence in Córdoba.

While we were travelling back to Córdoba by the same route the following day, my uncle told me a lot of news that he had heard from Abdul Rahman, which he, in his turn, had obtained from Andalusian sailors, travelers, and merchants from the cities of Africa. From his explanations, I gathered that the Fatimid, Al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah, had sent Jawahar Al-Siqilli, the Sicilian, on conquests that started from the city of Kairouan and occupied all the lands of Al-Maghreb except Ceuta, which stood and resisted under Andalusian administration, between the years 347 and last year, when the Caliph's army and fleets began to seize some of the cities of Al-Udwa. In 358 AH, Al-Mu'izz sent his commander Jawahar Al-Siqilli with a great army to occupy Egypt and the Levant. He also ended the Turkish Ikhshidid dynasty, which was affiliated to the Abbasid Caliphate. Jawahar proceeded immediately to build a new city in Fustat, which he called Qahirat Al-Mu'izz, (Cairo) and the news now is that the city and its Mosque have been established and completed. "The captain of the Egyptian ship informed Abdul Rahman that Al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah arrived in Alexandria on Monday the sixth of Sha'ban, with his family and the coffins of his ancestors. He also carried his gold, shaped like millstones, to Egypt on camels' backs, as

he intended to occupy Al-Qahirah to maintain control over Egypt and the Levant."

‘‘You seem to be upset at hearing such recent news from only three weeks ago,"

"I am not upset at all, even if he was born of a Roman Umm Walad, he is an Arab and better than the Turkish rulers and others who have controlled the Abbasid Caliphate in previous eras. Moreover, Jawahar Al-Siqilli is a loyal commander like many of our Sicilians. After all, they are heading east, not to Al-Andalus, and they are only fighting those who deserve to meet with hostility. I am annoyed because Jawahar did not succeed in retaking Antakya from the Byzantines who occupied it last year from the Abbasid, when they occupied other eastern cities that adjoin the city of Antakya, such as ar-Ruha, Nusaybin, and Diyarbakir, but failed to retake Aleppo." The eyes and words of my uncle expressed worry and anger while he was telling me about the news from the Islamic East, and the harder I tried to feel positive about it, the worse the news he had heard in Málaga was. ‘‘But Allah took revenge on the Byzantines and shook Antakya and demolished its towers. And the Abbasid Caliphate has deteriorated to the point that it failed to secure the caravan of pilgrims between Baghdad and Mecca during the last Hajj season, when the Arabs of Bani Hilal killed thousands of pilgrims and robbed them of their property."

‘‘Al-Mu'izz's journey from Al-Maghreb to Egypt, with the coffins of his ancestors, looks more like an escape or expulsion, not an arrival as conqueror."

"It is likely that he has no respect for the Berbers and was afraid that the remains of his ancestors would soon disappear because the Berbers are tough, temperamental, and hold no loyalty to one group of people, and we in Al-Andalus have been involved with them since our first day. I recommend you choose some books about the conquests of Africa and Al-Andalus to read while resting at home after your circumcision."

After hours of riding, my uncle asked me about the jangling sound accompanying us, and I told him that it was seashells that I had collected from the beach for Fatima, with the help of Durra, as she had asked me to bring her some. "What do you think of Durra?" I didn't find my uncle's

question strange, and I considered it an attempt to distract himself from the worry and sadness that had overtaken him.

“She is a polite, beautiful girl, and her brother is respectable. We are going to spend the night with Abi al-Fadl, are we not?” I wanted to stop talking about Durra because this conversation would definitely bring back the topic of circumcision. “They will not come with us to Córdoba now, will they?!”

“Of course not, they may come to Córdoba at the beginning of winter but not now, as this is their busy season. This is still the beginning of the second week of June, and they have five months of work in front of them, welcoming travelers and returnees between Córdoba and the sea.”

“Do you expect to see the crescent signalling the start of Ramadan tonight?”

"Inshallah, if we do not see it from Antequera, which is at a higher altitude than Córdoba, no one else will see it. In any case, we are traveling, so do not think about fasting tomorrow.” Indeed, I did not fast on the first day of Ramadan 362 AH, which corresponded to the ninth of June 973 AD, but I ate suhoor with my family in Córdoba on the second day and fasted for the rest of the holy month.

15

People's Choice

Allah forbids fighting during Ramadan if it can be avoided. However, our forces, under the leadership of Ghalib ibn Abdul Rahman, have withdrawn from the Marca Superior and are now roaming the lands of Al-Udwa with no consideration for the sacred month. Ghalib was carrying ten thousand dinars to be distributed among the chiefs of the tribes who were in opposition to Hassan ibn Qanoon, who escaped from the city of Asilah in the previous year. At that time, our forces destroyed the city, and Hassan continued to resist us from the foothills of the mountains.

In Córdoba, the Caliph doubled the alms given to middle-class people in the presence of the ministers and some of the Berber leaders who had arrived from Al-Udwa to witness the distribution. Gifts, clothes, bundles of dinars, and tunics were also distributed to them then they vowed allegiance to the Caliph through Jaafar bin Othman Al-Mushafi, Sahib Al-Mawarith, or Head of Inheritance Affairs. During the holy month of Ramadan, many letters were received from Al-Udwa, describing our victories and the vows of allegiance submitted by tribal leaders. The fleet of Al-Andalus anchored near the city of Asilah and joined the army, and a letter of allegiance was received from the governor of Udwa Al-Qarawiyyin of the city of Fez. One thousand and seven hundred strong men also arrived from Toledo in the north. They entered Córdoba in fine attire with white vests and Frankish swords, holding shining shields and spears. This army was headed to Al-Zahra, from where they were sent overseas, with new commanders, to support the soldiers in Al-Udwa. Before the end of Ramadan, Al-Amri returned, after distributing the money, and he told the Caliph what he wanted to hear about the situation there.

My uncle and I adhered to the requirements of our religion as we waited for celebrations to take place after the end of the holy month of Ramadan. In Córdoba, we had been intimidated by recurring natural disasters and we avoided disobeying Allah even more than the Caliph, who was disobeying

Allah with this warfare and the waste of money on some of the Berber tribes and the soldiers who fight them.

The conversations in the corridors of the Mosque and the markets during the month of Ramadan veered between the deterioration of the situation on the Islamic eastern front, and the possibility of the Christians attacking from the north, after the cities of the Marca Superior had been emptied of the soldiers who marched to Al-Udwa in North Africa.

The people of Córdoba were observing Laylat Al-Qadr, the Night of Destiny, on Wednesday, the twenty-first of Ramadan, when they saw a huge planet at dawn, rising up from the direction of the Qibla with intense light spreading along on the horizon, causing horror in those who saw it, as it did not correspond to the signs of Laylat al-Qadr, which should open up the sky, shedding its light on groups of sincere believers for the duration of which Allah will grant their wishes.

On Thursday, the sixth of Shawwal, the invitees and guests ate lunch at my uncle Ramadan's house near San Basilio, then the wedding procession went out, with more than a thousand men, women, and children, stretching along the inside of the wall to the sidewalk in front of the Mosque. We stood in a circle, the men at the front and the women at the back, both groups dancing and singing separately. A small circle of men and women was formed around me and my uncle, dancing and singing all the time. We took turns dancing and sitting out for a while to catch our breath. Most of the people dancing in the small circle were familiar to me as it included my uncles, their wives, their children, my uncle Abbas and his family, and of course my mother, my father, and my grandfather, who danced with his cane from time to time. And I was also surrounded by my aunts and their families, who were celebrating their younger brother. My uncle's friends and the acquaintances of our family danced with us from the beginning, and the rest of our neighbours joined the procession as it approached the Mosque. Our neighbour María, and her husband Jesús, had not yet returned from their pilgrimage to Compostela.

The procession halted on the sidewalk between the Mosque and the bridge, without stopping the singing or dancing. My uncle and I, as well as those in the small circle set out for our nearby house, where the

circumciser was waiting. My uncle looked at me and said: "Do you remember our agreement that you would not scream and would prove your masculinity in return for the trip to Málaga? If you stick to the deal now, your grandfather will buy you a horse that we will keep in our stable in Al-Zahra, but I do not want to hear one scream."

"May Allah be your aid, keep an eye on the circumciser and make sure that he does not cut anything except the foreskin of the penis and finishes his work quickly." While we were approaching the house, my uncle assured me that he would keep his eyes on the circumciser. My relatives were beating drums and unleashing their throats, while the sounds of the wedding party near the mosque rang out on the horizon. My uncle sat down on a chair and opened his legs, asking me to sit in front of him, while the circumciser was on the ground in front of us. My uncle Issa, my grandfather, and my father stood behind the circumciser, and my uncle Abbas stood beside my uncle and the rest of the family members who surrounded me so that the rest of the guests who had separated from the wedding party could not see anything. My uncle Ramadan grabbed me in his arms and both my uncle Abbas and my uncle Muhammad held one of my legs, while Issa looked me in the eye. Then the circumciser lifted my tunic over my knees. I had taken off my underwear, and he was searching for my penis which had hidden in my stomach when I caught a glimpse of his tools. He pressed his fingers into my stomach and took out my penis, tightening and stretching it, as he felt for the foreskin. Then he placed the kalba, the surgical pincer, on the back of the foreskin to protect the penis itself. A terrible pain engulfed my body, while my uncle Issa yelled at me to look at him as I almost exploded from the pain and my attempts to muffle my screaming, to the point that the circumciser started looking at me, instead of continuing his work.

"Cut it now, what are you waiting for?" Issa yelled at him angrily. I did not feel the scalpel cutting the foreskin, as that pain bears no relation to the pain of the Kalba, as it constantly presses on the foreskin before, during, and after the process. When he opened the Kalba, I cursed him and his ancestors while everyone watched as he continued pushing the rest of the foreskin back from the penis, which had become exposed. He then wrapped my penis in a gauze cloth. My mother moved closer behind her brothers to ask if the process was finished as she had not heard the usual

screams. My father made a sign to her, and she started to ululate, followed by the other women. Then my uncle carried me to bed, congratulating me and promising that they would all visit me later.

According to custom, before everyone started leaving the house, apart from my mother, Fatima and a few neighbours, I received a lot of gifts, dinars and my mother put a table beside me, on which there were nuts, sweets, and lemon and orange juice. She advised me to drink a lot of liquid in order to increase my urine so that the swelling would not obstruct my penis, and this was what I also wished for after hearing the experiences of others, but it was like a snowball's chance in hell. When the time came, I learnt that the circumcision itself was far from the last chapter in that torment, which lasted for days.

In the evening, my grandfather told me that they went outside the walls with the procession, as it went over the bridge to Secunda. They collected Miriam and began her procession across the bridge, as she and Issa rode in a horse-drawn carriage that headed towards Al-Zahra, followed only by my father, uncle, and other residents of Al-Zahra. Usually, the bride marches in procession to the groom’s house, as they stay there most of the night for the bride to show off her dresses and clothes in front of the members of the two families who celebrate her wedding, while they get to know each other through dancing, singing and eating food, and sweets. But my uncle did not want to witness the presence of guests at the end of the night, talking about the success of his wedding to Miriam, as it was the custom of the Christians for the bride and groom to go alone to their marital home. Therefore, some of our relatives stayed at Issa’s house overnight, to welcome the bride's family in the morning and share in their congratulations and blessings.

I asked my grandfather: "Is circumcision really necessary? Issa told me that it is important for procreation, but Christians procreate without such a process.” I continued: "Why are only we and the Jews ordered to bear such torture?” If the follow-up effects of the operation had diminished, I might have accepted the spoiling and the cash, but urination had become difficult and smarted and besides, the tip of my penis was incessantly swollen, so I wanted to argue with my grandfather about the process.

He said: "As you know, the common name is Tuhr, which means purity, cleanliness, and the removal of impurities, and it is a custom that all Muslims follow. Soon the pain will go away and you will forget about it."

I replied: "But until I forget it, there is no harm in knowing the reason why. Is Tuhr, or circumcision, mentioned in the Qur'an?"

He said: "No, it is not mentioned there."

My grandfather wanted to carry on with explanations and justifications that did not concern me, so I interrupted him, asking: "Was the Messenger, peace and blessings of Allah be upon him, circumcised?" My grandfather grabbed his beard and combed it with his hand. I raised my eyebrows defiantly and waited for the answer.

He continued: "The Holy Qur'an was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad when he was older, and this subject is not mentioned in the verses of the Holy Qur'an. Perhaps it is due to the traditions of the Jews who resided in the Arabian Peninsula."

"Would the Messenger imitate the Jews and get circumcised without permission from Allah and without any subsequent guidance from him about this in the hadiths?" I asked. Our conversation was starting to get more complicated and I sensed some anxiety in my grandfather's eyes, so I offered him a way out: "What is the origin of Tuhr and why do Christians not practice it?"

He said: "Say, Allah's blessings be upon the Prophet." My grandfather's posture relaxed after saying this, and he grabbed a plate, into which he put various sweets and nuts from those on my table. I repeated it, waiting for his opinion: "May Allah's peace and blessings be upon him."

"In the Jewish books, there is a reference to the effect that Allah appeared to our forefather Ibrahim, before he turned a hundred years old, and asked him to circumcise himself and to circumcise all his descendants, eight days after birth. According to the books of the Jews, Allah promised the Prophet Ibrahim the land of Canaan if they practiced circumcision. We do believe that Ibrahim is their prophet and also our prophet, however, while we do not accept their interpretation of the promise of the land of Canaan, but we do

accept circumcision. They considered that circumcision made them special and identified the Jews as the chosen people of Allah, and we implement circumcision to follow the teachings of the Prophet Ibrahim, peace be upon him. That is why Christians reject circumcision, because they reject the principle that the Lord favours one group of his worshippers over others." After this elaboration, my grandfather jumped at the opportunity to change the subject to distract me from the condition of my penis, the torment of urination, and the pain of the swelling as a result of a divine command to our Prophet Ibrahim. I wanted to ask my grandfather if circumcision would be divine torture for all males, whether Jew or Muslim, until the Day of Judgment, but he moved on to talk about the mare that Issa had told me about. He said: "Since you endured the pain with the courage of a strong man, I have decided to gift you a horse."

"Thank you, grandfather, how old is he?"

"He is five years old and still a foal, but you will be his first rider, and you can train on him in horsemanship, stabbing and fighting for at least the next ten years, if you treat him well." I didn't speak while he explained what he meant by horsemanship and fighting. I knew that we should learn horse riding and archery, following the edict of the second Caliph, Umar ibn Al-Khattab, but, from my grandfather's talk, it seemed that there was something tangible being plotted in secret. He said that there is a hadith of the Prophet Muhammad that states: "Goodness is attached to the forelocks of horses until the Day of Resurrection." My grandfather was silent for a while, and I replied with a nod that I knew that hadith. He added: "Your uncle expressed his great admiration for your horse riding ability and skills, your steadfastness, and your good treatment of Tahboub and Al-Shahba. Do you know the origins of the name horse?" It appeared that my grandfather was not in a hurry to clarify, and was waiting for me to observe the correct etiquette when speaking with older people.

"I do not know much. I would be grateful if you told me," I answered.

"The rider is attributed to his horse, something which is very important to Arabs, who are always proud of the lineage of their ancestors. The word "Al-Khail" derives from "khuyala" which means to take pride in oneself and have grace, while the word "Al-Husan" derives from "Hisn" with reference to

it being the castle of the man who protects and preserves it, and both words are used to refer to horses. Most Arabic poems and stories mention horses and give them special names, as if they were members of the family.”

I did not need anyone to entice me with a foal or explanations about the importance of horses in our lives and conquests, but I preferred not to rush my grandfather in his explanation, and opened a wide door for him to breach whenever he wanted.

"When the soldiers of Tariq ibn Ziyad crossed the strait of the Iberian Peninsula, did they have horses with them as well?"

"Tariq ibn Ziyad crossed the strait of the Iberian Peninsula on the fifth of Rajab of the year 92 AH, with seven thousand cavalry but only a few horses, due to a lack of ships available and the Arabs’ fear of traveling by sea. However, the next morning, they clashed with the Goths for three days, defeating them and taking their horses. Tariq asked Musa bin Nusayr to send horses and more soldiers, so he sent him five thousand horsemen to join the previous seven thousand as they clashed with the king of the Goths, who confronted the Muslims with forty thousand soldiers from Toledo. The battle took place near the lake of Barbate, and it continued for ten days, ending in victory for the Muslims, who shared the spoils and horses, but lost a quarter of their army on the battlefield. After the battle, the Muslim forces moved north to the city of Medina-Sidonia, under the leadership of Tariq ibn Ziyad, then arrived in Toledo after a few months, followed by Musa with twelve thousand horsemen to support the conquest, secure cities, and eliminate the remnants of the Gothic resistance." My grandfather started talking about the city of Medina-Sidonia, without giving me a chance to continue questioning him about the conditions of the conquest. He said: “It is a beautiful city with a huge castle in which boys learn horsemanship, and many relatives of your mother and uncles, and the rest of the Jund Filastin, live there."

I was again hearing about the presence of Jund from specific eastern places at certain Andalusian sites, despite the mixing and constant movement of the population, so I asked my grandfather about the reason for this. He answered: “That is a long story that you should read about in

books and our narratives, but I will give you a brief account of the reasons and the events involved so that you have some idea about the city of Medina-Sidonia when you visit it to learn horsemanship there. You will be nine years of age soon, and this is an appropriate age.”

I realized something suddenly, but the pressure of urine was about to make me explode, so I told my grandfather to wait a second, hoping that I would succeed in expelling the urine from my body. I sat on my behind and feet, with my knees at the same level as my chest in order to make a tent for my penis so nothing would come into contact with it. When I walk, I have to grab my tunic and move it away from my waist, and I have to spread my thighs apart to keep the wound protected. The pressure did not push the urine out, but it caused a burning sensation at the tip of my penis. My grandfather called to me to ask if everything was alright, and I told him how it was going. My grandfather knocked on the bathroom door and handed me a cup full of olive oil, saying: “Dip your penis in the oil for a while then the stinging will go away and it will be a little easier to urinate.” In the end, and after suffering great pain, everything was okay.

I told my grandfather: "To be honest, grandfather, I am still not convinced of the necessity for Tuhr or the importance of the divine promise."

"Your complaints are now meaningless, the foreskin has been cut and you became a man with great courage. I have never seen a boy like you, able to handle the process without screaming, so let us return to our previous conversation," he replied.

"So, I will become a rider, and you have decided to send me to Medina-Sidonia.”

"Yes, but our subject was different: The soldiers of the first conquerors were Arabs and Berbers. They intermarried with the people of Al-Andalus to form a new generation that became known as the Àrabs Baladís, or local Arabs. The Berbers chose to live in the highlands, north of Toledo and on the border of the Gaul countries. Five years later, the disputes stirred up by Caliph Suleiman of Damascus had worsened, and after that, it was agreed that the Berbers of Morocco would revolt against the Caliphate, encouraging the Berbers in the north of Andalusia who began their first

rebellion. After the Battle of the Highway of the Martyrs, Abdul Malik ibn Katan Al-Fihri, a Yemeni, took over Al-Andalus. During his tenure, the Berbers revolted again in Morocco, and Levantine forces arrived from the east to deter them, but they were defeated and the Berbers surrounded their remnants in Ceuta. With the spread of news of their victory, the Berbers in Al-Andalus moved towards Toledo and Córdoba to take them over, and then Al-Fihri allowed the besieged soldiers in Ceuta to return, sending them ships to come to his rescue. At the beginning, Al-Fihri had thought that the Berber revolt against the Levantines would not affect him. There were about ten thousand Levantine soldiers, under the leadership of Balj ibn Bishr. They succeeded in ending the Berber revolution, but the north of Al-Andalus emptied of Muslim presence. Ibn Bishr declared himself ruler of Al-Andalus, then the people of Al-Andalus killed him and appointed Abu'l-Khattar Al-Kalbi as ruler. The soldiers of Ibn Bishr came from several eastern regions, and Artobas Ibn Witiza, who was the Count of Al-Andalus, and the Chief of the Christians, advised Abu Al-Khattar to distribute those Jund, or military units, to different regions in order to secure Córdoba and protect it against their differences and disputes. Therefore, the Egyptian Jund was sent to Baja and Tudmir, the Homs Jund to Seville, the Palestinian Jund Filastin to Medina-Sidonia and the Rayya district, the Jordanian Jund Al-Urdunn to Málaga, the Damascus Jund to Elvira, and the Syrian Jund Qinnasrin to Jaén. The ruler agreed with the aforementioned Jund to give them a third of the non-Muslim tax paid by the Christians of the Dhimma and the farmers of those areas for protection, and in return, the Jund maintained security and sent soldiers to Córdoba whenever they were asked to do so to participate in Muslim conquests during the summer and winter."

"Did the conflicts and disputes come to an end afterwards?"

"Unfortunately no, the conflicts and disputes continued between the Yemeni and the Levantines in Córdoba, however with less fighting, and things did not subside until the arrival of Abdul Rahman Al-Dakhil, who eliminated the governors and gained the independence of Al-Andalus from the newly-formed Abbasid Caliphate and separated it administratively from North Africa."

So, I will be learning horsemanship and fighting with my mother's relatives who cherish their lineage although more than a quarter of a millennium has passed since they came here!

“At least the Yemenis and the Palestinians don’t fight now. What will they consider me in Medina-Sidonia, a Yemeni like my father or a Palestinian like my mother?”

"It seems that the oil has given you a sense of humour, and you have started telling jokes. That distinction ended a while ago. There is now Arab affiliation and Berber affiliation, as well as Mozarab affiliation. We are all Muslims, coexisting with the Christians, Jews, and others. There are Christians who imitate Muslims in everything but, officially, they belong to Christianity, or rather they are not religious at all. Our blood has mixed since the beginning of time and most of us are married to Andalusian women, who became Muslims of course. The children of your uncle Issa and his wife María will consider themselves Arab Andalusians as their admixture now represents a culture and civilization and is no-longer just a feature of blood-lineage.”

“The Prophet Issa, peace be upon him, was already from Palestine, the first Christians were from the East, and the Christians of the East are now Arabs as well,” I said, pretending to keep up with the conversation, but the picture had become completely clear, my uncle Issa had reassured my father and my grandfather about my horse riding skills and my endurance, and after my circumcision and reaching the age of nine, there were no longer any obstacles to learning horsemanship in response to the directive of the Caliph as regarded participation in the conquest as a price for the benefits that our Arab families receive. I learned from my grandfather that the notables of the city of Medina-Sidonia would arrive, as usual, to congratulate the Caliph on the occasion of Eid al-Adha, in two months’ time, and I would return with them to finish my primary education and then come back here to study science at the second stage, at our university and Mosque.

Now, I had at least a whole week in front of me where I would have to wear my tunic without pants underneath it and stay at home. I would also have two months before the start of a new life that could last for a whole year.

Consequently, I made the decision to study and review as many books as I could with stories of the Muslim conquests in Africa and Al-Andalus and to learn about Christianity, its history, and its character. Perhaps I would be destined to fight them, despite all the indications that the war would be with Africa. Thankfully, my grandfather was familiar with the history of Al-Andalus and Al-Maghreb as well as the Christian history books, as he would be staying with us in Córdoba for a while because my uncle Issa was a newlywed, and he had taken their house in Al-Zahra for himself.

My grandfather told me that Sheikh Ahmed Al-Razi had written a lot of books about the history of Al-Maghreb, and his son Issa was still with us in Córdoba and continued to write about Al-Maghreb and Al-Andalus. My father came to check my health and overheard our conversation about the history of Al-Maghreb, so he went to the library and came back with two books, one by Abu Bakr Muhammad Ibn Al-Qutiyya, the Goth (feminine), and the other by Muhammad ibn Yusuf Al-Warrag. “Both of these authors have asked me to prepare additional copies of their books, which contain a lot about Al-Maghreb, by the end of Ramadan. Review whatever parts you want with your grandfather, as we will not start making copies before the end of two weeks." While my grandfather turned over the pages of the history book discussing the conquest of Al-Andalus, my father mentioned the large number of requests for copies these days, necessitating the doubling of his current workforce of ten to fulfill the required requests.

“Suleiman, Abu Bakr Muhammad Ibn Al-Qutiyya, the author of this book, was a scholar of grammar and a poet who loved the Umayyad because he was a descendant of Sarah the Goth, the granddaughter of the Gothic king, Wittiza, whose throne in Toledo was usurped by Roderic. He aided his Muslim children against the usurper of their throne, and they converted to Islam after Tariq defeated Roderic in the battle of the Plain of Barbate. Sarah went to Damascus, years after the conquest, to complain about the injustice that had befallen her family, and she met Caliph Suleiman bin Abdul-Malik, who reassured her and married her to one of his loyalists, and she returned with him to Al-Andalus. This author, may Allah prolong his life, is one of her grandchildren.”

“Is it proper for Abu Bakr to be named after his grandmother?”

“Certainly, what could be so wrong with that, if she was knowledgeable, religious, and so courageous that she reached Damascus and was honoured by the Caliph himself.”

The other book was written by Muhammad ibn Yusuf al-Warrag. He was born and educated in Kairouan, but he had been living with us in Córdoba for a long time. My grandfather was occupied with Ibn Al-Gothic’s book, while I found stories in the other book about the conquest of Morocco, including the story of the warrior queen, Al-Kahina, the sorceress, to which I was attracted by the title.

16

Al-Kahina of Africa

To me, the story of Al-Kahina, the sorceress, is the most exciting event in the conquest of Africa, where this crone ordered the destruction of cities and the cutting down of trees to give the Arabs a distaste of the land in the hope that they would turn away after she had turned it barren. I will try to abbreviate what I found in the records about this era as much as possible.

In the year fifty AH, the Caliph in Damascus appointed the conqueror Uqba ibn Nafi Al-Fihri to Africa, to continue the conquest after he succeeded during the previous year in attacking the Romans on the sea with Egyptian soldiers. Uqba reached Africa with ten thousand Muslim soldiers and he conquered it by the sword, like those before him. The natives always followed Islam as long as the conqueror was there but apostatized at the first available opportunity. For this reason, Uqba decided to establish the city of Kairouan. He located it far from the shore to prevent unexpected raids by sea from the ruler of Constantinople.

The Arab soldiers fulfilled Uqba's request, but they complained: "You ordered us to build in harsh terrain and forests and we fear the beasts and serpents living there." Uqba went to the site designated for construction with eighteen successors of the Prophet's companions, peace be upon him, who had participated in the raid. They started reciting the Dua, the prayer of supplication: "You serpents and beasts who live here, we are the companions of Allah's Messenger, peace be upon him, go on your way as we will stay here and any of you that we find, we will kill."

The people then on looked in wonder as the beasts carried their cubs, the wolves their pups, the serpents their offspring and all left. Uqba exclaimed to the people to let them be and leave them to exist in peace. He ordered them to cut down trees and laid plans for the building of the Dar Al-Imara and the mosque, and Kairouan became a place of knowledge and a base for military forces. In the year fifty-five, Caliph Mu'awiya deposed both the

Wa'li of Egypt and the Wa'li of Africa, approving Maslama ibn Mukhallad as governor of both states. Maslama appointed his ally Abu Al-Muhajir Dinar to rule over Africa. Abu Al-Muhajir did not want to live in the Kairouan built by Uqba ibn Nafi, so he ordered it burned down and a new city constructed to immortalize his name. When Uqba found out what he had done, on his way to the Levant, he asked Allah to punish him. In Damascus, Uqba approached Caliph Mu'awiya, protesting against the actions of Maslama and his ally Abu Al-Muhajir, so the Caliph promised him that he would return to Africa and Kairouan, but this did not happen until after the death of Mu'awiya at the age of eighty-two. His son Yazid took the Caliphate and he told Uqba: "Take it before it falls into ruin."

This happened in the year 62 AH, in other words a year after the assassination of Husain ibn Ali, may Allah be pleased with them. At the time, Abd Allah ibn Al-Zubayr rose to lead a Caliphate in Mecca that rivaled that of Yazid, and he refused allegiance to Yazid ibn Mu'awiya, which has resulted in huge division of the Muslims ever since.

On his way back to Africa, Uqba passed through Egypt with twenty-five successors of the companions of the Prophet Mohammed. Maslama ibn Mukhallad welcomed him in Fustat, apologized to him for what had been done and assured Uqba that he had only commanded Abu Al-Muhajir to do good, and Uqba accepted his apology. Uqba entered Africa, imprisoned Abu Al-Muhajir for some time, destroyed the city that he had built, and brought the people back to Kairouan. He rode with the troops, the companions and the successors, and they circumambulated the city reciting: "O Lord fill it with knowledge and faith, with those who submit to you, and make it a bulwark for the religious and a humiliation to the infidels."

In the three years following Uqba's conquest of the rest of Africa, he killed groups of Romans and Berbers in Azab, Tiaret (Algeria), Tangiers, and in Ceuta, the seat of rule for the Gothic Ruler Count Julian, who appeased Uqba and made peace. In Tangiers, Uqba went into the ocean and said: "O Lord, if it was not for this sea that prevented me, I would have penetrated more lands, following the example of Dhu Al-Qarnayn, Alexander the Great, in defense of Your religion." On his way back to Eastern Maghreb, Uqba dismissed his companions and the army to their homes, while he and

a few others, one of whom was Abu Al-Muhajir, headed towards the city of Tahuda. Once the Christians realized that they were only a few, they closed the city gates to prevent them from entering. One of the chiefs of the Berbers, named Kusaila Ibn Lamzam, of the Awrubi tribe, saw this as a chance to take his revenge on Uqba and the Muslims, and he attacked them with fifty thousand Berbers. Uqba performed two prayers and told Abu Al-Muhajir to flee to catch up with the Muslims: “By Allah, I long for martyrdom.” To which Abu Al-Muhajir responded with: “By Allah, As do I.” They both broke their swords from their sheaths, as did the rest of the Muslim soldiers, then dismounted from their horses, created a circle, and started fighting their attackers until most of them were killed, including Uqba and Abu Al-Muhajir.

In the month of Muharram of the year 64 AH, Kusaila succeeded in taking Kairouan from the Muslims after he had rallied all the people of the Maghreb to besiege it, and the Muslims escaped from the city. In the meantime, after the passing of Mu'awiya, the Caliphate was passed down from his son to his grandson Mu'awiya II, who was the last of the Sufyanid line, and they were followed by the Marwanid line, starting with Marwan ibn Al-Hakim. The Caliphate had turned into a family inheritance since Mu'awiya Ibn Abi Sufyan took over, unlike the shura Caliphate before him. After Marwan passed away, his son Abdul Malik took over the Caliphate and, in the year sixty-nine, he sent Zuhayr Al-Balawi to Africa with a great army, to avenge Uqba. Zuhayr Al-Balawi had been one of the last to escape from Kairouan after he had failed to convince the people to hold their ground and fight Kusaila.

Zuhayr was able to recover Kairouan after a ferocious battle in which Kusaila and many Berbers and Romans were killed, and he installed many of his companions in positions, then traveled back East. On the way back, when he reached Cyrenaica he saw Roman ships carrying off Muslim prisoners of war after they had destroyed and plundered the city. He headed towards the shore to free the Muslim captives who called to him for help, only for him and all the Arab nobles who accompanied him to be killed by the Romans. In this way, the misfortune that had occurred with Uqba was repeated, and the Caliph decided to send Hassan ibn Al-Nu'man to Africa in the year seventy-eight.

Hassan arrived with overwhelming forces, more than had ever been sent before. Among those forces was my first forefather As'aad ibn Baher Al-Qalai. In Kairouan, Hassan asked the people: "Who is the mightiest of Africa's kings?" The response was: "The ruler of Cartagena." Hassan pursued and killed most of the Cartagenians, and the rest fled to Al-Andalus and Sicily. Hassan fought the remainder, took them captive and then ordered the destruction of Cartagena. He received news that the Berbers and Romans were gathering new forces to attack him, so he made his way to them on horseback. The Romans escaped towards Béja and took cover in the city while the Berbers escaped to the province of Annaba, and Hassan returned to Kairouan.

He rested in the city for a few days then repeated the question about who was left of the mightiest kings of Africa, so they pointed him towards a woman in the Aurès Mountains called Al-Kahina. She had brought terror to the hearts of all the Romans in Africa and all Berbers followed her commands. She was dark, practiced magic, and was in the fifth decade of her life. They told Hassan: "If you kill Al-Kahina, you will have all of the Maghreb in the palm of your hand". When Al-Kahina found out about the forces heading her way, she emerged from the mountains with countless troops and reached Bagai, which she emptied of the Romans and destroyed, assuming that Hassan wanted a city to take cover from her in. Hassan moved to the Valley of Meskiana, where Al-Kahina caught up with him, and a great battle broke out which eventually led to the brutal defeat and killing of the Muslims. Al-Kahina took eighty captives from the greatest notables accompanying Hassan, including Khalid ibn Yazid.

Hassan wrote to the Caliph that the nations of the Maghreb had no end, and whenever a nation was annihilated it was replaced by many others. The Caliph replied to him to stay wherever his response reached him, and that place was Cyrenaica, so Hassan remained and proceeded to build palaces there.

Al-Kahina controlled all of the Maghreb for five years. She told her people that: "The Arabs are after the cities in Africa and we only need the pastures, so it would be best to destroy Africa which will drive the Arabs back and they will never return." People followed her command and started cutting down trees and destroying cities and fortresses. Before, Africa had

shade from Tripoli to Tangiers, but Al-Kahina ruined all of that which prompted the Christians and Africans to flee, crying for respite from her misdeeds, and they then dispersed to Al-Andalus and the offshore islands.

Al-Kahina freed all the captives and sent them to Hassan but kept Khalid ibn Yazid in her custody. She once told him: “I never saw a man more beautiful or more courageous than you, and I want to breastfeed you so you will be a brother to my sons.” She had two sons, one of them with a Berber and the other with a Greek. She took barley flour, mixed it with oil and put it on her breasts and then called her two sons to eat with Khalid from her breast, so they did and she said: “Now you are brothers.”

The influence of Al-Kahina weakened after the destruction of the land, and news reached Hassan that the Berbers were scattered, so he moved on them with new forces. Once Al-Kahina learnt of this she was certain of defeat and death, but she refused to escape and insisted on fighting. She persuaded Khalid and her two sons to trust Hassan and sent them to him on horseback, after telling them that she had seen a vision and that her head would be cut off and her children would become great leaders.

Al-Kahina appeared with disheveled hair, speaking of her own demise, the battle became even more brutal, provoking her to flee, but Hassan followed and returned with her head in his hand. The Berbers then requested peace but Hassan refused unless they provided him with twelve thousand soldiers to fight by the Arabs’ side, and converted to Islam, following its doctrine faithfully, so they agreed to his conditions. Hassan appointed each of Al-Kahina’s sons to a brigade of six thousand Berbers and commanded them to fight the remaining Romans and the unconverted Berbers together with the Arabs, while Hassan left for Kairouan, undefeated and undisputed. He then focused his attention on Kairouan and on building a port in Africa.

Four years after the killing of Al-Kahina, the Caliph, Abdul Malik, appointed his brother Abdul Aziz as ruler of Egypt upon which Abdul Aziz ordered the discharge and summons of Hassan. Hassan suspected that Abdul Aziz coveted the treasure, so he ordered those he trusted to hide the jewellery, silver, and gold in waterskins and to put the captives and their belongings on display on the backs of animals until he reached Egypt. Hassan gifted Abdul Aziz ibn Marwan two hundred concubines who were the daughters of

Roman and Berber kings, however, Abdul Aziz robbed him of all his horses, luggage, belongings, and servants. Hassan left with the little that remained in his possession. He approached the Caliph in Damascus and complained about the misdeeds of his brother. The Caliph was angered by this, and Hassan said to those who accompanied him: “Bring me the waterskins.” He emptied the waterskins of the jewellery, and the Caliph marveled at him and thanked him for the good job he had done and for his honesty, and he told him that he would send them all back to Africa. However, Hassan refused the offer and replied: “I will accept no more Umayyad appointments.” When Hassan was dismissed, Abdel Aziz replaced him with Musa ibn Nusayr.

Musa entered Africa in the year eighty-two, after he pledged more conquests and spoils to the Caliph in Damascus and his brother in Egypt. He conquered the Castle of Zaghouan and the surrounding areas, at a distance of a day’s journey away from Kairouan, and he annihilated the people there and took ten thousand head of livestock and humans captive, leading them to Kairouan. Each of his two sons, Marwan and Abdullah, took even more captives than their father. He wrote to Abdul Aziz in Fustat about the spoils and sent him livestock, prisoners, and concubines, so he rejoiced and waited for more. When Musa conquered Sajumah and killed its kings, he ordered the children of Uqba ibn Nafi, Iyad, Uthman and Abu Abdu, to avenge their father by killing his murderers, so they killed six hundred of the elders of Sajumah.

It was destiny that a captive girl from the Nefzaoua tribe was sent to Damascus, grew up there among the concubines, was added to the harem of a prince and bore him two boys, the oldest of which was called Abdul Rahman. This boy was destined to survive the Abbasid genocide of his people, to flee to his uncles in the Maghreb then move to Al-Andalus, establishing the current Umayyad era which is still under the rule of his descendants.

Going back to the conquests of Musa in Africa; Abd al-Aziz died in Egypt in the year eighty-five, and in the following year Caliph Abdul Malik died in Damascus, and his son Al-Walid took his place and cut off the mandate of Africa from Egypt, making it independent, and Musa was established as ruler there. Musa bin Nusayr did not stop fighting against the Berbers, and

he moved on Tangiers in the west, where they had gathered in fear. They requested safety and demonstrated obedience, so Musa appointed his Berber ally, Tariq, over them in Tangiers. The rest of the Berbers wanted to stop fighting and asked for peace, but Musa did not trust them, so he asked for hostages, which they supplied, and Musa sent them with the Arabs to Sicily by sea where they were victorious and returned with much spoil. In this way, the Berbers joined forces with the Muslims until Musa decided to send them, and the Arabs, with Tariq bin Ziyad to conquer Al-Andalus.

These pages are merely a brief outline of the bloody conflict that lasted for half a century before they moved on to the conquest of Al-Andalus, the precise details of which are to be found in the book written by Muhammad ibn Yusuf al-Warrag. The reason for the delay in the conquest of Africa was the resistance and strength of the Berber people. The Romans and Goths were defeated in the first years after the conquest of Egypt. The other cause for the delay was the disputes that arose among the Muslims due to conflicts and war between the Caliph, Ali ibn Abi Talib, husband of Fatimah, daughter of the Messenger, and Mu'awiya ibn Abi Sufyan, which caused the first division in Islam. I was deeply horrified when I discovered that this conflict is still ongoing and blood-filled to the present. It is also likely that the Berbers will never let go of their strife and spite, and they will attack Al-Andalus whenever a chance presents itself. Gradually I opened my mind to the reasons for our wars in Africa now, as they are an extension of the Sunni-Shiite dispute, which has widened to a Shiite, Fatimid, Abbasid, and Sunni dispute, pervasive in Africa, Egypt, and the Levant. The remnants of the Abbasid in Iraq are now under Turkish rule, and in Persia they no longer exist. In Al-Andalus, we are Umayyad Sunnis. We fear the Al-Udwa in Morocco, and we want to expiate its Shias, and the Christians are waiting for us in the north and moving against us whenever they can.

17

Our Sixth Neighbour

After the afternoon prayer on following day, Ibn Imran knocked on our door, and my grandfather welcomed him in the reception room, where I joined them as he had come to congratulate me and to send his best wishes to my uncle and his wife in Al-Zahra. Ibn Imran is our sixth neighbour and he lives directly across the street from the Jewish synagogue. I know his two daughters, Rebecca and Chavah, well. The former is a little older than me, and the latter is a little younger, and they visit my sister Fatima frequently. Their father is a Jewish merchant who is a friend of my father, and they trade books between them.

Ibn Imran has established the first leather industry in the heart of Gaul. He brings clean, prepared leather from there and sells it to the craftsmen in Córdoba, then returns with loads of manufactured leather goods and paper to sell to monasteries. Also, he exchanges sandals, fabrics, and the rest of the leather goods, in the castles of the feudal lords and with the people living around them, exchanging them for unmanufactured leather and, of course, for any silver pieces available. However, Ibn Imran also consults my father about new books in Córdoba and tells the churchmen about them on his travels. Sometimes, he even gets requests to buy books in Córdoba or for translations of them from Arabic to Latin, so he asks my father to transcribe some books and his Jewish and Christian friends to translate them.

My father had not yet returned from the transcription centre which he had established, where he supervises transcribers and follows up on work assigned to other men and women who work from home.

Ibn Imran started talking about how quickly the pain goes away after circumcision, then moved on to books and his last journey. I remembered our neighbours, the pilgrims to Compostela, and decided to ask Ibn Imran what he knew about this and about the saint that the Christians make pilgrimage to. He asked me what I know, and I told him that my knowledge was limited to what our neighbour, María, had mentioned casually, that

Saint Jacob was once resurrected from the grave and fought alongside the Christians against Caliph Al-Nasir, the father of our Caliph Al-Hakim II.

“That is the tale that turned the saint’s shrine into a place of pilgrimage. As you may know, Jacob was one of the companions of Christ, if not the closest to him, and it may be assumed that he was peaceful, because Christ and his companions and followers rejected any form of violent resistance, and it is deplorable that they are making a warrior of him.”

Fatima brought coffee and plates of sweets, asked about Rebecca and Chavah, and sat with us to listen to the conversation.

“However, they turned him into a fighter. How did Jacob make his way from Philistina to northern Al-Andalus over a thousand years ago?”

“To be fair, Suleiman, some of those who make the pilgrimage to his shrine do so because of his holiness and not necessarily because of his role in the war against the Muslims. However, I will tell you the story of how he made his way here, and you can judge for yourself.

After Christ’s crucifixion, Jacob moved to the north to spread the message, then returned to the Holy Land with two disciples, but the Romans severed his head. His two disciples had a vision, commanding them to return their teacher’s corpse to Sanctus Jacobus.”

Ibn Imran sipped more coffee and looked at my grandfather as they exchanged smiles, waiting for the rest of the story.

“His disciples built a boat, placed the dead body in a stone coffin, and sailed along the Roman Sea to the strait, then turned north and sailed as far as the shores of Galicia, at the tip of the peninsula. Eight centuries later, a farmer saw a star fall from the sky to the top of a hill, and when they dug there, they found the boat, the stone coffin, and two dead bodies. Of course, because the Christians desperately needed a saint in their war against the Muslims, one of them became Saint Jacob’s dead body. Five years after a church had been erected over the grave, Jacob rose up and fought with the Christians, in the battle of 834, slaughtering seventy thousand Muslims by his own hand, earning him the moniker Santiago Matamoros, which translates to Saint Jacob the Moor-slayer.” We all laughed at the exaggeration of the tale.

“They believe anything and everything, even the unimaginable. They sailed the boat more than 500 years before the birth of the Prophet Muhammad and Islam, but by chance, their boat anchored in the farthest part of Iberia that the Arabs would not later occupy. It is really a big conglomeration of miracles worth going on pilgrimage to.” My father entered as we fell into another fit of laughter, and he greeted Ibn Imran warmly.

“Suleiman, Mashallah, a perfectly fitting name, like his namesake, may he also become wise! Congratulations on going through with it, and may his marriage bring you all joy.”

“He has a long way to go before he can marry, and he will soon go to his uncles to learn horsemanship. If the pilgrim María knew he did not believe in the saint’s miracles, she would not speak to him again.”

“I am not going to tell her anything. I know why she went on pilgrimage; her entire goal was to stop the torrents and earthquakes, and if she succeeds, she will have completed her task and will benefit everyone, but if the disasters continue, she will denounce herself and loudly deny the saint.”

Laughter was prevalent once more, and I was interested in asking a question of our wandering Jewish visitor, who, as it sometimes appeared, knew the secrets of the world. “Why did we occupy the entire peninsula, except for the spot where the saint’s boat docked?”

“Abu Qareeb has the answer, and he knows it in great detail.” My grandfather did not deny the guest’s statement, but he wanted to explain his reasoning to me. He went on to say that I was currently reviewing Muhammad ibn Yusuf Al-Warrag’s book on the history of the Maghreb and Al-Andalus, and I would be able to form my own point of view after hearing and reading more.

“Tariq conquered the lands of Al-Andalus with his forces as far as Toledo, then his commander Musa ibn Nusayr, the governor of Africa, requested him to slow down so that the small number of Muslims would not be dispersed in the vast lands of Al-Andalus. Tariq continued advancing towards the north, until the arrival of Musa a year later, and together they conquered more of the Iberian Peninsula. In fact, Musa crossed the Pyrenees and conquered Carcassonne, in addition to some areas of southern Gaul. At that time, Musa felt that the Muslims had the ability to

continue the conquest on the northern bank of the Mediterranean Sea until they reached Constantinople, which had been impenetrable to Caliph Al-Walid and his predecessors. Accordingly, Musa sent his messenger, Mughith Al-Rumi, to Damascus to inform Caliph Al-Walid about the conquests in Al-Andalus and to request permission to continue the road to Constantinople. Mughith Al-Rumi was the ally of the Caliph, and he had been sent with Musa as a spy, to keep the Caliph informed. “Only Allah knows what information Mughith conveyed about the spoils and captives, but the Caliph did not like the idea of conquering Constantinople because its conqueror would continue on to Damascus, where he would return as a hero and take the throne of the Caliphate, putting an end to the Umayyad era.”

This interpretation and perspective of our guest caught my attention, and I noticed my grandfather’s ears were moving, while my father seemed to know the interpretation of his Jewish friend already. “Mughith returned from Damascus and met Musa at the town of Luc near Sanctus Jacobus, while Tariq was conquering the lands on the coast of the green ocean. Mughith told Musa that the Caliph had requested that he and Tariq return to Damascus immediately. Meanwhile, the remnants of the Goths had taken refuge in the highlands. Therefore, Musa convinced Mughith to delay their journey to Damascus while they eliminated those Goths, but another messenger arrived from the Caliph with strict instructions to return to Damascus. Musa and Tariq left the area and gave the Muslim soldiers the right to choose whether they preferred to stay or to return south with them. Consequently, the conquest ended there before complete victory had been achieved. Those few Goths were the ancestors of the kings and princes of the Visigoth who have been attacking Al-Andalus, whenever circumstances permit, for the past two hundred and seventy years.” Ibn Imran added that this information was to be found in many books which recorded the history of the Islamic conquest of Al-Andalus. “Suleiman, I want you to know that wisdom lies in interpreting events and reading between the lines of history”

“I think I have heard this valuable advice, or something similar, before.” Sunset was approaching and the arrival of the Sabbath would force the visitor to leave, and I wanted to delay his departure as much as possible as I hoped for more information that I had not heard or read about before. “You are right in what you said, neighbour, but what is not mentioned in

these books is the Jews' role in this country. If you were here before Islam and before Christianity, why did you not rule or fight, and did you help the Muslims in the conquest?" When I saw my father looking at me it seemed that I had gone too far, as he apologized to our neighbour, but the neighbour smiled in satisfaction and dismissed the apology with a gesture of his hands, adding the comment that I was right and it was permissible to inquire.

"Perhaps my narration will help him to memorize important information, as I expect a bright future for Suleiman, and I am happy to inform him of anything he wants to know, if I have the appropriate information, of course. However, I have to go now, and I will visit you again in the coming days. If you still want to know the answer then, I will tell you." It was a polite departure, as our neighbour wanted to keep the door open between us, and he forbade my father from stopping me asking or re-asking such questions. He also did not think it polite to tell me his opinion right then, as the sun was about to disappear and he should be sitting with his family to light two candles before visiting the synagogue on Friday evening, and doing almost nothing until sunset on Saturday night.

18

Appreciation of the Conquerors

My thoughts were drawn to Ibn Imran's story about Musa ibn Nusayr. I scrolled through the papers in Ibn Al-Qiyya and Al-Warrag's books, but I could not find a similar explanation or indication of Musa's intention to continue the conquest across the northern bank of the sea to Constantinople. The information in the two books was extensive, detailing Musa's conquests, his intelligence, his strategic war tactics, the organization of the land, and the minting of the first currency in Toledo. Then, a summary of his and Tariq's journey from Luc to Córdoba and then Damascus, following Mughith's return from Damascus and the arrival of Abu Nusr as a second messenger from the Caliph, with instructions to bring back Musa and Tariq immediately.

My grandfather returned from the night-time prayer in the mosque to find me scrolling through the pages without fully reading them.

"I do not remember hearing anything about Musa's plan to conquer Constantinople, and neither of these books mentions it, nor do they go into detail about the conqueror's journey to Damascus and what happened to him afterwards."

"As I explained previously, this was when we started keeping our records. That era was lived through by our forefather As'aad, who entered the Maghreb with Hassan, came to Al-Andalus with Musa, and participated in the Battle of the Highway of the Martyrs in the heart of Gaul with Abd Al-Rahman Al-Ghafiqi. Our forefather wrote his records in Arabic without dotted letters, but my grandfather Badr reproduced them in a beautiful script, and you can begin reading them tonight."

My grandfather summoned his son, Qareeb, and went with him from his bedroom to the library, where they searched together. After a while, my grandfather came back with a book with thicker paper than usual, but the words it contained were well-written, colourful, and the edges of the pages

were illuminated. He made sure that I would treat the book with reverence and care. “Lay it on the bookrest to read, do not hold it wide open between your hands, do not scroll through the pages quickly, and do not eat or drink near it.”

I had an unclear picture of what had happened to the great conqueror after reading the stories of our grandfather As’aad, Hassan, Musa, and Tariq’s companion, over the course of several days, and from my grandfather’s explanations and answers to my questions.

Musa’s actions between Luc and Damascus indicate that he was already aware of his fate. He encouraged the soldiers to remain in the north and allowed the Jews who accompanied him from the Maghreb to encourage their brothers to settle in Toledo, conquering additional lands on the way back to Córdoba. Once back in our territory, it transpired that Mughith Al-Rumi had chosen to live in the palace. Musa told him: “This palace is only suitable for the governor of the land, so leave and take another house.” In this manner, he declared that Mughith was not to take over Córdoba, even though he had led the raid that conquered it. All the comments Musa made while traveling suggested that Mughith’s mission to the Caliph had not gone well, instead, he had incited the Caliph against him. The older warrior was eager to continue with the Jihad and complained incessantly about the trouble that had befallen him. He pondered on the mistake of maintaining Muslim territories with communication by land instead of expanding them across the sea, and wondered why the Caliph rejected the idea. Musa appointed his son Abd Al-Aziz governor of Al-Andalus and suggested Seville as the capital. He reached Tangiers by sea and appointed his son Abd Al-Malik governor of all of the Maghreb. He went on to Kairouan and appointed his son Abdullah as governor of Africa. He instructed his sons to provide their brother Abd Al-Aziz with warriors and to aid in the preservation of Al-Andalus. Our forefather As’aad accompanied the commander’s convoy as far as Algeciras and then returned to Seville with Abd Al-Aziz. My forefather gleaned the rest of Musa’s story from his travel companions who returned to Al-Andalus in the years that followed.

Musa distributed a large portion of his spoils to the people of the newly-converted Islamic lands he passed through, including Tunisia, Tripoli, Cyrenaica, Egypt, Gaza, and Acre. The distribution was based on existing

legislation at the time, according to which the state's share, or the Caliph's entitlement, was one-fifth of the spoils, tribute, and taxes from trade, while the Mujahideen, the warriors, were entitled to four-fifths of the spoils. He had not earned any tribute or taxes that he could carry to the Caliph, so he reserved one-fifth of the spoils for him and distributed his own share along the way, convinced that the Caliph wanted the money and that he himself would not return to Al-Andalus. In Tiberias, a messenger arrived from Suleiman, the Caliph's brother and the expected heir, asking Musa to delay his arrival. Musa told the messenger: "If I am late, then I have betrayed my oath to Allah, and failed to keep my promise. Inform Suleiman that, by Allah, I neither loiter nor linger, nor will I quicken my pace. I will continue my journey, and if I meet the Caliph alive, I will not be guilty of negligence, and if death befalls him early, then Allah will be the one to judge." When he heard this response, Suleiman vowed to crucify Musa. Thus, the conqueror became aware that the Caliph was on the verge of death and his heir desired to seize the spoils.

On Friday, the beginning of Jumada Al-Awwal in 96 AH, he arrived in Damascus and entered the Umayyad Mosque, forty days before the Caliph's death. Musa's entrance was notable because he was accompanied by some princes and senior officials from the lands that had been conquered peacefully. They came in their finest attire to confirm Musa's covenants with them and to pledge their allegiance to the Caliph. Al-Walid and Suleiman received the spoils, which included what was known as the Prophet Solomon's table, peace be upon him, studded with jewels, which Musa had carried from Toledo. They started questioning the conqueror about the missing table leg and why he had not brought all the spoils before dividing them. He responded that he had found the table as it was and that if he had not respected the teachings of the Surah "Al-Anfal", the Spoils, which was revealed after the Prophet's Battle of Badr in the second Hijri year, there would have been no conquest, and the Arabs and Berbers would not have allowed him to leave Al-Andalus with their share. He also informed the Caliph and his heir that some provinces and lands surrendered without a fight and were granted forgiveness and protection in exchange for paying the tribute if they adhered to their religion. But many of them converted to Islam, and they were neither plundered nor were tributes taken from them. The response completely silenced them, as he took the

words of the Prophet as his shield in the face of their continuing resentment.

Suleiman shackled Musa in iron after the death of Al-Walid and only refrained from killing him under pressure from the scholars. On the other hand, Caliph Suleiman commanded the assassination of Musa's son in Seville and dispatched representatives to dismiss and arrest his two sons in Tangiers and Kairouan and appoint replacements. He also granted the governor of Africa the authority to appoint the governor of Al-Andalus whenever necessary. During the Hajj season of the year 97 AH, Suleiman pretended to have forgiven Musa, accompanying him on pilgrimage, and consulting him on affairs and the ways to conquer Constantinople. Some of those who carried Abd Al-Aziz's head arrived in the city of the Prophet from Al-Andalus, and Caliph Suleiman commanded them to present it to Musa, upon which the Conqueror Sheikh died instantly.

This is a summary of my forefather As'aad's records, starting with the assassination of Abd Al-Aziz in Seville Mosque. The story my forefather told, on the other hand, did not provide any insight into Tariq bin Ziyad's fate. They most likely killed him within the first days of his arrival in Damascus, before he was able to flee to Al-Andalus and incite the Arab and Berber fighters and perhaps even gain independence from the Caliphate in the region. Despite the Caliph's conspiracy, following the assassination of Abdul Aziz, he was initially unable to impose a governor from his own supporters, as the people chose Ayyub Al-Lakhmi, Musa ibn Nusayr's nephew. Ayyub grew dissatisfied with Seville and moved the capital to Córdoba, but after a year the matter was settled by the governor of Africa, who ordered Ayyub's removal and the appointment of Al-Hurr Al-Thaqafi in his place, following the civil unrest in Al-Andalus that ignited between the Àrabs Baladís, who had conquered and settled on the land, and the Levantines who continued to arrive, and who considered Ayyub one of the Baladís.

Another year passed, and Umar ibn Abd Al-Aziz took over the Caliphate. He was a cousin of Al-Walid and Suleiman, and his mother was Umm Asim Jamila bint Asim ibn Umar ibn Al-Khattab, the Prophet's companion, and the second Caliph. Umar was seen as a just ruler when he ordered the Umayyad women to sell their jewellery, but he died of poison after two

years and five months, after calling back the soldiers who were besieging Constantinople, and he was seriously considering evacuating Al-Andalus at that time, due to the many disputes surrounding it. The situation of the Umayyad state in Damascus had deteriorated to the point where it was unable to pay the soldiers' wages.

19

King Solomon’s Table

During the forty-three years between the rule of Caliph Umar ibn Abd Al-Aziz in Damascus and the arrival of Abdul Rahman Al-Dakhil in Al-Andalus our country had 22 different rulers. The first fifteen of them participated in the conquests of the lands of Gaul, four of them were martyred there, and the last seven governors did not fight. In Damascus, the successors and descendants of Abdul Malik returned to rule the Caliphate, and six of them succeeded in taking power until the rest of them were killed by the Abbasids. Abdul Rahman Al-Dakhil ibn Mu'awiya ibn Hisham ibn Abdul Malik ibn Marwan was the sole survivor of Hisham ibn Abdul Malik, the Caliph who followed Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz.

There are countless tragedies, insights, and lessons to be learnt from history. Musa dedicated himself to killing the Berbers, conquering Al-Andalus and the Kingdom of the Franks, and collecting spoils to appease and gain the trust of the Caliphs, as he desired to conquer the city of Constantinople which had remained impenetrable to the Caliphs, and lo and behold, they rewarded him by slaughtering his son after humiliating him in his old age. Those Caliphs who killed and broke their vows were slaughtered like sheep after their state had weakened due to their misdeeds. As for the son of the Berber captive, he survived the massacre and entered Al-Andalus to eliminate his opponents and suffocate the last of the rulers in the Muttbaq prison in Córdoba. Some of those rulers had dismembered their Arab opponents and offered them for sale like slaves in the market of Córdoba.

We now live in paradise compared to that period, specifically since Al-Nasir and his son Al-Hakim ruled the Caliphate. But we are also fighting the Berbers and fear the Fatimid who undermined and suppressed the Abbasid Caliphate in Egypt and the Levant, while Baghdad has long since become a plaything in the hands of the Seljuk, the Persians, and the Slavs.

I will not leave off these pages before telling my grandfather’s story, which mentioned some of Musa ibn Nusayr’s tricks, and what he recorded about

the assassination of Musa's son, Abd Al-Aziz. A year after Tariq, Musa sailed with twenty Arab banners, one of which was given to him by Caliph Abdul Malik for Africa, and the second by the Caliph's son, Al-Walid, to be raised over whatever he won beyond Africa, and the rest of the banners were for Arab tribes, including a Gothic flag for Julian's soldiers. They camped in Algeciras, where they constructed a mosque called Al-Rayaat, the Banners. They continued to Medina-Sidonia, where they rested, before proceeding to Seville, through Carmona, which was located on a hill and fortified by a great wall. The Goth soldiers that Tariq had dispersed were regrouping in these fortified towns as Tariq and his forces conquered the country in the north. Musa failed to conquer Carmona after placing it under siege for many days, and he also failed to tempt its soldiers to surrender in return for being put in charge and paying the non-Muslim tribute. Therefore, he acted by deception. He asked Julian's soldiers, who had crossed with him, to pretend to be Christian reinforcements coming to help in the fight against the Muslims and they managed to convince the guards to open the gates. Once inside, they overwhelmed the guards and managed to keep the gates open for the Muslims to enter the city under the leadership of Musa and capture it.

Thereafter, he besieged Seville, bringing it back under Muslim control, and he refused to bombard the city with catapults or bring it to destruction. Musa left his son, Abd al-Aziz, in the city with his soldiers to prevent the return of the Goths. He then attacked Mérida and caught the soldiers in a night ambush, but they escaped into the city and closed the gates. Muslim soldiers attacked the city under the protection of a wooden battering ram. However, many Muslims were killed that night as they tried to widen an old crack in the wall while the Goths stoned them from above. Musa wrote to the Goths and met with the priesthood. He persuaded them to surrender and promised to leave them in possession of all the church's money and property, and pledged not to kill the Goths, providing they fulfilled the obligations of the Muslim soldiers who had been killed under the battering ram and passed the property of the soldiers and Gothic notables who had been killed or escaped to Arabs. The city surrendered on Eid Al-Fitr in the year of 94 AH. Probably, some of the priests thought that Musa was a wizard because the colour of his beard was different each time they met

him, as he was wont to dye his beard from gray to blond with henna, in the month of Ramadan, and then change it to black.

It was mentioned in the books of my forefather As'aad that he heard Ibn Ezra's words to Musa about how astonished the priests were when they saw the change in the colour of his beard as they asked him about Musa's age, and he exaggerated and claimed that he was over one hundred and fifty years old. Then, upon the arrival of my forefather and others, the talk shifted to discussing the table of the prophet Solomon.

‘‘Ezra, if we had that table right now, we would not need to prepare food during the siege of the city. Are you sure they are hiding the table in Toledo?”

“Yes, my Lord, the information obtained from the city's Jews has confirmed this.”

It was not clear to the people present if the governor was joking with Ibn Ezra about the food and the table, but the latter preferred to evade the conversation as they were approaching the capital of the Goths, where the table was hidden and it would soon be tested. Ibn Ezra added that: "With regard to the table providing food by magic, the ancient stories and tales may have exaggerated over the years."

"Are you taking back what you said about it providing food?"

“The information I gave you was quoted from ancient tales, according to which more than eleven thousand bulls and thirty-six thousand sheep, as well as camels and game, were provided every year on the table of Solomon, peace be upon him. The stories stated that a hundred gold tables were placed in the palace of Solomon every day, peace be upon him, and on each table a hundred golden platters, and three hundred golden plates, with a golden cup on each plate.”

‘‘Yes, that is what you said, and you also added that Solomon's table provided food for the rest of the tables. If we find it, we can conquer the whole world with a huge army that will never starve, wherever it finds itself."

The people who heard these words laughed, as some of them were Tabi'un, the successors who followed the Companions of the Prophet

Muhammad. Abdul Jabbar Zuhri was one of them, and he was surprised that there were people who believed in such tales.

‘‘The amount of gold on the tables could neither be carried, polished, or cleaned, and if each of the hundred tables he owned could carry one hundred platters and three hundred plates, and three hundred cups, one on each plate, then how big were the plates, and what was the size and weight of the tables, and in what palace would all of that fit?”

Abd Al-Rahman al-Ghafiqi intervened to make it easier for Ibn Ezra and said that he had only conveyed to the governor what he had heard from the ancients. “And we have all heard about the treasures of the prophet Solomon and his ability to control the genies, which is more important than the capabilities of the table. Did not the Prophet Issa, Jesus, peace be upon him, feed five thousand hungry people from a few crumbs of bread?”

“We have much spoil already, praise be to Allah, and if the table really provides us continuously with food, as you indicated, we will keep it in Toledo and entrust it to our cousins to distribute the food to the inhabitants of the city. But if we find that it is an ordinary table full of jewels, we will carry it to our Caliph in Damascus as part of his one-fifth share of the spoils.” That is how Musa gave the Caliph the right to any golden tables they found in Toledo.

Regarding the story of the first Islamic political assassination in Al-Andalus, when Abd Al-Aziz was killed, the records of our grandfather As’aad can be summarized as saying that Abd Al-Aziz continued the conquests in the southeast and west of Al-Andalus, taking Seville as his headquarters, to which he returned occasionally. Abd Al-Aziz ibn Musa ibn Nusayr, our first governor, married the widow of the last Visigoth king, Roderic, and he gave her the name Umm Asim and lived with her in the Church of Saint Rufina, in the center of Seville. A temporary mosque was built next to the church until such times as the Great Mosque was finished, and the doors of the temporary mosque were low so that all those entering it were forced to lower their heads. During the first Friday prayer of Rajab, 97 AH: “We were listening to the Imam’s sermon, as our governor, Abd Al-Aziz was sitting in the front row of the mosque. We started to pray and suddenly one of the worshipers stood up and stepped forward to the front rows of worshipers and stabbed the governor in his back with a dagger.” The offender was

Ziyad ibn ‘Udhra Al-Balawi, from the same tribe as the Al-Balawi who killed Uthman ibn Affan, the third Rashidun Caliph, may Allah be pleased with him. Another group of worshipers stood up and carried Abd Al-Aziz’s body outside the mosque, shouting that this was an order from the Caliph, and:‘...the fate of anyone that converts to Christianity and apostatizes from Islam’, and in Seville and all of Al-Andalus, they claimed that Abd Al-Aziz was wearing the crown of the Christian kings and sitting in the church with his wife, and that he had ordered everyone who entered to meet him to bow as a sign of obedience, just like the Christians, which was how they justified spilling his blood without resorting to judgment.

He was a chivalrous and fair warrior and a man of his word, as his story with Theudimer, when he took Murcia, proves. The story relates that the soldiers of the Iberian prince, Theudimer, were all gone, being either dead or having escaped, but the Muslims were not aware that he had no choice but to surrender, and he resorted to a ploy. He ordered the women of the city to stand on the hills, bearing spears, with their hair loose, in order to look like men when the Muslims saw them from afar. Theudimer came down to negotiate with Abd Al-Aziz, carrying a white flag. He started repeating to Abd Al-Aziz what he knew of the terms Muslims set for surrender, while the latter confirmed that this was so. Theudimer showed hesitation, as if he did not believe that the Muslims would not go back on their word and break their pledge, if he surrendered the city to them but, of course, they gave him the required covenants and pledges, and then they wrote a treaty of surrender, authorizing Theudimer to oversee six cities, and the district was named after the prince. According to the abovementioned terms, Theudimer accompanied the Muslims to his city where Abd Al-Aziz found that the spear holders were women and that the country was devoid of fighters, but he did not break the treaty, the text of which was as follows:

In the name of Allah, the most gracious, the most merciful

This is a document granted by Abd Al-Aziz ibn Musa ibn Nusayr to Theudimer, son of Ghabdush, establishing a treaty of peace and the promise and protection of Allah and his Prophet, All Prayers and Blessings of Allah be upon him. We will not set special conditions for him or any among his men, nor harass him, nor remove him from power. His followers

will not be killed or taken prisoner, nor will they be separated from their women and children. They will not be coerced in matters of religion, their churches will not be burned, nor will sacred objects be taken from the realm, [so long as] he [Theudimer] remains sincere and fulfills the [following] conditions that we have set for him. He has reached a settlement concerning seven towns: Orihuela, Villena, Alicante, Mula, Bigastro, Ello, and Lorca. He will not give shelter to fugitives, nor to our enemies, nor encourage any protected person to fear us, nor conceal news of our enemies. He and his men shall pay one dinar every year, together with four measures of wheat, four measures of barley, four liquid measures of concentrated fruit juice, four liquid measures of vinegar, four of honey, and four of olive oil. Slaves must each pay half of this amount.

The document is dated in the Muslim month of Rajab of the year 94 AH.

20

The Cousins

I started to get better gradually; urination became easier and stung less. The circumciser, Abu Al-Karim, attended daily to change the gauze on the wound, and my penis lost its previously innocent look, under the foreskin, and grew ugly. I had to believe Abu Al-Karim that its appearance would change for the better after the wound healed and the peeling and swelling diminished. On the third day, our house was filled with people, Issa and his wife came as well as my uncle Abbas, his wife, Sayed, Aisha, and Halima and the families of my three aunts, seventeen people in all, some of whom

were infants who would not stop screaming, and my three maternal uncles were there as well with some of their families. It was a Sunday when thirty people came together; uncles, aunts, and cousins who were supposed to come to a feast on the seventh day after Tuhr, the circumcision, and not now; it appeared that each group had thought they would be the only guests that day. My mother had not prepared sufficient food for so many so they ate the stuffed squabs, stuffed ducks, and Kebab skewers, which they had brought with them for me.

That evening, the headache I had developed from the screaming children prevented me from returning to my reading. Before my uncle Issa and Miriam left, I asked them to return for another visit before Friday, but Issa raised his eyebrows in disapproval. “We will be traveling to Málaga tomorrow; maybe I will see you in Medina-Sidonia. Anyhow, the next time we see you in Córdoba you will be like Antarah ibn Shaddad. Do not overlook any part of horsemanship, sometimes wisdom and poetry are a better aid than sword and slingshot.” I was struck silent for a moment as if someone had poured ice-cold water on my head, I recognized that now was the beginning of a new me, and I did not want them to leave without taking my best wishes with them.

“You will really like Málaga, Miriam, please deliver my greetings to Abi Al-Fadl on the way, and to all of the farm’s residents.”

“I will deliver your greetings to whomever you wish, however, we will be taking the inhabited route this time and will not be passing through Antequera. I spoke with your grandfather about Abi Al-Fadl, and if he arrives before you leave for Medina-Sidonia, you should welcome and assist them.” I thanked Allah that he had not mentioned the name Durra in front of so many, and I expressed my wish that Abi Al-Fadl and his wife would come before the Eid so I could see them before leaving.

At times, the week I spent under house arrest provided me with lessons in religion and ancient history, and on other occasions with modern political terms, in much greater form and variation than I had expected. On Monday, after the sunset prayer, my grandfather returned from the Mosque with my sheikh Al-Jahiz, as he wished to congratulate me, according to my grandfather. I assumed that Abu Qareeb was determined to instill as much

information into my head as possible before I left for Medina-Sidonia; perhaps the visit of Al-Jahiz was a prelude to Ibn Imran's upcoming visit. After superficial congratulations and claims that he had missed me, the sheikh diverted my desire to tell him about my observations in Málaga to talking about the stories of the prophets, specifically of the prophet Ibrahim Khalil Allah, or Abraham.

"You should know that both we and the Jews consider him our father, this is why we call them our cousins."

"And why do we call him Ibrahim Al-Khalil?"

"This is one of the things that distinguish him from the rest of the believers and prophets. Everyone seeks the approval of Allah, the Almighty, and to gain His favour by fulfilling all of our obligations, doing good deeds, and submitting to Him. However, Allah chose Ibrahim as Khalil, which means as a companion to him, as in the verse: 'Allah chose Ibrahim as a close friend.' This description only appears in the Qur'an in reference to Ibrahim."

I knew that my sheikh was no puritan, but rather a liberal narrator who specialized in amusing heritage tales, and therefore there was no need for me to hesitate in asking him any question.

"Then how many other prophets did Allah not designate as companions in the Qur'an?"

"There are around thirty prophets mentioned in the Holy Qur'an, the fourth of them being the prophet Noah, and the last of them, Muhammad, peace be upon him. Additionally, you can consider that Ibrahim (Abraham), Musa (Moses), and Issa (Jesus), also belong to the five major Ulu Al-Azm, the resolute prophets. The first prophet is Adam, followed by Sheeth, Idris, Noah, Hud, Saleh, Ibrahim, his nephew Lot, his oldest son Ismail, his other son Ishaq (Isaac), his grandson Ya'qub (Jacob), and his son Yusuf (Joseph). They are followed by five prophets, the sixth of which is Musa (Moses), then Harun, Yehoshua (Joshua), Dawud (David), Solomon, Ilyas, Alyasa, Uzair, Zechariah, Yahya, and Issa and Mohammed, peace be upon them all."

“Seeing that we and the Jews are cousins, from the same region, how did they precede us and arrive first in Al-Andalus?”

“The prophet Ibrahim was originally from Mesopotamia, the land of the world’s oldest civilization, where they worshipped the sun, the moon, the stars, and some of them worshipped idols or kings. Ibrahim was persistent, but they held firm to their unbelief, so he and his nephew Lot migrated to Philistine through Halab (Aleppo), which derived its name from this journey. Lot remained in Palestine while Ibrahim made his way to Egypt. There, the Pharaoh wanted to take his wife Sarah by force, but Allah protected them from this great injustice. All of this is mentioned in the Qur’an. Since Sarah could not bear any children, she offered that he marry the Egyptian, Hagar, who bore him Ismail. Ibrahim migrated once more, this time to the Arabian Peninsula, where he left the infant Ismail and his mother.”

I completed the story for my sheikh, summarizing it by saying that the Zamzam well was created by Ismail, and the land started to be inhabited. I continued by mentioning that Ismail and his father Ibrahim had built the Kaaba.

“What is important, is that the prophet Ibrahim returned with Sarah to Egypt, after they had grown old and, on the way, the Angels brought them the good news that Sarah, who could not bear children, would birth Ishaq, and, indeed, he was born in Egypt as was his son Ya’qub, and his grandson, Yusuf, he of the well-known story with the Pharaoh’s wife. The point is that Ibrahim’s children liked to travel and spread their faith among people who worshipped other gods than Allah. Later, they escaped from the Pharaoh towards Philistine at the time of Musa, who never entered that country as he died in the Sinai desert after the Exodus. Philistine, and the rest of the Levant, later fell under the rule of the Assyrians, so the rich Jews, merchants, and scholars, left it and migrated around the world. On another occasion, Nebuchadnezzar invaded Palestine and took the Jews captive, sending them to Babylon, which was more luxurious. Once again, some of them stayed there, while others migrated throughout the lands, looking for livelihood and spreading their religion with peaceful methods. Now, they are here in Al-Andalus, particularly in the coastal cities, where they have probably been present since several hundreds of years before the birth of the Messiah.”

“But the Islamic conquerors faced no Jewish resistance when they arrived in Al-Andalus, or later when the Christians were raiding us whenever possible.”

My grandfather and Fatima were taking turns bringing snacks, like dried meat, smoked fish, and later some sweets, while my teacher was providing me with whatever answers he had to my questions.

“This land was never Jewish, and even Christianity was not widespread. It was only common among the royals and the nobles. In fact, Christianity spread from Philistine to the world’s countries and kingdoms far faster and to more areas than Judaism before it. Despite both peoples refraining from using religion as a means of military conquest, Christianity quickly became the religion of kings and rulers, who imposed it upon others, something that the Jews failed to do, so they remained a minority, large or small, among other residents everywhere they settled. Since they would not convert to Christianity of their own volition, and for many other reasons, the Christian kings considered them enemies. If they needed them, they let them be, but mostly they oppressed them, and they blamed any harm that befell the land on them.”

“We do not have these issues now, we conquer by force and by the sword, and then we offer others the opportunity to either accept Islam and equality, or remain as they are while they pay the non-Muslim tax to maintain their right to security and safety. Why didn’t the first Jews and Christians use force to conquer? Does their religion forbid that?”

“All religions can be interpreted as for or against war and peace if it serves their interests. Judaism caused many wars among the Jews and with others; they never hesitated in their attempts to invade, but their neighbours were always more powerful so their kingdoms did not stand long. Christianity was born at the time of the greatest empires; they could not simply fight against the Roman armies, but many of the wars that followed were incited under the guise of spreading Christianity. The issue is not what the religion entails, but rather whether the means are available to spread it quickly and forcefully, or if it is left to spread gradually, without compulsion, until it prevails and becomes widely practiced.”

This information provided me with a useful background, and it was completed by our sixth neighbour, when he fulfilled his promise and returned to visit, after the siesta on Tuesday, this time bringing his two daughters Rebecca and Chavah with him. My sister's friends were out in the garden most of the time, although they did help to serve drinks and sweets from time to time. First, Rebecca came to ask if it would be appropriate for her father to visit, after a while. My grandfather had a meeting in Secunda with our in-laws there, and I asked for his permission to welcome our neighbour alone, until his return from there. He said that he did not see any reason why not, and we told Rebecca that her father was welcome, and informed her that my grandfather would join us later.

From Ibn Imran, I later learned that, a century before Christ, the Jews lived in most of the cities of the basin of the Roman sea, from Alexandria to Haifa, and from Antioch to the borders of India and Persia in the East, passing through Mesopotamia, from Antakya to Barcelona in the west, including the countries of the Greeks, the cities, islands, and the countries of the Romans and the Franks, from the north to Sicily, and of course Egypt, Cyrenaica, Tripoli, the Maghreb, African Cartagena, and its Andalusian sister opposite it across the sea, and, at that time, they were also to be found in Seville, Córdoba and Toledo.

"Our Jewish ancestors travelled in the rear of Alexander the Great, who left Greece to conquer other lands in the year 336 BC; he passed through Antioch, besieging Tyre and Gaza, he built Alexandria and reached the center of the Egyptian desert then ascended back through Damascus in the year 332, and he invaded Babylon and Persia. He built many cities in the lands he conquered as far as the borders of India. Many Jews accompanied the Greeks in their raids; they managed the administration, and they stayed there until after the end of Alexander's rule."

Our guest confirmed to me that this information, as well as other even older information, was inscribed in the records and books of the Jews which they kept in multiple cities, including Córdoba. "The Yeshivas, the Jewish colleges, of Córdoba and those in Lucena and Toledo, were established under the supervision of Moses ben Hanoch, with the endorsement of Hasdai ibn Shaprut, in the time of Caliph Al-Nasir, may Allah have mercy on him, and they are filled with collected and transcribed records."

“Is only religion and history taught in the Yeshivas?”

“The subjects that we teach, here in Al-Andalus, are exactly like those taught in Islamic colleges. As for the eastern cities, and Asia, Africa, and Europe, the Yeshivas there are limited to teaching religion. Here, we teach literature, Arabic poetry, music, mathematics, philosophy, and medicine to both sexes. As you know, some Jews learn the same subjects in the Mosque and in Arab institutes in other Andalusian cities.”

Our neighbour was well-versed in Jewish history. He was familiar with the details of the suffering they had experienced living in Gaul lands and in Iberia for centuries, until the Islamic conquest saved them.

“Seventy years prior to the emergence of Islam, the Jewish books record that Jews lived in the British Isles, and they were also spread around the lands of central Europe. As for Gaul, Jewish merchants lived there from the time of Julius Caesar. Before the year 600 AD, Jewish communities lived in all the major cities in Gaul, where the Merovingians brutally oppressed them. Chilperic ordered us to convert to Christianity otherwise he would gouge out the eyes of those who objected. As for Charlemagne, he was more lenient towards us, since he saw us as useful farmers, craftsmen, physicians, and people who are good with money. He chose a Jew as his personal physician. However, he kept the rules that prevented the Jews from acquiring some of the rights accorded to others.”

“If the Arabs had conquered Gaul, your situation would be similar to that in Al-Andalus.”

“That is true. Our situation and the situation of Gaul would have been better. In fact, the Jews’ position improved in Europe after the conquest of Al-Andalus, since the kings and princes of these lands wanted us as mediators and desired to benefit from our trade, knowledge, and close relationship with the Arabs and Muslims. For example, in the year 797, Charlemagne sent a Jewish interpreter with the political delegation to Harun Al-Rashid in Baghdad. Overall, the pressure we face in all Christian lands has lessened now.”

I did not repeat my question from his previous visit about what role the Jews had played in Al-Andalus during the conquest, instead, I asked him

about the Jewish situation before the Islamic conquest. Before he could answer, Fatima, Rebecca, and Chavah entered the sitting room, and they sat to listen to what was being said.

“The Jews of Iberia refer to themselves as Sephardim, and their origins can be traced back to the tribe of the king of Judah. When King Reccared converted to Christianity, his Gothic government joined the clergymen in harassing the Jews here and making their lives harder. They forbad them from taking any public position; they prevented them from marrying Christian women or owning Christian slaves. King Sisebut forced his Jewish subjects to convert to Christianity or be banished from the land. The king that followed him nullified this command, however, the Toledo Ecclesiastical Council, which was held in the year 633, issued a declaration stipulating that Jews who were baptized, then returned to Judaism, should be separated from their children and sold as slaves. King Swintila brought back Sisebut’s decree. At a later time, King Egica forbad the Jews from owning land, and in the year 691, he also prohibited any monetary or commercial exchange with the Jews. This was disastrous, so when the Arabs had stabilized their conquest of Africa, the Jews contacted Musa ibn Nusayr and agreed to help him conquer Al-Andalus.”

And here we were, once again, back to the topic from which all these explanations had emerged. I sensed that our neighbor was going to continue talking, but I wanted to show off a little bit in front of his two daughters, who were listening quietly and politely as if this history was being revealed to them for the first time.

“How did the Jews help Musa in the conquest?” I posed the question without any indication of denial or disapproval of the Jewish role, which I never seen mentioned in any books. I recalled my father’s expression of disapproval, during Ibn Imran’s last visit, at both my tone and my question, as I had asked him: “If you were here before Islam and Christianity, why did you not rule or fight, and did you help the Muslims in the conquest?”

“If you carefully studied the details of the conquest of the Berber lands, you will have found that peace had not yet been achieved, and Islam and the Arab language had not been accepted by the residents. In spite of that, the Jews were able to convince Musa that there was a chance to conquer the

Peninsula, and he should not wait until the situation in Africa had been completely secured. The Jews were prepared to provide information and advice on the geography, the cities, the Visigoth forces, and even to arrange an agreement between Musa and Julian, the ruler of Ceuta." Ibn Imran was speaking quietly and patting Chavah's hair as she sat next to him on the sofa. "Perhaps Musa thought that it would provide an opportunity to keep the Berbers occupied with war and collecting spoils, which would reinforce the Islamic position in their areas. Of course, he was not ignorant of the fact that Al-Andalus is a rich country, filled with spoils. He was also aware that the country's residents, like the Jews, had grown weary of Visigoth injustice, and we also informed him of the disputes between the members of the royal family. It was also not a coincidence that the Muslim forces entered from the south, led by Tariq, to coincide with Gothic forces heading north to subdue a Basque rebellion against the Gothic government in Toledo in the far north. Did you know that the period between Tariq's forces disembarking on the Rock of Gibraltar, and the arrival of the Visigoth king and his forces and the resulting battle was eighty-two days?"

"Yes, and during that time additional reinforcements arrived to support Tariq."

Our guest's face showed relief at my understanding of the importance of the context of events. He pushed his turban back a little. Coincidentally, my grandfather came in, having finished his business, and while they shook hands I was stunned to see how similarly the two men were clothed. The differences were minor; Ibn Imran's clothes were more colourful than those of my grandfather. He shook hands with Rebecca and Chavah, while they kissed the back of his hand, and he kissed each of them on the cheeks, praising their politeness and beauty to their father.

"Does one face trouble in Christian lands as an Arab and a Muslim?"

"I have not had any trouble for the past few years. In general, I travel as an Arab, but I don't deny my Jewish faith if asked. The important thing is to stay away from the itinerary of the last summer raid, in case the need for revenge overcomes someone, and I do have this problem in the kingdoms of the north, but in the lands of the Gauls, the Germans, and the Romans,

the risk is the usual one everyone faces of being overtaken by thieves. I wish the whole world was as safe as our country."

"Why don't all Jews live here, secure from the trouble of dealing in Christian countries?" Rebecca asked her father, her eyes glinting with anxiety as he talked about revenge and thieves. Perhaps she was thinking about what had been said a while before, about the suffering, eye-gouging, and being forced to convert to Christianity.

"At the beginning of the conquest of Al-Andalus, and with the general conviction of the necessity of reconstructing the country, many people came here with everything they could float through the water. Fifty thousand Jewish people gathered from Africa, the East, and the Jews of Asia, who had previously travelled in the rear of Alexander the Great, came here, in addition to Jews from all around and others who are still arriving from regions in Europe. In the city of Lucena, for example, most of the residents are Jews; half of Toledo has been made up of Jews since the conquest, and there are tens of thousands living in other cities. Commercial and professional restrictions have been removed, and we have become involved in all fields of agriculture, industry, finance, and public offices, just like the Arabs. But this, in turn, requires the activation of trade to buy the materials others have and to sell them our products, and, in any case, travel is a blessing, my daughter."

I asked my grandfather a hypothetical question to hear his opinions on some of the ideas that I had on my mind.

"If you had been in Tariq ibn Ziyad's shoes, would you have waited for eighty days for the Gothic king to meet you with his forces, or would you have moved forward with the forces you had to meet him or to flee?"

"To flee was no longer an option after having crossed the sea. To wait for him or to advance would depend on the information available and the location where he could wait. If you were able to find a site where you could trap the enemy, then it would be good to remain there. If you could ensure that you attacked him as soon as he arrived while his forces were tired from marching and yours were rested and ready, then that would be optimal."

"So if you had been in his shoes, you would have done the same?"

“Since we already know the details of what occurred, we could doubtless find a solution that would have lessened the numbers of the martyrs but, in general, what he did was good. If he had wasted their stamina on conquering cities and maintaining them under his control, he would have lost the majority of his soldiers, but he preserved them all and leapt in with them to destroy the Visigoths in a determining battle that destroyed them psychologically, and he then quickly drove through them to the north, to their capital, to prevent them from regrouping and collecting their thoughts. However, Musa’s arrival was decisive in eliminating the resistance and reconquering the cities and, without him, the whole conquest would have turned into a vast operation of invasion and looting destined for a quick retreat from Al-Andalus.”

Just then, my father emerged with a sad expression that silenced us all, and after exchanging greetings, we waited to hear what he had to say. “My heart aches to say it, Abu Abdullah, Muhammad ibn Yusuf Al-Warrag passed away today.”

“May Allah have mercy on him, La Ilaha il Allah,” we all muttered. My father told us that what had saddened him was the knowledge that he had not been able to finish transcribing Al-Warrag’s books. “I will now transcribe all his other books and bring forward the date to work on them.”

“Has he been buried?” my grandfather asked, and my father replied that the Salat Al-Janazah, the funeral prayer, would be performed for him, after the sunset prayer in the mosque, and he would be buried in the Ammer cemetery. A few minutes later, the three men left for the mosque to pray for Al-Warrag and to carry him to his grave, and I recited to the three girls the names of his books as they were leaving the house.

Al-Warrag was a traveler, born in Guadalajara, who grew up in Kairouan, roamed Africa, and wrote to Caliph Al-Hakim describing its cities and the wars between its kings. One of his books was the “Kitab Maslik Ifriqiya wa Mamalikha”, the Book of Roads and Kingdoms of Africa, which had provided me with information about the Islamic conquest of the Maghreb and Africa over the past days, may Allah have mercy on him.

21

Al-Aghar

After the Thursday lesson was suspended during the month of Ramadan, my grandfather continued to visit Emir Hisham. At that time, news of soldiers and money being sent to Al-Udwa, to reinforce the battles taking place there, was widespread in Al-Zahra as was news of the attempted capture of Hassan ibn Qanoon and his supporters. Two weeks previously, the Caliph had sent his trustee, Muhammad ibn Abi Amir, with heavy loads of money, jewels, and clothes, to be distributed to his partisans among the chiefs of the Berber tribes. The position of Muhammad ibn Abi Amir had risen in the state and among the chiefs of the Berber tribes, who flocked continuously to Al-Zahra to pledge their allegiance, as well as to take their share of garments and money. On that particular Thursday, the Caliph received a letter from Ghalib ibn Abdul Rahman, the Chief Commander, sent from Al-Udwa to inform him about the support of new tribes as well as the escape of Hassan ibn Qanoon, after a battle in which he lost many of his followers and was deprived of his property. Once the Caliph received the letter, he immediately ordered new reinforcements to be sent, under the leadership of Ghalib ibn Abdul Rahman. The Caliph also sent him some resplendent garments and Arab swords, to be distributed to those who performed well in war and to those trusted partisans who followed him. He also sent colourful Jubbahs, Urdu cloaks with embroidered edges, and many decorative turbans.

I mentioned that I was preparing to travel to Medina-Sidonia after Eid Al-Adha, in front of Emir Hisham, and I said: “Inshallah, I will be qualified to participate in one of the summer campaigns and record its events.”

‘‘How long will you be staying in Medina-Sidonia?”

“I will probably stay there for a whole year, and I may have to continue my education in Córdoba at another time.” I was aiming at killing two birds with one stone, first by informing him of the reason for my upcoming long absence, and secondly by laying the groundwork for my future participation in a summer campaign, on his recommendation, and not just as one of the

soldiers, particularly as the role of our family in recording historical events and stories required close knowledge of the decision-making process and the methods of implementation. This is how I informed him of my journey, and then I talked about the trip to Málaga and what I had observed there, as the prince showed interest in my description. He expressed a longing to see the sea, something which he had not yet been able to do.

The Emir told me about his visit with his mother and the Caliph to the Minat Al-Rumman retreat, which had been given to them by the great Slav slave, Durri. Five months previously, it had been rumored in Córdoba that the Caliph was angry with Durri, the treasurer, for shortcomings, and that he had asked the Head of Security in Al-Zahra, Muhammad ibn Al-Aflah, to humiliate him. Al-Aflah had him brought to Al-Zahra's precinct, where he kept him standing and reprimanded him, without being too harsh. He also moved Durri from his residence in the Palace of Al-Zahra to the Palace of Córdoba, and decreased his stipend to ten dinars a month. This situation continued until Durri, a slave of Jaafari's, and Ahmad Al-Zanji, who were all involved, wrote to the Emir, asking him to intercede for them with the Caliph. In order for this to be achieved, it seems that Durri offered his Minat Al-Rumman retreat to appease the Caliph. The Emir described the retreat as: "A wide, planted land with irrigated gardens. He presented it as a gift with its slaves, an ox, and its animals, which are many. A celebration was held, and we stayed there for a night before returning to Al-Zahra." Details of the celebration, the food, and the fruits had also spread in Córdoba, and the unanimous opinion on them was that such things had never been seen, not even in the royal gardens.

The palace preoccupation with the war in Al-Udwa did not affect the people negatively. Indeed, it may have helped the palace to gain the people's support. The Caliph sent the Head of the Postal Service, the Head of Security, and several Qadis to the cities and encouraged them to bring the people justice. He also remitted the money which some cities had been expected to pay as a contribution towards the building of the fleet. Abdul Malik ibn Al-Mundhir ibn Saeed went to the western districts, to Jerez, Alicante, Seville, Niebla, Carmona, Morón, Écija, and Medina-Sidonia, to examine the condition of the people. The Caliph commissioned the Head of Security and the Market in Jaen, Ahmed ibn Nasr, to consider the complaints of its people against the governor of their city, Abdul Rahman

ibn Jamhour. Yet again, Ahmed ibn Nasr was sent to Jaen to resolve the complaints of the inhabitants regarding what they were being asked to do preparing the wood, pitch, and tar required for the construction of the fleet and transporting them to Seville. The Caliph then decided to bear such expenses himself, instead of the inhabitants of these villages. Moreover, the Head of Postal Services, Abdul Malik, and the treasurer, Ahmad Al-Kalbi, were sent to Amnien city, by order of the Caliph, to consider the complaints of its people against the governor, Rashiq ibn Abdul Rahman.

On the way from the palace to my uncle Abbas's house in Al-Zahra, my grandfather spoke to me about learning horse riding and how necessary it is to master archery, swordsmanship, poetry composition, and to be generous and helpful towards others. "It is also useful to branch off into the science of making weapons from wood and rope, as well as the ability to identify weapons that are available on the battlefield."

"The weapons that Muslims have used in battle so far are catapults, and movable roofed towers and battering rams, to protect the soldiers standing behind or under them, and of course shields and swords."

We had moved about a hundred cubits away from Al-Zahra Mosque, and there remained approximately a hundred cubits to traverse to the southeast, before we reached the market, which consisted of a square building with a courtyard in the middle, and a stable for horses at its centre.

"These are not the only weapons we use, there are also fire spears, fireballs, hooked spears, used to prise open the doors of forts, and siege ladders of various sizes, some of them on wheels, and other weapons that you should learn to craft, to develop and to use."

The word fireballs caught my attention and confused me at the same time, so I asked my grandfather if he meant the oil-soaked balls made of fabric. He answered me: "Not quite, oil is something useful, like tar and pitch. But what I mean by fireballs is the Greek fire that was invented by a Syrian before Islam and was used by the Byzantine fleet against our fleet in the Battle of the Masts, when they burned many of our ships. It consists of jars, filled with a mixture of various flammable materials that are thrown at targets by catapult, and it is impossible to put out the fire as it continues to burn, even on water."

We arrived at the chain of market shops, interconnected around the square courtyard. The walls of the shops were similar in colour to the houses and palaces of Al-Zahra, with the lower half of the walls painted in a dark red color, with a white stripe at the top, followed by a red one, and then the rest of the wall is white or decorated with inscriptions, lines, or Quranic verses. My grandfather continued the conversation while we were approaching the stable, as he said: “The most important skill for a horseman is the management of the horse itself, as a good horseman is one who tames his horse.”

My heart began to pound as I realized that my grandfather had, indeed, prepared a surprise for me, to fulfill the promise he had made regarding my circumcision, as we stood before a white Arabian horse with gray spots on its back and the most beautiful eyes I had ever seen. Its nose was wide, its skull narrowed slightly behind the nose and then widened at the eyes, which were covered by eyelids with thick, long, black eyelashes.

"Is that him? He is the most beautiful horse I have ever seen."

I kissed the back of my grandfather’s hand then patted the horse and circled him, while he twisted his neck to follow me. I recalled the pain of the circumcision for a moment, but it paled in comparison to winning such a prize. When I had returned to myself, my grandfather had completed the deal with the owner of the stable, and I heard that he was safe for use, and his hooves had already been sharpened. I grabbed the foal’s rein and walked him beside us while we headed to my uncle’s house.

“Issa has left you a light, sturdy, undecorated, leather saddle which you will need in Medina-Sidonia. You will now have to choose a name for the horse. Do not rush to ride him you will need to get used to him and he will need to get used to you, before your first ride.”

‘‘I will ride him every day.”

“This will mean taking the horse to Córdoba and making an agreement there with a stable for overnight stays, as it does not make any sense to keep him in the house for two months. We will stay here for the night, and the horse can stay with Al-Shahba until we will find the best solution.” I liked this idea, because I did not want to leave my horse, and I would be able to spend most of the next day with him. The stable at my uncle Issa’s

house was empty, as he had taken Tahboub with him to Málaga, but my grandfather preferred to keep my horse in Al-Shahba's stable, so they would become familiar with each other; perhaps Al-Shahba would adopt my horse as her son, or as a friend, only Allah knows what goes on in the heads of horses.

In the following days, it was arranged for my horse to stay in Córdoba, as the husband of my aunt Zainab, Abu Musa, agreed keep him in his hotel stables.

Since my second day with the horse, I have dedicated some time every night to reading books about horses, their genealogy, stories, and the poems that have been written about them, searching for a name that suits my horse and learning about the proper way to handle horses, their food and their diseases. I found stories of Al-Objur, Al-Adham, Al-Bayda, Zamil, Dahes, Al-Ghabra, and hundreds of other horse names. Sometimes the horse was attributed to its rider, and at other times the rider was attributed to his horse. I liked the horse name Al-Adham, one of the horses ridden by Antarah ibn Shaddad. I especially liked where he said:

They call "Antar" as spears come raining down, like long ropes ripping through Al-Adham.

But the name Al-Adham means black, and my horse is predominantly white, and he is still young, therefore, I chose another name for him, one also used by Antarah, namely Al-Aghar, for which he composed this verse:

May Allah reward Al-Aghar, who in the flames of war stayed true

As your head and flanks me did shield, so my legs stayed steady for you

I did not care that Antarah was a pre-Islamic horseman, or that he was a black slave and the son of a slave from Somalia, who Shaddad ibn Muawiyah had married. His stories, his fight for what was right, and his ethical principles, as well as his struggle to end slavery, when he put his principles to practical use by supporting his people and fighting with them in battles and enduring hardship, all these characteristics emphasize his chivalrous horsemanship. The story of his love for Abla and his poems also confirm his horsemanship and serve as motivation to young and old.

My new routine began at dawn as I read some books about horses and warfare, types of weapons, and epic poetry, followed by morning lessons in the mosque, as my father had arranged for me to participate in literature and poetry lessons, and another one in chemistry, while in the evening I received an astronomy lesson for beginners who want to be guided by the stars in their night travels. The afternoon was dedicated to taking care of my horse, Al-Aghar, as I went to central Córdoba and took him for walks outside the wall. Every day we went by a different route in order to make the horse familiar with the location of his stable from all sides of Córdoba and its gates. Sometimes, I would take my horse to our neighborhood to walk around the Mosque and Secunda, in the afternoon. I also took him to the southern bank of the river, where the flow of the water was low in the middle of summer. Many times, I left Al-Aghar under the care of Fatima at home during the evening lessons and then brought him back to the stable, with my sister riding behind me, and we walked back to the house. On Thursdays, Al-Aghar and I used to go to Al-Zahra in the early morning, where I left him with Al-Shahba and went with my grandfather to the Dar Al-Mulk to meet Emir Hisham. After the end of his history lesson on the Umayyad in Al-Andalus and their administrative and political system, we exchanged stories, news, and experiences, During that time, my grandfather confirmed and checked the reliability of the news he had heard during the week, before recording it in our family narratives, and he used to tell me the conclusions he had reached and, from time to time, he would show me what he had written so I could connect the narrative with the written word.

Certainly, he wished me to record the facts and events that I heard and saw in Medina-Sidonia, as he alerted me to the fact that recording history is not always a matter of news heard in palaces, capitals, and major cities, but that it was equally important to record the details of life in the countryside. My grandfather told me that the city of Medina-Sidonia is located on the route between Al-Udwa and Algeciras on one side, and between Seville and Córdoba on the other, and hence all news coming from these areas would be well-known there.

In the evenings, my mother started sitting with me longer as we approached Eid, and the time for me to leave was nearing. She talked about Medina-Sidonia, her childhood there, and the home of her family and

relatives, especially of her uncle Abu Ibrahim. She also described familiar places in the streets, the mosque, and the fortress on the mountain, from where one can see the city and the plain for dozens of miles in all directions. My mother moved to Córdoba after she married my father, and so did her brothers, as they settled in the metropolis, maintaining their family relations and memories of Medina-Sidonia. She had not visited her hometown after marriage, and now she was giving me all these details about that city, and she did not seem to be worried about sending her firstborn and only son to her family and her city. She taught me what to say and what not to say in meetings between relatives, especially her female relatives and the wives of her cousins, with whose names I became familiar. I think that I will not find it hard to recognize everyone my mother mentioned, because of all the details that she gave me, assuming, of course, that their features have not changed in the intervening twelve years.

22

Papal Stories

After a pilgrimage to Sanctus Jacobus that lasted more than two months, our neighbours returned home on the last day of Shawwal, at the end of the first week of August 973. They had set out with a group of pilgrims from Córdoba to Huelva via Seville, then traveled by sea and ascended the western coast to the far north before entering the bay of Compostela, where they fulfilled their purpose and returned in haste in the same boat. As the group included some old men and many women, this was the quickest and easiest way for them. The safe return of the pilgrims was a significant event to the people of Córdoba as every neighbourhood or suburb was home to one or more of the pilgrims. Of course, the interest of the Christian population was greater, as the pilgrims had become pioneers, and proved the ease of travel. What I heard from Jesús over the next few weeks about the difficulties at sea, the nausea, and the overcrowding, did nothing to encourage my belief in greater ease by sea than travel on land, but the nature and circumstances of those who had wished to go on pilgrimage had motivated them to travel that way.

By coincidence, nearly a week after their return, I attended a session at Ibn Imran's house, which included Jesús, my father, and Ibn Imran. They asked the pilgrim about the journey and the conditions they encountered on overnight stays. The conversation then moved on to the affairs of the papacy, thanks to the information and news that Jesús had gleaned from other pilgrims. Most of the news originated in the stories of a priest who oversees a pilgrimage hostel near the Church of Sanctus Jacobus and the following is a summary of the events of the past ten years, as collected and transmitted by Jesús:

When King Otto I came to Rome in 962 AD to be crowned Emperor by the Pope, he witnessed and experienced the papacy's decadence at first-hand. At the time, it was not in Otto's best benefits to call the legitimacy of the

post that had established him as Emperor into question. However, with the support of the clergy beyond the Alps, he returned to Rome the following year and summoned Pope John XII to stand trial before a consistory. The cardinals on the council accused Pope John XII of accepting bribes for bishop appointments, appointing a ten-year-old boy as bishop, engaging in adultery with his father's lover, sleeping with his widow and her niece, and turning the Pope's palace into a brothel. It should be noted that Pope John XII refused to appear before the council or even answer to these charges, instead he left the council and went hunting. The cardinals then decided to depose him and chose Emperor Otto I's candidate for the papacy unanimously.

My father was perplexed as he listened to Jesús talk, while Ibn Imran nodded his head in agreement from time to time as if he was aware of this matter. The story continued with Jesús saying that the emperor's nominee, Pope Leo VIII, was not one of the clergy. Once Otto I returned to his land, the former Pope John XII arrested Emperor Otto's supporters in Rome, cut off their limbs, deposed Leo VIII, and appointed himself to the papacy by the decision of a council subject to his authority in 964. In that year, John XII died, and the Romans chose Benedict V to succeed him as Pope, while ignoring Leo VIII, the ally of Emperor Otto I. Otto returned to Rome from the Germanic lands together with military forces, deposed Benedict V and restored Leo VIII to the papacy. In return, Leo VIII solemnly acknowledged Otto I and his successors' right to rescind the selection of any future pope if they so desired. Indeed, when Pope Leo VIII died, Otto I chose John XIII as his heir. Following the death of this Pope last year, Benedict VI was appointed Pope with the Emperor's approval.

"The emperor's policy was implemented with a view to reform papal corruption, making it the responsibility of the emperor to appoint the pope, but this did not solve the problem; rather, it increased the differences without putting an end to existing absurdities." This logical conclusion, drawn by my father based on the series of events narrated, was followed by an explanation from Ibn Imran that Church traditions required the pope to be chosen with the approval of the clergy in Rome, its nobles, and its inhabitants. "However, the division of the governors of the provinces of

Spoleto, Benevento, Naples, and Tuscany and the nobles of Rome into opposing parties and sects enabled the most powerful party of the time to hatch intrigues to choose and control the Pope. And they all contributed to the deterioration of the papacy with their conflicts."

"But did the deterioration begin and reach its lowest point in the ten years following Otto I's coronation, or was the conclusion he reached correct, that the papal seat required political intervention and should be based on appointment?"

Ibn Imran volunteered once more to tell us stories stranger than fiction about the last century, when we, the Muslims, the Jews, and the Christians, were living in a completely different world.

"The conditions of the previous century were not better than those mentioned by Jesús during the past decade. Lambert I, Duke of Spoleto, led his army into the city of Rome in 878 AD. He captured and starved Pope John VII in an attempt to force him to back Carloman II's candidacy for the imperial throne. Twenty years later, another, distinct, charade occurred. Pope Stephen VI ordered that the body of his predecessor, Pope Formosus, be exhumed from its tomb, dressed in papal robes, tried before an ecclesiastical council for violating some church laws, then condemned, stripped of its priestly robes, amputated, and thrown into the Tiber River. In the same year, a political revolution erupted in Rome, leading to the deposition and strangulation of Pope Stephen in prison."

My father exclaimed: "Oh no!"

Jesús said: "Oh Lord!"

"Alhamdulillah," I said, as I turned to face the other three, adding: "We live in Al-Andalus, and we none of us suffer from things like that."

But the stories of that century were far from over. Ibn Imran added that the papal seat remained a point of contention for several years after that time and could only be obtained through bribery, murder, or the desires of well-shaped and loosely-behaved women. The family of Theophylact, one of the chief officials in the Papal palace, remained in control, raising and deposing popes as they pleased. Theophylact's daughter, Marozia,

succeeded in having her lover, Sergius III, appointed to the papacy from 904 to 911, and Theodora, his wife, succeeded in appointing Pope John X between 914 and 928. Of course, John X was accused, possibly falsely, of being Theodora's lover. Since he was the one who formed the alliance between the Roman provinces to put an end to the Muslim advance towards Rome in 916, it appeared from his actions that he was an excellent leader both in life and in politics. The daughter, Marozia, had a series of lovers, one after the other, before marrying Guido, Duke of Tuscany, with whom she plotted to depose John. The couple succeeded in murdering Peter, the Pope's brother, in front of his eyes, and then threw the Pope into a dungeon, where he died a few months later from unknown causes. Marozia promoted John XI to the papal throne in 931, and it was widely assumed that John XI was her illegitimate son with Sergius III. The following year, her other son, Alberic II, imprisoned Pope John XI in Castel Sant'Angelo but allowed him to direct the papacy's spiritual affairs while imprisoned. Alberic II ruled Rome for twenty-two years, during which the tyrant was in control of what he called the Roman Republic, and he appointed Agapetus II as Pope after John's death. On his deathbed, Alberic II decreed that his son Octavianus should succeed him in power and take over the papacy after the death of Agapetus II, and he got what he wanted, and so Marozia's grandson became the Pope John XII, who crowned Otto I as Emperor, and his tenure was characterized by various forms of indecency and prostitution in the Lateran Palace.

Before leaving Ibn Imran's house, I asked for my father's permission to ask our host to deliver a message to Gerbert, as these stories reminded me of that good man. My father seemed to like the idea and he reminded me that it might take a long time before our neighbour's travels coincided with those regions, so I should be careful about what I wrote.

"The heart of the matter will be to inquire about the details of the papal stories, whether they have been updated, how much is true as opposed to exaggerations that have been added over the course of a century. Gerbert is a history student with good relations, and nothing is hidden from him. I will give him a synopsis of the stories and ask him for his opinion." My father praised the idea and advised me to keep a copy of my letter so that I

could easily understand the response if it arrived a long time afterwards. Then he turned to converse with Ibn Imran, who was listening and paying attention to what we were discussing.

“Gerbert is a family friend who worked as a translator for the Barcelona embassy before finishing his education in Córdoba. Before leaving, he told me that he would be teaching at a religious institution in Reims and would try to incorporate some philosophical and scientific sciences into their curriculum. He also had high hopes that he would be able to encourage the use of Arabic numerals there instead of the more unwieldy Roman numerals.” I had no idea Gerbert had these plans or that he had discussed them with my father, who carried on his conversation with our host. “If your work leads you there, please give him our best wishes and ask if he needs any books or materials, and, of course, deliver Suleiman’s message once he has written it. Gerbert is interested in books and translation as well, also he is an honorable man, and you can count on him.”

“If Allah wills, I will write my letter within two days at most, and I may also find him a book as a gift.”

“It is enough if our neighbour is prepared to carry a letter, to send a book is another matter entirely.” I remembered that Ibn Imran already traded in books with the rest of the world, and it would be improper to burden a man with a gift deriving from his trade, but he saved the situation with his usual cleverness.

“I usually carry books appropriate to the people there, and I will choose others that Gerbert may need. I will tell him that one of the books he chooses is a gift from you, on condition that you get me another copy of that book.” I agreed, and my father laughed, and I realized right away that it was no different from what I wanted; indeed it was better, because Gerbert could choose his own gift. It would have been more logical if our neighbour had asked for two books, instead of just the one that would be chosen. In general, I was not bothered by Ibn Imran’s willingness to carry the gift as he had a trade relationship with my father, and he did not carry his goods in his pockets, but rather he carried them on animals across Europe, and our neighbourly relations were good and allowed for a little consideration. I was

intrigued by the idea of Gerbert introducing Arabic numerals in the North, and I knew that they never used zero in their numbers, so even a smallish number required a lot of digits, and also they used the Latin alphabet to write the numbers. The current year, for example, contains three Arabic numerals, so three digits, whereas, written in Roman numerals it requires eight digits, and is read as one thousand minus one hundred, expressing nine hundred, then fifty plus ten plus ten expressing seventy, then a letter repeated three times to express three (CMLXXIII). I mean, it was time they started using the zero and Arabic numerals, and I wished Gerbert luck in his endeavour.

After hearing the details about the papacy, I was not sure if it was the weakness of the lands and their systems that caused the clergy's conflict with one another and their conflicts with the rulers, or if the conflicts themselves were the cause of the

weakness of the systems and the countries. We have had interventions from religious people in Al-Andalus from time to time, when they opposed the philosophical views and statements of the astronomers, particularly those who spoke about the Spherical Earth, but such objections were limited in scope and in time and did not lead to collapse of the system. Just as the Qadis and the Imams publicly objected to the Caliphs, but their objections never escalated to the point of death, exile, or suspension of their work, which does not mean that poets and people involved in literature and politics are immune from trouble and imprisonment if their criticism is too exaggerated. Perhaps the secret of Al-Andalus' strength lies in its administrative and political system, which, of course, isn't without flaws and requires constant improvement, but it is an existing system with foundations that everyone can understand and invoke.

The Caliph commands and forbids, and his Viziers specialize in specific matters, and the Hajibs act on the Caliph's behalf in following up on their work. There is an army, with a Chief Commander, commanders, chancellors, corporals, permanent soldiers, and reservists who serve on demand. There are, of course, two naval fleets, each with its own commander, a base, soldiers, and ships. Within the army of Al-Andalus

now, there are forty types of soldiers, including high-ranking soldiers, Andalusian soldiers, Berbers, Zahrawis, Cordovans, infantry archers, armoured knights, free archers, slave archers, knights with bladed lances, and many other specialists and professions, in addition to guards, mercenaries, volunteers, attachés, and Mamluks. Soldiers incur specific expenses that increase, based on need, so each ministry has a budget, and one of the important ministries is the Ministry of Grievances, as well as the judiciary and judges who can fine the Caliph. Most of our Qadis speak or are familiar with Mozarabic and Vulgar Latin, allowing them to hear the complaints of any Andalusian who does not speak Arabic. There are now fifty-eight types of viziers, planners, trustees, and overseers in Al-Andalus. For example, we have the Sahibs of the three different levels of, Al-Shurta, the Security, Higher, Central and Lower, then the Sahib Dar Al-Sena'a, responsible for industry, the Sahib Al-Barid, the post, another for transport, and others for the mint, the market, the Administrator of Córdoba and another for Al-Zahra. All the districts of Al-Andalus have rulers, Qadis, and Sahibs Al-Shurta, appointed by the Caliph to administer the daily affairs of the district, but they are all linked to Córdoba in all of their affairs. The Caliph's guests are even seated in a specific order on the two Eids, as they are at the receptions for ambassadors and delegations. These details form a summarized part of each comprehensive detail, where every person understands his or her rights, position, duties, and responsibilities, and I do not believe that the Roman and Frankish lands have such foundations.

23

Political Principles

In the weeks before Eid, news of the war in Al-Udwa abounded, and messages increased between the Caliph and the Chief Commander, Ghalib, who was chasing Hassan ibn Qanoon and his associates and subjugating the cities and tribes that could not escape to the mountains. The Caliph displayed to those concerned his unprecedented determination to subdue Hassan or kill him. He never stopped sending reinforcements and money to Ghalib. Among those sent by the Caliph, was the former Vizier Yahya Al-Thaghri, who is from a large tribe that he leads with his brothers and cousins and which has given birth to many Viziers. The Caliph consulted with them, asking them to go to Al-Udwa to reinforce the Vizier, Chief Commander Ghalib, to which they agreed and they went to the Advisory Council in the quarters of the serving soldiers where they received gifts and bandanas from the Caliph, and, within four days, they had taken leave of their relatives and left for Al-Udwa with their soldiers. The Caliph bid them farewell and sent a group of archer slaves, free archers, and other Caliphal soldiers with them. Yahya was accompanied by his brothers Yusuf, Muhammad, Hashem, and Hudhayl, who were the sons of Muhammad ibn Hashem and his deceased brother Al-Asi ibn Al-Hakm Al-Tajbi Al-Thaghri, and their Mujahedeen soldiers. Two weeks later, the Caliph welcomed his trustee Yahya ibn Ali Al-Andalusi. He honoured him and asked him to lead his soldiers and return to Al-Udwa to unite under the leadership of Ghalib. Then, a message was received from Ghalib informing the Caliph that Hassan was still at large, but his current position was deteriorating. Ghalib said that many tribes had submitted, and they had gathered and celebrated with him, and he was starting to worry that spending on the soldiers would be compromised, food would become scarce, and prices would rise due to the large amount of food they consumed. The Caliph replied to him with a message in which he said:

“Do not concern yourself with money or food, I will continue to supply you with this until Allah grants us victory, even at the expense of the full treasure houses and warehouses of Al-Andalus, and even if only the

warehouses of Córdoba remain, I will send their contents to you also". The Caliph assured his Chief Commander that he was ready personally to depart for the city of Algeciras, to make his home there until the heretical evildoer Hassan was defeated. Among other things, in that long letter that was read in Córdoba, the Caliph insisted that Ghalib should not return before achieving victory, and only when Hassan was left dead or repentant. With his letter, the Caliph sent gifts and garments, carried by the treasurer, Ahmed ibn Hajib, to Ghalib to be delivered to the most important allies among the Hassanians and the Berber notables. The largest gift was for Ahmad ibn Issa, being seven thousand dinars, an Arab sword with gold ornaments on its sheath, eight colourful Ubaidian robes (named after the Fatimid-Ubaid Caliphate) Abāyas, and two Ubaidian outer robes, one of them sky blue and the other in the colours of the parrot, and three silk turbans, the first sky blue, the second red, and the third green, and a speckled mare of reddish hue with a locally-made Caliphal saddle and bridle. The seventh, and smallest gift, was for Hajjaj ibn Khalouf, being five hundred dinars, an Arab sword with gilded silver ornaments, decorated in cotton and wool, a Ubaidian garment, a Ubaidian abāya, an embroidered abāya, two silk turbans, and a pure-bred Arabian mare with a white blazed nose, and a saddle and bridle decorated with silver.

Three weeks after the letter, a reply from Ghalib arrived in Al-Zahra, to inform the Caliph that he had broken into the Le Karm fortress, where Hassan had taken shelter, but the heretic was able to escape, and Ghalib had released the Andalusian and Berber captives, who were being held in the fortress as hostages. Ghalib seized everything that the evildoer had left behind, including luggage, containers, sustenance, and food. He also demolished Hassan's residences, setting them on fire, and he sent a thousand horsemen after him. The Caliph replied with a letter in which he advised Ghalib to store food in anticipation of the continuation of the war into the winter, and he told him that there would be money available to him with the treasurer in Ceuta to the amount of a thousand, thousand dinars. "So be patient and repress your desire to return home until Allah enables you to take revenge on the evildoer." In that letter, the Caliph also ordered Ghalib to organize a mail service between Tangiers and Asilah so that animals could run with the news, and he was to organize the fodder for the animals, and calculate the monthly expenditure for mail-guards to carry

urgent mail from the battlefield to the port of Tangiers and across the strait to the Al-Andalus mail service, which had long been organized between its cities.

Among the news of the time was also the completion of Muhammad Al-Zubaidi's summary of the Kitab Al-'Ayn, the Book of the Eyes, in syntax, written by Al-Khalil ibn Ahmad at the request of the Caliph. Al-Zubaidi arrived in Al-Zahra to join Emir Hisham's companions to evaluate, refine and help him master the Arab language. The Caliph listened to debates on the arts of syntax and language between Al-Zubaidi and the scholar, Vizier Jaafar ibn Othman as they competed in oratory to the delight of the linguists who attended.

The last lecture by my grandfather, which I attended with Emir Hisham, before the Eid and my departure for Medina Sidonia, was on the Umayyad political system during the period of the Caliphate in Damascus. Throughout this time, my grandfather avoided making comparisons between the Caliphs of that period or mentioning what had been adopted from there in Al-Andalus and what had changed, whether negatively or positively. In the light of the controversies that preceded the assumption of the Caliphate by the Umayyad, they required a policy based on a theory that supported their rule and also justified it, and, according to the explanation of my grandfather it consisted of the following:

First: They followed the doctrine of Sunni Islam, which accords the previous Caliph the right to choose his successor, providing that he is from the tribe of the Quraysh. This was the case with the Rashidun Caliphs, and the choice was reinforced by the approval of the Muslim community by means of a public oath of allegiance.

"This contradicts the principles of the early Kharijite groups of both Sunni and Shia, which stipulate that every Muslim has the right to rule if he is pious and his piety is accompanied by righteous deeds. It also contradicts the Shiite theory which stipulates that the Caliphate belongs by right to the descendants of the Prophet and his heirs only."

The second principle that my grandfather mentioned was: "Your ancestors, the Caliphs, favoured Arab nationalism, and the Caliphate was only assigned to those who were born of a Muslim mother. Likewise, they only appointed Arabs loyal to their policies as governors over the states."

I later learned from my grandfather that he had modified this principle, as he told me that the Caliphate could only be assumed by someone whose mother was Arab. If he had said this in front of Hisham, it could have provoked a crisis, as most of his forefathers, the Emirs of Al-Andalus, were from non-Arab mothers.

The third principle of Umayyad politics was explained by my grandfather extensively, with generalities, and specific examples. In summary, they followed the doctrine of Jabriyah, or predestination, which claims that everything a person does is predestined, his profession is predetermined by the will of Allah and he does not have the freedom to choose. As the Umayyad rule by the will of Allah, and it was He who chose them to lead the nation, whoever revolts against them goes against the will of Allah, and that is why, since the Caliphate of Abdul Malik ibn Marwan, the Caliphs of the Umayyad dynasty have referred to themselves as “the Caliphs of Allah.” And they fought those who believed in free will, meaning that man is responsible for his own actions by virtue of his ability and his will. The Umayyad considered belief in free will to be traitorous and it was permissible to kill a believer in this. Abdul Malik ibn Marwan, and his son Hisham after him, killed both Marwan Al-Juhani and Ghailan Al-Dimashqi for their belief in free will. However, the two Caliphs, Yazid ibn Al-Walid ibn Abdul Malik and Marwan ibn Muhammad later discarded the doctrine of Jabriyah, of predestination, to follow the doctrine of Qadariyah, of free will.

24

My Mother's Uncle

On the day of Arafat, the day preceding Eid, a delegation of five men arrived in Al-Zahra from Medina-Sidonia to offer Eid greetings to the Caliph. My mother's uncle, Abu Ibrahim, was among them; indeed, as I later found out, he was both the oldest and most respected of them. They stayed at one of the guesthouses located near the Al-Zahra Mosque, and I went with my grandfather, my father, and my uncle Abbas to greet and welcome them. They arranged with my grandfather to stay for a few days after Eid at my uncle Issa's house, and they were aware that I would be joining them on their journey to Medina-Sidonia and would stay there with them to practice horsemanship.

My grandfather did not attend the Eid ceremonies in Al-Zahra this year, and I heard later from the delegation from Medina-Sidonia that some poets had performed well, and that Muhammad ibn Shakhees had recited poetry about the conquest of Le Kram fortress and the escape of Hassan ibn Qanoon. Muhammad ibn Shakhees also referred to Hisham, the son of the Caliph, with some verses that included:

Hisham will be our tenth Imam, though not before the ninth is ninety

A prophecy that was fulfilled, may Hisham the fourth's star be mighty

Al-Hakim's blood is in his veins; may his attributes ever shine brightly.

The thing that caught my attention most in those days was the wagers among some of our sheikhs in the mosque about the lunar eclipse, predicted by the young scholar Maslama Al-Majriti to fall one of the seven days after Eid, most likely on the night of the full moon in the middle of the month, a prediction which was rejected by others. Al-Majriti's information derived from the astronomical table produced and prepared by Abu Bakr Al-Khwarizmi, may Allah have mercy on him. The abovementioned table

followed the Persian calendar according to the doctrines of India, Persia, and Ptolemy of Greece, and now Al-Majriti had almost finished converting it to the Hijri calendar. Al-Khwarizmi was not only a compiler of astronomical information, but he was also the inventor of Algebra, and an adherent of the zero system as well as the author of the algorithm or logarithm, as Gerbert called it, that is why Al-Majriti said that he was almost certain that the eclipse would occur on the date he specified. Al-Majriti tried to convince the skeptics by citing the explanations of Yaqub Al-Kindi about planetary motions and he reminded them of Al-Batani's correction of the planetary positions.

I could not stay up all night for a week, sleeping for a few hours in the morning, while I was preparing for a long journey away from my family and Córdoba, so I decided to merely stay up in the mosque on the night that fell in the middle of the month. Many scholars gathered at the beginning of the evening, along with many interlopers, and their number gradually decreased as the night progressed. Some of them left the mosque with a laugh or commenting that they would distribute a lot of dinars if the eclipse occurred that night, while others were satisfied with saying that they would observe the moon from their homes, and in both cases, they were bid goodnight and wishes for a deep sleep by the others.

At early dawn, the moon slowly began to fade away in the west, changing from a full moon to a waning gibbous moon and then a waning crescent until it shrank to a crescent before vanishing, to be replaced by attractive red and orange colours. After a while, the crescent returned and acquired a blue hue, and it began to increase again in size towards the east until it had returned in its entirety and the eclipse had ended. Throughout this time, from early dawn until just before the moon was about to reappear, the people present followed this phenomenon, some explaining to the others what was happening and why. I rushed home within the final phase of the phenomenon, before the moon was full, to tell my father and to give him an opportunity to watch the last phase, for which he thanked me. I no longer had any doubt that all astronomical objects rotate in a semi-constant system, and that the gradual variation in the orbit is what causes natural factors such as the seasons of the year. The severity of exceptions in the change of such objects is what creates disasters and more severe phenomena such as the eclipses of the moon and the sun. But what I

heard during the week, especially on the night of the eclipse, is that many people believed that the Earth is a spherical object that rotates around its own axis, around the sun, the moon, and some other moving planets.

During the time between the Eid and the eclipse, my relationship with the delegation from Medina-Sidonia was strengthened as they visited us in Córdoba on the second day of the Eid. My mother prepared lamb stuffed with rice, almonds, pine nuts and a mixture of spices in the oven, for her uncle, his friends, and her brothers. The following day, she went to my uncle Abbas's house to help his wife serve the visitors who were staying in Issa's house next door. She was very excited to host and take care of her uncle, and it was likely that she wanted to offer him hospitality in the hope that it would be returned to me over the coming months.

My grandfather did not leave the delegation during their entire stay, and he exchanged information and held conversations with them as they wandered in Córdoba and its mosques, visited the Caliphal bathhouse, and the Secunda district, where they were hosted for lunch at the house of our kin, Miriam's family. Some days they rested in the courtyard and garden of our house in Córdoba, and on other days they did the same at my uncles' homes. I visited the synagogue with them after I asked Ibn Imran to accompany us on the visit and translate the Hebrew writing and inscriptions carved on the walls for them. He also told them that the women were allowed to sit up on the second floor, with their heads covered, and participate in the prayers from there.

The delegation took the opportunity of the special celebration made for them, and their stay in Córdoba, to attend the Caliph's reception of several ambassadors on Tuesday the 22nd of Dhu'l-Hijjah, which corresponds to the 23rd of September 973 AD. The reception at the Al-Zahra Palace was luxurious as always. The Viziers and the Hajibs were present, and poems were recited before the reception which began with the Muslim ambassadors who had come from North Africa as messengers of Abi Al-Afia, Ahmed ibn Issa, and Maymun ibn Al-Qasim, and they presented the messages they carried and received satisfactory responses. The messengers of the Frankish Kings then arrived. The first to arrive were the messengers of Sancho Garcés II of Pamplona, followed by those of Fernando Ansúrez II, Gomez, and Rodrigo Velázquez.

A week before the end of the year of 362 AH, the Sidonian delegation arrived from Al-Zahra, and we met with them in the Great Mosque in Córdoba. After the sunrise prayer we left for Medina-Sidonia on six horses, and two mules, carrying some of the delegation's belongings, luggage, and a lot of food prepared by my mother. Upon bidding us farewell, my grandfather whispered to me, saying that the fees for my education had been handed over to Abu Ibrahim and that if I needed anything else, he would pay for it and they would reimburse him. My grandfather told Abu Ibrahim he could rely on me, and he assured him that I am a keeper of secrets. It seemed that my grandfather wanted them to treat me as a man and put their trust in me. My father said that he would send me letters at least twice a month by post and that he would give me news of his transcription centre, the development of his work, of my mother, Fatima, Issa, and my grandfather, and he demanded that I send back letters regularly.

Our journey to Medina-Sidonia would take five days if we traveled swiftly, as we could travel between twenty-five to thirty miles a day, but, ultimately, the weather would determine the time. The last week of September can be pleasantly cool, or it can remain very hot during daylight hours, just like it is now in Córdoba. 'Haste is the devil's work,' was Abu Ibrahim's motto, and we would have to keep pace with his determination and his sixty years of age.

From the start of the journey, and for most of its duration, I rode on my horse, Al-Aghar, walking next to Abu Ibrahim. He told interesting and endless stories, most of them from his own experience, especially the endless battles. I noticed that his stories about battles did not all end by claiming victory, but he never spoke of defeat, so I said: "We will have a long time to talk about all the battles you mentioned. What do you think about telling me about the most important battles, and perhaps about the ones in which we were defeated?" I wanted to express my solidarity, so I preferred to join myself with him by using "we".

"Suleiman, no-one who has never been defeated and lost some battles, can know the value and ecstasy of victory when it is achieved. The important thing is to learn from every defeat and not to repeat the same mistakes." He was talking and looking at me seriously, his eyelids narrowed

and his forehead creased. “The worst and hardest defeat for me was the Battle of Alhandic, when I was twenty-five years old, and Caliph Abdul Rahman Al-Nasir li-Din Allah, may Allah have mercy on him, was fifty.” Abu Ibrahim rubbed his chin with his right hand near his throat as if he was preparing himself for a long speech, then he stretched his neck and said: “In fact, it was not a defeat in the sense that we were weaker than the armies of the Kingdom of Navarre and Leon, which had come to fight us near Simancas, on the contrary, we were stronger than them, but we wanted to give Al-Nasir a lesson in politics.” I raised my eyebrows in astonishment at his last words, which he noticed, saying: “Be patient, there is a reason for everything. The forces of the six Jund have a role in battle that secures their position in the country and the land. We were content and had agreed not to compete with the Umayyad for leadership in politics and governance, and to remain in the districts of the country in order to protect them, and to join the conquests, summer raids, and punitive expeditions whenever necessary. But the Caliph gave the leadership of the Muslim army to his Slav servant, Najda Al-Hiri. The freedom and leadership of Slavs in the palaces of the Umayyad is their concern, but for him to appoint one as a leader over us in a decisive battle, and after we had achieved great victories in a comprehensive advance, that was not to be borne. Therefore, the leaders of the Arab soldiers agreed to let Al-Nasir down at the beginning of the battle and to withdraw from the rear-guard, to see what the Slav and his fancy soldiers would do.” He then maintained a firm, calm tone of voice that gave no indication that he had already reached the age of sixty unless one was looking him in the face. “That was on the 11th of Shawwal 327 AH, and during the retreat, some soldiers fell into a trench dug by the Christians, and some leaders were captured as well, including Abu Yahya Muhammad ibn Hashim, the governor of Zaragoza.”

“The Christians consider the Battle of Alhandic a very important and great victory.”

“And so it was to them as they had suffered many losses at our hands since Al-Nasir become the Caliph of Córdoba, but it did not give them any permanent victory, as our superiority and progress continued after that day. The most important victory for us was that Al-Nasir stopped appointing Slavs over Arab forces. If we had acted as if nothing had changed under the leadership of the Slav, and defeated the forces of Ramiro II of León, the

Slavs would have been considered the conquerors and protectors of the land. Their next step would have been to take over the palace and to rule, eliminating our privileges so that we could no longer compete with them. Probably, the Caliph understood this after the defeat. He took no action and said no word to us, because the problem lay with his policy."

"But you may hate something even though it is good for you," I said, to show my understanding of what I had heard.

"That is right; sometimes one has to look to the future and beyond the next step."

The first stop on our journey was Écija, which is located southwest of Córdoba and is the city of Tariq bin Ziyad. We passed through Guadajoz shortly after sunrise. In the afternoon, we arrived at Alcalá de Guadaíra, which is half way between Córdoba and Écija, according to the estimate of Abu Ibrahim, who had traveled back and forth on this road dozens of times. Indeed, his horse acted as if he knew the road's secrets and stones. We set off on horseback for our first rest at the valley's side, where shallow water ran. There had been no need for one before that because we did not gallop the horses, but rather alternately walked and trotted slowly. I handed over Al-Aghar to Khalil, the stableman, the servant of my four companions. Abu Ibrahim asked Abdul Rahman to accompany me on a hunt while Khalil prepared the fire. Abdul Rahman had not yet reached twenty-five years of age. He was handsome and well-presented. He drew a crossbow from the quiver on his horse, which was black as night, and retrieved a game bag along with some other hunting gear.

"Here, we will set some traps away from the group and their noise that frightens the birds, and we will see if anything has been caught in them on the way back." Abdul Rahman said this while opening an iron trap, covering it with sand, and placing small pieces of bread on top of it. "This is only for bird hunting; take this one and do the same." It was not difficult, as this is not the first time I had set up bird traps in a valley or along the riverside. We set up five traps close together, and Abdul Rahman asked me to remember their position so we could retrieve those that had nothing in them. I set a stone a short distance away from each one, and Abdul Rahman picked up a dry, forked branch from the ground. "This is used for snake hunting. For your own safety, you should first know the poisonous

types, as well as the non-poisonous ones, which provide simple, meaty, delicious food and only require a small amount of fire to grill. Make one like this for yourself and keep it with you as a precaution." As he watched for movement among the tall grass in the middle of the valley, he lowered his voice at the last two words. He took off his bow, inserted an arrow, and spread his feet apart. "Throw a stone into the grass about thirty yards over to the left. Did you observe the movement there?"

"No, I did not see anything, but I am pretty good at aiming stones." I threw a stone, and a duck with a white head flew up. Abdul Rahman shot an arrow from his bow, and the duck fell a short distance from where it had taken off. We moved towards our prey, and Abdul Rahman warned me to be careful of my feet as the area was suitable for the sustenance of birds and poisonous insects, and a sting from a scorpion could kill. We searched the area where the duck took off from to see if it had been brooding eggs, but Abdul Rahman was not really expecting that, as he began telling me: "This is one of the birds that migrate south at this time, but this one has stayed on its own for one reason or another." He pulled the arrow from the body of the beautiful, poor bird that had been placed in the game bag.

"Why did you describe the duck as a "he" before you even caught it?"

"In general, male birds are the beautiful ones with decorative heads and bright feathers. Human women make themselves beautiful to entice their men, whereas it is Allah's will for the male birds to entice their females."

"Do you mean that women break Allah's laws?" I asked the hunter.

"Or men break them twofold, first by not beautifying themselves, secondly by showing contentment and love for beautified women. Judgment is about forming an opinion based on one's own perception. Ducks are guided by Allah and cannot change their form or function, whereas we have free will and can choose to violate or comply with divine laws." So, both a hunter and a philosopher.

"Do the sheikhs in Medina-Sidonia schools hit young pupils if they speculate?"

Abdul Rahman chuckled, asking if I had let any sheikh beat me and let him live.

“If a sheikh hits me, he signs his own death warrant. In Medina-Sidonia, there is no beating.”

“And I was not beaten in Córdoba either, but I only asked because sheikh Yunis used to threaten us when we were young that anyone who spoke about philosophy would face trouble.”

The philosopher hunter, the tormenter of the sheikhs, came to a halt in front of a burrow in the ground.

“This is a rabbit or a snake hole; how do you think we will get it out of here?”

“We could tie one of your arrows to a stick and stick it in the hole to see what comes out, or we could stick the arrow in several times from above the ground to see if there’s any trace of blood or anything else.”

“But, what do you think, is there a snake or a rabbit here, and is it dangerous to stick your hand in the hole?” I thought quickly, as Abdul Rahman had begun teaching me and testing my intelligence and general knowledge, and Abu Ibrahim and his companions were certainly not starving while waiting for the hunt; my mother had loaded the mule with masses of food from which we had not eaten a single meal so far.

“Of course it’s dangerous; even if you only saw a rabbit enter, a poisonous snake could be waiting for it inside. But this hole was not made by a snake; the footprints and droppings around it point to a four-legged animal, possibly a rabbit, and possibly something else with sharp teeth; let us stab it with an arrow.” While my companion used his hands as a trap in front of the hole, I began stabbing the ground over and over again until we caught our second prey in seconds.

“A duck and a rabbit are enough for now; let us go back and rest for a while, and maybe we got lucky and have caught something in our traps.”

“Are there any other wild animals that we should be wary of?”

“Yes, the wildcat. It is bigger than a dog, but it is also quicker and more powerful. Unless you constrict it in a corner with no way out, under normal circumstances it will not attack. It is preferable to avoid it because it has fangs and is not edible. And then there is the wild boar, which has large

fangs as well, and if threatened, it will attack and butts like a bull, although usually it runs away from people."

"But our neighbours eat boar and enjoy the flavour of the meat. I believe that if necessary, we could hunt and eat it, without fear of being poisoned, for surely Allah is All-Forgiving and Most Merciful." Abdul Rahman laughed loudly as he smacked my shoulder with his heavy hand.

"I like your philosophy, though I understand now why you get sheikh Yunis so angry."

I let Abdul Rahman grab the three birds from the traps and went to collect some fresh wild figs for us to eat, as well as a lot of dry almonds hanging on the trees from the previous and current seasons that had found no-one to collect them, and I decided to pick some for Al-Aghar. The bee-eater was the largest of the caught birds, and it was no bigger than the palm of my hand. It was brightly coloured, with yellow, black, and blue extending from its neck to its legs and green at the tip of its wings, followed by red and then white. It had a green tail and a long beak that allowed it to catch bees easily. The trap had caught it by the wing, but the wing was not broken.

"This bird helps us by catching insects, and its meat is not worth the effort of preparing it." I finished speaking and opened my palm to let it go. The remaining two birds were both yellow goldfinches, but one had been strangled by the trap and the other had a broken leg, so Abdul Rahman twisted its neck. We found the rest of the group sleeping in the shade, Khalil had kindled a fire with hot ashes in preparation for the game, and there was a boiling coffee pot to the side of it.

After approximately another hour, we were on horseback on our way to Écija. Initially, the area was covered in olive plantations and vineyards, but bushes, woods, and fig and almond trees on low hills, easily traversed along the remains of an ancient Roman stone road, soon dominated. When we arrived at the city, we discovered that the stone bridge across the Genil River had been destroyed, and a wooden bridge had been erected beside it, and part of a gate was still in place with remnants of the city wall at the two sides. The area all around the city also appeared to have been destroyed. I looked at my mother's uncle as the last rays of sunlight shone yellow on his white beard.

“It was demolished by Abdul Rahman Al-Nasir at the beginning of his reign. The city was under the control of the rebel Umar ibn Hafsun, so Abdul Rahman marched here in the winter of 300 AH, with an army led by Badr ibn Ahmad, who reclaimed the city and demolished the bridge and the walls to deprive the residents of fortifications in case they resolved to rebel once more in support of ibn Hafsun. And, because it is an inland city he decided not to rebuild the wall later, and the wooden arch still serves its original purpose,” Abu Ibrahim said, noticing some displeasure on my face, so he added: “That happened two years before my birth.”

“Why is Écija known as Tariq bin Ziyad’s city, may Allah have mercy on him?”

“Because Tariq stayed here for quite some time. After the first battle against the Gothic king and his forces, Tariq, and those who joined him from Al-Udwa, headed for the two cities of Medina-Sidonia, then the mujahedeen fighters moved to Morón, which we will pass later, and from there he ascended north to Carmona, which he also conquered, then turned westward, and conquered Seville. There, he heard that the Gothic forces were gathering near Écija, so he headed east until he reached here and defeated them. From Écija, Tariq dispatched a company to conquer Córdoba, led by Mughith Al-Rumi, accompanied by seven hundred cavalry. He sent another force to Málaga, a third to Vera, and a fourth to Tudmir, while he remained here with the rest of the forces waiting for the return of the others and then moved with them to conquer other cities until they reached Toledo.”

The available options for an overnight stay included a guest house belonging to the city governor, an inn on the other side of the city, or the mosque in the middle of it, and it was the latter that was chosen because our delegation was tired and we did not want to spend the night talking and catching up on news in the guest house as we were determined to continue our journey after the sunrise prayer. We did not need the inn because we were loaded with food. We left Khalil and the horses at a stable in the city centre to inspect the horseshoes, feed the horses, and care for them. We agreed with him that he would bring food to the mosque after the evening prayer, and we went to use the Hammam. Before we left for the mosque,

five men entered the Hammam, cheering and scolding Abu Ibrahim for not coming directly to their homes.

“We arrived late and plan to continue our journey at dawn, so please excuse us.”

“Of course we will; you are at home and among your family! Please join us for dinner and we will let you take your rest. But you can’t leave until we have fulfilled our duty of hospitality for three days.”

The discussion continued between Abu Ibrahim, with symbolic participation in support of his opinion from the rest of us, and the hosts, who demanded that they be allowed their rights. We walked with them to their guest house on condition that they guaranteed we could travel on the following day. As I learnt later, two of our hosts had attended the Caliph’s Eid reception in Al-Zahra, They normally had access to the Caliph after the entry of the delegations from the Six Jund, so, according to the Caliphate’s arrangements, we held a higher status, but no such difference appeared between the men that night. When I later asked Abu Ibrahim why he had not insisted on staying overnight in the mosque and thus sleeping early and traveling at dawn, instead of being late for dinner, obliging people to slaughter and make food, all of which meant that our departure was delayed. He explained that an evasion of hospitality would insult the people of the area, who would consider us misers, unwilling to host them in our turn if they passed through our area. Écija is on our way to Córdoba, and Medina-Sidonia is on their way to Algeciras and Al-Udwa, and neither of us can do without the other. “So, there was no room for evasion, and praise be to Allah, we got away after only one night. Typically, families honour their guests for three and a third days before questioning them about their reason for visiting or allowing them to continue on their way. The people of villages and small towns have kept their Arab mentality, not like the people of Córdoba.”

“And what would you have said later if we slept in the mosque and they found out?”

“I would say we arrived late at night and needed to leave early, and I would ask the sheikh from the mosque to deliver our greetings and apologies.”

“What do you think, how did they know we arrived so quickly?”

“It is certain that the stable owner immediately relays the news of arrivals to them, so they know which of the visitors to their city they should welcome and who they can ignore, as everyone has his own level of prestige.”

25

Solomon's Hudhud

We left Écija well into the morning after a long evening of chatting with our hosts, about history, geography, customs, and hints around the current political situation. To our hosts, the most important event was the Caliph's response to their complaint against Qadi Asbaq ibn Qassem and his transfer from his hometown of Écija to the court of Carmona. The changes also included the transfer of Ahmed ibn Mufrej from the court of Sidonia and Osuna to Málaga, after Khalid ibn Hisham's dismissal from there. Abu Ibrahim informed the notables who accompanied us through the city to bid us farewell, that Najit ibn Muhammad would arrive in Écija in two days' time, on his way to Sidonia, Algeciras, and Al-Udwa to deliver gifts and money for the expenses of the army. Abu Ibrahim was thanked for this information that he had gathered before leaving Al-Zahra, and which would enable the people of Écija to provide a suitable reception for the Vizier in charge of the army treasury.

We took the direct road south to Osuna, but our target for that night was Cazalla, ten miles west of Osuna. Umran suggested that we compensate for the time lost in the morning by galloping the horses. "The road is muddy and easy on the animals, and after two miles we can go along the river for five miles then turn west with it for another five miles before heading six miles on the southwest road where we will border the Huéznar River for five miles to Cazalla." Umran was speaking to Abu Ibrahim, and he continued: "We do not have to reach Cazalla tonight. We can sleep in any mail tower on the road, or on the banks of the river, since the area is inhabited, cultivated, and safe."

"If we are not lucky enough to get to Cazalla and have to spend the night somewhere before reaching it, we can stop for the night in Morón tomorrow." This answer of Abu Ibrahim's satisfied the soldier in Umran, and Sheikh Masoud was in no hurry at all. If it had been up to him, he would have spent three nights in every guesthouse on the road. Also, Umran had

no particular reason to return quickly to Sidonia castle, which he had been in charge of for years, but the nature of a soldier required him to choose the best and shortest road to his goal.

“If you want to gallop, we can race you for an hour before the lunch break.”

Umran agreed to my suggestion, and Abdul Rahman asked to participate, so Abu Ibrahim agreed, reassuring us that he, Khalil, and Sheikh Masoud would take care of the two mules and would arrive right after us at lunchtime.

Abu Ibrahim chose to make me aware of Umran’s standing, as he told me that he frequently supervised the organization and delivery of foodstuffs from Sidonia to the fleet, sometimes in the port of Al-Algeciras, and sometimes in Cádiz. That morning, I learned from Umran that Sidonia feeds the army on its way to and from Al-Udwa. Sometimes the city receives financial gifts in exchange for the services it provides, but often it does not get anything as this is one of the duties from which its residents derive importance in Córdoba. My mind became more active as I responded to the conversation and absorbed information. I asked about the different types of food and how they were handled until they reached the soldiers’ mouths, all while making a plan to win the race or at least to prevent Umran and Abdul Rahman from securing a significant win. Al-Aghar was younger than their horses, and I’m lighter than they are: I realized that my luck would improve the longer the race lasted.

The sun reached the middle of the sky, and, as we reached the riverbank in the west, our shadows were beneath us. Abu Ibrahim reminded us that we wanted to gallop and he suggested that we stop before the road turned away from the river so that we could take our siesta near the water. “The winner should prepare the fire, and the last to arrive should take care of all three horses.” Before we set off, my mother’s uncle asked me about how Al-Aghar was doing, and then he whispered to me: “They will get ahead of you at first, and you can outrun them later, but you should let them win without letting them realize that it is deliberate.”

“But I don’t want to lose, and I would not like having to take care of their horses.”

“Etiquette, Suleiman, requires that you do not win when you know that you can. If you cannot control your impulses then at least come in second.” I did not like the idea, but I was there to learn, and maybe my mother’s uncle was right, what mattered was that I knew I could win. We set off and sped up gradually until the horses reached their full potential. Umran and Abdul Rahman ran parallel for a while with Al-Aghar behind them, and then Abdul Rahman slowly moved into the lead and I had to bypass them both before retreating from the first position. I unleashed Al-Aghar, kicking him with my heels to encourage him. I also drummed my hands repeatedly on his flank and bent my head over his neck. I passed Umran and when Abdul Rahman looked behind, he found me following him. His attempts to urge his black horse to greater speed were unavailing, as its neck and front legs were covered in sweat. I outran them for a while then rested my heels around Al-Aghar’s belly. It seemed that Abdul Rahman had decided to let Umran get ahead of him, as he now followed me on his horse, and I saw Abdul Rahman a few paces behind him. Gradually, we slowed down and drew closer together again, finishing the race side by side. Umran considered himself the winner, as he started telling us that constant speed is best for a horse, giving it staying power and enabling it to win. He added that he would lay the fire, and before I could utter a word, Abdul Rahman said that he would take care of our horses.

I did not succeed in my voluntarily chosen mission and came back empty-handed with no game to find that Khalil had prepared food and coffee, having declared that it would be best to eat the food we had. We took our siesta to the sound of Khalil’s flute, and we reached the bank of the Huéznar River just before sunset. It was clear that we would not reach Cazalla before nightfall, so we decided to spend the night wherever suited us best before evening as the moon was on the wane and would give no light to help us travel by night. This was the first night we slept on our own with no host, and the first time I had slept at night without a roof over my head. I told my companions about what I had seen and heard on the night of the lunar eclipse, and I listened to explanations about night guidance by the stars that filled the sky, and I saw more than ten comets pierce the sky.

The fortress of Murcia was an hour west of where we remained overnight, but we headed south to Cazalla and entered it between the forenoon and noon. It is a small village on a flat hill with houses of one floor, inhabited by

farmers who work vast areas with abundant river water. We thanked all those who offered to host us, repeating our need to reach Morón before sunset, and we succeeded in continuing our journey without getting off our horses. The land between Cazalla and Morón is red, muddy and flat, and wheat and barley are cultivated there, in between forested areas.

I was intrigued by the large number of hoopoes on the road. Sheikh Masoud said that hoopoes are numerous and are not afraid of people like other birds “because they are neither hunted nor eaten them, for the hoopoe is a smart bird.” The story of the Hudhud and the Prophet Solomon the Wise is known to all. It appears in the Quran, but explanations and conclusions differ from school to school. I had no choice but to see the story through the eyes of Sheikh Masoud. He said that the Prophet Solomon understood the language of birds, animals, insects, and everything that stepped on the land and swam in the sea. “His soldiers, the genies, the birds, and the animals were wont to shade him from the sun when he was out walking.

One day the Hudhud was not in position, so Solomon the Wise threatened it with severe torment if it did not have a convincing reason for its absence. When the hoopoe arrived, it defended itself by saying that it had been occupied in flying to Yemen where it found a people who worshipped the sun and had not heard of the strength of Solomon the Wise or his religion, and that they were ruled by a woman of beauty, wealth, and intelligence, called Bilqis. It was clear that the Sheikh interpreted the story as a challenge from the Hudhud to the prophet who commanded mankind and the genies, and of course, the Prophet Solomon was surprised by what he heard, so he sent the hoopoe with a message to Bilqis inviting her and her people to convert to Islam. The Hudhud dropped the message in front of her, and, as is stated in the Quran, she said to her people: "O eminent ones, indeed, to me has been delivered a noble letter. It comes from Solomon, and indeed, is 'In the name of Allah, the Entirely Merciful, the Especially Merciful, be not haughty with me but come to me as Muslims.’” According to the Quranic narration, Bilqis converted to the religion of Solomon, of course, thanks to the Hudhud. But the Sheikh did not say from where the Hudhud had flown and returned to Yemen twice, nor did he explain how Bilqis converted to Islam even though a book other than the Quran was revealed to Solomon, son of David.

I did not want to provoke the Sheikh at the beginning of our journey and at the beginning of an entire year during which I would visit the mosque and see Masoud almost every day, and so I asked for no explanations.

The closer we got to Morón, the more forest trees we saw and the higher the hills became. In the afternoon, we saw the city at the top of a high hill. Umran told us that it was at a height of four hundred yards: “And the castle is surrounded by twelve towers and has five gates and a water well that helps the soldiers withstand siege for long periods.” But the city around and below the castle was not walled, and Abu Ibrahim said that its name was taken from a Mauritanian community that had inhabited it long before the emergence of Islam. It is a Semitic city, located halfway between Córdoba and Sidonia. We spent the night as guests of the castle soldiers, and instead of the summer heat which we had experienced day and night since we left Córdoba, I found the air in Morón cold after sunset, and it grew progressively colder as the evening advanced.

The road from Morón to Guadaíra Lake took us a whole day, during which we crossed three rivers, and we saw the Ronda mountain range on our left all the way south. The land was not flat, but it did not consist of high hills either. It resembled a group of half-circles loosely interconnected, like domes lying across the land in disorderly fashion. For most of the day, we were accompanied by the braying of donkeys and mules, the reason for this being the large number of mule farms in the area. The economic strength of Al-Andalus and its prosperity is dependent on the abundance of mules and the guarantee of the equivalent of two mules to every Andalusian. They are the main element in plowing, planting, transporting, and irrigating, and this area is well-suited to the production and breeding of mules, according to Abu Ibrahim, who provided me with appropriate information once he noticed my lack of knowledge about this matter.

“In the spring, farm owners are eager to obtain a strong donkey to mate with ten or fifteen mares every day. Eleven months later, the mares give birth to male mules. And if a horse mates with a female donkey, the result is a female mule. Mules, whether male or female, are sexually active but they are infertile and cannot get pregnant. Three years after being bred, a mule can be put to work.”

“And why do we need mules when we have donkeys and horses?”

“They are stronger, can carry more, and jump higher than horses, and they are smart enough not to let themselves be exploited by being worked to exhaustion, unlike the horse that will obey its owner to the death, and mules are subject to fewer diseases. As for the donkey, it is small, weak, and stubborn, while the horse is fragile, so mules are best for working the land and for the army.”

“This means that the mule decides when to stop working, and it might want to take a break at a critical time for the owner! Generally speaking, I would not exchange Al-Aghar for ten mules, for a mule is a mule, even when it is raised among horses.”

Between the castle and city of Morón and the castle of Guadaíra, we saw tens of farms with large houses attached to them, and we passed by two villages. The castle of Guadaíra sits alone on the summit of a mountain, with no inhabitants around it, but it overlooks a large village from above, as well as the lake of Guadalete, which extends to the southwest, less than half a day’s walk from the city of Arcos, which is at a day’s distance from Sidonia. The road beyond Morón is filled with castles, and among the castles there are watchtowers, and every ten miles a mail tower is to be seen. According to Umran’s explanations, each tower is occupied by three soldiers, three horses, and two mules. The soldiers take turns as look-out from the top of the tower, and normally, they can see two other towers, one on each side, from where signals can be sent by reflecting light off mirrors, or bonfires can be lit at night to warn of danger or to announce the arrival of a mail carrier.

“The mail carrier changes his horse at every tower and can cover up to a hundred miles a day. If the message is important, one of the soldiers from the tower carries it onward at night and the horses never stop running by day or by night. If the message can be delayed, or is too confidential, the soldier entrusted with it can rest in one of the towers for a few hours before continuing on his journey." From the context of the conversation and from some of the questions that I asked Umran, the overseer of Sidonia Castle, I learnt that the towers distributed on the main roads between the cities and districts of Al-Andalus were also used by the regular mail service, where the mail is carried on mules that are not changed at the towers, except in cases of necessity. But the mail carrier has the right to protection,

accommodation, and food in any tower or castle, and he delivers messages from the cities to the castles and receives messages from them for other cities.

“Of course, in times of crisis, it is difficult to deliver the mail and it takes a long time. During the rebellion of Umar ibn Hafsun, Alcalá de Guadaíra, in front of us, was under the sway of Hafsun’s people, and they blocked the roads. So the mail went west and then north and east to Córdoba.” The interjection of Abu Ibrahim reminded me of that other castle, which had been under the control of Ibn Hafsun, on the road between Antequera and Málaga, and this meant that his rebellion had reached from the mountains of Málaga to the Ronda mountain range that ends not far from here.

From the reception we received from the castle soldiers it was clear that we were approaching Sidonia and that my companions on the journey were important people, especially Abu Ibrahim, and of course Umran, who acted as someone of higher rank than the soldiers. We had goat roasted over the fire for dinner, and boiled eggs mixed with olive oil, thyme, and white cheese made from goat’s milk for breakfast.

In the morning, from Alcalá de Guadaíra, I observed two consecutive watchtowers to the north, and a tower to the south, followed by the city of Arcos and the Embalse del Navero reservoir. Within my line of sight there were herds of goats and sheep, spread along the bottom of the mountain and the valley.

“The area behind us is suitable for mule breeding, and the one in front of us seems to be pasture for sheep and goat breeding, so what is there around Sidonia?” My companions on the journey laughed as we descended from the castle towards the village to the left of the river, and Sheikh Masoud said that ducks, geese, and chickens abound here, next to the sheep and goat breeding farms. “We too produce these animals and birds, but we also have fat bulls and cows. Mashallah, water is abundant, as you can see, and the land is flat for the cultivation of grain and fodder, and grass and weed are available summer and winter.”

“Paradise awaits you, Suleiman, and don’t forget about the wild birds, rabbits, and deer; they are all waiting for you to hunt them.” There was no exaggeration in what Abdul Rahman said. All the way to Arcos, wheat plantations covered the ground as far as the eye could see, and thousands

of birds from tens of species and of multiple sizes landed on the shores of the lake. A little sparrow-like bird that I was seeing for the first time caught my attention. It was running around on its legs more than normal sparrows that are constantly flying and landing for short periods. Its head was marked with a crown of feathers in the shape of a triangle. I was told it was a lark, and it could be seen anywhere where water and wheat plantations were to be found. I counted nine types of wild duck, of different colour and size, three types of which were closer in appearance to chickens, but they floated and caught their food in the water. Large, inedible birds, nested on the ground and in the tops of trees or on the roofs of houses. Some of them ate fish, and others caught worms or insects and frogs. Despite their many types, they shared many characteristics such as the length of their legs, necks and beaks, which in some were pointed, and in others thin or curved.

26

A Wife's Revenge

Shortly before noon, we arrived in Arcos from the northern end. From a distance, we could see clearly that it had been built along the edge of a cactus-covered, orange cliff-face. The city wall was cut into the edge of the mountain, and it seemed pointless to me to have built it there, as it appeared nearly impossible for the city to be invaded from the northern end, whether by force or peaceably. At this angle, only climbing lizards could cope with the height, and the city is protected by another natural barrier, namely the river that surrounds it on three sides. The castle battlements were visible at the top edge of the mountain before we turned to the right on the ascending road, where one of the three city gates is to be found. I imagined that whoever stood on the battlements would feel like a bird in the sky, and I hoped we would spend some time in the castle. We arrived at the city gate and left Khalil and the animals in a stable to its right. The animals could not ascend the steps leading to the city centre, where the mosque, castle, and palace are located. My traveling companions acted as if they had returned to the homes of their relatives, but the faces of the soldiers and the guards at the city and castle gates visibly reflected concern. A mixed group of men sat in reception area of the palace, and none of them smiled while greeting us, though some of them welcomed Abu Ibrahim, Umran, and Sheikh Masoud by name. I quickly sneaked out of the reception area onto the adjacent, covered balcony. I saw the river near the base of the cliff from in between the four arches along the balcony's outer edge, and in front of me, a peregrine falcon flew in the air, looking for prey, and then hovered for a while, its wings immobile and its position unchanging.

"Unbelievable! Allah give me strength, and where is he now?" I had not heard the news that caused my mother's uncle to express his displeasure out loud, and I did not hear what response he received, so I returned apprehensively to the reception area to inquire.

"Praise be to Allah, he did not die from the incident, but where is she now?"

“My mother has been at her parents’ home for two days, but my father’s situation is dire, and nothing can be done. We must wait and see what Allah decrees. We thought of taking him to Córdoba, but the physician said the road was too long for him to travel and that the physicians in Córdoba would be unable to save him.” The speaker was a young man of not more than twenty years of age, clean-shaven, sitting without his turban. He looked as if he bore the burdens of all humanity upon his shoulders.

“Since his life is only a matter of days, can we see him now?”

“Possibly of hours, I will go and see if he’s awake.” As he left the reception area, the young man responded to Abu Ibrahim’s question once more, while the rest of those present remained mostly silent or voiced their distress and asked Allah to have mercy and not to forget them. I looked Masoud, Abdul Rahman, Umran, and Abu Ibrahim in the eyes, but none of them offered any explanation; perhaps they assumed I had heard everything while I was on the balcony, or they did not want to say anything in front of the others. When the young man returned and asked us to accompany him, I stood up and followed them through a corridor, past three or four doors, until we reached the patient’s room. Abu Ibrahim shook his hand, and the others contented themselves with greeting him verbally and wishing him good health. His beard and hair were grey, and he appeared to be younger than my mother’s uncle, but his face was sallow and grey, so that he looked severely exsanguinated.

“Ahmad told me what happened. Inshallah, you will get better soon.”

“Did Ahmad also tell you that his mother refused to return my penis?” Did I really hear that Ahmad’s mother was refusing to return Abu Ahmad's penis? All my senses awakened as I would have to understand what had happened without getting explanations from anyone.

“He did not; there are a lot of people in the reception room. Inshallah, a new penis will regrow later, but what would be the point of returning or keeping it?” Abu Ibrahim spoke without expressing his concern that the man’s life was about to be cut short.

“How could it grow back? She chopped it off at the base, and I bled profusely! The physician asked her for the chopped-off part in the hope of sewing it back on, but she refused. Before she even left the palace, the

soldiers searched her room, but they didn't find it. She insisted that I divorce my new wife before she returned it. The Qadi told her that Allah had permitted four wives, and she should not disobey His command."

Everyone remained speechless in the face of these developments, possibly waiting for more details from the husband, who had tired from talking. "Tell your uncle, Abu Ibrahim, what your mother told the Qadi."

"Her stance was that Allah both permitted and prohibited polygamy at one and the same time because the verse required the husband to be fair to his wives, and stated, in the words of Allah: "and you will not be fair." From this, my mother deduced that you should not get married a second time. My mother also stated that the reasons for permitting polygamy no longer exist." It was clear that Ahmad supported his mother while mourning his father's coming demise.

"And you, son, were not able to relieve your mother of your father's penis to console him psychologically?"

"This is their business, she refuses to return it, and my father refuses to divorce his new wife."

"Was it necessary for you to get married, Abu Ahmad? Umm Ahmad comes from a good family, she bore you three sons, and she did her best to take care of your home, and there is nothing wrong with her. Why did you not consult with her at least and get her consent?"

"I did tell her but she refused, and I gave her the option to choose the new wife, but she rejected that as well. And before my wedding night, she pretended to be willing and asked for intercourse then she cut it off. Damn her! I will complain about her to Allah soon, what do you think, Sheikh Masoud?"

"I think that you should give testimony every time you go to sleep, for perhaps Allah will choose not to wake you from your sleep to relieve you of your torment. Lament about her on the Day of Judgment, but forgive her now, for perhaps Allah will respond to your complaint later if you show forgiveness and do not disgrace your family."

“You are on her side, too, Masoud! Isn’t it you people who make us marry by Allah’s command! Is her behavior against Allah’s commands or not? Why do you want me to forgive her?”

“Because you are on the verge of death and it is better to forgive, and if you ask the judge not to pursue her case anymore, you will prevent a scandal befalling your name....”

“Ask Allah for forgiveness, Sheikh Masoud! Let the man be, he has suffered enough already.” Abu Ibrahim’s voice was filled with anger as he scolded Masoud. I remembered the pain of the circumcision and imagined the difference between having the foreskin cut and cutting off the organ from the middle, or from its base as the wounded man had put it.

“Judge as you see fit, Abu Ibrahim and inform the judge that I accept your judgment, and you are all witnesses.” Abu Ahmad’s voice started to get lower, he gasped for air, then passed out and breathed no longer.

“Go to your mother and tell her that she will no longer be sought, and get your father’s penis back so that we can bury it with him after we pray for him this afternoon.” We all left the room except Sheikh Masoud who remained to recite verses from the Qur’an, and the news of the death spread in the palace, the castle and in all the city of Arcos, which had lost its ruler in such a dramatic fashion.

That night, a messenger from Al-Udwa arrived at the castle on his way to Córdoba. The mourners at the funeral ascertained from him that Hassan ibn Qanoon had lost many of his companions after a raid launched against them by Chief Commander Ghalib and Vizier Yahya Al-Tajibi. Ghalib had tempted some of Hassan’s companions with money, so they informed him of his route and helped block his way. When the two sides clashed, the soldiers pretended to be defeated and lured Hassan and his companions to the plain where the rest of the soldiers ambushed them. The battle lasted until midday, and Hassan fled by himself, leaving his companions who saved their own lives by declaring allegiance to the Caliph. The soldiers chased Hassan’s fleeing companions, beheaded one hundred of them, and left another three hundred dead.

This news reached Arcos at the same time as the event between Abu Ahmad and Umm Ahmad, and Córdoba would have to be informed of what

had transpired in order to appoint an alternative ruler. To ensure that the story would not be magnified or exaggerated, Abu Ibrahim wrote an account of the event, to which he added that the deceased has asked him before witnesses to give a tribal ruling in the place of the Qadi's ruling, and that he had chosen to preserve the honour of the family by forgiving the perpetrator. He wrote also that the people of Arcos would choose a ruler and send him to Córdoba to kiss the hand of the Caliph.

We stayed in Arcos for the rest of the day and throughout the day and night of the following day, before setting off for Medina-Sidonia, and we took the opportunity to get acquainted with the city and its ancient Roman monuments. I went around the city on top of the wall and the three gates and wandered through its tiered streets, some of which cannot accommodate two donkeys side by side, especially those that belong to vegetable and bread sellers, who place burdens on both sides of the animal.

The wall is made of brown stone, and it does not differ from the wall in Córdoba in either form or design, except that it does not run flat but goes up and down, following the contour of the mountain. The houses are white, and it can be seen that the older ones were built of mud or small compact stones. Most of the houses are of two floors, and some are of three or have attics above the second floor and, of course, they have an inner courtyard with a flight of stairs leading to the upper floor. I wandered the narrow streets at the beginning of the siesta and was easily able to hear what was going on in the houses on both sides of the street. Voices and the smell of food were coming out of the windows that were open wide in search of air. In the centre of the city, close to the mosque, I found a church and a synagogue, but the Christians and the Jews lived among the Muslims and did not have their own neighbourhoods.

27

Crones and Maidens

We left Arcos on the last morning of the year 362 AH. Unusually, we walked silently, although we would sleep at home that night, or rather my companions would sleep in their homes. The horses were walking behind the mules. I wanted to raise my companions' spirits without hurting their feelings or belittling the severity of what had happened, especially in the case of Abu Ibrahim, who was a friend of the deceased. "Oh uncle, the pain of circumcision is enough for me. If I was to marry, and even that is no longer certain now, then one will be more than enough." Suddenly we started chuckling; I kicked Al-Aghar around the middle. "See you in Medina-Sidonia!" Al-Aghar raged like a storm after he had been half asleep a moment ago, and I heard my mother's uncle pleading with Abdul Rahman: "Catch up with this lunatic, or he will gallop all day." It seems that the hunter was also looking for a reason to break out, as he caught up with me after a while and went ahead urging his black horse on. Al-Aghar understood what was required of him without any additional pressure from me, I bent over and stretched out on his back, and he galloped ahead until I no longer heard the black horse panting or Abdul Rahman shouting. We crossed three valleys, and I stopped at the fourth and walked my horse back and forth in the water, freed him from the saddle, and finished wiping off his sweat with a bath in the water of the valley. As Abdul Rahman arrived, I was retying the saddle around Al-Aghar's middle, and his body was shining and energetic.

"Are the two of you spirits? Your horse doesn't look tired, and he isn't sweating." Abdul Rahman's turban had flown from his head, and his black horse had turned white from the sweat.

"We are not spirits, and Al-Aghar is not a horse, he is a Buraq, a winged stallion. We have been here for a long time; we bathed and drank and have been waiting for you and your black horse. Did you hunt something on the way to keep you back?" Abdul Rahman said nothing, but he moved towards Al-Aghar, touched his back and chest, and shook his head.

“Are we on the right road or have you followed us out of the way?”

“We are on the right road, and we are about a quarter of the way there. Another ride like this and you and the Buraq will be over the hill, and from there you can see Medina-Sidonia sitting like a crown on the summit of the mountain. Take good note of the road for in the coming days I will want to race back and forth between Medina-Sidonia and Arcos with you.” I detected despondence in the voice of the hunter, but I was impressed that he admitted defeat and wanted to try again, so I decided to make him feel better by telling him what Abu Ibrahim had told me.

“I will outrun you a second, a third, and a tenth time. Over short distances, you and your horse can outrun me, but my horse and I are younger and lighter, and we will win any race over a mile long. You should not expect to win, so watch out you don’t develop a complex.”

“The information I was given about you is catastrophically incomplete. They told me that you are a soft Cordovan, good at writing and reading, and I thought you knew nothing of horses.” He was talking to me while wiping the sweat off his horse, gradually turning him black again, but he still breathed raggedly.

“It’s not wrong, but I have learned a lot about horses from books, and this is not my first long trip. I traveled from Córdoba to Málaga with my uncle, and we slept one night on the road and the next in our house by the shore.”

“Two days and one night? Were you on the Buraq?”

“The first day we left in the morning, and on the second day the innkeeper gave us breakfast so we left late, and we arrived before sunset. If Al-Aghar had been with me on that trip, we would have arrived even faster. My uncle and I rode turnabout on Tahboub and Al-Shahba. If my uncle comes to visit me in Medina-Sidonia, I will introduce him to you.” Before I finished my last words, I noticed that Abdul Rahman was staring at something in the distance.

“Turn around slowly, and you will see three red roosters on the right bank of the river, just one of them would keep us sated all day long.” I had never seen such huge birds until now, not even in the Zoo of Al-Zahra. Their legs were long and they had no upper thighs, unlike other birds. They had a body like a ship resting on a wooden pole, a neck like a goose but with no

feathers, and a head like a kite. The feathers on their bellies were white, the chest and back red with black stripes, and they had tails that opened like a peacock's tail, but had shorter feathers.

"They look wary, their eyes are fierce and their necks are stretched. If they can fly, it will be difficult to approach them."

"They fly easily and elegantly, but they present a big target for an arrow, whether they are on the ground or in the air. Take your horse and cross the valley, then turn to the right and attack them from behind, so they run towards me." Al-Aghar followed me quietly, and Abdul Rahman moved very slowly, preparing his bow and arrows while keeping his horse between him and the birds. On the other bank, I mounted Al-Aghar and sped to the right, and when I realized that I had gone far from where the birds were, I turned back to the valley and crossed the water, moving casually, hoping to approach them as closely as possible to get a good look at them before they flew. But their colour seemed to annoy Al-Aghar and he neighed, so I headed towards them swiftly. Before they could fly over Abdul Rahman, he had shot off two arrows at them; one of them dropped, and the other two survived. I dismounted from Al-Aghar and retrieved the victim, avoiding its beak. Its weight was equivalent to that of a medium-sized goat, and as Abdul Rahman slaughtered it he said that it nests in excavations on the ground, and the females sit on two to three eggs. At his request, I dug a hole to bury the feathers and the intestines of the bird in. When the rest of our companions joined us, the bird was ready for roasting any time we decided to rest. The animals drank, Khalil picked up our catch, and we continued on the road together.

"I heard from your uncles that you are a friend of our Emir Hisham, do you think he will make a good caliph?" Like the others, I looked at Sheikh Masoud in surprise at such a question coming out of nowhere. Abu Ibrahim shook his head disapprovingly at the Sheikh's words, and Abdul Rahman just smiled, while Umran responded quickly: "You will never change; you will continue to ask whatever is on your mind with no caution. One of those days, your words will lead you to prison or to the grave."

"But Suleiman's uncle said that he is a friend of the Emir, and therefore I want to know his opinion about the next Caliph."

“And who told you that Hisham will be the next Caliph, and how can Suleiman or anyone else judge a ten-year-old boy whose personality has not yet developed?”

Masoud told Abu Ibrahim that the Sheikhs of Córdoba and others were talking about Hisham as his father’s heir, despite the fact that he had not yet taken the pledge of allegiance. He said also that Córdoba was full of talk about a misunderstanding between Al-Hakim and most of his ten brothers, and that only three of them were attending official ceremonies at the palace. This information provoked Umran, who asked mockingly and disapprovingly:

“Where did you get that news from, Sheikh, we were with you and we heard nothing of this?”

“We separated a lot in Córdoba, and I visited the mosques as well as my acquaintances, and the information is correct: The Slavs and the Caliph’s wife are attempting to persuade Al-Hakim to take the pledge of allegiance from Hisham soon.”

“Listen, everyone,” Abu Ibrahim said as he stopped his horse, and we stopped in turn. “I will put anyone who talks about this matter directly or indirectly in Medina-Sidonia in prison immediately. I do not want any talk about this, or even a hint of the relationship between Suleiman and Hisham. The issue of the caliphate is an Umayyad affair, and they know what they are doing. And we should not interfere in matters that do not concern us. One’s fate is predestined.”

“But all of the Umayyad Caliphs died young, and this matter is still ongoing.”

“Allah give us strength! It seems that the Sheikh drank wine for breakfast, come, Suleiman caught a rooster for you and you will be sane again after lunch”. Abdul Rahman’s intervention eased the tension, the Sheikh stopped disputing, and I was inspired to answer the first question he had put to me.

“Emir Hisham is a very kind, intelligent person, and he is receiving an extensive, careful education. If this continues over the coming years, if Allah wills, he will make a good Caliph like his grandfather and father.”

“I fought with his grandfather, and Umran and Abdul Rahman fought with his father, and you and your generation will fight, if Allah wills, with him, and in Medina-Sidonia we will teach you all the arts we know to preserve position among other soldiers. But let us end this conversation here, until Allah commands otherwise. Let us taste this rooster, which was Suleiman's first catch.”

“I did not catch it; Abdul Rahman shot it from the sky with an arrow.” After we stopped on the bank of the Guadalete Valley, I changed the conversation to the subject of the heirs of the late Abu Ahmed, “Will the new wife get her share as one of the heirs of the deceased?” My mother’s uncle sighed and looked as if he would prefer not to talk about that either.

"The marriage was not consummated, and nothing changed, so there will be no inheritance for her. What happened to the family was a real disaster. Besides the death, there is also the scandal, and now all of his sons will be deprived of taking their father’s position, and they will have to leave the palace soon. They may have already escaped from the criticism and left the city. All his work and efforts wasted for a whim. May Allah damn the devil.”

“Yes, may Allah damn the accursed devil,” Masoud said while performing his ablutions at the edge of the valley. He continued: “The devil overwhelms the sane with the whim of a fleeting moment, but Abu Ahmed wanted this marriage, despite his wife’s refusal and the advice of his friends. This was not a whim, and the devil had nothing to do with it.”

“Shall I sneak up behind him and push him into the water to cool his brain?” Abu Ibrahim responded to Umran’s whisper by saying that the Sheikh was partly right, but his way of talking was annoying. “Let him talk as he pleases for now, I will arrange something for him with his wife that will make him forget all he has heard in Córdoba and seen on the road.” And when laughter arose, the Sheikh turned round to ask them what they were plotting.

We decided to walk on slowly without resting, and after a while, we saw Medina-Sidonia on the top of a hill and, as we got closer, it became clear to me that it looked like Arcos. The northern border to our front was walled and it stood at the edge of a steep cliff, with the castle on the northeastern edge, and Abu Ibrahim confirmed that it contained a palace, just like in

Arcos. The road to it ran along the river but, as I saw later, it is not surrounded on three sides by water.

In the afternoon, a sand storm erupted in the city and moved north. Abu Ibrahim noticed that I was having trouble understanding what was going on. “What you see now are your crazy relatives, they are on horseback and are heading this way to greet us - any excuse for a celebration! They will be here soon, and we will be covered in their dust.” The storm cloud arrived; some of them were already pulling out their swords, they circled around us, and came to a halt behind us, singing and chanting, while we all remained on our horses. We reached the Gate of the Sun, or the Gate of Córdoba, before sunset, for everything here has at least two names. As soon as we passed through the gate that had been opened to welcome us, the ululations, cheering, and welcoming from the women increased as the rest of the relatives of each of my companions gathered, waiting for them to appear. The rest of the people of the city, who had heard the news of our arrival a while ago and had certainly been able to see us approach along the road for hours, all participated in the celebration.

We got off our horses in the square and it was time for kissing; three kisses on each cheek, and a hug, while the head was held fast to prevent escape. An endless process, and my traveling companions had not warned me of what was awaiting me. The men stood in lines to kiss as we shook hands and kissed and greeted them. The women and girls stood in a line behind the men, and when we had finished greeting the men, I started to greet the women’s line alone, and Abu Ibrahim told them: “This is Suleiman, son of Aminah.” It bothered me that he named me after my mother, but I understood that he introduced me to them like this because they knew my mother. The crones took the opportunity to ask after my mother, and they kissed me while they were talking and did not stop at only three kisses on each cheek either. When I was lucky, I caught a maiden in the line, and I did not leave her before her cheeks were swollen from kissing or another old crone pulled me away from her. The line turned into a circle, the girls stepped back, and I remained surrounded by the crones and mothers carrying their children on their hips. “How is your mother?” “How many brothers do you have?” “How old are you?” One even asked me if my uncle Issa had married. I gave full answers, and I checked their faces, looking to see if I could recognize anyone from my mother’s description that I should be wary of.

A young girl introduced herself as the granddaughter of Abu Ibrahim and said that he had asked her to rescue me and take me home. I walked beside her proudly and made myself as tall as I could, but I did not even reach her shoulder. Everything about her reminded me of Mariam, my uncle's wife. She was very beautiful, fit, willowy, and everything was just the right size. But she differed from Mariam in that her hair was black, and she had black eyes and long eyelashes.

"How old are you, Suleiman?"

"Ten, soon eleven." I thought it was permissible to exaggerate.

"I am eighteen, twice your age; my name is Zahra." Her sharp tone suggested that she had misinterpreted my usual, scrutinizing looks, or perhaps she was overly sensitive.

"Have you seen my horse Al-Aghar? I left him in the crowd."

"Khalil took him to the stable, don't worry, you will find your things at the house."

"You go home or wherever you want to go, I am going to tour the city and I will come after the night-time prayer." I decided to make her fail the mission assigned to her by her grandfather so that he would know she had behaved badly.

"But you are new here and don't know the city or the house."

"Medina-Sidonia is not bigger than a single street in Córdoba, and I can go as far as the moon at night and still return on my own, so please go on ahead." While we were talking, we entered a street that led us to the square opposite the mosque. I could see the walls of the castle behind the mosque, and that meant that the palace was there, and we were in the eastern part of the city. Before Zahra had finished asking if I was sure what I wanted to do, I set off down towards the gate of Bethlehem in the wall, recalling my mother's explanations. I left the gate and the wall to my left and walked on to the south gate, the Gate of Algeciras. I left that gate behind me and walked north, then turned left at the first intersection, and stopped in front of the second house. This was the home of my mother and uncles. I pulled out the key hanging around my neck but hesitated for a moment before entering the house. I thought that perhaps it would be an

insult to Abu Ibrahim to come here first instead of going to his home. I decided to go in, but just for a short while, without sitting down. It was almost nightfall, but I could see the clean, wide white courtyard around which there were flowerbeds filled with mud and dry weeds. To the right of the courtyard was a staircase with decorative tiles leading to the second floor, and continuing up to the attic above the second floor. To the right of the staircase was a corridor leading to the back garden, and in that corridor was the secret entrance to the underground cellar where my mother went to hide when someone was bothering her, and she did not want them to know where she was. They thought that she was outside the city, while she was under the house in what remained of the Roman underworld, a place which was over a thousand years old. It was full of antiquities and Roman coins, but my mother had revealed the secret to no-one except her son. There was no time to explore the house or the hiding place then, I had to leave before the neighbours broke into the house and insisted on fulfilling their duty of hospitality.

I headed northwest to the Gate of the Saltwater Spring and turned right to cross the city centre to the mosque and the castle. I found Abu Ibrahim in the mosque, and Masoud was very happy to see me in the front row. After the prayer, my mother's uncle asked me if Zahra had annoyed me.

"Girls are intelligent until they turn twelve, and then their intelligence decreases and their pride increases until they marry and turn into good people, isn't that so?" The old man laughed and said that she might have been jealous because I kissed all the girls of the city except her, then we stopped talking as Masoud came and sat with us.

"In next Friday's address, I will welcome you officially and let everyone know that you have come to stay with us. Do not forget to come and pray and don't be like Umran and Abdul Rahman, who I only see at Ramadan and the Eids."

"Suleiman will take part in some lessons he did not take in Córdoba, so you will see him constantly at the mosque. Most of his time will be spent at the castle to learn horsemanship and martial arts."

"I will spend some time at our house; the garden needs attention." I thought it was a good opportunity to let them know that I had passed by the house and that I could manage on my own if necessary. We excused ourselves

from Masoud and left the mosque. We climbed the staircase to the castle behind the square, and to the palace where my mother's uncle lived with his family. The entire time from the end of the prayer, Abu Ibrahim was greeting and shaking hands with people in the square and on the staircase. For the first time, I concluded that he was the ruler of the city. I thought myself foolish not to have realized this before, and I was surprised that no one in Córdoba had told me. I did not see Zahra that night, and I was so tired that I could only ask about Al-Aghar and postponed visiting him until early in the morning.

I woke up late, and my ears and nose led me to the dining hall where I found about ten people from the household and its employees. "Good morning, it looks like you are late coming back from the moon," Zahra said discourteously. The others did not understand what she meant. "Good morning everyone, good morning thorn,... I mean Zahra (Blossom)."

"He seems to have an even bigger mouth than you, Zahra. Good morning, I am Abdul Raouf and this is Sameh, and this is Lubna, the youngest. And this is my father, and you already know my grandfather." The speaker was younger than Zahra, and the eldest of Ibrahim's children. His mother entered with milk and he continued introducing her as well: "And this is Umm Abdul Raouf, your mother's first cousin."

"It is the beginning of the month and of the year, and there is no moon, what on earth are you talking about?" Ibrahim asked his eldest daughter. "Yesterday, instead of coming home with me, Suleiman said he would travel to the moon and return at night." Her father stopped speaking, wondering what was going on, and her grandfather remained silent, convinced that I was capable of responding, while her younger brother and sister listened to my mother's cousin intervene in my defence: "Now it is Suleiman's turn. You have vented your rage on him."

I decided to respond immediately, otherwise, being one of the youngest, I would be reduced to the weakest position among them, and I recalled some lines from a satirical poem I had thought of yesterday after meeting the daughter of my mother's maternal cousin who is also the daughter of my mother's paternal cousin.

They named you Zahra for the blossoms that bear fruit

This blossom produces but a prickly thorn

Fit and beautiful with character of scorn

A husband and cave home would best you suit

It was not as good as Ibn Shaddad's poems, of course, but these were my first biting verses, and they came out spontaneously and hurtfully so that Zahra left the hall amidst the laughter of the others. Her mother commented: "He who plays with a cat must bear the scratches." Her father asked her grandfather: "Who is this that you have brought with you from Córdoba, Abu Ibrahim?"

I spent half the day riding Al-Aghar outside the city wall to introduce him to the region and to keep him strong after the long daily rides of the past week. In the afternoon, I visited the home of my mother's family and found a gardener working on the garden and a woman cleaning the house, on Abu Ibrahim's instructions. In the evening, the first dinner party was held to welcome me, and parties continued almost daily for more than two weeks, attended by the sons of Abu Ibrahim, Ali and Jamal, his daughter Maha's husband, and my mother's cousins Ahmed, Mansour, and Hamdan, who are the brothers of Ibrahim's wife Sobhia. They each had four or five sons and daughters, the eldest of whom was my age and the youngest still an infant. It was clear that the Arabs of Medina-Sidonia are all related by blood or by lineage, and because I was the guest of Abu Ibrahim, and belonged to people of Córdoba of Yemeni origin, the feasts had no end, and I was not able to accept or refuse because, at the time, I was in the home of my primary host. But our customs necessitated my knowing everyone who invited me so that I could invite them in my turn one day when an occasion of their own warranted it. It is not quite accurate to say that the invitations were for me, rather they were for hundreds of people, but given in my honour, and at the end of each event, the competition to issue the next invitation started, while appeasing those who gradually turned to the back of the queue.

28

The Principles of Horsemanship

The southeastern tower of the castle, or occasionally the attic of our family home, became my sleeping quarters. The view to the front from both locations extended south to Barbate and the city of Algeciras on the coast, to the west to the city and the gulf of Cádiz, and to the east to the plains extending from the Ronda mountain range. From the top of the tower, I could also see the river and the plain extending to Arcos.

On the first nights of the month, I was astounded by the density and the brightness of the stars in the sky, many of which were hidden as the moon rotated. The weather in Medina-Sidonia in the middle of Muharram 363 AH, corresponding to the beginning of the last week of October 973 AD, was hot by day and cold and windy by night. I was told that it resembled the desert climate, despite the fact that water and grass coated all of the land. With each passing day, it rained more frequently and more intensely.

My theoretical lessons revolved around everything related to horsemanship, including history, legislation, texts, methods, and the arts of applying its manifold terms, while my practical lessons included training and a gradual introduction to the use of weapons and the art of horseback riding, as well as hunting methods and survival training without water or food. All in all, there was a group of ten boys of similar age, five from Medina-Sidonia, two from Algeciras, and two from Seville. Abdul Rahman was responsible for teaching us hunting and survival techniques. Sheikh Masoud took upon himself to teach us the history and laws of horsemanship, linking everything back to the Prophet, his Companions, and the Holy Qur’an. Al-Assi took over the use of the sword and archery, and Al-Atti who, like Al-Assi, was one of the castle soldiers under Umran’s direct supervision, took over horse-riding and fighting from the back of a horse. In the early weeks, we were also under the supervision of Sa’ad ibn Ibrahim, who was about fifteen years old, half the age of the rest of the teachers, and his task was to help us build up the muscles required for the manipulation of weapons and for riding.

He told us that he would check in on us every two weeks to see how far we had progressed. The program was extremely exhausting; our day started with the predawn prayer and did not always end with the sunset prayer if nighttime practice was required.

At the beginning of the new year 974 AD, the notes I had been taking every evening had grown to a hundred pages and needed to be re-worked and explained, if others were to be able to understand their meanings, content, and objectives. To summarize some of the terms of horsemanship, it may be said that one of the benefits of learning this, is that it drives away anxiety and grief from the heart, and Masoud was fond of quoting some verses of the Surah At-Tawbah, the Repentance, in that regard: “So fight them and Allah will punish them at your hands, put them to shame, help you overcome them, and soothe the hearts of the believers - removing rage from their hearts. And Allah pardons whoever He wills. For Allah is All-Knowing, All-Wise.”

Horsemanship is more than just fighting with a sword; the sword is only half of it, while the other half is a matter of debate. True horsemanship consists of two things, one being knowledge and eloquence and the other mastery of archery and the art of wounding. Because the Prophet and his Companions perfected those two aspects of horsemanship, they were able to conquer hearts with debates and proof and lands with swords and spears. Allah the Almighty commanded His Prophet to debate with infidels and hypocrites, as well as to be the executioner of His hardened enemies and warriors. The science of debate and fighting is one of the most important sciences and the most beneficial to worshippers in both this life and the afterlife, indeed, apart from the blood of martyrs, the ink of scholars is the only equivalent. Exaltation and high status are only granted to these two groups in the two lives we experience, and the rest of the people are their subjects and should revere them as their leaders.

I recorded one of Masoud’s lessons which stated that horsemanship is in the service of Jihad, which is of three types. The first is Defensive Jihad, which is the most difficult, as the Prophet said: “Whoever fights to protect his wealth and is killed, is a martyr. Whoever fights to protect himself, is a martyr.” The second type of Jihad is the pure Offensive Jihad, which only one of two types of man desires: either a man of great faith who fights to

uphold Allah's word or a man who desires benefit and gain. The third type is the Jihad that man engages in of his own volition; good people choose it to uphold their religion, while ordinary people choose it for money and the love of victory. The Defensive Jihad is obligatory on everyone, and only a coward will abandon it; it permits a slave to strive without the approval of his master, and a child without the permission of his parents.

As part of the definition of horsemanship, we also learnt that it is divided into two types: only those who have faith and courage can truly accomplish it, while the second type is common among the brave men who learned its arts from the Prophet and his actions. It has been proven that the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, was accustomed to stab with a spear, to ride horses saddled and bareback, and to carry a sheath on his shoulder. Horsemanship manifests itself in four disciplines, the first of which is attacking and retreating on horseback, the second is archery, the third is stabbing with spears, and the fourth is manipulation of the sword; anyone who excels in these disciplines is recognized as an accomplished horseman. Those four disciplines were only mastered to perfection by the first Conquerors of Islam, the warriors of faith, the Companions, may Allah be pleased with them, and to add to their knightly chivalry they had chivalry of faith, certainty of purpose, they competed to achieve martyrdom, and they gave their souls to attain the love and satisfaction of Allah.

The art of archery alone runs to twenty chapters that must be learned, and the Prophet is said to have recommended archery above all else. The fundamentals of archery include fifteen aspects that range from how to hold the bow to determining the reasons for failure to hit the target, the movement of the arrow on its way to the target, correction of all errors, rules for safety while shooting; and, of course, standards of manufacture for bows and arrows. There is a whole chapter on shooting etiquette, which includes things like arriving in a clean state, praying before shooting, reciting invocations to hit the target, all of which emphasize that this is a matter far removed from amusement or entertainment. Etiquette and learning to shoot are counted as humane principles to which an archer should adhere, but there are nine other aspects relating to the equipment to be used and the quality of the craft in order to ensure hitting the target. Each aspect consists of multiple characteristics that should be carefully observed, according to Al-Assi's instructions even the position of the mouth

during shooting is related to the accuracy of hitting the target. Al-Assi showed us the twenty secrets involved in mastering archery while standing, sitting, or on a horse, as well as the twelve defects that can affect the bow and arrows and how to identify and deal with them. Other equestrian arts, such as stabbing with a spear and sword use, were overseen by Al-Assi, and I learned new ways of riding horses, whether saddled or bareback, from him.

In less than four months, Al-Aghar has learnt evasive tactics, running to either side and backwards, avoiding an attacker and jumping to one side at the last moment so that the attacker falls into the void, whether it is a rider, a wolf, or a foot soldier. Gradually, I was able to stab a watermelon that was rolling on the ground with a spear from the back of Al-Aghar or to hang on one side and snatch something off the ground while my horse was running at full speed.

With Abdul Rahman, we learned quickly and easily how to hunt for animals, birds, and fish, as well as how to identify which insects and wild plants are edible and which are poisonous and should be avoided. We started fires by banging rocks together and rubbing wood against wood. We roasted and ate ants, bees, and various lizards, and snakes. We learned how to find water in all conditions and places, by day and by night, how to sleep safely in the wilderness, and what to carry with us in all circumstances to help in emergencies. We climbed mountains, camped in caves, and built shelters out of mud, grass, and wood. We built rafts and sails to use the rivers for transportation and learned how to treat wounds and make use of some wild herbs.

During my stay in Medina-Sidonia, I communicated with my family in Córdoba by letter. My father wrote to me that he had transcribed many of the books of the physician Al-Zahrawi, which were popular in both the Islamic and Christian worlds. In a later letter, my father explained that Abu Al-Fadl and his wife had visited Córdoba and that, after visiting specialists, he had accepted that it was him who could not have children rather than his wives. He also adopted an orphan boy from Córdoba, bought a girl from captivity, and returned to Antequera with a fully integrated family. I was informed that our sixth neighbor, Ibn Imran, had met Gerbert and brought a lengthy letter confirming the veracity of the papacy rumors. In fact, Gerbert

added the information that one of the Roman nobles had imprisoned and then strangled Pope Benedict VI in prison at the end of the previous year. He appointed himself Pope for a month, took possession of the papal treasures and fled with them from Rome to Constantinople, and there was now a new Pope in Rome named Benedict VII.

I did not need news other than of my family from Córdoba because the war in Al-Udwa was the most important event of the first half-year of my stay in Medina-Sidonia, and we were aware of the messages and news being exchanged between the two parties. Every week, messages and news passed by us, or we saw visitors from Al-Udwa on their way to Córdoba to receive gifts from the Caliph for their war efforts or the price of the betrayal of Ibn Qanoon by his supporters, and we frequently bore witness to the severed heads that were carried to Córdoba. Commander Ghalib crucified some of Ibn Qanoon's companions, after which his son and sister surrendered and pledged allegiance. Then Hassan himself followed, surrendering once only a few hundred of his supporters remained. Towards the middle of the year, he was granted safe passage and began preparing to travel to Córdoba to submit to the Caliph. I also knew from the letter carriers that Emir Hisham had contracted smallpox and that the Caliph was worried about him so he began distributing money and alms to turn away misfortune, and he continued and even increased this after the Emir's recovery. In the month of Rajab, a caravan passed through Medina-Sidonia on its way to Algeciras with a group of mules laden with money, jewellery, and garments, accompanied by the Caliph's trustee, Durri, who had previously given Minat Al-Rumman to the Caliph and was now one of the Deputy Heads of Cavalry. The money was for the soldiers, and the gifts were for the chiefs of the tribes who arrived in Algeciras on their way to Córdoba after Hassan ibn Qanoon surrendered.

There was some anxiety in Medina-Sidonia at the time, and there were many meetings between the residents and Abu Ibrahim after evening prayers. I overheard them talking about the soldiers and Berbers who would soon set out for Córdoba, and how, on their way there, they would devour everything like locusts. I reasoned that every ten men required a goat or a sheep besides bread and rice and the ingredients for the simplest food. Every hundred men would require ten and a thousand would devour a hundred goats, and in Al-Udwa there were ten thousand Andalusian

soldiers and only Allah knew how many of Al-Udwa's people would accompany them to Córdoba over the coming months. They would all pass through and stay for at least one night in Medina-Sidonia, which would harm the livelihood of its residents. I spoke with Abdul Rahman, and we agreed on a plan that we presented to Abu Ibrahim together. Abu Ibrahim confirmed that, according to what he had heard from Durri, the authorities would not pay the cost of food in advance and, in his experience, the money would not be paid to the soldiers and supporters but would be hidden by those it was entrusted to.

"What options do you have if you are certain they will not pay?"

"To take food from our people, each according to his ability, and this means that herd owners will sell out now, before the locusts arrive, and they will be reluctant to raise livestock in the future. Of course, we could buy livestock from them and pay for it with Córdoba's annual share of production. But this will cause us problems and lower the value of Medina-Sidonia. We do not have any choice but to refuse to feed them." Abu Ibrahim's response to Abdul Rahman's question suggested that he had considered everything from all perspectives.

"Perhaps Suleiman's plan offers a way out. He suggests gathering old mules on a communal farm and feeding them to the soldiers whenever they pass by as if they were goats and deer that had been hunted. Suleiman and his companions, the future knights, aided by two or three others, would slaughter, skin, and cut the meat before delivering it boneless to the town for cooking, long before it is to be served to the soldiers. The bones and remains can be buried by the young men on the farm, and the source will remain hidden."

"If they can tell by the taste of the meat that we are offering them mules as hospitality, the scandal would be disastrous."

"They eat camel meat most of the time, and the soldiers will not be able to tell the difference between mule meat and that of goats or old deer, and anyone who concludes otherwise will be wise enough to realize that the food has not been paid for and the money is ending up in the wrong place." Abu Ibrahim was not opposed to the idea and instead praised me, and he asked Abdul Rahman to count the old mules in the town, to collect them

from their owners in exchange for a small sum of money and to release them in city pastures.

“If Commander Ghalib returns with the first regiment of soldiers, I will persuade him to allocate money instead of food, which will benefit the people of the land, enabling them to sell their livestock, and if Ghalib does not come with them, or we are certain of their parsimony, we will feed them ‘deer’. For the time being, just keep it between the three of us!”

Ghalib and Hassan did not pass through Medina-Sidonia until the following year, but groups of soldiers continued to travel to Córdoba, and among them were Hassan ibn Qanoon’s three sons, who he had sent as hostages, together with other relatives, and they all attended the Caliph’s reception for his guests at Eid Al-Fitr. It became customary for every tribe to send its children as hostages to Córdoba, in order to ensure that they adhered to the treaties of peace and surrender.

The region of Medina-Sidonia sent its Qadi to represent it in Córdoba on that Eid. The Qadi reminded the officials in Al-Zahra of the importance of factoring in the cost of feeding the soldiers traveling between Al-Udwa and Córdoba, as the cities and villages along the road did not belong to the Marca Superior and had other liabilities to fulfill. Indeed, after Eid, Marwan ibn Ahmed ibn Shaheed came with funds from Al-Zahra to Al-Udwa, and agreements were made with roadside food vendors. The aged mules of Medina-Sidonia gained a life of bliss on the farm until their lives reached a natural end.

One of the important items of news that we heard from Córdoba during the month of Shawwal was the return of authority over the mint to Muhammad ibn Abi Amir, while he retained all his other positions. Before the end of the month, Ziyad ibn Aflah, the Vizier of Horse and Servants, met with Jaafar and Yahya, the two sons of Al-Andalusi, to finalize the purchase of their slaves, who had complained of ill-treatment. The meeting was attended by a group of jurists. The sons of Al-Andalusi refused to pledge allegiance and were disrespectful towards Ziyad. Then they proceeded to insult the Caliph and demonstrated by their responses and conversation that they were Shi’ites so that the Vizier of Servants saw himself obliged to inform the Caliph immediately of these matters. Ziyad ordered them to return to the meeting, where he humiliated them and their supporters before sending

them directly to Al-Duyrah prison in Al-Zahra, and their father was transported there as well. Days later, the father was informed of his two sons' misdeeds, for which he apologized, and he was released, while his sons, Yahya and Jaafar, were transferred to the Al-Muttbaq prison.

Ghalib and the soldiers from Al-Udwa moved to Algeciras, in response to an order from the Caliph, ten days before the end of the year, and the former Vizier, Yahya Al-Tajibi, remained in command of some of the soldiers in the Maghreb. This information, and the specifics of the victory in Al-Udwa, were contained in a five-page pamphlet written by Vizier Jaafar ibn Othman, copies of which were sent to all the regions of Al-Andalus to be read to the people in the mosques.

The Caliph received four foreign embassies at Al-Zahra Palace with requests for the renewal of peace treaties, all of which were successful, and the embassies left for their respective countries. However, one day after the departure of the Castilian embassy, news arrived in Córdoba that García Fernández had repudiated his allegiance and broken the peace with an attack on the Castle of Medinaceli and the subsequent theft of cows and sheep by his soldiers and the killing of some Muslim soldiers. The Caliph immediately demanded the return of the embassy, but the delegates refused and fled, prompting the soldiers to return them forcibly, and they were taken in handcuffs to prison in Córdoba.

In Medina-Sidonia we speculated that García intended the attack as a test of Córdoba's reaction and defensive capabilities at this time.

29

In the Company of the Commanders

I was meant to leave for Córdoba with the Eid Al-Adha delegation at the beginning of the last month of the year. Instead, I elected to follow a suggestion of Abu Ibrahim's to remain somewhat longer and return with Commander Ghalib and his forces. This would grant me the great opportunity to be introduced to the Commander by recommendation of my mother's uncle and to observe how the soldiers travel and how they are organized. The fact that Abu Ibrahim did not leave with the delegation either, encouraged me to stay. He sent Ibrahim, Masoud and Umran, as well as someone from the other tribe in Medina-Sidonia, all surely accompanied by Khalil.

At a later time, my grandfather revealed to me that there were two receptions that Eid. Hisham sat in front of his father, the Caliph, in the western hall in Al-Zahra with the Slav, Hajib Ra'iq, and the Head of the Central Security Forces on his right, and the Head of the Higher Security Forces on his left. On the next level were the sons of dignitaries, Viziers, and Slavs and the delegations of scholars and notables, foremost of which were his uncles. Upon hearing this account, I could think of nothing but Sheikh Masoud's certain smile of pleasure at the fulfillment of his own prediction of a year ago, of preparations for Hisham to rule while still a child, due to his mother's persistence.

My heart swelled with pride at hearing Abu Ibrahim introduce me to Chief Commander Ghalib. He mentioned that he was my uncle, and he spoke of our Yemeni family. Ghalib recalled that he had met my grandfather, and then my mother's uncle informed him that I was a close companion of Emir Hisham, and that I had made great progress in learning horsemanship here, during the course of the previous year. I spent all night long with him, Commander Ghalib, and the rest of the commanders. The seating arrangements for that evening, and for the twelve evenings that followed,

and perhaps for the two nights that preceded them, between Algeciras and Medina-Sidonia, was as follows: Commander Ghalib was seated in the centre of the hall, to his right was one of the chief hosts, and to his left was Sheikh Hanoun; both the host and Sheikh Hanoun had two or three of the six commanders that had fought with Commander Ghalib in the war at their side. There was also a mix of officers, other hosts, and princes and leaders of the Bani Idris, the Husainid, and the Quraysh, who accompanied Sheikh Hanoun. Hassan ibn Qanoon rarely sat next to Sheikh Hanoun, but on the journey, he invariably rode close to Ghalib.

The appearance and gravitas displayed by Sheikh Hanoun spoke true to his origins and ancestors; he was Ahmed ibn Issa ibn Ahmed ibn Muhammad Idris ibn Abdallah ibn Hasan ibn Al-Hasan ibn Ali ibn Abi Ṭalib, cousin of the Prophet and husband to his daughter Fatima. This meant that Sheikh Ahmed, called Hanoun, the Compassionate, was of Quraysh origin from the lineage of Ali ibn Abi Talib, the Caliph, and Fatima, and there is no closer lineage to the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him. If we think back, the first major dispute in Islam was between Abu Sufyan and his children on one side, who were Umayyad, in other words Al-Hakim's ancestors, and the Caliph Ali ibn Abi Ṭalib, his children, and his supporters, who were Hanoun's ancestors. One can imagine what the Sheikh and his supporters felt as they made their way towards Córdoba with Ghalib, who had defeated them, and after having changed their doctrine and declared their allegiance to the Umayyad Caliph in Al-Andalus. His brother Ibrahim, his two cousins, Maymun and Yahya, and their children and families, all rode with Hanoun.

Our journey from Medina-Sidonia to Córdoba was unhurried, and we were hosted every night. On Wednesday, the third of Muharram of the New Year, we took over Guadajoz, at three miles distance from Córdoba. Of course, no one wanted to enter Córdoba at night and, at the same time, the people of Córdoba could reach us in an hour on horseback or on foot. In order to shield the Husainid people and their families from prying eyes, luxuriously equipped rides arrived by night to take them to the homes that had been prepared for them, equipped with mattresses and blankets and stocked with food, firewood, dyes, spices, and all the necessities of the

finest of homes. On their way towards Córdoba, they were accompanied by the slaves and trustees of the Husainid.

I could have reached my home in less than an hour but I preferred to remain with the soldiers that night and enter the city of Córdoba in the morning as it was known to have made preparations to receive the soldiers, their leader, and their guests, after such a resounding victory.

Horses arrived from Al-Zahra for us to ride according to rank. Ghalib moved in a crowd of his soldiers, surrounded by the six commanders: Maysour Al-Rumi, Rashiq Al-Baraghawati, Abdullah ibn Marwan, Caesar, and Saad ibn Abdul Rahman, who are of mixed race, in addition to the two chiefs of service, Marwan bin Maslama, and Ismail bin Al-Sheikh. They were also accompanied by the Head of Horse, Salama Al-Jaafari, and the treasurer, Ahmed ibn Hajib. The Banu Idris, the Husainid and the Quraysh advanced with Ghalib, and I was allowed to ride behind them with the senior officers, until we arrived at the area in front of the bridge, which was perfectly arranged for their reception, packed with soldiers, carrying shields and gripping spears, and extending in two rows to the gate of the palace. There, Vizier Jaafar ibn Othman sat on a chair with various sergeants-at-arms, guards, and others before him, waiting to welcome Ghalib, the leaders, and the guests, once they reached him. The procession continued through Córdoba and turned to Bab Amer, after which we turned to the south towards the river, outside the wall, where Ghalib and those with him settled down in Nória on Thursday and Friday, pending the completion of preparations to receive them in Al-Zahra. After dismounting in Nória, I asked Commander Ghalib that I be excused to go home, which he permitted, and I exchanged words of thanks with him and hopes for another meeting during one of the coming summer raids.

I found our house full of visitors as I had been seen among those in the procession, and the news had spread to all the family and neighbours who had come to confirm it from the source. Once I was alone with Fatima, Aminah, my grandfather, and my father, I was rendered speechless by fatigue, and I slept until it was time for the Friday prayer.

Before the afternoon prayer, I went with my grandfather and my father to Nória to thank the commander for taking care of me on the way from Medina-Sidonia, and we took a mule load of various Cordovan sweetmeats. We were admitted to Ghalib quickly and easily as his guards had all grown familiar with me during our journey, and they greeted us with smiles and welcome. We found him resting from the heat of the late September day. After introducing my father, recalling my grandfather to him, and exchanging pleasantries, the Commander asked me if I would accompany them on the festive march to Al-Zahra on the following day, and he informed me that the Caliph and Hisham would both be present at the reception.

“Chief Commander, Sir, the reception is for you and your brave soldiers as a way for the Emir Al-Mu'minin, the Commander of the Faithful, to recognize your efforts and the victory you achieved and to honour and reassure your esteemed guests. I, on the other hand, had merely the honour to accompany you on the way and to be under your care, I have no right to interject myself on such occasion,” I said, my back slightly arched, but with my head up in order to maintain eye contact with the Commander.

“I predict that Suleiman will have an astonishing future heading embassies. It would be well if he learned the tongue of the Franks and the Greeks to round off his horsemanship.” He directed his speech to my grandfather and my father then turned to me, saying: “I understand that you wish to refrain from any formal participation tomorrow and will abandon us. I will notify Emir Hisham that you marched with us.”

“I would be honoured if you would pass this on for me, may Allah lengthen your life, I will be lucky to enlist under your command on one of the summer raids once I am allowed to do so.” We drank our coffee, and Ghalib gave my grandfather some details about the situation in Al-Udwa. Before we left, I requested permission to greet Sheikh Hanoun. Ghalib raised his bushy eyebrows: “He is a free man and our guest and it is his right to accept or refuse; he is in the tent next to mine.” The Commander called his guard and asked him to inquire from Sheikh Hanoun whether or not he wished to greet the father and grandfather of the young Cordovan horseman that had

accompanied them from Medina-Sidonia. As we exited Ghalib's tent, we were notified of the acceptance, so we made our way towards that of Hanoun.

Prior to this visit, I had spoken with my father and grandfather about this man, his lineage, and my feelings of empathy and sympathy due to his situation. My grandfather embraced him, kissing his cheeks and beard, and they touched noses in the traditional Quraysh greeting. "This is your home; you are among your people, do not be sad or worried, your dignity is ours." As for my father, he kissed his hand and hoped to see him once more before he returned to his country: "Glorious and with head raised high." Tears stained the beards of those of his people in Hanoun's tent when my father and grandfather shook hands with them and kissed them in greeting. At that, we concluded our greeting and left, as it was not appropriate to stay before they had met with the Caliph, who they had been carried from Africa to meet. We left the area in silence, without uttering a single word, as if we had an unexpressed agreement not to discuss it any further. After we relaxed and found solace, my father tried to lighten the mood.

"It seems that you learned more about how to speak and embellish your words than about horsemanship."

"Knowing how to speak is part of horsemanship, as is poetry and literature. Suleiman has shown fortitude and excellence in the presence of the commanders and the family of the Prophet Muhammad." My grandfather spoke while looking straight ahead, as he leant his hand on my shoulder. It seemed to me that he truly needed something to lean on, and I hoped that a year had not weakened his body. "How are you in poetry, Suleiman?"

"I spontaneously composed a biting verse on my first day in Medina-Sidonia, against Zahra, the daughter of Ibrahim, which made her less argumentative, but I have not been inspired to compose any poetry since then."

"If you are in need of inspiration to compose, that's not a problem, it just means that you require more education and to be in a situation that naturally motivates you. You should not be dependent on instinct or

coincidence; we will take care of this together after you rest and plan the next stage with Qareeb.” I hesitated to inform my grandfather and father that I would like to participate in a summer raid, as I was still young and must wait for some time to pass and for more favourable circumstances and, at present, there was no escaping plans for my immediate future.

Throughout Thursday and Friday, I could sense that the people of Córdoba were unable to decide whether the people of Al-Udwa had been brought as hostages and prisoners or as guests that came of their own volition and could decide when to leave. After Friday prayer I heard comments in the Mosque such as: “Our land is full of Jews, Christians, and Atheists that no one has forced to convert to Islam, so why would anyone be eager to fight Shi'ites in their own homes?” “Every year they send summer and winter raids to plunder and take captives in the north, instead of conquering and spreading religion.” “Tolerant with strangers, yet hard on those close by, may Allah grant us strength.”

The celebration on Saturday was not conclusive as to the status of the guests, on the surface, it was held to honour them, but in reality, its purpose was to intimidate. The festival was arranged by the Vizier of Horse and Servants, Ziyad ibn Aflah, as well as the Head of the Higher Security Forces, Al-Qasim ibn Tamlus and his brother Ahmed. They arranged two orderly rows, the first in Al-Zahra and the second in Nória in Córdoba. The procession of Ghalib and his commanders advanced and behind them rode Hanoun, his brother, his cousins and the rest of their leaders, followed by Ghalib’s senior officers. At the first stage, they marched between two connected rows of soldiers from Córdoba and the provinces, armed with spears and shields. The soldiers escorted the procession for a distance and then retreated, to be replaced by two rows of armoured knights, then knights from Tangiers in armour, then two rows of armoured sergeants-at-arms, who handed them over to the cavalry squadrons and armoured and helmeted slave archers, followed by the Jaafari slaves in white abayas and fur hats, carrying bows and arrows. After that came the turn of knights in armour bearing spears, then knights with breast armour and chain-mail shirts and fully-accoutered knights, as well as musicians with horns and drums who accompanied them to the Master of Ceremonies, past banners

depicting lions, tigers, snakes, eagles, and other images, until they reached a row of horses and mules in beautifully decorated livery. From Córdoba to Al-Zahra, not many members of the public had gathered on the roads other than some of the curious and boys drawn by the sight of the soldiers.

When the procession reached the gates of Al-Zahra, other elements of the reception were initiated until, finally, it reached the City Administrator, Muhammad ibn Aflah, after which they all walked behind Ghalib to the military barracks and dismounted in the southern quarters. After a short rest, they were brought to the Eastern quarter, where the Caliph, three of his brothers, the Viziers, Commander Ghalib, the Heads of the Security Forces, the scribes, the children of the Viziers, and the Supreme Qadi were present. Soldiers, holding swords in sheaths inlaid with jewels, stood beside Slav eunuchs bearing swords and spears. The slaves of Ubaid Jaafar Al-Mushafi were also present with shields and gilt turbans on their heads and in their hands Frankish spears with staves decorated with silver inlay.

When all had assumed position, the guests were permitted to enter. They were headed by Hanoun, who spoke words of praise and gave thanks so that the Caliph honoured him and permitted him to sit, which was repeated with all his people. The Caliph thanked them for their submission to him and promised them gifts and blessings, and he authorized their children to enter the assembly in their honour, although they were not permitted to remain.

After they left, they passed the Western quarter, where Emir Hisham was seated with the Head of the Central Security Forces and senior Slavs to his right and left, and he was greeted by the guests and by notables from the provinces, who were there to bear witness to what they saw. Most of the notables from the provinces had attended the feast and had remained in Córdoba for this celebration, after which they were permitted to return to their own districts.

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Earthquake and Illness

Forty days had passed since the reception. After the midday prayer on Monday the earth shook in Córdoba and in most of the regions of Al-Andalus, according to messages received from the Security Heads all around the country. The earthquake was not a unique occurrence, but its timing and severity on that occasion led many to see it as punishment for the mistreatment of the family of the Messenger of Allah, who remained in Córdoba.

During the following month, on the twelfth of Rabi' Al-Awwal, the Caliph suffered a stroke that prevented him from appearing before the people as his whole side, including his eye, mouth, hand, and leg, was paralyzed.

Our neighbour María was accustomed to visit my mother at least once a week, and I would sometimes overhear some of the news she brought, which did not differ much from the gossip that had spread all over Córdoba among the Muslims, Jews, and Christians. Much detail was on offer, and the content varied according to the source, whether the pronouncements of astrologers, reliable sources, or interpretations attributed to scholars and those with knowledge of the Holy Books, but the consensus was that the Caliph had angered Allah and the people, and he was destined to meet his demise. I laughed when I heard María confirm early on that the reason for the Caliph's illness was sexual insatiability as he had taken a beautiful new mistress who exhausted him and infuriated Subh.

Hasdai ibn Shaprut's long experience in healing, as well as the young pharmacist Ibn Juljul's experience in producing medical remedies, and Al-Zahrawi's surgical equipment, all contributed, in a way known only to Allah, to relieving the pain of the hemiplegia of Caliph Al-Hakim Al-Mustansir Billah. However, he disappeared from the public eye for around two months, during which time several doctors took turns treating at him, both together and individually. At first, they treated him with a mixture of olive and sesame oil, boiled with garlic, cloves, a pinch of salt, and mastic gum powder. After it had been boiled and then cooled, the mixture was applied

to the Caliph's body, but this did not lead to a quick recovery. Fortunately for the Caliph, his illness was not so very dangerous, and he could be cured by cauterization, and this is what Al-Zahrawi did. He cauterized three areas of the Caliph's face. The Caliph refused the presence of guards or other doctors during the procedure and chose to suffer in private. The procedure saved him, and he returned to his former glory in less than two months. He ordered the freeing of one hundred slaves, one third of whom were freed immediately, with the second third to be freed after some while, and the remainder merely recommended for freedom. Two days later, the Caliph announced the repurposing of some of the many saddle-makers' shops in Córdoba for the education of disadvantaged children in order to relieve some of the burden imposed on the mosques. Above all, he gave thanks to Allah the Almighty for his recovery from illness by reducing the debts and taxes of the people in all of Al-Andalus for the year 364 by one sixth, and he ordered: "the preparation of pamphlets to be delivered to all his subjects, to inform both the literate and the illiterate of the one-sixth reduction to prevent them from being fooled by a member of the public or misinformed by an official."

The misery of the public in thinking that the Caliph had met his demise, and the unease that surfaced over the belief that a conflict had erupted among the heirs as well as the arguments about the name of the next in line to the Caliphate, morphed into rejoicing. The news of attacks by the Kingdoms of the North on the cities of the Marca Media had reinforced rumours in Córdoba of a crisis in the palace. When the news of the Caliph's recovery was confirmed by companions who had witnessed it, heralds filled the streets, spreading the joyous news of the recovery of the Amir Al-Mu'minin, the Commander of the Faithful, and all those who in their terror had made promises if he regained his health, fulfilled their vows, and they gathered to congratulate each another. Gradually, the country filled with news and poems, like that of the Head of Central Security Forces, Yali ibn Ahmed, who began with praise to Allah for the ending of his distress and his return to happiness and concluded by saying that Caliph Al-Hakim is the shadow of Allah over the land so that he was truly miserable until his life had regained its meaning with the recovery of his master:

Praise be to Allah, the Ever-Exalted, the Almighty

Our misery has ceased, we are now at peace

We rejoice in our faith, and our path became straight,

The conclusion was true, the moon shone bright for you

The world is once more in its glory, our affliction reduced to a story

The land glows, our Imam is restored, every wrong has become a right

The joy in our hearts overflows its confines, oh what a sight

My joy was yet greater it seems for my heart had grown wings

***

Allah revived me as from my deathbed I arose

Stand in glory, our Imam, our guide, as your lifetime longer grows

You are the shadow of Allah in the land and the rain that on it sings.

Yahya ibn Al-Hadhil, the most famous of our poets at the time, praised Allah and expressed sadness for the Caliph's illness. He said that happiness had spread among the people just as Jacob had rejoiced at Joseph's survival. The most important point in Ibn Al-Hadhil's poem was that he expected Hisham to take over the reins of government if his father died, and he claimed that Hisham was steering the ship of the kingdom in which he would be aided by the blade of Al-Amri Al-Ma'afari, who, it should be noted, had never participated in any battle.

Hajib Jaafar Al-Mushafi took over the administration of Al-Andalus during the Caliph's paralysis and during his convalescence. He was also the first of the Caliph's companions to be received after his illness, which was both an honour and a demonstration of his close relationship with him.

Subh, the mother of Emir Hisham, was the most troubled by the Caliph's illness. She knew more than anyone else that the body and mind of the Caliph would not recover to its original condition, and that he would not survive if he were to have another incident like that, and, in that case, one of his brothers, the sons of Al-Nasir, would take over the Caliphate, because Hisham was young and he had not yet taken the pledge of

allegiance. During the period between the Caliph being seen by his companions and his public appearance, rumours spread that Hisham Abu'l-Walid, had been declared crown prince on the decision of the Caliph and that the ceremony would be held soon. Perhaps these rumours originated with Subh and were spread by Al-Amri, and perhaps they were leaked by the Caliph himself to test the reaction or to familiarize people with the idea.

After prayers in Al-Zahra Mosque, Al-Hakim received Chief Commander Ghalib and discussed the Marca Media with him, including infringements there and the spies' reports about the enemy's preparation of joint forces from several northern kingdoms in the Marca Media after they had learnt how far away the forces in Al-Udwa were. Jaafar Al-Mushafi joined the consultations in front of the entrance to Al-Zahra Mosque, and of course, Hisham sided with his father, the Caliph, who ordered Commander Ghalib to prepare to stand firm and fight their enemies.

The Caliph moved to Córdoba after his doctors persuaded him to avoid the cold weather in Al-Zahra and advised him to stay away from his new mistress as, once he saw her, he was unable to resist temptation! At least this is what was rumoured in all of Córdoba. The winter snows at the beginning of the year 975 AD in Córdoba and its environs were unusually heavy. After some weeks the snow gave way to heavy rain, the river overflowed, flooding the quay, the bridge went under, and some of those attempting to travel by boat from Secunda to their homes in Córdoba drowned.

There was news from the Marca Media, stating that joint forces of the Galicians, the Basques, the people of Pamplona, and of Castile, had attacked and besieged the Castillo de Gormaz, one of the frontier cities northwest of Medinaceli. The people of the fortress withstood the treacherous attack by those in violation of the treaty, and they killed many of the attackers and chased after them, initially through the Valley of the Duero. After their defeat, the aggressors attacked the residents of the nearby cities, north of the river, again violating the treaty and breaking the peace, and they had advanced unafraid towards the Castillo de Gormaz, knowing that the Caliph's armies were busy in Al-Udwa which was very far away, and therefore they had reassured themselves that they would not be chased after looting the fortress. When these details became known,

Córdoba was filled with condemnation and criticism of the policy of the Caliph, and every Cordovan claimed that he had anticipated just such a result.

All the cities of Al-Andalus were like a magnificent beehive, all ready to fly to the aid of their brethren. The Caliph decided to expedite that summer's military campaign and to direct it against the people of the Marca Media, and to use his most loyal supporter, the Chief Commander, as the blade that would fall to avenge him. At that time, Commander Ghalib bin Abdul Rahman, was also referred to as the Sheikh of War, the trouble-shooter, and the anguish-reliever. The Caliph received Commander Ghalib in the palace of Córdoba with ceremonies that no Vizier or leader before him had ever been honoured with, and he relayed instructions to him to prepare for the start of the campaign quickly, without waiting for the supplies, support, and money that would surely follow. During the following three weeks, messages reached the different districts of the country, reporting that the military campaign had been brought forward; people were encouraged to join the campaign, and the Imams in the mosques urged the faithful to pray and to volunteer in support of their brothers. The Caliph met with Commander Ghalib again, on the seventh of Sha'ban, and learnt from him that he was ready to start the accelerated campaign. He left the palace with a new title, one that had never been awarded before, namely that of Dhuʾl-Sayfayn, the Keeper of Two Swords, and contracts were written for the position. He held two swords, decorated with precious stones, a gift from the Caliph, to his shoulders, and rode a horse gifted to him from the Caliph's stables, accoutered in the most finely crafted Caliphal livery. Commander Ghalib almost flew from joy, his honour, pride, and happiness over the appreciation and trust that he had won on display. Two days later, Dhuʾl-Sayfayn left Córdoba to start the campaign with a large contingent of soldiers and volunteers under his command. Commander Ghalib led them from the palace of Córdoba while the Caliph and his son climbed the Bab Al-Sudda, the Gate of the Embankment, raising their hands in prayer to Allah, asking him to grant victory to the soldiers that served Him.

Every day, messages arrived from Commander Ghalib with details of his path and of the soldiers and volunteers that were joining him. As his father's representative, Emir Hisham summoned the Viziers and ordered them to return to their cities to prepare forces in support of Commander

Ghalib. At Commander Ghalib's request, he sent Abd Al-Rahman Al-Tujibi to Zaragoza, and Abd Al-Aziz Al-Tujibi to Daroca, and he sent a company of slaves as well as a large number of servants, attendants, and archers under the command of the youth, Sahel. They were accompanied by Muhammad ibn Umayyah, the treasurer, who was responsible for the funds being sent to the commander to finance the military campaign.

These reinforcements did not empty Córdoba of its men and fighters, indeed, the city witnessed equestrian competitions overseen by the Caliph and Hisham from the top floor of the Bab Al-Sudda, during which two participants were injured, and the Caliph ordered the arrest of the perpetrators as he required that bouts should not result in injuries.

At the end of Sha'ban, the first sighting of the Unbelievers on the other side of the river occurred, with horses and men parading in front of each other. It was clear that Commander Ghalib did not wish to launch an attack before halting his advance and reviewing the situation. A week of calm encouraged his opponents to cross the Valley of the Duero on the seventh of Ramadan, but the few Muslims at the site withstood them and persevered until Commander Ghalib reached them with his soldiers and the remaining attackers were defeated. Anticipating an ambush, the defenders did not chase after them over the northern bank of the river. After the battle, Commander Ghalib decided to retreat to Langa de Duero, twelve miles from the river. He preferred to wait for late arriving reinforcements and to complete mobilization in the districts of the Marca Media, following the call to battle. Commander Ghalib explained the retreat in a message to the Caliph in which he voiced his concern about the columns of soldiers moving from the south, east, and west towards him, as some of them would pass near enemy positions, and he preferred to protect them by bringing them to a location away from the river until his preparations were complete.

At the beginning of Ramadan, new volunteers left Córdoba eager to contribute both funds and their persons to the campaign without having called up. This prompted the Caliph to send heralds to threaten soldiers that had delayed their departure, so everyone who was late, even the sick, prepared themselves, and they were led from Córdoba, together with some volunteers, by the slave of Al-Jaafari, accompanied by a mule caravan loaded with various types of equipment and weapons. A few days later, the

Head of Security, Qasim ibn Muhammad, followed, accompanied by servants being sent to battle as soldiers that had previously only been seen at receptions and while boasting. Four days later, the Caliph was angered by the Security Chief, Yali ibn Ahmed, the poet who had called him the shadow of Allah, and at Ahmed ibn Saad Al-Jaafari, so he removed them from their posts and sent them to the Marca Media. He also ordered the sons of the other Security Chiefs to the Marca Media, despite not being angered at them, and they were sent off with the recruiter and a treasurer, who carried money to Commander Ghalib.

Conditions in Córdoba and the absence of a group of our sheikhs at the front, as well as the coming of Ramadan, left us a lot of free time when we were not studying at the mosque. At noon of the eighth Sunday of Ramadan, I left the Mosque to walk near the bridge and saw Rashiq Al-Barghouti, one of my companions on the journey from Sidonia to Córdoba, mounted on his reddish horse, with ten men tied in ropes behind him, and surrounded by soldiers carrying poles on which seventeen severed heads were impaled. They stopped in front of the Bab Al-Sudda, opposite the water wheel on the river. I approached with others to find out what was happening and greeted Rashiq, who seemed to remember me. He smiled and answered my question: “This is the traitor Abu Al-Ahwas and the rest of his still living companions.” It appeared from Rashiq’s answer that he expected everyone in Córdoba to know all about Abu Al-Ahwas, the traitor! I pretended to understand and asked him about the heads that the soldiers were hanging on the palace wall to both sides of the Bab Al-Sudda. “These are the heads of the non-believers who obeyed him and refused to surrender when I asked them to.” I praised his actions, and resolved to inform myself from other sources as the consequences might be dire if he became aware that I was ignorant of his achievements.

On our return from Medina-Sidonia, Rashiq had been sent to Lleida, a city between Barcelona and Zaragoza, as temporary deputy to Hisham Al-Tujibi, who had gone to Al-Udwa and had returned to Córdoba only a few days ago. In Lleida, Abu Al-Ahwas escaped from prison. He was an apostate and an enemy of Abd Al-Aziz Al-Tujibi, who had been imprisoned by his cousins, the governors of the region of Lleida near Monzón, because he was accused of assisting the enemy and revealing the weaknesses and flaws of the Muslim forces to them. He escaped from prison and took

refuge in Castell de la Suda, where the Christian residents paid the non-Muslin tax every year to the governors of Lleida. And of course, under the prevailing circumstances, it was easy for him to convince them not to pay when the time came. Therefore, Rashiq went with his soldiers and volunteers to besiege them. The forces of a Count from the area attempted to come to the assistance of the Christians, but Rashiq blockaded the road and killed some of them while the rest barricaded themselves behind the walls. The siege continued, and the dissidents abandoned all hope, so they agreed to surrender Abu Al-Ahwas, return to their allegiance, and pay the tax in exchange for their lives. The heads of the killed were put on display while the living were deposited in Al Muttbaq prison. The Caliph ordered Rashiq and the soldiers to Commander Ghalib in the Marca Media and to leave the city of Lleida to Hisham, so he complied immediately.

We heard no current news about the situation in the Marca Media until Eid Al-Fitr. And for the first time in years, the Caliph celebrated in the Palace of Córdoba, as he did not return with Hisham to the women in Al-Zahra after his partial recovery from paralysis. On the eve of Eid, my grandfather told his children and relatives that he would take them the next morning to greet the Caliph and the Emir, but my uncle Issa had not yet returned from Málaga. My grandfather told me to enquire if our neighbour Jesús wanted to accompany us, and also Ibn Imran, who was in the city at that time. When my father queried the intention and the appropriateness of that decision, his father replied that they have the same rights and duties that we have, and there was no reason to prevent them from participating in congratulations to their Caliph at Eid and on his recovery. He also asked me to go to Secunda to tell Miriam's father of what he intended. "And if he does not like the idea of greeting the Caliph, invite him to join us for lunch on the afternoon of the Eid."

In the morning, my grandfather stood at the door, surrounded by fifteen sons, relatives, and neighbours. I stood with my cousin Sayed beside my grandfather, who introduced himself to the Master of Ceremonies as: "Khalid Abu Qareeb Al-Qalai, the educator of Emir Hisham, and his sons, grandchildren, relatives and neighbours, the neighbours of the Caliph and Emir Hisham in Al-Zahra and Córdoba." The Master of Ceremonies welcomed us and explained to my grandfather that the Caliph was not receiving anyone this Eid except his brothers and his companions, who

would also greet Emir Hisham, and he invited us to have a seat and join the noble people of Córdoba until the ceremonies began. We later learnt that the Caliph only received two of his brothers and the most distinguished of the Viziers, as they moved from his western hall in Dar Al-Rawdah to Emir Hisham in the hall of Al-Zaahir, where the ceremonies were held. The inevitable conclusion was that the Caliph did not want any of the people to see his face close-up, or that he was exhausted from his illness.

Abu Al-Mutrif Al-Mughirah, son of Caliph Al-Nasir, sat to the right of his nephew in the hall of Al-Zaahir, and Abu Al-Qasim, his second uncle, sat to his left. Abd Al-Aziz did not attend due to illness, as was said. And, as usual, the rest of the caliph's brothers, the sons of Al-Nasir who had accompanied their father to all such events, did not attend nor did any of their sons. To the right and left of the uncles the Viziers Jaafar, Ziyad, and Ahmed stood with the Hajibs of the young Emir and the rest of the notables of Córdoba who had not made their way to the Marca Media. Mohammed Al-Amri attended the ceremonies, of course, with a lot of servants, attendants, and Slavs. We greeted the Caliph after the Quraysh and the Husainid, among them Yahya and Hasan, sons of Qanoon, who, like Sheikh Hanoun, did not attend the ceremony due to illness. We were followed by the jurists and the district judges, as well as the representatives of the Umayyad armies. Sheikh Hanoun did well not to attend the ceremony because some poets recited ridiculous poems that had nothing to do with the situation in the Marca Media, but rather praised the victories in Al-Adwa and made fun of the Fatimids in Egypt. And, of course, the reciters of the poems emphasized that Emir Hisham would be the tenth Caliph of Al-Andalus, and the beginning letters of their lines formed the name of Abu'l-Walid Hisham.

Finally, we received good news of conquest and victory and of the defeat of the aggressors who had attacked the Castillo de Gormaz. Their siege of the fortress, which continued for seventy-four days, ended in failure. And so the Basque, Sancho Garcés, returned to Pamplona, and his brother-in-law, García Fernández of Castile returned to Burgos, and Ansur Fernández and the Gómez returned to Álava and their castles. Before the failure in Gormaz, Ramírez Sancho Ramírez of León had come together with his aunt Elvira, who convinced him to seize the opportunity to take a pledge of allegiance from the leaders and princes of the kingdoms of the North, if he

achieved victory for them. Like others, she aspired, to expand the influence of the Christians in Al-Andalus, and thought that the soldiers' preoccupation in Al-Udwa was a good opportunity for the achievement of her purpose. All the participants in this conspiracy of treaty-violators and traitors sent ambassadors annually to Córdoba to sue for peace and security.

According to the details that we heard in Córdoba, it was not Dhuʾl-Sayfayn and the forces that went north who defeated the armies of the kingdoms of the north. The besiegers of the Castillo de Gormaz had agreed on a Sunday to give the pledge of allegiance to Ramírez and to attack and break into the fortress on Monday. They were certain of victory because Commander Ghalib and his forces were still in Langa de Duero and would need at least one day to arrive, which would give the besiegers all the time they needed to destroy and plunder the fortress. Castillo de Gormaz was located on the northern side of the river and was surrounded by water on three sides. Therefore, Commander Ghalib's forces would have to cross the water to reach the walls. Throughout Monday, the besieged Muslims withstood the attack and fought as one, taking advantage of the walls and the strength of their fortress, and they left the attackers no opportunity to rest at night, as they attacked them with arrows until they retreated at early dawn. Then, all the people of the fortress chased after them with spears and swords, overrunning and destroying the fleeing soldiers' and attackers' camps. Eventually, they halted the pursuit, fearing an ambush on the other side. On the way back, they gathered up everything they could find that had been left behind by the soldiers fleeing in terror. The news reached Commander Ghalib, so he moved towards the fortress and crossed the water to find that everything was over, and no trace of the attackers remained. It is likely that the Chief Commander was aware that news had reached the Caliph already, so he outlined the details of what had occurred and told him that by the time he received this message, he would have already chased after the remaining soldiers and destroyed their cities.

In a later letter it was confirmed that Commander Ghalib had conquered their cities, burned their crops, and put San Esteban, near Gormaz, to the fire. The forces of García Fernández were encamped in the Valley of Duero, near Daroca, but Allah willed their defeat. Most of them were killed and the rest were scattered and fled. Abd Al-Rahman ibn Hashim Al-Tujibi sent a message from Zaragoza stating that he had chased the remaining

soldiers of Ramírez's forces to the north near Tudela to the farms of Castile. And, while returning in the evening, he had beheaded thirty of their soldiers, including the Commander of the Carcastillo Fortress. He sent their heads with the message and, as usual, they were displayed on the wall around the Bab Al-Sudda.

31

Between Heaven and Hell

Despite the complaining voices to be found in Córdoba, according to the statements of Andalusian visitors, merchants and sailors returning from their travels, conditions in Al-Andalus were superior in every respect to those in other areas of the world at this time such as the Kingdoms of the North, Byzantium, Rome, the Islamic East, India, Sindh, and the rest of the nations.

At the end of 364 AH, which corresponds to the first week of September 975 AD, Issa and Miriam returned to Córdoba with their infant son Marwan, taking advantage of the Eid al-Adha celebrations to show their baby, the latest product of Al-Qalai family, to its grandparents. Issa had always been interested in following the news from the East, and we in Córdoba were interested in the news coming from the North. Somehow, the misery of the news coming from the East, compared to our lives, our circumstances, and our victories in the North, encouraged us praise Allah even more for the heaven-on-earth in which we lived. Life was good, money was plentiful and religious coexistence had not been affected by the violation of the treaty by the kingdoms of the North. Córdoba had learned from past experience to separate religion from obligations of citizenship. By and large, the conflict with the Shia Muslims in Al-Udwa and the Christians in the North did not affect relations between the citizens of Al-Andalus. Furthermore, Andalusians became accustomed to the opportunism displayed by the kings of the North, as they would immediately violate any treaties with us and try to seize land in Al-Andalus every time an Andalusian Emir came to power or when they sensed any sign of weakness among us. We all knew that they were not like Arabs, who are bound by the weight of the promises they make, and they felt no shame in breaking their vows and covenants, just like the Berbers of Al-Udwa. They felt confident in their unity, knew of the battles the Andalusians were fighting in Al-Udwa, had witnessed that forces been withdrawn from the north and sent across the water to the south, and it was inevitable that all the rumours and news about the Caliph’s illness, the current disputes within the Umayyad Caliphate, and the

assigning of the tasks of the Caliph to Emir Hisham, would become known to them. So why would they not try to test their strength and power and march south? The important thing is that, for now, they have won spoils rather than the benefits that they wished to achieve, and the Marca Superior has been filled once again with our forces.

Before the end of the year, Córdoba lost one of its most famous scholars, Moses ben Hanoch. My grandfather, my father, and I, went to offer our condolences to our sixth neighbour. We also asked him to accompany us to the Rabbi of Córdoba, to whom my grandfather expressed his sorrow for the loss of Moses to the Jewish community as a whole. The story told of Moses was akin to a myth: It was said that an Andalusian pirate captured a ship that had departed from one of the Roman ports, and Moses was on board as one of four Jewish rabbis who had graduated from the institutes of Babylon. So one of the four rabbis was Moses ben Hanoch, another his son Hanoch and the other two were called Sahariya and Hociel. Moses and his son were sold as slaves in Córdoba, Hociel in Kairouan, and Sahariya in Alexandria. It was claimed that each one of them had been ransomed and had established a science institute in his city from which to spread his Babylonian knowledge. Moses and his son were immediately ransomed in Córdoba and he participated in the establishment of the Yeshiva with the help and support of Hasdai ibn Shaprut, physician to Al-Nasir and his son Al-Hakim. Hasdai's work in the Yeshiva was on-going and his knowledge was being spread worldwide. The Yeshiva provides facilities for the teaching of literature, music, mathematics, and medicine under the supervision of Hasdai, as well as religious sciences under the supervision of Moses and his son. Fortunately, the four rabbis were followers of the school of Sa'adiah Gaon and not followers of Karaite Judaism. Sa'adiah believed in revelation and in transmission of the Torah by word-of-mouth, i.e. in both a written and oral Torah, similarly to the Karaites, but he also held by common sense and insisted that if the text of the Scripture conflicted with reason and common sense, it should be assumed that the text in question was not to be taken literally by any one sane. He also refused to accept the descriptions of Yahweh that Karaite Judaism believed in, as they determined His size, the length of His arm, and His beard, whereas, according to the school of Sa'adiah, such descriptions of Yahweh were inappropriate as He was not a human being.

Returning to what I heard from my uncle Issa about the news from Baghdad, there was strife between the Sunnis and the Shias at that time. While the governor of the city, Bakhtiar Izz al-Dawla, was occupied with bringing the soldiers their wages, in his absence, a Turkic soldier burned down his house and demanded that Caliph Al-Moti abdicate his throne in favour of his son, which he did. Al-Moti abdicated as he had suffered a stroke. His son, Al-Ta'a Billah became Caliph, under the command of the Turkic soldiers, of course. Then, the Turkic soldier marched to fight the government of the deposed Izz Al-Dawla, taking the Caliph and his father with him. On the way, both the father and the Turkic soldier died, and the soldiers returned to Baghdad, where another Turkic commander, called Alp-Tegin, was appointed. Bakhtiar Izz al-Dawla asked his cousin, the Sultan of Persia, to help him defeat Alp-Tegin, but his cousin preferred to seize the opportunity to take over Baghdad and imprisoned him.

The news from Egypt can be summarized by saying that the Fatimid Caliph, Al-Mu'izz Li-Din Allah, sent Zalim Al-Aqili to Damascus to expel Qarmatian forces from the city but, after he had succeeded in his mission, strife occurred between his forces and the people of Damascus. The Qarmatians escaped to Ramlah in Palestine, occupied the coast of Tiberias and then decided to march to Egypt as long as its forces were in Damascus. But the Fatimid Caliph reached a secret agreement with the Al-Tayy tribe, which supported the Qarmatians, and promised its leader a hundred thousand dinars if he pretended to be defeated by the Fatimid forces and misled the Qarmatians. Meanwhile, Alp-Tegin and his Turkic soldiers, who escaped from the battle in Baghdad, occupied Damascus and declared it annexed to the Abbasid Caliphate, rather than to the Fatimid Caliphate. On the Egyptian front, the tribal leader fled in exchange for dinars, and he deceived the Qarmatians until their forces were dispersed and scattered. Those who survived returned to Al-Ahsa, their original country in the Arabian Peninsula.

A full picture of the status of the East, requires mention that, north of Damascus, the Byzantine emperor, Tzimiskes, sent an Armenian leader to invade Diyar Bakr and Rabi'a, but his forces were defeated by the governors of the region, who captured the commander, and carried him in shackles to Al-Mosul, where he died of his wounds. But of course, the Byzantine emperor prepared a new campaign to take revenge on Diyar

Bakr. In the year 364 AH, Caliph Al-Mu'izz Li-Din Allah died in Cairo, and his son Al-Aziz Billah became the new Caliph.

During the illness of Caliph Al-Hakim, Vizier Jaafar Al-Mushafi was able to convince the Caliph to reduce the expenses of hosting the leaders of Al-Udwa, with Hassan ibn Qanoon at their head, by sending them away from Al-Andalus, provided they did not return to the Maghreb to stir up trouble there. Al-Mushafi took oaths and vows from them, concluded agreements with them to this end, and let them leave. They sailed from Almería to Alexandria and then travelled to Cairo, where they were warmly received by the new Fatimid Caliph, who attacked and insulted Caliph Al-Hakim Al-Mustansir in a letter. But Al-Hakim responded with one sentence in which he said: "Although you know of us, you have cursed us, and if we knew of you, we would respond." With which severe reply the Fatimid Caliph was put most firmly in his place.

Endless political dilemmas, Caliphs as mere figureheads while the actual rulers were mercenaries, conflicting groups with people living in insecurity, and bands of thieves and robbers collecting taxes and blocking roads: All of these things explain the reason for the increase in the number of immigrants to Al-Andalus, whether workers seeking a livelihood, merchants looking for safety and profits, scholars ambitious for freedom of speech and writing, as well as the huge number of black Africans who had converted to Islam together with the merchants and now found it natural to wander in Muslim countries, or the slave markets teeming with Slavs from the east of Europe and from the islands in the sea.

32

The Precursors of Misery

After fourteen months of persuasion, deception, and pampering, Subh was successful in persuading Caliph Al-Hakim to appoint her son Hisham as his successor. On Friday, at the beginning of Jumada Al-Akhir of 365 AH, the Caliph sat in his palace in Al-Zahra, and he began his speech, stating his intentions and imposing them on the attendees. He distributed signed and attested letters throughout the provinces of Al-Andalus, asking the Imams to make invocations for Hisham as the crown prince from their pulpits. Hisham was a minor, and, as such, it was unlawful to grant him the right to rule, but the Imams neither refused, nor did they demand that the Caliph appoint one of his successor's uncles as regent. All was left to chance, or rather to Subh's control over her son in his father's absence. The letters stating the decision were carried and secured by Muhammad ibn Abi Amir, the Head of Security, who, as his Chancellor, was delighted with Hisham's future prospects. From that time onwards, Al-Amri's residence in Al-Rusafa became a centre for opportunists and the needy, and the flatterers who swarmed to his door were met by him with ease and a warm welcome. His tables quickly became inadequate for all those who frequented his residence, which speedily grew in size. While Al-Amri was winning people over and increasing the number of those loyal to him, he never failed to pay a visit to the residence of the Hajib Jaafar Al-Mushafi to flatter him.

In this year, the sons of Al-Andalusi, Jaafar and Yahya ibn Ali, left Córdoba with new forces for Al-Udwa to replace Vizier Yahya ibn Hashem and his forces, who later returned to Córdoba before departing for Zaragoza. The sons of Al-Andalusi were originally Berber Shias, who had been welcomed to Al-Andalus by Caliph Al-Hakim until he heard about them reviling him, upon which he ordered their imprisonment until they apologized and agreed to fight in Al-Udwa, and onlyhimlsmber of ths2542542542542542542542542

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255255255 then did he release them with honour. Caliph Al-Hakim issued an order to Vizier Jaafar Al-Mushafi to release Abu Al-Ahwas Al-Tujibi from Al Muttbaq prison, together with his companions who had been brought as captives from Llérida by Rashiq, another piece of news that spread in Córdoba and caused astonishment. We did not know if they had been wrongfully imprisoned or if their crimes were insignificant and thus their punishment had been adequate. It is likely that Tujibi family members had mediated and pledged to deter their traitorous relative and to ensure his good behaviour in the future.

The Caliph fell victim to another stroke at the beginning of Safar, the second month of the year 366 AH, and this time he was alone in the bathroom of his palace in Al-Zahra. He was found dead by his Slav servant, Judz, who informed his fellow servant, Fa'iq. Both of them were senior Slav servants; Fa'iq had been put in command of the postal service and Judz, oversaw both the Markets of the Smiths and of Falconry, and they both held authority over the Slavs inside and outside the palace. Before reporting the death, they discussed the matter and decided to hide the body until they had informed Al-Mughirah, the Caliph’s brother, of the situation, to enable him to arrange for the takeover of the caliphate after his brother. The Slavs rebelled against their dead master’s order to pledge allegiance to Hisham because they were afraid of what would happen to the Slavs in the palace and throughout the land if Mushafi and Al-Amri handled affairs as the guardians and Hajibs of Hisham. They wanted a strong Caliph who would make use of them rather than rival competitors for the role of guardian and Hajib to a child, which would weaken the Slavs’ position.

“We will inform our Master, Al-Mughirah, and ask him to take over the caliphate with our support, on condition that he agrees to acknowledge his nephew Hisham as ruler once he is old enough.”

“This is an excellent suggestion, Fa'iq. If Allah so desires, we can protect ourselves in this way, and honour our Master Al-Hakim by ensuring his son’s rule over the caliphate. Let us ask Vizier Jaafar Al-Mushafi to come here, under the guise of a meeting with the Caliph, and then we will slit his throat to ensure our wishes will be fulfilled and we will avoid the possibility of coups.”

“Glory be to Allah, Judz, you are suggesting we kill our Master’s Hajib, and a sheikh, and feel no shame to say so; perhaps he will not disagree with what we want, it would be better not to start with bloodshed, let us consult him and give him to understand that this is what we wish.”

Fa'iq sent for Jaafar; at this point, no one else knew about the Caliph’s death. They presented him with their plan, and he realized at once that opposing them now would result in his own death, so he agreed with them enthusiastically. “By Allah, this is the best suggestion and the best course of action to take, and I will put myself under your command. We shall all follow your order. So, be resolute and seek advice from the sheikhs, for they despise disputes. For my part, I will take control of the palace and follow your orders.”

Jaafar left and locked the palace gate, but he sent for supporters such as Ziyad ibn Aflah, Qasim ibn Muhammad, Muhammad ibn Abi Amir, Hisham ibn Muhammad ibn Othman, and other viziers, all supporters of the Caliph and his son, the rightful crown prince. He also sought the help of notables from the Banu Birzal, who were his own followers, and he summoned the rest of the leaders of the free soldiers in Córdoba and Al-Zahra and, of course, he neglected to summon any of the Caliph’s brothers. At the gathering, Jaafar announced the death of Caliph and informed those present that the Slavs had broken their allegiance to Hisham, and he began to urge and incite them: “If we guarantee the state for Hisham, we will secure ourselves and have control of the world. But if it passes to Al-Mughirah, he will replace us with others to appease his dislike of us.”

They conferred and convinced themselves that none of Al-Nasir’s sons, the uncles of Hisham, would preserve their status and positions. Some suggested killing Al-Mughirah immediately, before he became aware of the

death, which would deter the rest of his brothers and ensure they kept the pledge of allegiance they had made to their nephew the previous year. They agreed to the killing but were afraid to carry it out until Al-Amri enticed them, as he had quickly sensed that this was his moment.

“I am concerned, people, that corruption will inveigle its way into your hearts and, as we are all followers of our leader, Jaafar Al-Mushafi, we should not disagree with him. I am willing to kill Al-Mughirah on your behalf, if the leader orders it, so you can be at ease.” Jaafar was impressed with Al-Amri’s quick support and the assurance of leadership that he had given him with no objection from the rest of the attendees. He was also happy to hear Al-Amri say he was willing to kill Al-Mughirah, so he agreed.

“You have more authority in this great matter due to your special relationship with Caliph Hisham and your position in his court,” Jaafar said, thereby consolidating Al-Amri’s position, and he sent him with a group of trusted soldiers on the mission which they moved to carry out at once, while the others were still assembled. Al-Amri was in the company of Commander Badr, a trustee of Caliph Al-Nasir, with a hundred of the Caliph’s soldiers. They surrounded Al-Mughirah’s residence in Al-Rusafa, Córdoba, and Muhammad and his group approached to find him assured, unprepared, and unaware. Al-Amri mourned the death of his brother, the Caliph, to him and informed him that Hisham had taken over as ruler and that the Viziers feared opposition. Al-Mughirah was terrified and attempted to conciliate Al-Amri. He purported to be delighted with his nephew’s position as Caliph stating: “Inform them that I am attentive, obedient, and faithful to my allegiance, so there is no reason for us not to be conciliated as you wish.”

The story that Al-Amri encouraged to spread, was that after his concerns had been resolved, he felt sympathy for Al-Mughirah and sent to Jaafar to tell him what Hisham’s uncle had said and that he posed no threat to anyone based on his findings, and he asked Jaafar to reconsider the killing. According to the story he spread, Jaafar responded by reprimanding him for the delay and pushing him to end the matter in a letter that stated: “It was you who enticed us to this decision, you should do what you have to,

or leave, and we will send someone else." Al-Amri handed the letter to Al-Mughirah, leaving it in his hand as he walked out. Soldiers stormed his room, strangled him, and hung his body from his bedroom ceiling as if he had committed suicide. All this happened in front of his family, who were threatened by Al-Amri to close up the house and not to talk about what had happened if they wished to save their own lives, and they were forced to bury the body in the garden of the house. When they left the house they spread a rumour that Al-Mughirah had hanged himself because they were forcing him to ride to his nephew to offer him his allegiance. Al-Mughirah was then twenty-seven years old, Hisham not yet twelve, and Al-Hakim was sixty-five at the time of his death.

Fa'iq and Judz learnt of Al- Mughirah's assassination and Hajib Jaafar's admiration for his murderous Vizier, Muhammad Al-Amri. So Judz told Fa'iq; "I advised you to assassinate Jaafar, but you would not listen to me. Let us rush to him at once to demonstrate our support while pleading for his protection."

The two servants of the Caliph arrived at the Hajib's door, saying: "Our hearts are filled with despair about what Allah has guided you to, may Allah reward you well on behalf of our Master's son, the state, and all Muslims." Jaafar showed some willingness to accept them, in order to keep the peace during the period of preparation for taking the pledge of allegiance to Hisham as Caliph but, of course, they none of them let go of the grudges they held.

33

Fox-fights

After news of the killing of Al-Mughirah spread, Hisham took the pledge of allegiance from the notables and from the people. The title “Al-Mu'ayyad Billah”, Supported by Allah, was quickly chosen for him, and on his Caliphal ring was inscribed “Hisham ibn Al-Hakim, Billah Ya’tsm.” His Chancellor, Al-Amri, sat in front of him while the Chief Judge of the Mosque, Muhammad ibn Ashaq, took the pledge of allegiance from those who attended the council, including his uncles and their sons, the Viziers, servants, the notables of Quraysh, and prominent residents of Córdoba. On Friday, the Imams in the mosques of Córdoba raised their voices with invocations for the new Caliph, but the public showed no strong support, nor did they respond with: “Amen, O Lord of the worlds.” And there were no manifestations of genuine happiness among the people at this new beginning. On Saturday, the new Caliph paraded through Córdoba on his horse, in the finest of garments, accompanied by Al-Amri and those who served him, and with troops behind to intimidate anyone who dared to object or criticize: The message was clear to everyone. In the afternoon, it was announced in Córdoba that the imposed tax on olive oil, which the people hated, had been waived, finally spreading some joy after the atmosphere had been filled with terror. Rumours circulated to the effect that the decision had been the idea of Al-Amri, not of Hisham. On the same day, as we learnt later from the heralds, the Caliph promoted his father’s Vizier, Jaafar, to Hajib, and Al-Amri to Chief of the Viziers, instead of his position in the Central Security Forces, and he appointed him assistant and deputy Hajib. Of course, that was a show of gratitude from Subh, Hisham’s mother, to Jaafar and Al-Amri for what they had done and to ensure that they would remain loyal to her as she was now the real ruler, not her son, the Caliph.

In fact, every Andalusian knew that it was the Basque, Subh, who had built up Al-Amri, but he had proved himself too by serving Al-Hakim and in negotiating with the Al-Udwa tribes when the Caliph appointed him there during the war. As for Jaafar, he had been companion to Al-Hakim from his

youth, as he was the son of Othman ibn Nasr Al-Mushafi, the educator of Al-Hakim. When Al-Hakim assumed the caliphate, after his father Al-Nasir, he appointed Jaafar Chief of Viziers and Head of his Personal Secretariat after just three days, and he promoted him constantly, until he ran the affairs of the country on behalf of Al-Hakim during his illness. But now, Jaafar had become like an orphan, although he still held the most prominent position as Hajib to the new Caliph: He had to approach Subh directly or through the ambitious Al-Amri. The inevitable result of this was that competition between the two men was unavoidable, and they competed to appoint their own supporters to many sensitive positions to ensure their control over the present and the future. They both also strove to gain supporters from among the notables, the military forces, and the leaders of the Jund, and Jaafar had already appointed many of his relatives after Al-Hakim fell ill.

Before the end of the first year after Hisham's inauguration, the public, the companions, and palace conditions in Córdoba had changed completely to an unbelievable degree. Allah willed the death of Abu Ali Al-Qali, the author of the Kitab Al-Amali, the Book of the Eyes, Muhammad ibn Yahya, the Grammarian, Abu Marwan Al-Muradi, the writer, and Abd Al-Malik ibn Sa'id all died that year as well, and it became known as the Year of the Scholars.

The first victims of political change were the people and their security. Bands of criminals terrorized the streets of the city at night, forcing people to take turns guarding and protecting their streets, neighbourhoods, and homes. Sometimes rumours asserted that Jaafar was mobilizing the terrorists and providing protection for them, and at other times rumours circulated accusing Al-Amri. The second victims were the Slavs, who had served Al-Nasir and Al-Hakim, of whom there were more than a thousand serving in the palaces. In fact, Al-Hakim Al-Mustansir previously condoned their transgressions against the people, saying at the time that: "They are the trustees of our sanctuaries and the public should be lenient with them." Their fear of Jaafar reached its peak after he had revealed their plan. He had begun having their every move followed and had learnt that Fa'iq and Judz were plotting against the country, so he consulted with Al-Amri on how to get rid of them all. Al-Amri's proposition was to separate them, so he had himself appointed to supervise five hundred of them. Instead of oppressing them, he treated them well, won them over to his side, and

used them to increase his reach, all while claiming to Jaafar that he had separated them and had them under control. In addition to the Slavs, Al-Amri was also supported by the Banu Barzal, the first people from Al-Udwa to support the Caliph and who had killed Ziri and his supporters and become the first forces from Al-Maghreb to serve Córdoba. In addition to the Slavs and the Banu Barzal, Al-Amri also won over the rest of the army of Córdoba to his side, so that the dependence on the rest of the Slavs was greatly reduced. Judz sought to gain the favour of Caliph Hisham by asking permission to go to his home, thinking that his request would be refused and his position strengthened, but Jaafar let him resign, and the Slav Durri became the commander of the Slavs. At that time, Jaafar also advised Al-Amri to get rid of Durri, and he prompted some people to complain about the transgressions of the Slavs and their acts of banditry, and when Jaafar submitted the complaint to the Caliph, Al-Amri supported him.

According to the details that circulated in Córdoba about the end of the Slavs, Durri was asked to come to the Diwan of the Viziers to respond to the complaint made against him. When he arrived there, he suspected a plot after seeing the preparations of the soldiers, so he turned back, but Muhammad ibn Abi Amir prevented him, and when he attempted to arrest him, a fight occurred between them. Durri grabbed Al-Amri's beard and started shaking him by it. Al-Amri was never a fighter so he started calling for help from the bystanders, and some of the Banu Barzal rushed to his aid and rescued him from Durri. They hit and injured Durri with their swords, at which he lost consciousness, so he was carried to his home where he was strangled to death the same evening. The inevitable result of these developments was an order to Fa'iq and the rest of the Slavs to leave the palaces and to stay in their homes. Al-Amri completed his mission by chasing after them in their homes and stripping them of their money and possessions, but Fa'iq was able to flee defeated to the Balearic Islands. It was this which prompted Sa'id Al-Shantarini to indite his mediocre verses:

Remove every naive, unjust slave from the palace of our ruling Imam

Whenever we met, their denial of nightly evil deeds was just a sham

A pleased king was lightened of the burden of their heavy weight

His face alight with joy at freedom from their ignorant state

None in the palace should remain but the readers of the Holy Qu'ran

And our good pure Vizier

The third victims of Al-Amri's rapid increase in power were the inhabitants of the northern kingdoms. As usual, the Christian kings were encouraged by the death of a Caliph, and they attacked the frontiers, so the people sought help from Córdoba, but Jaafar Al-Mushafi did nothing except to advise the residents of Calatrava la Vieja to demolish the water dam on the river to keep the attackers away. This was a failure for Jaafar, and the people resented it, so Jaafar accused Ghalib of failing to protect the cities on the frontier. Al-Amri took advantage of the situation and exaggerated the supposed, potential danger to Jaafar, after Hisham assumed power, and he suggested raising a strong army to fight. Jaafar saw no obstacles to this; he was keen to eradicate the story of the demolition of the dam from people's minds, as well as to destroy the pride of his old rival, Chief Commander Ghalib, fearing his return to Córdoba to take over affairs, especially as he was the most famous and beloved man of the people. Jaafar offered leadership of the army to notable people in Córdoba, but they refused, so Al-Amri volunteered for the mission. Perhaps their refusal was meant as a hint to Jaafar to get rid of Al-Amri, who had stipulated that one hundred thousand dinars be prepared. When some of them objected to this huge amount, Al-Amri told them, "Take twice the amount and leave and good riddance to you." The objectors fell silent.

Developments progressed in favour of Al-Amri, who was in charge of the army as it accomplished its first raids. He did not go to the camps of the soldiers in the kingdoms of the north, and had no intention of restoring the land they had previously taken over, instead, he moved on the Castillo de los Baños, which was nearby and belonged to Galicia. He besieged it, took captives and plundered its territory and surroundings. After fifty-three days, he returned to Córdoba and distributed the captives and spoils to the soldiers who glorified him more after his generosity to them and the good sustenance during the march. Al-Amri wasted no time and wrote to Chief Commander Ghalib warning that there were many plots against him, and he was doing his best to ensure Ghalib's prestige and position with the woman of Caliph Al-Hakim and his son. Indeed, Al-Amri strengthened

Ghalib's position and contradicted the rumors spread by Jaafar about his failure to confront the enemy, and he persuaded the Caliph to give him the position of Vizier of Two Diwans. The Caliph's message reached Ghalib, informing him of his new position and stating that he should meet with Ibn Abi Amir to prepare the summer campaigns together and that Al-Amri would lead the Córdovan armies while Ghalib would lead those of the frontier.

After just thirty-three days, Al-Amri dramatically initiated the summer campaign as he went out on the day of Eid Al-Fitr to meet Ghalib in the city of Majrit, (later known as Madrid) which was built by Caliph Al-Nasir, may Allah have mercy on him. There, they plotted to conspire against Jaafar, after Al-Amri had gained an alliance with Ghalib by supporting him in the palace and in the harem. They led the forces together and conquered Castillo de Mula, taking many spoils, most of which fell to Ghalib, but he relinquished them to Al-Amri. After the raid, they went to Medinaceli and, before they parted ways, they agreed the details of their plan against Jaafar. Ghalib said to Al-Amri: "You will gain a great name and glorious acknowledgement in Córdoba with this conquest and the captives and spoils, and people will be distracted from our plans and your mission. Do not leave the country or Córdoba again before you have removed Jaafar from his position and assumed sole authority." Al-Amri was encouraged by the support of the 'Saviour', and when he arrived in Cordoba, he learnt that Ghalib had sent messages to the Caliph in which he spoke of Al-Amri's creative battle tactics and his good behaviour, and he also praised his efforts and diligence.

One of the elements of their plan was for Al-Amri to distribute the spoils of the campaign to the people of Córdoba and to sell them the captives at the lowest of prices. From that day on, he acquired the sobriquet, Al-Jallab, which had two meanings for the people of Córdoba as Al-Jallab could be a seller of slaves or of donkeys.

34

A New Victim

The security forces controlled by Al-Amri have arrested some of the thieves that were terrorizing Córdoba, and rumours have been circulating that they admitted a connection to one of Jaafar's relatives. As a result, Al-Amri proposed to Hisham and his mother that Jaafar's authority should be limited, with no reason offered, as it would be a blow to the Caliphate if the people of Córdoba were to discover that the Hajib Jaafar was connected to the lack of security. The Caliph wrote a decree stating that Jaafar was deposed as governor of the city and that authority had been accorded to Ibn Abi Amir. Armed with the decree of deposition from rank Al-Amri went to the council only to find Othman ibn Jaafar sitting pridefully in the governor's chair. Al-Amri and his companions approached Jaafar's son, scolding him as he clumsily grabbed his belongings and fled. They sent his horse after him so he could ride it back home.

And, just like that, Al-Amri held tight hold of the reins of the security forces, the army, the Berbers, and the hearts of the women in the palace, while Jaafar was left with no influence or any opening that would enable him to recover his previous position, so for now, he turned his attention to grasping at a way of escape. As for Al-Amri, he immediately took hold of the leadership of the city, and with a snap of his fingers the dangers of the thieves and robbers were gone, the corrupt were suppressed, and the houses of prostitution were shut down. To close the curtain on this whole charade, Al-Amri ordered that his cousin, Amr ibn Asqalajah receive a public lashing on a charge of extorting the people of the market, then he appointed another cousin, Amro ibn Abdullah ibn Amir, to govern the city, and he prompted him to improve security control. This appointment was a fulfillment of the pledge that Al-Amri took to some of his friends while they were strolling in Córdoba. All that was left for this pledge to be completed

was for Ibn Al-Marazi to take charge of the market and Ibn Al-Hasan to be appointed head judge in Málaga, where he could enjoy all the figs his heart desired.

Before a year had passed since the changes were implemented, Jaafar played his last card. He wrote a letter addressed to Ghalib in which he addressed him pleasantly and asked for the hand of his daughter, Asmaa, in marriage for his son and he was indeed successful in securing a marriage contract. However, once he became aware of this, Al-Amri reminded Ghalib of their agreement and he requested termination of the contract as he wanted to marry Asmaa himself. Al-Amri sent a group of the most influential people to mediate and convince Ghalib, so he rescinded what he and Jaafar had agreed on, and he issued another marriage contract between Asmaa and Muhammad ibn Abi Amir, who vowed that she should be the most treasured woman of his heart.

When the time for Al-Amri's third battle came, he entered Toledo and met with his father-in-law Ghalib, who received him with much pomp and grandeur. They left together to conquer the fortresses of Al-Mal and Zanbaq and to attack the city of Salamanca and despoil its districts. Once again, Al-Amri returned to Córdoba carrying many spoils, captives, and severed heads, only thirty-four days after leaving it. No one before him had been able to return with such a great number of spoils, brought from afar in such a short time.

The speed at which the army moved raised many questions and became the talk of the people in Córdoba before it was obscured by new occurrences. Like others, we discussed this in the mosque during astronomy and Latin classes; we debated the element of speed, was it possible or not? Could the army make a trip of eight hundred miles, filled with many battles, in just thirty-four days? And what were we to make of such events and progress if it was true? I was one of those debaters who argued that it was possible to complete this trip at this speed or possibly even faster. I stated that one hour of diligent walking on foot or on horseback could cover four miles, thus, it was possible to go forty miles in a day without running or taking a long rest. Therefore, ten days would equate

to four hundred miles covered on the way there and another four hundred coming back, with two weeks to spare for resting and fighting battles, as well as for emergencies. Those arguing against it said that the raid occurred in the summer, in the months of September and October, meaning that the troops and the horses would need rest and food, which would eat into the day. Generally, such an elaborate lie, where all the soldiers lied and claimed that they had gone to Toledo then made their way to Salamanca before returning here, could not be maintained. So, they did it and they could have done it even faster. There is no doubt that they could have, the route had been in use for hundreds of years, food and accommodations were accounted for, and the soldiers used it twice a year and, at this point, neither Al-Amri nor Ghalib would have had any trouble financing the journey.

The most important thing, according to what I heard explicitly from my father and from some of the sheikhs in the Mosque in secret, was not the matter of speed but rather the purpose of the raids. “What good is there in flying to the moon and coming back fast if one does not stay there to spread justice and religion? Are we in such need of money and women that we would send our soldiers to plunder swiftly, to spread terror and then race to return, hoping to gain the favour of the lowly ones of Córdoba?” The questions my father raised were filled with rage and reminded me of what he had told me years ago about Al-Amri’s desire to climb up the ranks as quickly as he could and to garner support without actually achieving anything remarkable. I also learned from my lessons on horsemanship and its fundamentals that a Muslim should not resolve to plunder and thieve, but rather Jihad should only be undertaken with the purpose of defending and upholding the word of Allah. The raids of Al-Amri were only for plunder and theft, and were bringing disgrace to the Qur’an and the Muslims, branding them with foreign traits.

People spread the news about the rise in Al-Amri’s salary with chuckles, it had now reached eighty dinars, what was even more significant was that with the positions he held, he was now the Vizier of two authorities like his father-in-law Ghalib, who followed the request of the Caliph to bring his

daughter Asmaa to be wed to Al-Amri in a majestic scene in the Caliph's palace of Al-Zahra. Hisham gave the bride away, while his mother and the other women undertook dressing and preparing her. At the time everyone swarmed about how polite and incredibly beautiful she was.

The person who benefited most from Muhammad's preoccupation throughout the three months of his honeymoon was Jaafar Al-Mushafi. However, on the tenth of Sha'ban, a warrant was issued for the arrest of Jaafar, his son, his servants, and his nephew Hisham. Al-Amri accused them of embezzlement and deposed them from all the positions they held. He went after them the same way he did with the Slavs before them. He confiscated all their money and returned it to the Caliphate treasury in Al-Zahra, all with Subh's approval. He demanded that they repay the money that they had already spent and their pockets no longer held, so they could not pay it back. Muhammad imprisoned them, assaulted them, dispersed their families, then sold Jaafar's palace in Al-Rusafa to repay the debt they owed. He took vengeance on Hisham and sent his cold corpse to his family from Al-Muttbaq prison. The reason why Al-Amri held Hisham in such contempt was that, during the third raid, he stole the severed heads of the Christians which Al-Amri had brought all the way to Córdoba and gave an order to his servants to throw them in the river; this was enough for Al-Amri to hold a grudge against him and he took the first chance that presented itself to strangle him.

The people of Córdoba felt no fear of the acts that Al-Amri was committing openly, rather they relished the humiliation that Jaafar was being subjected to and considered all that he was going through an act of divine vengeance for his actions against Al-Mughirah, and some even wished that the same fate would befall him.

The gossips of Córdoba refused to believe that Subh had overseen Asmaa's dressing and wedding, as this was in sheer contradiction to the stories they had spread about the love affair between Muhammad and Subh, however, following Jaafar's arrest the rumours returned and were present in the minds of people. They chose to explain that the Caliph's mother accepted the marriage of Muhammad and Asmaa as a political ploy

to fool the father Ghalib, ensuring that he would help them or at least would keep silent regarding what they had in mind for Jaafar. Thus, Subh was turned into an accomplice in the conspiracies of Muhammad to the point that she was deemed willing to accept that her lover Muhammad would take a new wife, who he would have to please until they were able to get rid of her father. At that time, the people of Córdoba aimed much criticism at the political scene and its people, and many poems were composed that castigated their acts. The following verses were among those composed to describe the situation and condemn the passiveness and acts of Qadi Ibn Al-Saleem while predicting what was to come:

What was promised is near, doom approaches tis clear

All that once we despised, comes closer we comprise

The Caliph his office to playground restyled

The judge complies, the mother is with child

Muhammad Al-Amri did not rush into killing Jaafar Al-Mushafi. First, he started by humiliating and degrading him, his way to further prove how low he was to all. Perhaps Al-Amri preferred to keep him for a while until his plans were complete. He dragged him many times to the Viziers' council to answer to claims he chose arising from his past. Some of the Viziers would stroke Al-Amri's ego, while others still had some dignity when it came to the truth. During the last session, when they investigated in the Caliph's palace in Al-Zahra, Jaafar was brought by the prison guard Wathiq, who began demanding that he pick up his pace from the prison to which Jaafar answered: "Show me some mercy Wathiq, I wish that I was dead, so I can finally rest." Humiliation had weakened his bones, but he had an alert mind, and he composed the following verses on his way:

One cannot trust fate not to change, time passes and people come and go

And I, once a lion-tamer, was reduced to cowering before foxes

If humiliation and indignity were the answer

The good would shun the wicked like a cancer

Jaafar entered the council of that sly fox, Al-Amri, in the presence of the Viziers, none of whom he greeted. This prompted Vizier Muhammad ibn Jaber to scold and shout at him for abandoning the courtesy of offering a greeting. Jaafar did not dignify his words with a response until ibn Jaber went too far, upon which Jaafar responded with: “You who lack righteousness and decency, faining ignorance of what you knew; your actions are those of an ingrate and you have failed those who stood by you.” The Vizier was flustered by this, but after he had given what he heard some thought, he claimed that he had not received any help from Jaafar and instead, he started listing all the accusations and his misdemeanours.

“So you deny that I saved you when you were accused of embezzlement?”

“What embezzlement do you speak of? The charges have been substantiated against you and you negate them then claim that you saved me when I was in dire need?”

Jaafar faced the assembled: “By Allah, may anyone who has knowledge of this speak out.” Upon which Vizier Ibn Ma’ash conceded: “Some of what you say is true.” And he asked his colleague, the Vizier, to go easy on Jaafar.

Chivalry overtook Vizier Muhammad ibn Jahwar, and he directed his speech to Ibn Jaber. “Did you not know that whoever was out of favour with the Sultan avoided greeting his loyalists for if they returned his peace greeting, they would anger the Sultan, and if they did not return it, they would anger Allah for violating His command to return salutations? So it is best to refrain from salutation, as Abu Al-Hasan, Jaafar, well knows!” The Vizier felt shame at the bringing up of his embezzlement and the display of his ignorance of proper manners; his face paled and he fell silent.

The Viziers started debating about the money unaccounted for, asking Jaafar to pay it back to which he replied; “By Allah; I have sold all that I

own, both old and new, and my hand holds not one dirham more, even if I were to be cut to pieces." Al-Amri ordered that he be sent back to be detained in Al-Zahra's prison, and he later informed the Council of the Viziers that he would not pass judgment or kill him before he confessed where he had put the money.

"I will make him accompany me on the summer and winter raids, and I will detain him once more when I return to Córdoba."

Jaafar's skepticism towards Al-Amri pushed him to bid his family farewell, on the presumption that he would meet his demise. They waited for him at the prison gate where he told them: "The invocation that I have waited forty years for will now be fulfilled!" His family asked him to explain.

"At the time of the Caliph Al-Nasir, some people spoke against a man so I ordered that he be beaten, that his life be overturned, and that the term he served be longer. Subsequently, I had a dream one night in which I saw someone telling me: "Set this man free, his prayers to Allah against you have been answered, and they will someday come to fruition." I woke up in terror, and I had the man brought in and requested him to forgive me and to take his invocation back. After some begging and refusal he told me what he had invoked against me saying: "I prayed to Allah that you would meet your end in the most confining cell, akin to where you have caused me to live for some time." Now, as you see, his invocation has been fulfilled, and I have come to regret my actions when it no longer matters, ever since I freed this man, I have been expecting to meet my demise in prison."

Satisfaction at Al-Amri's raids and rejoicing at what he was doing to Al-Mushafi were enough to satisfy the public, while the honest people among the notables, who were not involved in serving Al-Amri's endeavours, expected evil to result from his policy, which seemed to be speedily turning the page on the era of the Umayyad. There was no doubt that Muhammad Al-Amri had been acting as the Hajib of Emir Hisham and extorting instructions and orders from him, but it was also a fact that he had disposed of the Hajib that Al-Hakim had chosen for himself, and of the Slavs, and that he was drawing ever nearer to the Berbers, adding more of

them to the army of the capital, which was quickly joined to the army of the frontier under the leadership of his father-in-law. Those in support of the Umayyad era found themselves facing harsh options, either to submit, to blandish, or to revolt. Terror was what moved all, especially after the Umayyad Emirs had slipped out of Córdoba and taken cover in the districts of Al-Andalus, fearing that they would face the same fate as Al-Mughirah. Most of them forewent acting or having any say regarding ruling affairs, to an even greater degree than at the time of Caliph Al-Hakim. One of the most prominent problems for the Umayyad in Al-Andalus had always been the family's behaviour as regarded positions, if they were given a chance or were permitted to participate, they would disagree and fight as they had done many times before. However, if they were excluded from participation and decision-making as Caliph Al-Hakim had done, this would result in the displacement of the Umayyad, perhaps a disaster would befall Al-Andalus, as Al-Amri's policies were untested and remained to be evaluated.

36

My First Raid

For some time, my father had been certain that Al-Amri was aware of his unwillingness to be associated with him, and my grandfather was equally unsure of what to expect in the future. For this reason, our conversations at that time tended towards reassurance, reminding each another, for example, that Al-Amri was also of Yemeni origin, and he needed more Arab support to strengthen his position even though he was not a proponent of tribalism, but rather a politician and, at other times, we said that he needed supporters as he had a large number of opponents currently and was therefore unlikely to pour out his anger and wrath on any except his opponents. My grandfather and his sons decided to sell the house of my uncle Issa in Al-Zahra and to buy another in Secunda, and they also decided that my uncle Abbas should buy a house in Córdoba without selling the house he owned in Al-Zahra.

Meanwhile, I decided to ask my father for permission to participate in the summer raid of this year 368 AH, as I had previously agreed this with my grandfather, and I began to enumerate the advantages of my participation, especially at this time, before giving my father a chance to reject the whole idea. I said that the Chief Commander most likely still remembered me, and that Muhammad Al-Amri knew our family very well and had seen me several times with Emir Hisham and, of course, I would obtain the necessary permission and recommendation from the Caliph. I also pointed out that I would not participate in the battles; my mission would be to record the facts and events of the raid, in line with the profession originally chosen for me which I should be practicing. My grandfather added his opinion to my words, saying that my participation in this raid would be safer than participation in the future, because would I soon be fifteen, but current circumstances and conditions did not permit me to participate in the battle, and the intended benefit was to gain experience and to observe in order to determine my future options and choices. My grandfather told my father:

“Do not forget that Al-Amri’s raids are quick, and they head north not south. The people and forces of the Kingdoms of the North leave their countries before our forces arrive, and they return after our departure, so Suleiman will have returned to us before we even notice his absence.” Of course, my grandfather was exaggerating by saying this, but my father had no choice but to agree.

The call-up for the summer raid began with the arrival of the Jund forces from the districts and their encampment in Al-Saradiq Camp, near the old Palace of Al-Rusafa which was built by Emir Abdul Rahman Al-Dakhil in the north of Córdoba. At that time, the palace and its district were far from the parade ground of Al-Saradiq Camp, but now the intervening space had been connected by buildings, and the parade ground was adjacent to Al-Rusafa Palace from the north.

Abd al-Rahman arrived with three hundred soldiers from Medina-Sidonia, and I kept my promise to introduce him to my uncle Issa and to the rest of the family, which my father and, of course, my mother, Umm Suleiman, considered an additional reassurance.

More than nine thousand men were gathered at the camp. There was a mixture of volunteers, Jund soldiers from the districts, and the army of the capital, which was camped in Al-Zahra and contained increasing numbers of Berbers who were favoured by Al-Amri and whose numbers increased with every raid. Usually, the Caliph, or his representative, would lead this army and march with it until it joined up with the frontier army, but the current situation indicated that Al-Amri would lead our forces and march to Córdoba, while the frontier army remained under the command of Chief Commander Ghalib, who was approaching seventy-five years of age. The expectations of the soldiers were that Ghalib would leave his son-in-law the upper hand in leading the two armies, as he had done on previous occasions.

The call-up for the summer raid ended in less than a month, and Al-Amri had been encamped in the middle of Al-Saradiq, surrounded by the soldiers from the city, for the past two days. I was armed with a letter from the Caliph, assigning me to make a record of the events of the raid together with other narrators and writers, and my grandfather and his children strengthened my position, as they made successive visits to the camp in

order to introduce me to their acquaintances. In front of my grandfather and my father, Al-Amri asked me to take care of Khairan during the march and to teach him Arabic. Khairan was about ten years of age, and he was one of the boys that Muhammad Al-Amri had taken captive in his first conquest. He had taken him as one of the slaves he adopted who accompanied him everywhere and even took his name.

We had no stated purpose to achieve during this summer raid as our army marched north, accompanied by the sound of drums. We were positioned behind the mules that carried the tents, and a message had also been sent a few days previously to the western, eastern, and central districts of Al-Andalus, detailing the schedule of our progression. Scouts and spies also went out to monitor the roads we were taking, as it was necessary for them to precede us to the frontier towns and to the line of the Duero River in order to investigate the forces, readiness, and location of enemy gatherings and camps. The frontier spies and scouts used to do this work, but Al-Amri had increased the use of scouts, and he also maintained in constant contact with them by messenger throughout the army's march.

Every day, many volunteers and soldiers joined us from the Andalusian districts we passed through on our way between Córdoba and Toledo, and they followed us through dozens of villages and several large cities. I also saw castles and fortresses on our way and the towers which had been established to send and receive messages were situated at a distance of about every ten miles along our route. Before we reach the fortress of Alarcos, Al-Amri received some information that prompted him to change our line of march from the north-east towards Toledo to the northwest, as we marched along the northern bank of Tagus River for three days, before returning to the north, and crossed two moderately high mountain chains before reaching the Tormes River, which led us to Salamanca. From there, we were about a two-day march away from Zamora in the north, or about four days from Valladolid in the northeast.

Until now, no one, whether friend or enemy, knew where we were going, as otherwise the Christian spies would confirm the arrival of Al-Amri and the city army in Salamanca and the approach of the frontier army towards Valladolid to their leaders. Zamora, Valladolid, and Burgos are located at equal distance along the bank of the Duero River, which was considered the border between Al-Andalus and the northern Christian kingdoms. This

river runs from its source near Burgos in the north-east to Valladolid in the south-west, then meanders west towards Zamora and reaches its estuary in Portugal, where it spills into the Atlantic Ocean.

The most important thing was to prevent the Christian spies and their leaders from learning which area we would attack in this summer raid. It was likely that Al-Amri would lead the army from Salamanca to Zamora, or to Valladolid to cross the river with the frontier army to the north to continue marching together to Burgos, the largest and most important city of the Kingdom of Castile, or he might wait for the arrival of the frontier army here to attack Zamora and the territories north of it, like León, the capital of Galicia.

The next day, we continued our easy walk to the north and encamped a day's distance from Zamora. All the city's soldiers on this raid were horsemen; we had no infantry, and our numbers reached over twelve thousand horsemen. A camel corps of sixty walked alongside us, and this was the first event of its kind in the history of the conquests in Al-Andalus. Berbers rode on the backs of these camels; ten camels each carried a drummer, another carried a piper, and the rest accommodated spear-throwers. When we marched from Córdoba, the drummer beat on four drums, two of them hanging from the sides of the camel, and two next to each other in front of the drummer, who had his ears wrapped in a turban so that he would not be deafened by the tunes of the piper playing behind him. Every day, during the march, the corporals of the army gave orders to run to specific notes of the drums and pipes to accustom the horses to attack rhythms which were intended to cause disruption to the soldiers and horsemen of the enemy.

During the first week, I could hardly control Al-Aghar when the drums and the pipes grew louder, and I observed that what bothered Al-Aghar and the other horses was the sight of the camels and their sounds and movements, rather than the beat of the drums, which Al-Aghar was experiencing for the first time as well. That night, orders were given to us not to light any fires or to make any noise as about three thousand horsemen separated off from us before sunset and marched to the northeast, where they were instructed to light fires indicating a large number of soldiers. They were also instructed not to set up tents and to march at dawn to the northwest in order to cross the Duero River to reconnoiter with the rest of the army around Zamora.

I discovered a village near our camp that had been abandoned by its people due to attacks by enemy soldiers from Zamora. Some of the acquaintances and supporters of Al-Amri dispersed to sleep in some of its houses and ruins. I picked up my blankets and searched with Khairan for a suitable place to sleep. We found a man and an older person in a ruin that we entered, thinking it was empty. We were unable to recognize their position or rank from their clothing. The man was mixing crushed wheat with water, making a kind of bread and serving it to the older man uncooked. I asked him to stop, as it was likely to give anyone who ate it stomach cramps. I took out some bread that I had by me and gave it to the man with a small piece of dried meat that I had brought from Córdoba and had not eaten until now as there was plenty of food throughout the journey and this was the first night when we were not allowed to light a fire to cook on. I also gave the man a few dates that Khairan had obtained on his daily visit to the commissary mules.

“May Allah bless you. You are very generous, but what are you and your companion doing here?”

“I am Suleiman Al-Qalai, and this will be the first summer raid I record the events of, and this is Khairan Al-Amri, one of those Ibn Abi Amir captured in his first conquest. I am helping him to learn Arabic.”

“And I am Jaafar Al-Mushafi, and this is my son, Othman. Your friend insisted that we participate in this raid as well.” The old man was talking while chewing his first bite and looking at the food in his hand, while Othman moved some stones to make it easier for us to put down our loads and share their company, then he took some dates and chewed them with dry bread. It seemed inappropriate to refuse this unspoken invitation, and I decided in my mind that there was no reason not to sit with Othman and his father, I considered it an opportunity for me to speak to him.

“I have seen people older than you volunteer in this raid. Tomorrow Inshallah, the cooks will lay fires and make us something hot to eat.” This was an attempt to pretend ignorance if he did not want to speak or to provide opportunity for the former Hajib and Vizier to say what he had to say, especially as I had made him aware of my profession as a recorder the events of the raid.

“The volunteers volunteered to participate, and the elderly among them may have participated to become martyrs, or perhaps their health is good. As for me, I did not want to come, and I did not volunteer either as my health is not of the best, even a dog could bite me or drag me from Al-Muttbaq to a tent or to the wilderness, without any care, as you can see, and if I did not have Othman by my side, taking care of me, I would have died by now. But if I am killed by a Christian, I will not be counted as a martyr because I did not join the Jihad, or the conquest, willingly.” It was clear that the man had lost any dread or fear of Al-Amri and knew that he had nothing left to lose or to worry about, and therefore there was nothing obliging me to fake courtesy.

“Nobody is perfect, we are all imperfect and make mistakes, and if you have no flaws or were wronged by someone, you will be the front row before Allah. I don't mind telling you that the people of Córdoba believe that you wronged them when you were in power.”

“You are an outspoken, kind-hearted, generous young man. Tell me; what’s the most awful thing you ever heard about me?”

“I will be honest with you: It was your order to kill Al-Mughirah. Charges of embezzlement and looting don’t make you worse than anyone else, everyone who had power embezzled and looted. But the killing of an Emir who was not conspiring, or even aware of the death of his brother, the Caliph, whose name was raised by the desire of the Slavs without his knowledge, to have him killed in that way was dreadful! I apologize, but it was you who asked and who praised my candour.”

“I was an accomplice and a participant in the decision to have him killed, but the story which that dog promoted was calculated to harm me and give him cover, even though he was the one who carried out the act. Perhaps you can tell me who killed the other Emirs and displaced the rest while I was in Al-Muttbaq prison?”

“Acts are not measured by the magnitude of the fault or wrongdoing, and the murderer of one innocent person is not better than the murderer of ten innocents. We do not know what punishment this may engender or when, or what punishment he suffers and how, Allah is All-Knowing, All-Wise. If my grandfather was here, he would advise us to forget such hard times and to remember the good and happy ones, because this will ease the pain of

the soul and only the pain of the body will remain, which is much easier to bear.” I wanted to entice the old man to talk about his past experiences or to reveal some of his secrets, but he sighed and put down what was left of the bread in his hand, chanting:

I thought to dismiss my deeds, but could not; I believe they occurred for a reason.

By Allah, time has passed us by since then, yet no remembrance is out of season.

For a while mishap we did avoid, demonstrating cheerfulness and radiance instead.

In the night, at times, we had no idea where we belonged, nor our crudeness did we dread.

These days are no more than clouds upon the land, that rain down good and evil.

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The mangonels before Zamora

We broke camp that night, leaving most of our impedimenta behind and, at dawn, set off for Zamora lightly laden. At noon, the drums were struck, and pipes were played across the river close to the south wall. They were waiting for us, and we were greeted by a flight of arrows, soaring over the wall. We released arrows in our turn, but neither party succeeded in hitting the other. An hour later, three thousand in all arrived from the northeast to occupy the area north of the walls, cutting off supply and escape lines for the besieged, dispersed in every direction, weakening their defense to the south. To ensure that no one was injured by the arrows from Zamora, other forces crossed the river from two areas a little further east and west to join the besiegers from the north, so that less than half of our forces remained on the southern bank, together with our equipment and the camp kitchen, and Zamora was completely surrounded.

The city had been built on an island, in the middle of the river, and had been inhabited by Arabs since the conquest of Al-Andalus, but the soldiers of the Kingdom of León continued to dispute with the Arabs over it and, over the last half-century, from time to time, they succeeded in occupying it and would banish the Arabs from the city. Al-Amri sent a herald to the besieged to guarantee their safety if they surrendered the city without a fight, and left without carrying anything with them by noon of the following day.

They appeared to have underestimated the cavalry's ability to cross the water and storm the walls, and they hoped for rescue from León, so they declined to leave the city. There were no skirmishes on the first night of the besiegement, and we laid fires in our camps along the riverbanks, and scouts and spies went out towards León to identify any warlike movement to avoid us being taken by surprise. Al-Amri instructed the cooks to grill meat and to throw fat into the fire in order to enrage those besieged in

Zamora and to give them to understand that early withdrawal in the morning would be better for them. Our evening repast was grilled meat and soup made from Bulgur wheat, cooked with meat bones. Throughout our journey, all the warm food served to the soldiers consisted of stews made of chickpeas, beans, or lentils and other dry legumes, cooked in water with onions, as well as the meat of any animals that were hurt or injured that day. The soldiers ate from food they carried with them during the day, and not a single day passed without them passing a source of potable water and filling their water skins.

On the morning of the third day of the siege, our engineers finished creating three mangonels suitable for bombarding the city and two for attacking the gates and the wall. Many experienced volunteers assisted with the carpentry. Others gathered stones of particular weights and piled them up, according to weight, in areas near where the mangonels would be erected. When the vanguard of the frontier soldiers arrived that day, Al-Amri instructed them to reinforce the siege in the north and to lead their infantry in the direction of León, looting, destroying, and burning everything over a two-day march to the north, stopping short of the city itself. The mangonels were put into action, and I watched and counted to one hundred between every throw from a single engine. First, we showered them with stones that fell on every part of the city as a result of three converging engines that threw light, far-reaching stones then we started to increase the weight of the stones bit by bit until they impacted the southern wall. The fourth mangonel targeted a specific point between the buttresses. When the fifth mangonel had destroyed the gate, the attempt to destroy the wall was halted, and the five engines threw burning fireballs into the heart of the city. Residents and soldiers fled through the gates, and our troops began pulling them from the water and binding them with ropes. Some of the stronger men attempted to flee along the riverbed, but they were followed by arrows. Their chances would have been better if they had withstood until evening and escaped at night along the riverbed east and west, or of course if they had surrendered and made their way out safely. Their numbers were not significant; the captives made up three hundred, most of

them soldiers, and about fifty had been killed by the stones and falling masonry, and those who attempted to flee were even fewer.

Based on the actions of our forces, we had been expecting a greater number of prisoners, as well as more plunder and greater spoils, but the small town was devoid of most of its inhabitants, and the soldiers did not find much worth plundering once they stormed the city. The palace contained pieces of furniture that were not worth the trouble of transporting, and the soldiers searched in vain for treasure chests, tax money, or jewels. Before storming the city, orders had been given not to destroy the rest of it, because Al-Amri wanted to turn it back into a frontier city.

I saw three dead bodies in the palace courtyard, near the stables, which appeared to be those of a family, of a father, mother, and son on top of whom a wall had collapsed. When I got closer to them, I noticed that the child was breathing rapidly. When I touched him, he flinched, and then some volunteers appeared behind me, searching the other two dead bodies, seeking for anything of value. I pulled the boy away from them, as he was weeping silently, and told him, in Vulgar Latin and with gestures, that there was nothing to be afraid of, and he was safe with me. Khairan helped me to calm him down, and we dusted him off while we were moving and talking. I was not sure if I had the authority to take captives, but I knew right away that someone would try to take the boy to sell in Córdoba's slave market because he was an easy, expensive commodity. I explained to him that his only chance to survive was to stay with us, and he appeared to feel reassured by Khairan as he was his own age and spoke his language fluently. I decided to do my best to keep and to protect him, and I reasoned that the soldiers, having seen me for days with Khairan, the servant of Al-Amri, would assume that this boy also belonged to Al-Amri, and that the soldiers not knowing my exact position and status, even if they thought that I was close to Al-Amri, would all help me secure the boy by omission, if he kept behaving almost as if he belonged with us. My next mission was to persuade Khairan not to speak of him, and I told him that his careless chatter could result in the boy's death or sale by the soldiers, and that we would tell his master Al-Amri about this later, when things calmed down on the way back to Córdoba, so he agreed to keep silent and play-along with this three-way affiliation.

The boy was chubby, blond, and his hair was clipped short with his neck and ears showing so that he would have resembled a Córdovan boy if the colour of his hair and the fear on his face had not been so apparent in the circumstances. In one of the rooms we wandered into, we made him a turban out of a curtain. We began going around the houses like looters, but all of my senses were focused on saving the boy from the hands of others, so I began addressing him and Khairan in Arabic whenever someone looked at us, and they responded properly, Khairan in a broken tongue and the boy with gestures, as if he understood what he was being told.

In the evening, I made up my mind and registered my capture of the boy with the corporal responsible for spoils. I told him I spoke his language and that Khairan would help me take care of him until he was to be handed over. I persuaded the corporal that tying him up and putting him with the rest of the captives was unnecessary. With the registration, there was no longer any danger to him of being stolen or attacked. I asked the corporal about the amount of spoils that had been registered thus far, and he assured me that it was not worth mentioning and that the most valuable things were the captured soldiers, if anyone could be found redeem them or to buy them. However, word got around camp that we were going to continue north towards León. After the cavalry and infantry of the frontier had set out in front of us, flames arose from the fields, which did not bode well for the finding of spoils.

We moved north, passing through small, destroyed villages with a population of no more than ten families. Under the supervision of the soldiers of the frontier, we followed the river's northwestern branch towards Astorga and, after two days march, passed the branch towards León. Al-Amri wanted to prevent the soldiers of Ramiro III from leaving León, to which the infantry and cavalry of the frontier were slowly marching, while we hurried to Astorga, which had been under Arab control for the first hundred and thirty years after the conquest of Al-Andalus. The road from Zamora to Astorga is part of the ancient Roman road that connects the north to the south in a straight line, connecting Gijón on the Atlantic Ocean with Astorga, Zamora, Salamanca, and Mérida, and Seville with Cádiz near the strait that crosses to Al-Udwa of the Maghreb and Africa. León, the capital and the largest city of the north, has a population of less than three

thousand people. As for Astorga's population, it is even less than that but the city has a sturdy, high wall, with many round buttresses to strengthen its cohesion. Between the two branches of the river and the two cities of Astorga and León, I saw wheat farms and dozens of disadvantaged communities with low houses and barns for animals and pigs, protected by dilapidated wooden fences, If those unfortunate people were aware of the superior conditions of their Christian brothers in Córdoba and other Muslim countries, they would almost certainly leave to live under Islamic leadership. There was nothing to hinder our armies, who were destroying the rest of that already desolate area, from conquering and keeping the country, being kind to its people, winning them, and improving their working conditions. We destroyed the area around Astorga and returned quickly to Zamora. On the way north, Khairan and I were with the soldiers in the rear, and on the way back, we were at the front, and the boy Jorge took turns riding on Al-Aghar with me, and often with Khairan on his strong mule.

Before parting with the soldiers of the frontier, who had come without Commander Ghalib, the spoils were collected, and the volunteers from the frontiers took their share, while Al-Amri decided to allot the rest to the Berbers, the Córdovan volunteers, and others who had joined us on the way. The Jund soldiers from the districts and the capital soldiers received none of the spoils. The corporal responsible for the spoils estimated Jorge's value at ten dinars, and because I was the one who had captured him, he asked me to pay three dinars if I wanted to keep the boy, and I gave him the dinars immediately, as I was carrying ten for emergencies, and he wrote me a bond, putting Jorge under my name. Al-Amri directed the soldiers of the frontier to rebuild, inhabit, and protect Zamora as one of the frontier cities.

On the way back, the Berber mercenaries raced on horseback, sometime swooping under their horses' bellies and then climbing to stand on their backs while they flew like the wind. I had never seen any Berber cavalry to match their skill or their speed, and what surprised me most was the speed of the camels when they started running, moving their front and hind legs together like horses; I had thought they only moved their feet alternately. The races, and the Berbers' incomprehensible whoops, brought grimaces of disgust to the faces of the Córdovan soldiers and volunteers, particularly

the corporals. Three weeks later, we were welcomed with joy in Córdoba for having taken Zamora and terrorized the kings and kingdoms of the North. I agreed to meet with Khairan twice a week to continue our language lessons.

The day after our return, I explained to Jorge the importance and necessity of accompanying me to the bathhouse to take a bath. But he refused, claiming that he had bathed in our house on the evening of our arrival, and his body and clothing were clean. I insisted that he accompany me, but my mother was following our conversation as I translated for her, and she told me to go alone and promised to persuade Jorge to accompany me the next time. I was struck by Umm Suleiman's words and stance, as she was not fluent in Jorge's language. So why did she encourage him to stay, and how had he persuaded her, given that he spoke neither Arabic nor Mozarabic? Had she understood something from the boy's words that I was unable to comprehend?

When I returned home, I found my father, mother, grandfather, my sister Fatima, our neighbour Jesús and his wife María, and my uncle Issa, his wife, and their child gathered to congratulate us on our safe return from the summer raid. I was expecting that gathering and an even larger one tomorrow, a Friday, when my uncles, aunts, and their families would attend. With the exception of Jorge, who continued to look at the ground, everyone was looking at me, and I noticed something in their eyes other than their pride in me after this foray, and something of sympathy in my mother's eyes. My uncle welcomed me with a hug then whispered in my ear: "They have discovered she is a girl, not a boy."

"Who's the boy, who's the girl, and who are 'they', what on earth are you talking about?" I said quietly, while Issa dragged me away from the attendants and explained the situation to me.

"I came to see you with Umm Marwan, and your mother had summoned María to question Jorge, who told them that she is a girl, and when they informed us, I said: "Of course you know that she is a girl, and you kept

silent about her disguise to keep the soldiers away from her, and I asked your neighbour to inform Jorge of that." My uncle fell silent, and I was thinking about how embarrassing it would have been for me if everyone knew about the girl: I would be a laughing stock for over a month.

"And what did Umm Suleiman say?"

Without your neighbour hearing us, she said that you wanted to take the girl to the bathhouse. I asked her to stop talking after she said that and added: "Either you were trying to keep her hidden, or you intended to send her to the women's bathhouse, and you planned to tell everyone when you were ready." Once again, my uncle had saved me.

"All praise to Allah, you arrived just in time, before things went wrong. We will just have to keep up the farce," I said and went back to greet the neighbours, but María drew me to her side, and I was almost numb from what I had heard so far.

"Thank God you saved her." María then placed her lips near my ear and whispered: "She is the city governor's daughter," before returning to her normal voice, saying: "Jesús and I hope to adopt her if you set her free." I whispered in her ear that I knew who she was and where she came from, and I asked her to keep it in the dark and keep the girl quiet, or else she would be taken as a slave to the palaces, because I had bought her under false pretenses. María indicated with her hand that her lips were sealed, and I promised her all would be well and hastened to let her take the girl to their house until the matter could be settled and procedures decided upon. Before Jorge left, I made her understand the importance of retaining that name, possibly changing it to Jorgie and claiming to be a relative of Jesús. I reminded her that any breach of this agreement, or any disclosure of where she was from, would result in harm that I would not be able to prevent. The story ended peacefully as only Jorge and my uncle knew the truth, and my mother had some doubts which she may have disclosed to my father, but he never actually mentioned the matter. As regards Khairan, who I met frequently, I informed him later that my uncle had sent Jorge to our farm in Málaga to learn and to work.

I could not understand why María and Jesús were so taken with Jorgie. Córdoba's slave market provided constant opportunities to buy boys and girls of all kinds and sizes. The slave trade flourished at a low price on the borders between Al-Andalus and the kingdoms of the north, as the Franks brought them from northern and eastern European countries and sold them to Andalusian Jewish and Muslim merchants in exchange for gold dinars, and from the borders they were transferred to fattening farms or training and eunuch institutes in Lucena to be sold in the slave markets of Al-Andalus, or re-exported to the East. María and Jesús could have brought back a girl with them from their pilgrimage to Sanctus Iacobus. I pondered the reason for their admiration and love, after gradually recovering from the shock, and after promising María that I would give her Jorgie. I did not regret the decision, but I was curious as to why they wanted her, and I thought that it might be a reassurance that she had not been harmed by anyone after her separation from her parents, which was not the case with the rest of the slaves, of course.

In the days that followed, I wrote on the back of the purchase contract that I had granted Jorgie her freedom, and two people witnessed this and signed in front of the judge, who, thankfully, did not ask to see her. Using only the name, I phrased the words to avoid specifying whether Jorgie was male or female. Because there was no mention of Jorgie’s age in the original contract, I was not asked who would be responsible for the freed slave. I kept the judge busy by telling him about who I am, who my father and grandfather are, and how I obtained the contract from my first participation with Al-Amri in the last summer raid. With my chatter, I tried to steer him away from any legitimate questions, such as my age or anything about Jorgie. Of course, I could have asked my father or Jesús for assistance, but I did not want them to be complicit in falsifying facts in order to avoid consequences to them if the matter became known. I handed over the contract in its new form to our neighbours, who were excited to entice the girl to study in Córdoba. They persuaded her that the affliction and misfortune had provided her with an excellent opportunity.

“You are now free, Jorgie! This is a contract confirming that, and if you wish to return to your country, we will all work together to make that happen.”

“I am going to try to learn to live here. After my father and mother died, I was left with no one in Zamora.” María embraced her, as previously, she had taken upon herself to provide her with the love and care she had been robbed of.

“You know Khairan! He is from your area, too, and he could have fled and rejoined his family while we were there. Of course, your position is better than his in your home country, but it will not hurt you to study the sciences here.”

“She will stay here, and she has told Jesús and I that she will write letters to her relatives to let them know she is fine.”

Her new parents had clearly talked with her, and she had agreed to be educated here and to live with them as their daughter. Jesús and María were therefore able to reach an agreement with a teacher to supervise her education for an agreed-upon annual sum, and they would, of course, choose one of the masters of Latin, both classic and vulgar, to teach her whatever they chose, in that language and, of course, Arabic. Before I left her that day, we all agreed to give her the sobriquet Khokha, the Peach. After bathing and putting on feminine attire, she did indeed resemble a peach in more way than one.

37

Disguise Mania

My meetings with Khairan continued smoothly, with friendship and empathy, despite our age difference. Of course, I did not tell him about Khokha, but that summer I repeatedly encouraged him dress up as a girl. I liked the idea of disguise in general as well as impersonation of the opposite sex. I was bothered by my failure to uncover Khokha who had been by my side the whole time, had slept beside me, and helped me to feed and saddle Al-Aghar. When I thought back to the details of the journey, I see that I should have noticed that Jorge constantly avoided urinating in public or any degree of nudity when washing, and I had no idea when or how he had relieved himself during the weeks of the journey. I wanted to achieve the opposite with Khairan, to turn him into a girl, introduce him into the women's bathhouse, and to remove him as easily. He had yet to grow any facial hair, and even if he had some hair, it was blond, and many of our girls and women are hairy, even when they are young, and they go to the Hammam to remove all the hair from their bodies. I solved the problem of Khairan's short hair by making him wear a headscarf to match the rest of his female garments. I already had experience with such things, as he was the same age as Fatima and Khokha. His voice had not yet changed, and all I had to add was some make-up and perfumes. I applied kohl to his eyes and coloured his lips with grape juice. It would have been enough if he had bitten his lips until they turned red before entering the Hammam, but I expected him to lose all the colour from his face out of fear.

He practiced imitating the way girls walked and their movements and then I accompanied him to the downtown Hammam, away from our neighbourhood. He was to inform the woman guarding the gate that his master had sent him after his mistress to ask her about something he wanted immediately. And if the woman asked him about his mistress, he was to say that her name was Subha, Umm Muhammad, and to give a general description that would apply to most women. Inside the Hammam, he was to walk from one room to the other and memorize the descriptions

he saw and then to choose the most beautiful girls in order to wait for them and follow them home. Khairan embraced this dangerous plan enthusiastically, and we pledged to one another not to divulge the secret. If he was discovered, the escape plan was for him to scream for a long time, and then I would come and create chaos that would enable him to escape. I told him not to stop walking around in the Hammam, not to stare at those present, not to run, and to come out after only one round. I wanted to prove that disguises could work, but we were not alone in that, rather it was one of the well-known secrets among the frequent visitors to the Mosque, and even among the younger visitors who come to learn the Qur'an from the sheikhs in the mosques that gangs of Córdovan boys were competing to successfully enter a Hammam, and some of them revealed the date on which their competitors would attempt to do so, so they would be discovered and flogged. The most recent setback for Al-Fihri's gang was the arrest of five of them last year for plotting to enter a Hammam as girls. They were flogged and the Qadi ordered them to be carried on donkeys seated back to front, with the intestines of slaughtered animals on their shoulders, and to be taken around Córdoba while heralds followed, announcing their deeds to the public.

Of course, the situation for Khairan and I was different. We would not divulge the secret, and Khairan was already beautiful and did not need much disguise, and we chose the Hammams carefully. By Christmas, Khairan had already entered eight Hammams, and we collected descriptions and identified the houses that contained the most beautiful bodies in Córdoba. The plan could have been repeated five hundred times, but that was dangerous because Khairan could let down his guard, and there was no need to repeat the act, which did not mean much to young Khairan, and was not really meaningful for me apart from the knowledge of where the beauties lived and their most intimate details. The act was not even remotely close to the chivalry of horsemanship in any shape or form, so I stopped without repeating it even once more.

Khairan learned Arabic quickly, and I asked him to describe girls in Arabic and taught him the words and sentences required for an accurate description. He travelled between Al-Zahra and the palace where Al-Amri resided, in front of the Mosque and near our house, and he saw Khokha in

the street repeatedly but did not recognize her. He thought she was just one of the neighbour's daughters.

Some in Córdoba claimed that Al-Amri avoided living in Al-Zahra for fear of being assassinated, and others said that it was due to Muhammad's desire to be free of the control and interference of Subh. Whatever the reason, that year, the Hajib started building a city that would rival Al-Zahra, which he inaugurated himself on the other side of eastern Córdoba and named Alzahira, for he was convinced that nothing dire could overtake him as long as he was far from Al-Zahra, Al-Amri informed the Caliph's mother that his spies had discovered a plot by his uncles and their sons to kill Hisham, and advised her to impose strict control over movement inside Al-Zahra. Khairan was one of the spies Al-Amri tasked to watch Hisham, and he told him what exactly was happening inside Al-Zahra, which made it easier for me to visit the Caliph as an old friend and a companion of Khairan, as the guards guessed that my visits were known to Al-Amri.

Subh was not convinced by the explanation for Al-Amri's abandonment of Al-Zahra, nor by him spending money on building a new city, but her hands were tied and she was unable to do anything but conspire, and that required either the Slavs, the Umayyad, or, of course, the army and Ghalib. However, Subh had made all of them, and others, her enemies from the beginning, in addition to Al-Amri, who refused to enter Al-Zahra, and it was no longer possible to kill him by poison or anything else. The justification used for dismissing the Caliph in that manner and with such haste, necessitated a vigorous raid to track down the conspirators among the Caliph's uncles, sons, and families, which only dispersed them more widely and pushed them to hide themselves even deeper within the regions of Al-Andalus. The weakest link Subh could see was the old man Ghalib, the father-in-law of Al-Amri, who she might be able to move to sympathy and provoke his chivalry about the besieging of the Caliph and the treatment he received, but that required the difficulty of persuading him through correspondence that could fall into the hands of Al-Amri's spies.

After one year, I met acquaintances returning from the summer raid to find out the most recent news. I felt the disappointment of the soldiers and volunteers at the lack of spoils and the increase in the influence of the Berber mercenaries who received the same salaries as the soldiers of

Córdoba and the Frontiers. They did not care if there were spoils or not; what mattered to them was quick destruction and to return with as many severed heads as possible. That was the case last year as well, and most likely this would not change soon, given the poverty of the residents of the attacked areas and their knowledge of the dates of summer raids, even if they were unaware of the location. As soon as they heard that the raid was coming, they took up their belongings and departed to the north, and did not return to their lands until the raiders had gone.

Al-Amri continued to appease the Berber and raise their status in Córdoba, whereby they had all come on a donkey or on foot in shabby clothes, but now they wore the most luxurious garments, made of silk, rode the most majestic horses from ancient bloodlines, and lived in houses like palaces, such as they had never seen in their wildest dreams. This situation, of course, angered the soldiers, the Jund, the volunteers, and the people of Córdoba, who had to endure these people that Al-Amri had summoned and empowered.

38

Astrologers Lie, Even When They Are Telling the Truth

The city of Alzahira was built on the Guadalquivir River using a horde of craftsmen and machines, and a wall was built around the buildings and gardens, and viziers, writers, and hajibs built their palaces in land surrounding the city, granted to them by Al-Amri. As usual, hypocrites competed to live near Al-Amri, according to the tradition of living near the Caliph Al-Nasir in Al-Zahra, may Allah have mercy on him. Alzahira became the city of Al-Amri, and two years after it was completed, it had become the centre of the government. The Dar As-Sikkah, the Mint, was transferred from Córdoba as well, and Al-Amri had become the de facto ruler of the Caliphate while Hisham, in Al-Zahra, merely held the title of Caliph. Al-Amri wrote to the provinces of Al-Andalus and to Al-Udwa ordering them to bring the tax money to his new city, and all the provincial rulers with needs or requests were warned to come to Alzahira, and not to go to the Caliph's residence in Al-Zahra.

The story which had spread among the people as to why Al-Amri had chosen this plot to build the city, or perhaps even the essential reason for its construction, was that Caliph Al-Hakim, may Allah have mercy on him, had heard about a plot of land suitable for construction, so he sent Al-Amri to investigate and to buy it for the Caliph before someone else did. When he arrived in the said area, he asked an old woman about the condition of the plot and its suitability for construction. She said that she had heard a prophecy from the ancients that someday a great city of a great king would be built in this area. Eventually, Caliph Al-Hakim did not buy the plot, and it remained as it was until Al-Amri gained control of the whole country and established the city of Alzahira to fulfill the prophecy he had been told of as he was enamoured of astrologers and reading prophecies of the future, and he had many dealings with them.

One day, Al-Amri asked his servants to bring three astrologers from the markets of Córdoba, as he intended to flog them, but he did not tell anyone this. When they came, he asked each of them separately what they foretold

would happen that day. Two of them embarked on their endeavours, mumbling and speaking absurdly, with peculiar shenanigans, speaking of planets and galaxies, and weaving stories about upcoming victories and which star would bring luck to Al-Amri. However, the third was clever and suspected Al-Amri's malicious intent, so he said "My lord, I do not deserve what you intend for me, but I shall comply with whatever you do." Al-Amri replied, "If you manage to tell me what I intend to do to you in detail, I will give you enough money to spare you working in the streets."

"My lord does not kill anyone unjustly, and his prison is only opened to heretics and those who deny his blessings and favours, of which I am not one. I presume that my Lord has ordered a flogging as the most merciful punishment for those who foretell the good in his era." Al-Amri laughed at how cleverly and frankly this third astrologer spoke, and he gave him a bundle of dinars, and ordered the other two to be flogged for their foolishness.

In the three years that followed my first summer raid, I was accustomed to meet with my acquaintances before their departure and after their return. The meetings with Khairan continued, but they decreased after he had mastered the language sufficiently and after he started to become more occupied, but I continued making infrequent visits to him in the city of Al-Zahra. Most of my time was devoted to working with my father, supervising the process of transcribing books and buying all the new ones issued and examining some translations from Arabic into Latin, which I had mastered, allowing me to give my opinion on the quality of the translations. With every visit to the Caliph, I used to return books then borrow the same number again from his father's library to be copied by our workers before returning them. I also persuaded my father to make wooden moulds that were carved with decorations, designed for each book, and to stamp them with ink on the pages, corners, and margins of the books, to decorate them and raise their price. The books borrowed from the Caliph's library were copied by day and by night, once they entered our workshop, one transcriber replacing the other.

On the afternoon of each Friday, I would walk on the sidewalk and over the bridge with Fatima and Khokha, as well as Rebecca and Chavah, the daughters of our sixth neighbour. Rebecca had grown up suddenly these

past years; she was but a few months older than me, but now she had turned into an elegant, graceful, womanly lady, while the three girls were close in age and size, and their eyes and laughter still held a hint of innocence.

On one of the Fridays of the spring of 370 AH, corresponding to 981 AD, Khairan was riding his mare, rushing from the west to the east along the sidewalk. On seeing us, he stopped and I hurried to speak to him. His appearance announced that an important event had happened.

“The servants of Subh clashed with the guards who prevented Caliph Hisham and his mother from riding with their servants on a tour of Córdoba. I am on the way to Alzahira to take orders and ask for more soldiers.” He and his horse were sweating, and the horse could no longer deliver him to Alzahira as it was fighting for wind, so I brought him a good-looking horse from those that were rented out for picnics and told him to return it to the owner on his way back in the evening, and his own horse would be with the owner. When Khairan prodded the horse and started urging it to speed up, the owner tried to chase him, but I told him that this was one of Al-Amri’s servants, and his horse would not be harmed. I asked him to take care of Khairan’s mare until he returned and gave him two dinars, one for the hire of his horse and one for looking after Khairan’s mare, and I threatened him if any harm befell it.

I told Rebecca about this matter, which by morning would no longer be a secret, but I asked her not to inform the other girls, and only to tell her father. We returned some while before the beginning of the Jewish Sabbath as I wanted to inform my grandfather and father of what had happened in Al-Zahra because we had personal interests there, such as the house of my uncle Abbas, and the books that we borrowed secretly, as well as the fate of my poor friend after this desperate act of his mother’s to appear before the people without the Hajib. Before the end of the week, the news about their uncompleted tour was widespread among the public. Some deplored Subh’s behaviour, while others said that the Caliph had every right to take such a tour, and it was not logical for anyone to consider the tour an attempt to get rid of Al-Amri, who had spread a rumour that the Caliph had delegated him to rule the affairs of the Caliphate because he

had devoted himself to the worship of Allah and did not wish to be disturbed by anyone.

During this period, I decided to participate in the following summer raid, which would coincide with the beginning of 371 AH.

Between the spring and the summer, Al-Amri's proponents spread stories of his justice, his honesty, his piety, and, of course, his intelligence. He intended in this way to cover up his persecution and intimidation of the Umayyad and to win the hearts of the public as a prelude to his endless plans. They claimed that Muhammad ibn Abi Amir had written a copy of the Holy Qur'an by his own hand, and that he carried the copy with him during his battles to read and contemplate the Book of Allah. But of course, they did not mention that he used to drink alcohol in the afternoon and in the evening, a fact known to the people of Córdoba and to everyone who accompanied Al-Amri on his conquests or participated in his nightly entertainments and poetry recitations.

Caliph Al-Hakim drank alcohol as well, but he stopped drinking during the two years of his illness; a large number of people in Córdoba drank alcohol too, produced and sold under the supervision of the state and which brought in a reasonable income from taxes. All these things were known to us, so that it was entirely implausible to believe him a pious man who adheres to all the provisions of the Holy Qur'an.

The most recent rumour spread is that a merchant from Aden, in Yemen, came with jewels and precious stones to Al-Andalus and presented them to Al-Amri, so he chose some and offered the merchant a bundle of dinars. The merchant walked in the main square, then decided to take off his clothes and swim in the river in order to cool his body from the heat of the sun on that day. A kite swooped on his clothes and snatched the bundle of dinars and the rest of the jewels and flew far away. The merchant became distressed as he followed the kite flying in the sky over our city, and when the time came to pay for the goods which he had requested the Andalusian merchants to carry to Yemen in advance, he had no money or jewels to barter with them. The story reached Al-Amri, so he had the merchant brought before him to hear the details, and he blamed him for not reporting the problem at the time.

Al-Amri asked the merchant: "Did you see the path the flying bird took?"

The merchant replied: “It passed east of the gardens that surround your palace.”

Immediately, Al-Amri called the Head of Security and told him: “Bring me the sheikhs from Al-Rambla.”

The sheikhs arrived quickly and entered the palace, as they did not yet know the reason for their summons. Al-Amri asked them: “Is there anyone in your neighbourhood whose financial situation improved overnight?”

The sheikhs debated the conditions and affairs of the people of the Al Rambla neighbourhood, and then delegated one of them to speak. He said: “Oh, My Lord, we know of a poor man of who used to work with his children with their hands and to carry water barefoot, because he was unable to buy an animal. This man bought an animal today, as well as a plain garment for himself and his son.”

The next day they brought the man and the merchant, and Al-Amri had the poor man brought next to him and said: “We lost something that fell down to you. What did you do with it?”

"Here it is, my lord." And he took a bundle out of his pants, at which the merchant shouted with joy, and Al-Amri asked the man to recount what had happened. He told them: “While I was working in my garden under a palm tree, the bundle fell in front of me, so I took it as it looked so enticing. I thought that the bird had stolen it from your palace which is close-by, so I took it under my care. But my need pushed me to take ten dinars from the bundle, and I told myself that is the least that my lord would give me in his generosity. Al-Amri asked the merchant to take his bundle and check the contents, so he did and said: “Nothing has been lost from it my lord, except for the dinars that he mentioned, and I would give them to him as a gift.”

“Such an act behooves a reward, and we shall not detract from your joy, if he had not combined admission and denial in his statement, his reward would have been even greater.” Then he ordered the merchant to be given ten dinars in compensation and the farmer another ten, as a reward for not wasting what he had found, and he also informed him that if he had brought the bundle before helping himself to its contents, he would have received a greater reward. As for the merchant, he kept repeating: “By Allah, I will spread news of your greatness and generosity in all countries, and tell

everyone that you are master of the birds as well as of people, for they turned towards you and did no harm to your neighbour.” The merchant meant that he would spread the word that Al-Amri was like the prophet, Solomon the Wise, who spoke the tongue of birds and animals.

39

The End of a Relative by Marriage

On the summer raid of 371, we were accompanied by two Jaafars. Jaafar Al-Mushafi, an old, humiliated captive who no longer commanded anyone's respect because he accepted his situation instead of committing suicide, and the second Jaafar was ibn Ali, known as Ibn Al-Andalusi, who remained by Muhammad Al-Amri's side throughout the march. The Berbers under Jaafar's command and others who had come to Al-Andalus to join Al-Amri's army were singing and dancing on horseback and drumming on camelback. We marched at a slower pace than usual, and had a lot of food and drink with us just like a wedding procession that had left Córdoba for Toledo, and the fortress of Mayrit (Madrid) and Guadalajara, where the table of the Prophet Solomon, peace be upon him, was to be found. Our goal was to travel towards Medinaceli to meet with Chief Commander, Ghalib, the Holder of Two Swords, and of Two Vizierships. Although there were few volunteers, the Jund from the provinces were there in force. In exchange for the regions they manage, they are obliged to participate in the summer raids and jihad, as well as to pay taxes from their bounty.

As we neared the village of Algora, less than a day's distance from Medinaceli, a letter arrived from Ghalib, stating that he was waiting for his son-in-law in the Castle of Atienza, west of Medinaceli and directly north of Algora, a distance of a day's journey on horseback. We camped on the outskirts of Algora, and, at dawn, Al-Amri set out, accompanied by Jaafar ibn Ali, some Jund officers, the senior corporal of the capital army, and some Berbers and Slavs carrying banners and other items to heighten our appearance. The scribes were permitted to accompany the caravan, and I was among them. We walked through the valley that separates the two banks of the Sierra de Pela, arriving in the afternoon at Atienza to a feast awaiting us inside the castle. Ghalib sat at the head of the table, and

around Al-Amri were the leaders of the Jund, his father-in-law in front of him and Jaafar ibn Ali and some of the attendees beside him, while the rest were distributed around the dining tables, wherever space allowed.

We had our fill of greetings, and meat, and rice, washed our hands, and then retired to the divans for sweets and bitter coffee. Suddenly, all talk quieted as our attention was drawn to the ongoing conversation between Ghalib and Al-Amri, specifically when the latter exclaimed loudly: “Do you believe the lies of a slave over your son-in-law who supported you?”

“That slave is who created the man you are now, and she is the mother of our Caliph, and I did not agree to offending them and imprisoning the Caliph in Al-Zahra. You must vow that you shall return to the right path.”

“And what if I do not, what are you going to do, old man!”

“I will chop off your head, you son of a bitch!” When Ghalib pulled his sword from his scabbard, people rose to their feet, stunned, while Al-Amri stepped back, raising his hands to receive the blow weakened by interfering hands that had restricted Ghalib’s movements, in an attempt to hinder the assault. Al-Amri ran, blood seeping from his fingers, and Jaafar ran behind him while voices rose to defuse the situation, calling on them to request forgiveness from Allah, but none of the soldiers moved to follow Ghalib’s command to arrest Al-Amri: They let him be, thinking the command was given out of rage towards his son-in-law and partner, especially as it appeared that he had not planned to kill or arrest him in advance and had not ordered his arrest beforehand. Although I and some of those who had come with Al-Amri did not stay in the fortress long, we had to make an effort to catch up with him and him companions, as they urged their horses as fast as they could to escape what they thought was a conspiracy, and they were expecting to be chased. We arrived at our camp before the evening prayer. That night, it was rumoured that Ghalib had allied with the Christians, and he planned to assassinate Al-Amri, so we marched to the fortress at dawn to end the alliance between Ghalib and the Christians.

Jaafar’s six hundred Berbers surrounded Al-Amri and those with him, with the rest of the soldiers trailing behind. Before we reached the hill

overlooking the fortress, Ghalib's soldiers appeared and climbed up it ahead of us, then the swordsmen descended upon us, raising their white banners, and our Berbers turned on their heels, and the Jund of the provinces spread to the north and right, as everyone was unsure in the face of the impending attack and only some of Jaafar's Berbers remained around Al-Amri. Ghalib's soldiers rushed towards him, Ghalib, who was nearly eighty, in their middle, with a big turban on his head that resembled a golden egg wrapped in a red, and a green cloth pulled over his brows. Some Berbers approached him by order of Jaafar, but he quickly wrestled them to the ground without stopping, and those who followed them struggled to evade his blows. Al-Amri remained steadfast on his horse, clapping his hands in admiration for his father-in-law, while his knees trembled in fear, and he remained paralyzed as he recognized that he would meet his end. Suddenly, Ghalib's hand dropped to his side, still holding the sword, and his horse dashed forward in the direction of Al-Amri. Before Ghalib's horse could trample Al-Amri, Jaafar came forward and grabbed it, bringing it to a halt. In that moment, Ghalib fell dead from the back of his horse, having been neither being stabbed nor hit. By a miracle, Ghalib's life was taken and Al-Amri given a new one.

After Ghalib fell, fighting ceased immediately, and Al-Amri met with the leaders of the capital and frontier armies, as well as the soldiers' commanders, and they agreed to march to fight the Christians in the coming days, after defusing the situation and burying Ghalib.

The news of the battle, the disagreement among the Muslims, and Ghalib's death in a battle against Al-Amri reached Burgos, which was three days away. González of Castile sent a request for help from Sancho Garcés II in Navarra and from Ramiro III of León. They believed that under current conditions, defeating the Muslims had become possible, and they would be eliminated in a short period of time. Al-Amri's calculations led him to the conclusion that victory over the Christians was necessary so he could connect their losses to that of Ghalib, restore unity among the Muslim forces, and return victorious to Córdoba.

Our camp was moved from Algora to the town of Naharros, south of the castle, and from there we set off through the valley along the Sierra de Ayllón mountain range, heading to Aranda de Duero, when Al-Amri received news of Castile soldiers gathering between Aranda and Burgos. Some factions of cavalry set out from Aranda to the site of the Castilian camp, scattering the soldiers and returning with about twenty heads, cut off from their owners' bodies, and they burned small villages and farms north of Duero. Al-Amri did not accompany the forces to Burgos; instead, we proceeded west to Simancas and Zamora, camping on the southern bank of the Duero River. The march was swift, with the Berber horsemen, the capital soldiers, and the Jund from the provinces leading the way; while the infantry of the frontiers marched in the middle, with their horsemen making up the rear to protect them from any hostile forces that might catch up with them, since the soldiers of Castile had not been annihilated in the battle, and the soldiers of Navarra had not yet arrived. The middle and rear of the march were a day behind schedule between Aranda and Simancas.

The Christian lands are large and broad; the terrain is filled with mountains, with poor roads, few cities and a few villages, small in size, subject to feudal lords in exchange for military services and payment of taxes to their king. They lacked money, commodities, and crafts, and their soldiers were sluggish due to the large number of shields they wore for fear of death by stabbing, and their post system was unregulated. The fact that they were in constant conflict with one another, and that they had internal disagreements too, was their most significant weakness. Confronting them was a powerful and wealthy Islamic leadership system with a highly populated country. Al-Amri wanted to strike the Christian forces as soon as possible, before they joined forces. We were moving quickly as a powerful, colossal mass, to strike unintegrated military gatherings, destroy plants and animals and capture people in our path. Simancas is the lowest point of a triangle formed with León in the northwest and Burgos in the northeast. Each of the three cities is governed by a distinct political system. Simancas is an Islamic city and Burgos is the capital of the Kingdom of Castile which has recently gained its independence from the Galician Kingdom of León.

Al-Amri divided the horsemen into two groups, one headed to Burgos and the other to León, each a five-day march from Simancas.

I accompanied the horsemen headed towards León, and we advanced without any considerable resistance from enemy soldiers. We found small, empty villages, and in some villages, I saw inhabitants living in an unfathomable level of poverty, clothes that one could not make out the original colour of due to the grime covering them, cross-eyed children, many of them with hare lips, that even the soldiers refused to capture. In those moments, I realized that those who come to us as slaves are not from the poorest classes in the Christian kingdoms, which is why they learn quickly and take up positions among the Slavs and in the life of Andalusian palaces, workshops, and manufactories.

Our aim was not to reach León or Burgos, but rather to sweep the lower half of the triangle. After three days of marching north, we headed east to meet the horsemen who had marched to Burgos and then descended to Simancas, where we discovered that the infantry had burned the entire lower triangle. A week later, we set out on a day's walk from Simancas to Córdoba. We had received news that soldiers from Navarra, Castile, and León had gathered on the Duero River, southwest of Simancas, and were on their way to us. At sunset, Al-Amri spread the forces in a wide semi-circle, ordering the two advancing sides not to light fires, and he had a large fire lit in the centre, where there were a few soldiers with mules carrying loads and kitchenware. The first rays of dawn awakened the camp of the Christian soldiers, who discovered that they were surrounded by forces advancing towards them from three sides, and the soldiers could have been captured as they slept if it had not been for the whoops and early drumming of the Berbers. Those who reached their animals were saved, and those who fled on foot were pursued and their heads removed from their shoulders, and those who survived joined their kings and leaders on the northern bank of the Duero and returned to their cities.

Following the decisive ambush, the Berbers put the severed heads on stakes and commenced singing one word to the beat of the drums, like dervishes: "Almanzor, hum! hum!" By the end of the day, we could not tell if they were referring to Al-Amri or to Jaafar ibn Ali, who assisted Al-Amri by stopping Ghalib's horse from running him over.

Al-Amri assigned Abdul Rahman ibn Al-Mutarrif Al-Tujibi, the governor of Zaragoza, to supervise the frontier army and to protect the fortresses along the Duero River during the period that falls between the summer raids, as he was the leader of the Banu Tujib tribe which had been given control of Zaragoza for centuries and had fought in the battles of Al-Udwa together with the soldiers of the capital, during the days of Caliph Al-Hakim. The choice of Abdul Rahman Al-Tujibi was welcomed with satisfaction by the frontier soldiers, who had lost their leader, Ghalib.

On the way to Córdoba, all the soldiers learned, once more, that Al-Amri had ordered his servants to collect the dust from his face and clothes after each battle and store it in a jar to use to cover his body at burial. We also knew that he carried his shroud, which his daughters had woven with their own hands from linen derived from a small farm that he had inherited from his father. He intended to demonstrate that he is a true Jihadi who aspires for Allah to be pleased with him to the extent of shrouding himself in something lawful, or hallal, and no one ever acknowledged that such an act amounted to an admission from Al-Amri himself that everything he owned, other than the shroud, was not hallal. I asked Khairan about the issue with the dust, and he told me that he was the one responsible for collecting it now. We discussed the best ways to do so in order to collect the most dust appropriate to the courage and struggle of Al-Amri. Before we arrived in Córdoba, it was rumoured that Al-Amri was to be called Almanzor, and indeed, a few days after our return to Córdoba, the capital of Al-Andalus, as he was hailed as Al-Hajib Almanzor from the pulpits of the mosques, like a king, with no mention of the Caliph Hisham. Henceforth, the letters of Almanzor to governors and leaders started with his name as follows: From Al-Hajib Almanzor Abu Amir Muhammad ibn Abi Amir to so-and-so. Moreover, the viziers and others, whether young or old, started calling him "my Lord", and they also started standing in the presence of his children, kissing their hands too.

If Jaafar Al-Mushafi had been allowed to kiss the hands of Almanzor now, in exchange for his release, perhaps he would have wasted no time and done it, but he was poisoned by Almanzor, days after the last time he was brought back to that infested room in Almuttbaq prison in Córdoba. And Allah willed that Jaafar would die after Ghalib and not before him, even though his humiliation lasted for years. The scribe of Almanzor, Muhammad ibn Ismail, and Muhammad ibn Maslama both accompanied Jaafar’s corpse to hand it over to his family and his son, as they were ordered not to leave them until he was lowered into his grave. There were no

signs of injuries or stab wounds on his body, according to Ibn Ismail, as he was naked and nothing hid his body except a piece of cloth from one of the prison gatekeepers.

“Muhammad ibn Maslama then called a washer to bathe his body on a door that he pulled off the side of the house, which I considered to be a truly ironic fate. We left his house for his grave, as we walked with no one, except the Imam of the mosque who was summoned for the funeral prayer, and no one dared to look at him or walk behind his coffin.”

This was what was reported by Muhammad ibn Ismail in astonishment at such an irony of fate, and which was widely reported among the people of Córdoba after a while. Muhammad, like so many others, had known Al-Hajib Jaafar in the days of his glory and had attempted to deliver a note to him on which he wrote his needs.

“I waited in his way during his ruling days. I swear, I was not able to approach the procession even with tricks or deception due to the large number of people, who surrounded and welcomed him, as well as the people who came and filled the streets to submit their needs, until I managed to hand my paper to some of the servants on the wings of his procession, assigned to take papers.”

Al-Hajib Jaafar, the conspirator, the oppressor, the oppressed, who quoted the following lines of verse in his grief:

The days I loaned my patience as they passed, the more I persisted the longer they stay

A man sailing in a sea of shame, after riding on the waves of fame and slipping into decay

The soul is what it seeks to be, whether filled with greed or lost in the fray

With time my soul was dear to me, humiliation I bore, and disgrace on it did weigh

To myself I said, ‘O soul, die precious, the world that once was ours, does now but stray.”

These lines, and so many others of similar meaning and lessons, were uttered by Al-Hajib Jaafar Al-Mushafi after he had despaired of receiving amnesty and forgiveness from Al-Amri. Before that, he wrote many lines to evoke the sympathy of Al-Amri when he was in Almuttbaq prison, such as:

Mercy is in order for a man who in his words has been mistaken

With shame and regret my lord, he arises with oath of loyalty taken

Who better shall I find than you to lend a helping hand?

Shall not you set your pen this old man to unband?

Your rage touched the sky, shall your heart to forgiveness be stirred

Even kings when asked for mercy with mercy answered

These verses seemed to have further enraged Al-Amri instead of evoking his sympathy, as they could be understood in two different ways. The first is seeking sympathy through some words describing the dignity of Al-Amri, and the other can be derived from lines that can be understood as an accusation to Al-Amri for lacking forgiveness and generosity, exaggerating his anger and reminding him that he should show mercy to his people otherwise he is no lord to them. Al-Amri also sent some verses in reply to the same rhyme of Jaafar, reminding him how he tattled on him with the allegation of embezzlement of money from the Dar As-Sikkah, during the days of Caliph Al-Mustansir Billah:

An ignorant man you are, seeking grace when kindness from you was far

You call me a king but not a word do you mean, no word of yours holds weight

Of life despair, you lamb in a dish; kings may be vengeful when they are irate

My soul once enraged will not forgive, even if all on earth for you intercede

When these verses reached Jaafar, he realized that there was no hope for him and there was no use in begging so he gathered what was left of his courage and warned Al-Amri, as was rumoured in Córdoba, with the following lines:

I have a term that I shall reach and when it expires, I shall perish.

If I meet hungry lions and it is not my time, I need fear naught

Look at me and beware, for once I stood in the place you have sought

Over the following months, the people of Córdoba were not at all perturbed or concerned about Hisham and his mother, as they were placed under house arrest in their palace of Al-Zahra. They also refrained from severely criticizing or opposing Al-Amri's being called Almanzor and imitating a king with his every action. Almanzor also managed to persuade the people that Ghalib, his father-in-law, had conspired with the Christians, and he had to be killed, despite the rumours that he had hired Jaafar ibn Ali to kill Ghalib on the battlefield, as he was one of the most well-known horsemen, famous for his courage and horsemanship. All of Almanzor's plans and endeavours seemed very obvious to us in Córdoba, however, and perhaps, for this reason, Almanzor was not afraid of the people's exasperation once it was known that Jaafar al-Mushafi had died by poison. Security and safety prevailed and that was what the people always demanded, whether in times of crisis or times of prosperity. Surveillance over the markets was also tightened up against the scale cheaters and price inflators, and the market officials were particularly concerned with seizing those who violated public morals as well.

An accident occurred on the Sunday night of the third day of Sha'ban that worried the people of Córdoba before they condoned it, shrugging it off as behaviour to be expected from Al-Hajib Almanzor. A few days later Khairan told me all about the incident. He said that Almanzor had gone out as usual on one of his winter evenings, surrounded by ten of his viziers and other senior administrators. The drums and tambourines chimed with the chords of the lute and the rhythm of the piper. Once Ans Al-Qulub started to dance and shake her hips in the noisy atmosphere, people became ecstatic and grew tipsy. When the cup-bearer poured him a glass of wine, Almanzor said: "Give a drink to the person closest to my heart." The poor cup-bearer was confused, as he did not know for whom he should pour the drink, especially as all the people sitting were nobles and highborn people. Al-Amri rebuked him: "Give it to Vizier Abi Ahmed! May Allah curse you!" Jaafar ibn Ali was delighted with this praise, so he took the wine cup and drank and danced to the sound of music, although no one else at the gathering did so.

He was completely drunk when he left in the dead of night with some of his servants. He had not gone far from the gathering when Ma'an and his companions came out and knocked him down to the ground with their swords, as he did not have the strength to fight them back. They cut off his head and right hand and

carried them to Almanzor, out of the public eye, but of course, Al-Amri showed up in public as if stricken with grief.

When I heard this story, I remembered the Berber chants of “Almanzor, hum! hum!” so I appreciated that Al-Amri was wary of the emergence of any potential rival. Al-Amri had allied with Jaafar Al-Mushafi against the Umayyad and the Slavs, then he allied with Ghalib against Al-Mushafi, and hired Ibn Ali to kill Ghalib on his behalf on the battlefield if necessary, and now he was getting rid of Ibn Ali and taking his Berber army. The killer of Ibn Ali was Abul-Ahwas Ma’an Al-Tujibi, the conspirator from Lleida, who had conspired with the Christians and guided their soldiers to the blind spots of the Muslim army. He was arrested and escaped from prison, then Rashiq captured him and brought him with ten of his companions and the heads of his supporters, to be imprisoned in Córdoba until the Caliph decided to release him. This conspirator was killed the day after he cut off the head of Jaafar ibn Ali.

40

Exile and Flogging

By the year 372 AH, Hajib Almanzor had already removed the rest of Caliph Al-Hakim's men, may Allah have mercy on him. He did not exclude anyone in any category; he dismissed the scribes, replaced the rulers of the provinces, changed the judges, and dispensed with the soldiers and scholars. He appointed men who had been educated and raised by him, who erased all mention of their predecessors and supported Almanzor in his command. The main changes were in the army; he established himself as commander of the capital army and of the frontier army, and, after ending the dominance of the Arabs and the Jund of the provinces, he continued to build an army made up of Berber mercenaries, mixed with soldiers from the Andalusian armies. The Berber forces had no training or system compatible with the Andalusian soldiers of different military ranks and specializations, and instead of the Berbers learning the Andalusian military system, they spread chaos in the army by disrespecting military traditions. They relied on Almanzor's support, who in fact deliberately intended to create animosity between the Andalusian and Berber soldiers, thereby ensuring his own position as the only one capable of providing peace between them, and he ensured loyalty by paying the monthly salaries of the soldiers.

In Alzahira, the number of new Slavs affiliated with Almanzor increased rapidly, but they called themselves Al-Amri servants, and those of them who were adult participated in the summer raids. Khairan estimated that there were two thousand servants ranging in age from six to thirty years old.

A new phenomenon that the people of Córdoba were talking about was the large number of concubines who had been brought to the capital by Almanzor from the provinces of Al-Andalus, east and west, and the countries of the Slavs and Franks, as well as captured women, that he sent as gifts to the homes of the nobility in Al-Andalus, to the new provincial

rulers he had appointed, to the judges and jurists, the Fuqaha, depending on the qualities of the concubines best suited to each. What the public did not know was that they had been trained to spy and were providing information to Almanzor through harem overseers in constant contact with them. All the details about what was going on in people's homes, or during celebrations, meetings, and conversations, and what was said about Almanzor and his rule during times of relaxation and insobriety, or in suspicious gatherings between partisans of various opponents, were reaching our Hajib.

While taking astronomy lessons at the Mosque years ago, the book of Ibn Khordadbeh, the 'Kitab Al Masalik w'al Mamalik', the Roads and Kingdoms Book', which he had written a hundred years previously in Baghdad, had been mentioned. That geographical scholar had spoken candidly about the roundness of the Earth while describing the geography of the globe, and not as a matter of astrology and fortune-telling. My curiosity about the book led me to look for it in the Caliph's library and to transcribe it before I returned it. Thank Allah I did so, for it was burnt before the start of the new summer raid in the middle of Muharram 373, corresponding to the end of June 983 AD. Almanzor wanted to appease the extremist religious jurists, the Fuqaha, to turn a blind eye to his actions, so he pretended to be pious and to adhere to Islamic law, the Sharia, and gave them permission to choose philosophical and astronomical books from the library of Al-Hakim to burn in the heart of the valley under the bridge, in the presence of the hypocrites claiming knowledge such as Al-Asili, Ibn Dhakwan, Al-Zubaydi, and others. The 'Kitab Al Masalik w'al Mamalik' was among the victims of that fateful day. Below, I will transcribe some complete sentences for you from the first page of that book, which related to neither astronomy nor philosophy, but had been written to define and facilitate the collection of taxes from the new Islamic kingdoms as the book identified them and described how to reach them:

"In the Name of Allah—the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful

This is a book that describes the earth, creation, and the Qibla of the people of every country, kingdom, and path in all corners of the earth,

authored by Abu'l-Qasim Ubaydallah ibn Abdallah ibn Khordadbeh, the trustee of Amir Al-Mu'minin, the Commander of the Faithful.

Abu'l-Qasim wrote: The Earth is round like a ball, placed in the hollow of the sphere like a yolk in the hollow of an egg. The air around the earth pulls from all sides to the sphere, and the proof of creation on Earth is that the air weighs on the lightness of their bodies, and the earth weighs on the heaviness of their bodies, as Earth is like a stone pulling iron. The Earth is divided into two poles by a line which runs from east to west, and this is the length of the Earth, which is the longest longitude of the globe, running from the South Pole, around which Canopus revolves, to the North Pole, around which the Big Dipper revolves. So the earth rotates three hundred and sixty degrees in its equatorial position. The degree is twenty-five parasangs, and a parasang is twelve thousand cubits. A cubit is twenty-four fingers, and a finger is the width of six barley grains laid next to one another. That is nine thousand parasangs. The Astrological distance between the equator and each of the poles is ninety degrees, and the earth rotates horizontally like that, except that the population of the earth is found twenty-four degrees beyond the equator, and the rest is submerged by the Great Sea. So we are on the northern quarter of the earth, and the southern quarter is ruined due to the intense heat there, and the half beneath us is devoid of people. There are seven regions in each of the northern and southern quarters."

That was all the astronomy that was mentioned in the book, and it seemed that what had angered the extremist jurists of Córdoba was the reference to the roundness of the Earth and how we are able to stand on it and are pulled to it without falling from the sides and the bottom. On the same page, the author talks about how to determine the direction of the Qibla for prayer in Islamic countries. The rest of the book is descriptions of the roads and distances between all the kingdoms of the Earth, and their characteristics. Regarding determining the Qibla, he stated:

"The Qibla of the people of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Baghdad, Wasit, Kufa, Al-Mada'in, Basra, Hulwan, Dinavar, Nahavand, Hamadan, Isfahan, Ray, Tabaristan, all of Khorasan, the countries of the Khazars and Kashmir in

India, from the wall of the Kaaba, where the door is located, extends from the northern side, on its left, to the centre of the east. As for Tibet, the Turkic countries, China and Mansura, they are eight parts behind the centre of the east due to the proximity of their Qibla to Al-Hajar Al-Aswad, the Black Stone. As for the Qibla of the people of Yemen, they pray to the Yemini corner of the Kaaba and they direct their faces towards the people of Armenia when they pray. As for the Qibla of the people of Maghreb, Africa, Egypt, the Levant, and the Arabian Peninsula, it is in the centre of the east, and they pray to the Levantine corner of the Kaaba, with their faces towards of the people of Mansura. These are the Qiblas and the direction towards which they should pray."

As Almanzor returned from his summer raid, he learned from his spies that a group of scholars were angry about what he had done to the books and about his siding with the extremists. Some said that the rule of the Amirites was ephemeral and evanescent, and it was rumoured that these people were prophesying and, accordingly, that they dabbled in astrology. As a result, Almanzor had Muhammad ibn Abu Juma'a arrested and his tongue cut out, then he was killed and crucified as an example to others and to keep them from speaking out. As for the poet Abdul Aziz ibn Al-Khatib, who also fell victim to the scourge of the spies, he was imprisoned but not killed because he was one of Almanzor's poets. From prison, the poet began to flatter Almanzor, saying:

As you will, not fate, the rule is yours, for you are the one, the Tsar

You are like to the Prophet Muhammad, your supporters the Ansar

This flattery was considered by our Hajib to be mockery, not appeasement. As a result, he ordered that Abdul Aziz be flogged five hundred times, while heralds announced to the public that he is a heretic.

In the end, he was exiled from our country at the same period it opened its doors to a new group of Berbers, the Banu Ziri ibn Manad Al-Sanhajai. The Sanhajai brothers had a dispute in their own country and fought their

brother Hammad, commander of the castle named after him, but he defeated them. The defeated Zawi, Jalala, Maksen, and their soldiers came to Almanzor to ask him for arms and permission to fight the Christians. The Hajib offered them some other soldiers to accompany them to the north, but they refused saying: “No one attacks the enemy’s country with us, except our cousins who have come with us, the Sanhajai and our loyalists.” Almanzor armed and financed them and sent a guide with them to lead them to the north so they could launch raids and ambushes to terrorize the Christians at all times of the year, loot animals, capture women, and burn everything they came across in quick and unexpected attacks. They were able to obtain spoils because they operated outside known traditions and times, and were able to surprise the farmers during the working seasons, unlike our summer raids that occurred during the harvest seasons, when our soldiers razed the crops or burnt them.

Terror spread among the people in Córdoba due to the increase in the Berber population and their violation of our customs and traditions. Gradually, fear spread to the provinces of Al-Andalus under their new rulers, and devastation increased in the neighbouring countries due to the forays of Almanzor and the raids of the Berbers. Life in the palaces of Alzahira seethed with nightly impudence, masquerading as addiction to literature and poetry in the manner of the Umayyad Emirs. Abu Al-Ala Zaid Al-Baghdadi, one of the best Ghazal poets of our generation came to Almanzor. He was a pretender and a liar, but persuasive and bold, and he won Almanzor’s admiration, aspiring to be like the late Abu Al-Qali, the author of ‘The Book of Quotations’, the Al-Amali book for Caliph Al-Hakim, may Allah have mercy on them. The refined poetry sessions in the homes and gardens of Córdoba turned into meetings for drinking alcohol, and spouting assonant and indecent poetry at night, that sometimes ended with the poets surrounding a youth or a concubine.

The peace that prevailed through spreading fear no longer comforted noble Córdovans. As for me, I kept transcribing, going on picnics with the four girls whenever there was time on Fridays, and meeting with Khairan from time to time. But I was seriously considering going on a long journey outside Al-Andalus, then returning to build a family. To that end, I read

many books on travel and geography and acquired news from different countries in preparation for choosing the right route.

41

Of Joy and Sorrow

On our last three outings, I had noticed a young man following us from a distance once we left our street. He followed us wherever we walked, whether to the bridge and the embankment or, as happened this time, to the city centre. When I noticed what was going on and turned to look at him, Rebecca's face turned red. I left the girls in a shop that sold juice and returned to the young man without stopping to analyze my feelings or my current motivation.

"Why have you been following us for weeks from the moment we leave the house until we return?" I angrily asked the young man, who was of my own age, displaying in advance the Yemeni hooked dagger that my grandfather had sent me for my trip to Málaga.

"Please do not be angry, Suleiman; I have honest intentions! And I know you have no plans to marry Rebecca."

"How do you know I do not want to marry her? And, even if that is true, do you intend to follow our every move on Fridays?"

"I tasked an elderly woman, who works as a matchmaker, to inquire for me a month ago, and I do not know how she obtained her information, but if it was all wrong, this will be the last you see of me. The reason I have not acted yet is related to my family; I am concerned about their reaction when they learn I want to marry a Jewess." The young man spoke politely and appeared elegant and knowledgeable, and I was afraid that if I reprimanded him now and claimed that I wanted to be with Rebecca, I would deprive her of a good opportunity at a time when it is difficult to find eligible men for the girls of Córdoba due to the abundance and cheapness of the female slaves acquired by dealers from women captured on raids as well as the concubines we received.

"Listen! I am not going to ask you about your family or where you are from right now. We will meet at the Mosque after the midday prayer tomorrow. I would like to know everything there is to know about you and your family,

and perhaps I can help you with advice on how to proceed with your family and hers. The matchmaker is right; I do see her as a sister as we have been friends and neighbours since childhood." At this moment, my aim was to ask for her opinion before doing anything, and it quickly occurred to me that I should give her a chance to get a good look at him, so I said: "Come to the juice shop with me and stay there when we leave." On the way to the shop, I learned his name; he was Nasr Al-Balansi, the Valencian, a Mozarab who worked as a supervisor in his family's textile business. He greeted those present in a low voice and purchased pomegranate juice. As for me, I shifted my position so that my back was to Nasr and my face to Rebecca, so that she could see Al-Balansi. I whispered to her not to be embarrassed and to take a good look at him while she was speaking to me, and I would explain everything to her later.

"For now, do not hesitate to just focus your attention on his face."

We left the shop, letting Chavah, Fatima, and Khokha walk ahead of us, and I told Rebecca that I intended soon to leave for a long period, and I added that I thought of her as a sister, so she would be in no doubt about the nature of our relationship and her future. In fact, I had not felt anything more towards her in years, and I had not sensed anything different on her part, so what I said came as no surprise to her, and I followed up with what I had learned about Nasr. We agreed to obtain information from him first, before informing her father. That evening, I thought about her calm response and the speed with which she had accepted the idea of marrying Al-Balansi, so I presumed that she had been thinking about this for weeks as she sensed something that I did not when he first started following us.

I made clear to Nasr Al-Balansi that he would not be seeing me during the engagement and marriage negotiations, but he should always remember that I am a brother to Rebecca, and if he hurt her in any way, he would be answering to me. He agreed to follow Jewish tradition in his marriage, leaving her free to observe the Sabbath if she wished. I suggested that he bring this up when he asked for permission to get engaged, because Jews do not usually marry their daughters to non-Jews, and if they are not reassured and certain that their daughter will have the right to adhere to her faith, they will not accept. I explained her father's social status and position among the Jews to him, as well as his trade and his business with the Franks across the border, as a hint to Nasr about the possibility of expanding their textile trade outside Al-Andalus, and to inform him indirectly that he and Rebecca would get a fine dowry and enough furniture to furnish

a separate home. He carefully listened to all of this information so that he could use it to persuade his family to agree to the marriage. They were Christian, but they lived among Muslims and had similar habits, the only difference between them being their religious rites. Indeed, many Mozarab are not strictly observant. Accordingly, Nasr's family would accept the idea of their son marrying a Muslim woman more readily than that of him marrying a Jewess.

Nasr met with me several times to obtain reassurances for his family, and I did not hesitate to visit my neighbours to inform Rebecca and her father in detail of his family's social status and business. Both parties were well-suited; a wealthy family of craftsmen and a family of merchants, both of them highly educated and far removed from reliance on state resources for a livelihood. Rather, they paid tax on what they produced and the profits therefrom. This meant that the future of the ménage would be guaranteed, free of the vagaries of politics and its fluctuations in these days.

The next day, after the engagement, Nasr's family was welcomed, in the presence of the neighbourhood Rabbi and Ibn Imran's friends. As for Rebecca, she began to cover her hair, limit her outings, and never went out alone. In a short period of time, her sister Chavah got engaged to a young Jew who worked as a goldsmith in Toledo and was related to the family. Thus, I was left with no more female companions than Fatima and Khokha, both of whom were now fully grown and the picture of womanliness.

Fatima was implicitly engaged to our cousin Sayed, and after the engagement of her two friends, I sensed her anxiety, and I deduced from her overtures on the matter that she would prefer some moral support and reassurance from Sayed at this time as she feared being sucked into feigned understandings between the families. Subsequently, I suggested Sayed should send her a gift if he had not changed his mind, and gifts began to reach her independently of any occasion. Khokha, on the other hand, did not express herself verbally but, occasionally, the way she looked at me seemed as if she was asking where her gifts were, and sometimes she revealed an attachment that went beyond sisterly love.

The summer of 984 AD was filled with joy; I turned twenty, danced at three weddings, and our business in transcription and bookbinding, inks and paper expanded. Sayed and my uncle Issa managed the agriculture and fig trade admirably, and the ships carrying our exports in previous years had not been subjected to any attacks by pirates or enemy forces. Despite

people’s fear of politics, Córdoba was still well-lit at night, conversation and poetry filled its gardens with life, the fountains pumped water, and outdoor picnics on land and along the river decreased during the week, increased at the weekend, and on holidays everywhere was crowded. Newlyweds and vacationers could hardly obtain bookings at Córdoba's inns and residences outside the wall. For one reason or another, many Córdovans accepted the idea that the light of the Umayyad was subsiding. Public dissenters were persecuted, and those who objected in secret were apprehensive.

Anger and hatred were directed at the Berbers, rather than at those who empowered them. They tainted the army and diminished the importance of the conquering Arab soldiers and families to the country, the residences and palaces of Córdoba were crammed full with them, and they lived from the bounty of Almanzor. These Berbers were not like their brethren, the farmers and traders who took part in the conquest and settled with the Arabs, and who can be seen now in the markets and shops selling their wares or working at some job, also the majority of them live outside Córdoba. My father is among those who have been concerned about the situation since Al-Amri took over the reins of power, though he was also dissatisfied with Caliph Al-Hakim’s behavior prior to that, but he is not miserable and he distinguishes between daily life and political anxiety. Over the past years, he has traveled to Toledo, Valencia, and Almería on numerous occasions in search of new books and to promote what we are transcribing.

Great as the joy of summer and its celebrations was, and the happiness brought by Eid al-Adha, Christmas, and Nayrouz, the Coptic New Year, the sorrow I suffered on the second of Ramadan of the year 374 AH, corresponding to the end of January 985 AD, was indescribable: My grandfather did not wake up when I attempted to awaken him for the pre-dawn meal on that day. He had not been sick or even unwell the day before, but Khalid ibn Abdullah Al-Qalai was born in the last year of the previous Hijri century, and had remained hale and hearty for seventy-five years, which is a blessing from Allah the Almighty. Our recorded history dates back to the time of As’aad ibn Baher ibn Abdul Rahman Al-Qalai, who was born in Yemen in the year 58 AH and fought with Hassan in the Maghreb before conquering Al-Andalus with Musa. That history of my nine forefathers indicates our long lineage, praise be to Allah. My father is now forty-five years old, and while my cousin Sayed and sister Fatima are on

their way to securing the lineage of our families, duty will prompt me soon to secure the lineage of my father, Qareeb, as this is what Allah expects from His servants. I wept silently for my grandfather, but in my heart, I wished for a similar, simple death after a life full of giving and love like his. The news spread in Córdoba and Al-Zahra, and crowds of our acquaintances and relatives, as well as hundreds of Yemeni community members, attended my grandfather's funeral prayer that afternoon at the Mosque. We did not want to relinquish my grandfather's coffin to anyone; my father and uncle Abbas carried the front, while Sayed and I were at the back. Everyone else who assisted in carrying the coffin took a turn in the middle until we brought him to the cemetery and buried him next to his wife. I begged my aunts and female relatives not to cry, and I drove away more than one group who came to offer their services as mourners, wailing and screaming on behalf of the deceased's family before burial. Instead, I assigned a qari, a reciter, to chant verses from the Holy Qur'an about death in a loud voice during the funeral procession, while another reciter took over during the burial itself.

42

The Demons of the Cemeteries

During the forty-day mourning period, I made sure to visit the cemetery repeatedly, at unspecified times, sometimes after the Morning Prayer if it was not raining and late in the afternoon on Fridays, as well as sometimes in the evening. That was my first visit to a cemetery, and I was astonished to see widows, some of them quite beautiful, visiting their husbands' graves, or pretending to do so while in fact they were showing themselves off and drawing attention to who they had been married to, while actively seeking new husbands. Such widows are valuable prey to men in need of money, as they do not need a dowry, but instead bring what they inherited from their deceased husbands. All the interested man needs is to read the name of the deceased from his gravestone and ask how much he left behind. I thought what was going on was the last thing that should be happening in such a place by widows in front of their husbands' graves.

One night, after Eid Al-Fitr, I soon realized that this was not a big matter compared to the fact that fornicators met here too, because few members of the public frequented cemeteries at night for fear of illusory spirits, ghosts, and demons. At first, I thought I was seeing sad families mourn their loved ones in the quiet of the night, although that was not usual. However, I heard screams and groans, and when I sneaked closer; I saw a couple entangled. I became angry and was about to attack them when a better idea came to me, so I withdrew. On the fortieth day, we visited the cemetery in the morning and distributed dates and dried figs to the beggars there or rather, to the competing collectors present on these occasions. But my plan for the night was completely different.

Fornicators were having intercourse in the garden in the middle of the cemetery and under the trees among the graves. At the time of the night prayer, the Muezzin's voice gradually grew louder, accompanied by the strong beats of a drum approaching from border of the cemetery to the middle, but there was no drummer to be seen. This part was played by Khairan Al-Amri. At the same time, two white ghosts, each four meters tall, set off from opposite sides of the cemetery to the middle. I had tied some

white cloth together and held it impaled on a long spear with my hand, so that the cloth fell from the top of the spear to the soles of my feet. I moved slowly swaying left and right and sometimes jumping up or to the side. On the other side, Sayed moved in a similar fashion, but his spear was topped by a Qadi's turban. Screams arose from those at the edges of the cemetery as they ran in fear and trembling with their bare butts on display towards the middle, stumbling over gravestones and the bodies of other fornicators who were lying down. Then they ran from the middle to the fourth corner, accompanied by barking dogs, and when we met in the middle, the cemetery had already been cleansed of their abomination.

Khairan decided to employ similar tricks in the rest of the cemeteries with his fellows. I told Khairan that if that scheme was not successful, he should spread rumours that the sisters or female relatives of neighbourhood gang leaders were practicing prostitution in the cemeteries for money, of course with reference to the name of each leader but without mentioning the names of the women; that would eliminate the phenomenon and encourage the gangs to keep their eyes out for cemetery defilers.

Khokha shared our grief over the forty days, and she did not leave my mother's side or our house except to sleep at home. Before my grandfather died, when there were no other girls around, she used to cover her head every time we went out together. At the end of the mourning period, she learned that I intended to travel by sea to the island of Sicily and the Lands of the Franks, and she surprised me with frank words that rendered me speechless.

"If you want me to wait for you until you return from your journey, no matter how long it takes, that will be all that I desire and all that I can hope for. If you know in your heart that there is no point in waiting, please tell me right away, and we shall continue to live as no more than neighbours."

I had not thought about marriage before my grandfather's death, and now I had no specific choice for a wife among the daughters of Uncle Abbas and my other female cousins, but I did not think that I would find anyone better than Khokha among them. Nonetheless, I did not want to confirm her request or to brush her off in a way she could misunderstand. I thought it quite unlikely that I would fall in love during my travels and I decided to show my respect for her while also leaving the choice to her.

“No one seeking a wife would be able to find a better one than you, Khokha, for you are beautiful, respectful, educated, polite, and skilled. But I have not made up my mind about marriage, and I do not know when and how my travels will end. What I am sure of now is that I do not intend to get married during my journey. If I return and find you married, I will confer with you about who to choose as my wife, and if you wait for my return, we will discuss the situation and come to the right decision together.”

Before I had finished speaking, her blue eyes glistened with her tears. I realized that I was hurting her feelings with my neutral words that held no expression of feeling for her. I pulled her into my arms, feeling every breath she took against my body, every beat of her heart in concert with mine.

“I did not mean to hurt you with my words. I just wanted you to be free to decide while I face the unknown. You know how much I want you.”

That was the first time we had embraced face to face, and she was satisfied with what she was hearing as she whispered: “You will find me waiting for you whenever you return and whenever you make up your mind.”

I do not know why the cemetery jumped to my mind just then, but I asked Khokha not to visit the cemetery for any reason or at any time, but I did not tell her the reason why, nor did she ask.

Nothing can be hidden from Umm Suleiman: Two days before I left for the port of Dénia she asked me what she should say to any relative who asked her explicitly or with hints about the possibility of my marrying their daughter. In order not to anger anyone and to comfort all my relatives, I told my mother to relay my decision not to marry any female relative, because I loved them all and thought of them like Fatima.

“So, you are going to marry Khokha, right?” I appreciated my mother’s direct intervention in this matter, which was not yet fully developed in my mind. She was my mother, and she wanted reassurance, and it would be useful for her to know her future daughter-in-law if I had made a decision, especially as I would be away from Córdoba for some time.

“Do you want to be mother-in-law to your son’s wife as well as being mother-in-law to your daughter’s husband?”

“If you have decided and have reached an agreement with her, then tell me, may Allah bless you.”

“What do you think of her? Of course I would not get married without your consent. Would you choose her for me?” I asked, as I was late involving my mother, I pretended to give her a role in choosing the bride.

“Of course I would choose her for you, from the first day you brought her home with you I had a feeling that you would marry her, and I always looked to her as my future daughter-in-law. Khokha is the most beautiful and well-educated girl, and her family belongs to the most respectable of their people. But have you asked her to marry you formally or not?”

“Make it official on the second day after my departure, and ask Jesús and María’s permission for the betrothal so that she will be your daughter-in-law with all rights and duties.” My mother was about to ululate, so I reminded her that the betrothal would take place after my departure, and the ululating after the consent of the other party, or on my return. That decision would make Khokha happy, and would take my mother’s mind off my journey, and both the women I love the most would be busy with each other while I was away, while my longing for Córdoba and its people would increase as the days went by.

I had great need, and perhaps was longing, to travel outside Córdoba and all of Al-Andalus. I had no doubt that the outside world was chaotic, poor, underdeveloped, and dangerous, but I wanted to see it myself and record my own observations, not just to read the writings of our travelers and geographers. In fact, I had thought before of visiting Gerbert, in the city of Reims at the farthest point of the Frankish countries, and after the death of my grandfather, I felt the need for something new. My father and I studied ways to expand our trade in books and writing supplies to the cities I would pass through. There were no problems with the marketing of paper and types of ink or even the pens that we had expanded into the production of. Our concern was that the booksellers we contracted would start working independently and would copy books badly or erroneously. I suggested a solution to my father that he liked and which we adopted, which was to give each bookseller in the city twenty copies of one book, and then send him, after a month or two, copies of another book, thus no seller would see the value in transcribing additional copies.

I rented five mules, three of which were loaded with books and our other commodities, and I rode the fourth, together with my luggage for the trip. Abdul-Jabbar Al-Ishbilyah, the Sevillian, accompanied me to get to know the new booksellers, record their supplies and arrange a means of communication with them, as he was currently the distribution manager for Córdoba and Seville. Abdul-Jabbar was to return with the mules and any new books that we found on the way, or with a load of goods needing to be transported from Dénia to Córdoba.

In my luggage, I carried several small glass ink bottles as gifts and for my own writing as well. Some contained blue ink and others black and red. In my luggage, I also placed two hundred sheets of white paper, and the book 'Tutbib Man la Yahduruhu Tabib', For He Who Has No Physician to Attend Him, by Abu Bakr Al-Razi, for use in treating myself for diseases and pains acquired on my travels. This book is easy to use to accurately diagnose pain, treat it with herbs, medicines, or other self-help, unlike Al-Razi's other books, such as his Comprehensive Book on Medicine, or his studies on differentiating between Gout and Rheumatism, or on the use of music in treating mental patients.

I took several books as a gift for Gerbert, including the book of the Andalusian astronomer, Maslama Al-Majriti, 'Al-Jadid Al-Qadim', The New and The Old, in which he converted Al-Khwarizmi's Persian calendar into Arabic to facilitate dealing with the latest discoveries in astronomy and the movements of stars. The second book was 'Kitab al-Kawatib al-Thabit al-Musawwar', The Book of Fixed Stars, by Abd Al-Rahman Al-Sufi, who died ten years ago.

I would have liked to carry more books, but my journey by land and by sea would be long and I would have to carry my luggage for days and perhaps for weeks.

43

To Sicily

There are many different routes from Córdoba to Dénia: You can travel from Cordoba to Málaga and then sail to Dénia on one of the many ships that sail to Sicily, or you can take the land route, whether through the cities of Jaén and Albacete to Dénia; or travel from Jaén, Granada, Cartagena, Murcia, to Alicante, and on to Dénia, without passing through Jaén, Granada, Cartagena, That was the quickest route and the one I chose, after resisting my yearning to visit my uncle Issa in Málaga. I thought that passing through Jaén, Murcia, Alicante, and Dénia was sufficient to learn more about the southeastern regions, to conclude some agreements for the sale of books, paper, and ink, and to search for any new books and publications in the markets of these cities.

I was enjoying the spring and the blossom-laden breeze the entire time I journeyed on land, and Allah sent me a boat that was due to sail from Dénia on the 24th of Shawwal, on which, after one day's sailing, we passed by the island of Ibiza, the first of the Islamic Balearic Islands. On the following day, we passed the island of Mallorca and its sister island Menorca, and there were two days left until we passed by Sardinia and two more days after that to Sicily. There were thirty-seven passengers and four sailors, besides the Captain, Hassan Al-Bahri, whose appearance was reassuring to the passengers traveling from Dénia to Alexandria. He had a slight, clear accent and spoke almost Classical Arabic. Hassan hailed from Southern Egypt, and he began his career working as a navigator on the Nile River, and this was his fifth voyage between Dénia and Alexandria. When he heard my wish to stop for at least one day at one of the Balearic Islands, he told me that he does not usually stop anywhere except Sicily.

"The Balearic Islands are ruled and inhabited by Muslims, but it is the thieves who are truly in control. They impose high prices and demand never-ending taxes on goods, even if they were not discharged or shipped from their islands. Therefore, I avoid their harbours and docks, and

Alhamdulillah, I have only been there once so far, and I do not intend to visit again voluntarily."

"Do they constitute a threat to ships at sea?"

‘"Of course, they have pirate ships that take shelter and find harbour in the smaller islands, but they do not attack Arab or Muslim ships, because such an act would lead to retaliation or reprisals from the ship's country, but they attack Roman ships and plunder their goods and people. They even launch raids on the cities of the northern coasts, and if they are not lucky with spoils, they carry off women and children as captives to sell them as slaves." Hassan spoke in a lower tone when he mentioned the dangers of the sea to prevent the rest of the passengers from hearing him, as they were by no means all Muslims who would not be subjected to captivity by Arab or Muslim pirates.

"Are there any other pirates that could disrupt our voyage, or it is this just a problem confined to the Balearic Islands?" I was not afraid of the sea pirates, but I wanted to know the extent of his knowledge and hear some of his experiences.

"Some Berbers from the Maghreb attack ships that sail on the sea and along the coasts of the Franks, Romans, and Slavs, while the Arabs of Tripoli and the pirates of Corsica, which is ruled from Kairouan, also practice this sport, and so do the Romans and the Franks. However, they dare not attack us, and if they did, they would not be able to catch up with this boat."

He explained some of the characteristics and advantages of his boat to me and said that the reason for its speed was because it did not sail flat on the surface of the water, but had a draft, shaped like a triangle, which made it easy for it to cut through the water, regardless of the speed of the wind which blew on the large sail in the middle, and the smaller ones in the front and at the rear. Goods were carried in the lower, submerged part of the ship, while passengers, drinking water, and cooking supplies, such as firewood, legumes, luggage, and so on, were carried on the deckckesr, but itse it is not flat 325325325325325325325325325325325325325325325325 325325325325325325325325325325325325325325325325325325325325325325 325325325325325325325325325325325325325325325325325325325325325325 325325325325325325325325325325325325325325325325325325325325325325

 of the boat that is surrounded by a wall more than a cubit high. I had not known before then that sailboats could sail into the wind, but Hassan’s explanations made sense, especially when I saw in person how the sails work, in coordination with the rudder, while we were sailing from west to east and the winds that filled our three sails were blowing from the south.

I liked the voyage thus far; it was much faster than traveling overland, and usually easier, although I knew from reading that the sea could be treacherous and dangerous. There was no such thing as privacy on the boat; the passengers were forced to turn into a family during the journey. Each one knew the personal habits of the others, their greed with food, their snoring, their rudeness or their kindness, and their knowledge or their ignorance, among other things. I was also bothered by the need to limit the use of fresh water, which was available only for cooking and drinking.

Seven of the passengers were headed to Sicily, while the rest of them would continue to sail on with new passengers from Sicily to Alexandria. I relayed my confidence in his integrity and instinct to Hassan Al-Bahri, and I told him a lot about my field of work and the purpose of my voyage. Instead of wasting time fighting boredom, I asked Hassan to procure some new books written by Egyptians, or books that they had received from the East, and to transport them in his boat to our agent in Dénia, and I also wrote a letter to the agent, telling him to take what he would be offered and send it to Córdoba immediately. In order to avoid carrying books similar to those available in Al-Andalus, I gave him to understand that he should choose new publications, and I gave him ten gold dinars, eight for the purchase of books, and two as his fee for transporting them in his boat. He resolved to write down the price of each item he bought for each voyage and send the details to Córdoba, through the agent in Dénia. On my return to Al-Andalus, my father or I would write to him confirming the conditions of our collaboration and how to manage the work or perhaps to ask for specific books.

The most important benefit I obtained was the quantity and type of advice I received from Hassan about the various ways to circumvent the Romans and to walk among them without them realizing that I am a Muslim, and how to conceal my money and barter. Such advice was not the only thing

Hassan and I talked about as once our relationship grew stronger, he ventured to ask me about my adventures with women, and when he sensed my hesitation, he moved on to relate some details of his adventures and his ways with women in a manner that I could not have imagined or dreamt of. Certainly, I refrained from telling him that I had no experience with women, as I only responded to what he was saying out of courtesy, indicating that I had not tried this or that, while he accused me of conservatism and insisted that I should listen to him and try what he said and pray for his health if I enjoyed it.

On the evening of the fourth day, we had come to the end of the southern mainland of the island of Sardinia, as we had completed two-thirds of the voyage, but the clouds quickly thickened at night, obscuring our vision of the sky and the stars. It was quieter than usual, and I could hear nothing but the muttering of prayers and supplications to several gods in different languages, while Capitan Hassan Al-Bahri gave concise orders to the sailors, commanding them to close and secure the two mizzen sails and to lash what could be secured on deck as well as to seal all the openings between the deck and the cargo hold. At that moment, the passengers gathered their belongings and luggage, and we all crowded into a sort of cabin that occupied the front third of the boat. From under the apex of that space, we could observe the sea in front of us and the rest of the boat behind, while our view to the right and the left were blocked by the walls of the cabin. I left the cabin and moved towards the rudder, which was currently being controlled by Hassan. The wind had yet to turn treacherous, and I did not find it difficult to control my balance for a distance of less than twenty cubits.

"The weather seems erratic, and the sea level may rise. Would it not be better to return to Sardinia now rather than to sail towards Sicily for another two days?" I asked, in an attempt to express my concern without betraying my fear.

"If the weather does not improve, these winds may push us to Sicily, and we should make use of this." Hassan was silent for a while as he observed the clouds, then he said: "It would be more difficult and more dangerous to return to Sardinia. You know it is the country of the Franks, and our pirates frequently attack them, so fe you sailinno3273273273273273273273273

they could take revenge on us. For your information, we are not far from the southern shores of Sicily, but our dilemma is the difficulty of approaching any coast or dock in such stormy weather. We have the choice to let the wind guide us further until we near the coast of Sicily, hoping for a chance to moor the boat and restock with wood and food. If the wind drives us away from Sicily, I will carry you to Alexandria; it is more beautiful than all the lands of the Franks”. I felt better for seeing that Hassan had not yet lost his sense of humour, and I asked him if he required any assistance. He asked me to go back to the other passengers to reassure them, and he warned me that my belongings and luggage might get wet if I did not carry them on my back. He also said, "If you need to vomit, do it where you are standing and do not approach the side of the boat, and tell the others the same."

I returned to the cabin with great difficulty, as the boat was swaying in six directions, cutting through the waves, traversing the water, and throwing up sea foam on either side. The passengers stared at me, waiting for news, so I explained the situation to them while strapping my luggage to my back to keep it from getting wet, which would damage the books and papers I carried with me. Fortunately, I did not carry many clothes or books, nor had I carried any food to sea with me, because food was included in the fare. I remembered that I am not an experienced swimmer, as my experience had been confined to the few days when I visited Málaga and learned a little from Ahmed, the image of whose sister, Durra, was floating in my mind; she must surely have married and had children by now.

Time slowed that night, and the wind began to strike us from the north after having blown lightly from the south. Heavy rains were falling on our heads without slowing down due to the speed of the wind, and perhaps it was for our own good that the darkness prevented us from seeing the waves which raised us to the sky then brought us down again. I do not know what

happened to Hassan, but all the passengers began to vomit up the lentil soup that they had in their stomachs, the last thing we had eaten that afternoon. The saltwater and the rain were lashing into our faces every few seconds, in concert with the fall and rise of each wave until we bottomed out again. For a brief moment, I saw my whole life flash before my eyes, and I saw Khokha too, but the situation required vigilance and strength to hold tight to the wooden railings along the two walls of the cabin which we had thought were there for hanging towels and clothes on. I knew that the walls of the boat had openings that allowed water to run out of the boat into the sea, and therefore we would not sink from the weight of the water which was pouring over us, and despite the severity of the situation, I was almost certain that we would continue sailing east. The wind speed began to slow down around dawn, and our vision became clear with the passage of time, so we started to pray to Allah and to congratulate each other on having survived such a rough night.

At daylight, it became clear to the Captain that we had veered to the south and it would be difficult for him to reach the port of Palermo at the end of the first quarter on the northern coast, because the winds had not receded at all. He said that it would be better for him to moor at one of the southern ports, but the passengers from that country begged him to disembark us at least in Trapani, on the western coast, which is a two-day walk from Palermo and would obviate the need to cross the mountains that separate the north from the south. We moored in Trapani before evening, and all the passengers disembarked to rest and lodge that night in the town mosque, after eating soya soup on the beach.

Before we parted in the morning, Hassan agreed to carry us to Palermo to relieve us from the necessity of walking or renting animals, and perhaps what convinced him was that the storm had finally subsided, and of course, there were passengers for Alexandria waiting for him in the port, and I reminded him that we had not lost any time, despite staying on land that night.

That afternoon we disembarked in the port of Palermo with our stomachs full of fava beans, cooked in the way of the people of Southern Egypt, who left them swimming in the soup. The happiest of those taking their leave was a man who had been accompanied by his younger son on a medical

trip to Córdoba, where Al-Zahrawi performed a stone-removal operation on his bladder. Who would not have preferred to walk now or ride animals, something which he had found exhausted him on the way between Córdoba and Dénia. I promised to visit the man and his son during my stay in Palermo, as during the calm days at sea, they had given me a lot of useful information about the markets and notables of their country.

44

The Emperor's Conqueror

I went to the Great Mosque, in search of the Qadi, the imam, or someone of knowledge, to inform them of my arrival on their island and to seek advice on accommodation, my work, and my future travel plans. It was a Saturday, and I found Qadi Ibrahim ibn Malik in session to consider claims that had been brought before him. He was in his fifties, and his well-groomed white beard contained streaks of dark hair; he also appeared to have suffered some loss of vision, as he brought the papers close to his eyes to review the details of the claims. He wore a turban similar to that of our qadis in Al-Andalus, but his cloak, which he wore to keep warm in the afternoon, was black. I introduced myself to him shortly before the prayer, and we continued conversing about conditions in Al-Andalus and the conduct of Hajib Almanzor, and he told me that the best host for me on the island would be his friend Abu Al-Na'im, Ali ibn Hamza, called Al-Basri, as he was from Basra and used to live in Baghdad. The name was not unfamiliar to me, but I could not place it precisely, so I asked the Qadi for more information in order to be better prepared when he introduced us after the sunset prayer.

The Qadi said that his friend had hosted the Arab poet, Al-Mutanabbi when he came to Baghdad and that he had written critiques of books, in response to famous scholars, including his response to the 'Kitab Al-Nabat', the Book of Plants, by Abu Hanifa Dinawari, his response to Ibn as-Sikkit's Book of Logic, and his response to the 'Kitab Al-Hayawan', the Book of Animals, by Al-Jahiz. The Qadi mentioned three or four other critiques to works of literature and language, including those of Ibn Duraid, Al-Asma'i, Ibn Al-A'rabi, and others. As if this was not fortune enough, the Qadi stated that Abu Al-Na'im had made a written record of Al- Mutanabbi's poems after he arrived in Sicily.

After the afternoon prayer, Qadi Ibrahim remained in the mosque, and I stayed with him, exchanging news, until the time arrived for the sunset prayer. He told me fascinating stories about the conquest of Sicily, some of

which I had learned from history books. The latest jihad stories here concerned what the people of the island had experienced just two years ago.

“The Emperor of Rome, Otto II, who calls his land the Holy Roman Empire, wanted to conquer his Greek adversaries in Calabria, which we call Gloria, and their Arab neighbours in Sicily.”

The Qadi began his story after he had settled comfortably in his seat, and I immediately expected a long story that might not end before the sunset prayer, and I had eaten nothing but some of the beans cooked by Captain Hassan Al-Bahri.

"He gathered his forces and travelled hundreds of miles from north to south by land and sea until he reached Bari, on the north-eastern bank of the land facing us. Did you know that between the years 232 and 257, Bari was the capital of an Islamic emirate?”

“No, I had no knowledge of that before now. I read that the island of Crete was Islamic for one hundred and thirty-three years, that our rule of it ended twenty-four years ago, and that it had been conquered by Andalusians. I also know that Andalusian explorers established a state in Jabal Al-Qilal near Marseille that fell ten years ago.” With this response, I wanted to display some of my information in the hope of breaking down the barriers between the Qadi and I, so that he would commend me when introducing me to his friend Abu Al-Na’im, once he came to pray, as I truly hoped to be the guest of Al-Mutanabbi’s host.

“Not only did we rule Crete and Jabal Al-Qilal, now called Fraxinetum, but we also ruled Cyprus and governed Corsica and Malta, as well as the Emirate of Sicily, and you, in Al-Andalus, governed the Balearic Islands. To return to our story; the Emperor planned a punitive expedition, and the Greeks, the people of Constantinople, did not stand in his way, despite the presence of the city of Bari and all of Gloria, the borders of which extended all the way to Naples which was under the rule of Basil II and his brother Constantine IX, opponents of Otto II. When the news reached Caliph Abu Al-Qasim, may Allah have mercy on him, he decided to transport soldiers by sea from Sicily to Gloria, where they could confront Otto II away from our land. The armies crossed Messini to Rio on a few ships that took turns transporting them. Messini is a city on the coast, and one can see the city

of Rio from the mainland of Constantinople. So Abu Al-Qasim did not bring the fleet with him to Bari, due to the length of the journey by sea, the ease of the crossing, and the weeks-long overland route, and, of course, no one knew for sure where the two parties would meet. Our forces crossed to the east coast, two weeks after leaving Palermo, and I saw Otto's fleet at sea and his forces approaching an impenetrable fortress near the town of Stilo, which had been occupied by some of our advance forces."

Some of the attendees gathered quietly around us, undoubtedly familiar with this story of a battle which their people had fought only two years ago.

"The collision in the fortress was unequal, as Otto II's troops attacked en masse, before the rest of our army could arrive, killing two whole companies of soldiers. Because the fortress was in a mountainous area, where the Muslims were vulnerable to enemy attack, Abu Al-Qasim decided to retreat towards the plain and the eastern coast, and he asked his commanders not to challenge his decision. Some of our commanders thought their Emir was making a cowardly retreat upon seeing Otto II's iron-clad soldiers on their huge horses. Of course, Emperor Otto II assumed that his opponent had turned away, so he pursued them hurriedly with his entire force, shedding some of the weight and shields they carried as they strove to march. They reached the Muslims on the 20th of Muharram of the year seventy-two, the Muslims mobilized to fight, the two parties met, and the war between them intensified. A group of Franks attacked the centre and the flag holders near the Emir. They cut through the army and reached the centre, many of our troops were separated from their Emir and order was disrupted, so that the Franks were able to reach him, and he was hit directly in the head, becoming a martyr, together with a group of brave, notable people. Then, the rest of the Muslims, who had thought that their only option was to flee, returned, determined to fight together with their brothers for victory or martyrdom, and with that, the fight increased in intensity and to such effect within the rows of the two armies, that Otto II and the Franks met with a crushing defeat. About four thousand of them were killed, and many of their Patriarchs were captured. They were chased until nightfall, and the victors gained much spoil.

The Emperor of the Franks escaped with a Jew, who was one of his dignitaries. When the Emperor's horse succumbed to exhaustion, the Jew

said: “Take my horse, if they catch me, I leave my family in your care.” So the ruler took his horse, and the Jew was killed. The Emperor reached his tents, where his wife and companions were waiting. Our soldiers did not pursue him into the tents, but some soldiers from Constantinople captured him and his dignitaries and carried them off by boat. They were later rescued by Otto’s fleet, and they returned to Verona, where the Emperor appointed his child, who was three years old at the time, king over Germania and the northern part of the Roman Empire. The Emperor’s wife, on the other hand, mocked his defeat and humiliated him because of it. Otto II died the following year, a young man, less than thirty years of age: He succumbed to the wrath and anguish he felt after his defeat.

The remainder of the battle was led by Jaber ibn Abu Al-Qasim, and Jaber quickly returned with the army through Gloria, but they were unable to carry off all the spoils they had collected and a lot was left behind.”

“May Allah have mercy on the Emir and all Muslim martyrs. So your Emir is Jaber ibn Muhammad ibn Abu Al-Qasim!”

“Our Emir is now his brother, Jaafar ibn Muhammad, who took over last year, aided by his brother Abdullah. Their father, the martyr, ruled for twelve years, five months, and five days, and he, may Allah have mercy on him, was just and endowed his property for the poor and was known for his good deeds.”

Before the Qadi had finished his story, I was alerted to the presence of a man who appeared to be much older than the Qadi. He greeted us, and we responded, without interrupting the story. The Qadi welcomed him and invited him to sit down. When we were getting ready for prayer and our ablutions, the Qadi introduced me to Abu Al-Na’im, mentioning my Yemeni and Andalusian ancestors, thereby relating my origin to that of this son of Mesopotamia. I requested permission to go and wash, and Abu Al-Na’im remarked that the Qadi had kept me captive, as he did with all his visitors. When we came together again, it was clear that the Qadi had disclosed his impressions of me to his friend and had told him what he knew of my book business and my upcoming journey, and that he had chosen him as my host during my stay in Palermo.

Abu Al-Na’im’s beard was short, and his light hair was covered with a round cap, similar to the caps worn by the boys in Al-Andalus. His teeth were very

white, and his complexion was dark rather than light, indicating that he frequently wandered in the sun, which showed in his apparent good health for his age. When we parted ways with the Qadi, Abu Al-Na'im told him that we would not be attending the afternoon prayer because his guest appeared tired. The Qadi responded that my eyes were sunken from hunger, and he was correct. We dined on fish and I fell asleep immediately afterwards like a drunk; the ground rose and fell beneath me all night, and I was unable to distinguish between my dreams and reality.

In the morning, I found myself in the reception room of Abu Al-Na'im's house, and I remembered that I had fallen asleep the previous day, while he was talking to me, so I apologized as we ate the warm breakfast prepared by his maidservant, who I had met the day before. The maidservant, Se'da, took my clothes to free them of the grime had accumulated during my journey, while I went to the Hammam with my host. We passed by the port to bid farewell to Hassan Al-Bahri, as Abu Al-Na'im wished to be introduced to him and to pass to him some letters for delivery. He also asked for some things to be brought to him from Alexandria on the return trip.

The boat did not unload goods from Al-Andalus here, indeed, it took on fifteen more passengers, who wanted to travel to Alexandria, a few kantars of hazelnuts and pinenuts, and some kohl for the eyes, and the captain whispered to me that he was carrying a chest full of silver briquettes.

"Always keep an eye on your weapon," Hassan advised as we bid him farewell. I laughed and told him that it was always at my waist. I hinted to Abu Al-Na'im that Captain Hassan was referring to my Yemeni dagger, but Hassan, of course, was joking and reminding me our conversations during the crossing.

The weather on this first day of Dhul-Qa'dah was spring-like, as if the storms of the previous day had never occurred. As we walked to the market in the capital of the Emirate, I removed the cloak from my back and threw it over my shoulder. The boat cargo offered an opportunity to talk about the materials the island contained, so my host explained that these included gold, silver, alum, kohl, vitriol (sulfur salt), iron, lead, and ammonia extracted from the volcano in Jabal Al-Nar and transported to Al-Andalus.

"Is it true that Sicily is free of beasts, lions, snakes, and scorpions?"

“It is customary among islanders to believe so, but Sicily is vast and mountainous. I have not seen any of the predators or poisonous creatures you mentioned, and these creatures tend to avoid human settlements in the first place, but I believe there are some, and Allah knows best.”

We left the city wall behind and came upon a market that extended from east to west, so we turned west, with Abu Al-Na’im leading the way. I told him I wanted to buy a set of garments in Frankish style and to exchange some of my gold dinars for Sicilian and Frankish dinars.

Palermo is a city teeming with residents inside the wall; it is not like Málaga or Jaén or other medium-sized cities in Al-Andalus, but it reminded me of the crowds inside the walls of Córdoba and the surrounding suburbs. I learned from my companions that Emir Khalid ibn Ishaq had established a neighbouring city called Kalsa, south of Palermo, and installed the government there in order to keep the people in power away from the crowds and to relieve the people of Palermo from them, without removing the two sides far from one another since Kalsa is connected to Palermo, in a similar way to Al-Zahra and Córdoba. The seaport is located in the Slav neighborhood, which is also outside the wall, and it appears to be the most beautiful and elegant of all. Harat Al-Masjid, the Mosque neighbourhood, is also large, and it is known as Ibn Saqlab. It is situated on the Wadi Abbas, a river valley home to numerous water mills. Ibn Saqlab is near another new quarter. Each of these quarters have their own markets and craftsmen to serve the residents, and Abu Al-Na’im estimated the total population at around two hundred thousand, making Sicily’s metropolis one of the four or five largest cities on the globe after Córdoba, Baghdad, and Constantinople. I bought modest garments, the fabric of which had been left undyed in its natural colour, and I also acquired a chainmail shirt, such as Roman soldiers wore to protect themselves from arrows and stabbings. I made sure to buy a cap, similar to that worn by religious scholars among the Christians, to keep my head warm.

The time for the noon prayer was approaching quickly, and I did not want to exhaust my host with a longer tour, so I suggested returning via the Great Mosque road. We passed through another street that caught my attention with its many mosques and its lack of lamps to light the road at night. The explanation I received, after I questioned this, was that the medium-sized

mosques in the old city had formerly been homes. “There are also some small mosques frequented by the members of one family, where the women pray behind the men of their family and there are no strangers present.”

“In this way they can pray freely and privately and avoid overcrowding by not visiting the larger mosques,” I said to Abu Al-Na’im: “However, the mosque’s mission is to be open and to bring people together.”

“There are enough large, spacious mosques to do this and to teach people as well, but the small mosques are additional, and perhaps something of an improvement on individual prayer at home. In Palermo and its suburbs, there are more than three hundred mosques of all sizes.” Abu Al-Na’im smiled as we entered the Great Mosque, and I asked him why. “I was remembering a joke that Sicilians used to tell about teachers. Rather than acknowledging that three hundred teachers is an appropriate number to serve the inhabitants of a large city, they linked the lure of the profession to the exemption of teachers from participation in jihad against their enemies.”

In the afternoon, we relaxed in Abu Al-Na’im’s salon, and his Frankish maidservant, Se’da, kept plying us with delicious drinks and snacks. When I thanked her, she said I needed to eat well before setting off for Reims! It seemed that her master told her about my journey, or that she had overheard our conversation yesterday. I tried to move the conversation towards Abu Al-Tayyib, Ahmad ibn Al-Husayn, the Arab poet known as Al-Mutanabbi.

“Did he really claim to be a prophet?”

“Yes, he claimed that during his stay in the Samawah desert, in one of the towns of Kufa. He was a young man whose excellence in poetry had made him arrogant, and people were drawn to him. He angered, Lu'lu', the Emir of Homs, who had him arrested and reprimanded him vigorously. In the end, he repented and the Emir released him from prison, as has been confirmed. After some time, he joined Emir Sayf Al-Dawla ibn Hamdan in Aleppo, flattering him. That was in the year three hundred and thirty-seven, and Sayf Al-Dawla liked him very much, granted him many honours and allocated him an annual stipend of three thousand dinars, besides fiefs, presents, and gifts.

Abu Al-Tayyib was in bliss until the day he argued with Ibn Khalawayh in the Emir's council, which sat nightly. Ibn Khalawayh jumped on him and hit him with a key in his hand, wounding him in the head. Sayf Al-Dawla failed to interfere or to defend he who had hitherto only spoken in his praise, so Abu Al-Tayyib left, angry and bleeding, and he departed from that land, after having spent nine years there, during which he praised Sayf Al-Dawla and immortalized him in his poems."

I asked Abul Al-Na'im to recite some of Abu Tayyib's verses, so he settled his back comfortably on his cushion and intoned:

How long shall you wear the robes of passivity, how much longer shall you subsist in misery

For a death without a sword in the hand is a death with no honour in the land

Take a leap of faith, to trust in Allah is meet, death in battle, like honey in the mouth, is sweet.

Every poem tells a story and belongs to a specific time, and the original meaning sometimes requires explanation and interpretation as he made use of many metaphors and similes, and he also manipulated language to his own liking, with clear eloquence. Abu Al-Na'im surprised me with the information that he had all the poetry Al-Mutanabbi had written, with a mention of the occasion to which each poem referred. Before I could express my desire to transcribe the poems, he read it from my eyes. That very day, I had told him a lot about mine and my father's work in the field of transcribing, binding, and distributing books.

"If you are a good transcriber, you may be able to complete a volume in a few days."

"I learned calligraphy and transcribing from childhood, and I can transcribe up to fifty pages in one day and part of the night. But I would prefer you to find someone to transcribe for me so that he can earn some money, and I will gain the time to get to know your beautiful city and the island and its people."

Abu Al-Na'im agreed with me and assigned me one of those whose skills he trusted to transcribe Al-Mutanabbi's 'Diwan' and complete it within a week. My host returned and continued with part of Al-Mutanabbi's life story, saying:

"He left Aleppo for Damascus, and then travelled to Egypt, where he praised Kafur Al-Ikhshidi, hoping to be granted rule over a province. But Kafur disappointed him, so he became the object of the most brutal invective from Al-Mutanabbi, who then fled to Baghdad, where I was his host.

Later, he traveled from Baghdad to Persia and Shiraz, praising Adud Al-Dawla ibn Buya, so he was generous with his grants. But he did not stay in Shiraz and returned to Baghdad." Expressions of sadness and irony crossed the face of my interlocutor, and he said: "He escaped the pursuit of kings, but was eventually killed by Fatik Al-Asadi on his way back. Fatik wanted to take revenge on Abu Al-Tayyib because his poems contained great invective against his nephew, Dabbah. Abu Al-Tayyib knew Fatik was waiting in ambush, but he refused to seek help from anyone, and he decided not to delay his journey or to change his route. On the twenty-eighth of Ramadan of the year 354 AH, Fatik attacked him near Dayr Al-Aqul, west of Baghdad, and they started to fight, and Fatik killed not only him but also his son Muhassad and his servant Muflih, may Allah have mercy on them all."

It was clear from the way he spoke that Abu Al-Na'im was in possession of more precise details concerning this incident, but I did not ask, and I hoped that he had written down the details in his papers. I was excited to read the invective that had resulted in the tragic death of such an innovative poet at the hands of a nobody, who no-one would ever have mentioned had he not committed this act.

45

Se'da's plan

By means of daily tours through the markets of Palermo and its regions and my dealings with the booksellers and listening to the stories of merchants about their experiences, as well as receiving their advice, I acumulated much information relevant to my journey to Reims. It transpired that the best way to travel is by sea and along rivers, as land routes are almost non-existent, the forests are thick and impenetrable, and water remains the main trade route between the countless kingdoms, duchies, and principalities of Constantinople and the Frankish Kingdom. The good news was that Sicilian dinars were commonly in use in trade exchange deals and important daily transactions in mainland countries, such as Rome and Genoa, whether located near or far from Sicily. The coinage I am referring to here in these lines is the 'Tarì', a gold dinar unknown in the Islamic world and called 'Tarì' by the people of the mainland. This dinar was minted by Caliph Ibrahim ibn al-Aghlab when he conquered Sicily one hundred and sixty years ago. The Fatimids continued to mint the Tarì dinar in Sicily, after they expelled the Aghlabids, and they retained the inscription *"I bear witness that there is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah"* on the face of the dinar and the name of the caliph at the time of minting and the date of manufacture according to the Hijri calendar on the back. A copper coin surviving from the Byzantine Empire was used for small transactions. Bartering was also prevalent in the countries of the Romans and the Franks. I also saw the new gold Roman dinar that had been used alongside the Tarì for fifteen years. Basically, it is an imitation of the Tarì dinar, as it also bears the inscription *"I bear witness that there is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah",* in badly inscribed Arabic due to the craftspeople's ignorance of the language, and the date of minting and the name of the Al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah are on the back. The Roman dinar is not identical to the Tarì, as it weighs 1gm of gold, while the Tarì weighs 1.05gm. Moreover, the purity of the gold is inferior to the purity of the Tarì. Therefore, the

merchants I spoke to advised me to take this into consideration when concluding deals and contracts, and they recommended that I should always exchange the Roman dinars. In the countries of the Franks, they use a “silver brown” coin, four of which equal one Tarì dinar, and an Andalusian dinar equals four Tarì dinars.

On Thursday morning, Se'da seized the opportunity to approach me when Abu Al-Na'im was preoccupied with looking over some of his works, while looking carefully behind her. She said: “Go to the slave-merchant: He knows all the pirates, and he may help you to travel safely to the land of the Franks.” She did not give me a chance to ask anything as she continued to describe the man's shop and its location in the market and then added: “If he pretends to know nothing, I will come with you tomorrow at the time of the Friday prayer, as he does not close his shop.”

I was already searching for transport in order not to miss any appropriate opportunity that might not reoccur for months, and I thought that Se'da would not have given me the information that she had, which seemed confidential, if she did not think that it would be useful to me. I went to the man, and I found a shop with its goods covered in dust and no apparent activity, so that it was clear to me that the goods did not change or move from their place, and therefore the shopkeeper must have another hidden trade. I asked him directly if he knew of a straightforward way to travel to northern Gaul. He directed his attention to me as soon as he discovered from my accent that I was a foreigner, but he began interrogating me as to why I asked put this question to him.

“Because you are a slave trader. and you deal with pirates and are involved in their spoils, and also because pirates use ships to plunder cities, and I want to travel on one of their ships.”

He smiled at me and said: “Tell me, who told you all these fabricated stories?” He was not an old man, but his face was wrinkled like someone who had suffered starvation or faced a lot of hardship in life under the glare of a burning sun.

“The right question is, is there anyone in Palermo who doesn't know about your relationship with the pirates? My source of information is a maidservant in a respectable house, and she knows you. But, if you have no intention of helping me, I will leave you alone.”

“Don't get upset so quickly, tell me how can I help you if I really am friends with pirates, where do you wish to go?" He started to rub his right palm with the fingers of his left hand like someone expecting to get paid.

“I want to travel to Reims, and I don’t think the pirates will go there, but if they could take me to any spot in the Rhone valley, that would be perfect for me.”

“And what do you want to do there?”

“I lent a friend some money and I want to get it back.” I thought that the man might sell me to the pirates and get paid twice, once by me and once by them, so I told him: “I should be back here in less than three months, and if my return is delayed, my friends here will know that your pirates are the reason for my absence, and you will pay the price.”

“What you need is not easy, and your terms are complicated. They can take you to Arles or even to Avignon, but that’s still a long way from Reims, and if the Franks do anything to you, you want me to take the responsibility! How much will you pay?”

“I will pay when I return and have had my money back.”

“Be here tomorrow; I need time to consider the available opportunities and to ask around among the refugees who came to us after the fall of their country, in Jabal Al-Qilāl as they know the Rhone.” His words made sense to me, as the Rhone River formed the border of Jabal Al-Qilāl to the west, and a decade had not passed since their mass exodus from their country. So we agreed to meet at the time of the Friday prayer.

I told Se'da about what had happened, and that I thought he wanted to get rid of me quietly, without refusing my request so I would not tattle on him. She disagreed, and she told me that she would come to his shop after me.

His first question was why I didn't attend the Friday prayer. I told him: “I am not religious and I only pray once in the evening, and I asked him: “Why do you not close your shop?”

“I sell stolen goods and captives and make free people slaves. Do you think that Allah will accept my prayers?” A straight answer from a man whose name I had not asked, as for the reason behind my absence from the Friday prayer, that is due to the fact that the people here are Shiites, and it

is customary for Shia imams to curse the other Islamic sects, in one way or another. Also, I preferred not to appear cowardly, and I wanted to avoid entering into any disagreement or dispute with the good people here. Therefore, I reduced my visits to the mosques and decided to skip the Friday sermon.

Se'da arrived after me, and she began to explain to the man, who she called Galas, that I was the guest of Abu Al-Na'im and the qadi's friend. The man's eyes opened wide on hearing these words, but I could not discern any other facial expression due to the wrinkles on his face.

"You must ensure his safe arrival in the city of Arles where the Rhone commences, and he will be accompanied by someone to witness his arrival to Arles who will return with the pirates to confirm his arrival there." She spoke these words confidently, although she had not even told me anything about such a plan, and the man was unsure whether she was speaking with the knowledge of the qadi or not. Galas apologized to us, as he had not yet received any information, and he asked us to give him a few more days when he would be able to tell us what could be done.

"What have you done, Se'da?" I asked her, after we left the shop and were walking through a market that was almost empty of passersby and had most of its shops closed. I asked her: "Who will travel with me and return with the news?" She looked behind her and told someone following us to catch up and then introduced me to a girl, in her twenties, who was all covered up, except for her face and some of her dark black hair. "This is Samar, look at her face so you can recognize her, and I will tell you more about her." The girl looked at me out of wide, hazel eyes, her eyebrows furrowed somewhat with a tinge of both sadness and hope. Then Se'da told her to go on her way, so she went in front of us and turned into one of the side streets of the market. "She is a girl from Lyon on the Rhone river, who was kidnapped five years ago, and hopes to return. I think she might be useful to you." I looked closely at the girl as she turning into the street; she was a little shorter than me, obviously buxom, despite what she was wearing that day, and I noticed that her heels were white and her ankles bore no trace of any daily hard work.

"What are you planning? You know the obstacles and challenges facing men when they travel to the land of the Franks, so how do you expect me

to travel with a woman who looks like a flower that attracts wasps?” Se'da laughed at my metaphor and explained to me that Samar would be of great benefit to me because she was familiar with the region and also spoke the language, which could help in playing an agreed-upon role and ensure me a safe journey.

“The pirates will take you safely to the Rhone river, and Samar will smoothly guide you through her country afterwards, at least as far as her city, Lyon.”

I was thinking of the possibility that Samar could dress like a man, but the size of her backside might hinder that plan, and whoever has a large rear is likely to also have large breasts. I stopped fantasizing and asked Se'da: “Where does Samar serve, and why does she need to run away?”

She hesitated to answer, so I repeated my question and added: “You should consider that there will be no agreement if you hide anything from me, and you had better forget the whole idea”

She repeated the details of Samar's kidnapping once again, and her failure to forget over the years, and before we reached the crossroads where we should part, Se'da admitted that Samar was one of the servants at the Emir's brother's palace. It seemed that this maidservant wanted to turn my happiness as Abu Al-Na'im's guest to misery, and perhaps she might even lead me to prison.

Since my arrival in Sicily, Abu Al-Na'im had been taking me to the evening meetings that he and his acquaintances, who worked in the field of literature, held at one of their houses, and sometimes he invited them to his house. On the tenth day, the qadi invited us to dinner at his new home. Initially, the conversation between the five invitees was multifaceted, until I recalled Samar and asked the qadi about the Islamic views on slavery.

"Islam declares all mankind equal and orders slaves to be freed, as the first privilege of Islam, but everyone knows this, so why have you asked this question?”

“I asked because we can witness the persistence of this phenomenon throughout Islamic history until now, as slaves are bought and sold in the markets, and captives constitute a significant portion of the Harem in all countries.” I brought up the issue of the harem in order to avoid provoking

any of the attendees or appearing as someone who criticizes the Emir of the country.

“We differentiate between Muslims and non-Muslims, as well as between free non-Muslims and spoils of war. A Muslim may not be enslaved by another Muslim nor sold by him. Non-Muslim captives can be ransomed by their families and rulers and returned, otherwise, they are sold as slaves if they do not convert to Islam. Our captives are sold as slaves to others as well. Suleiman, do not forget that most of the slaves are brought to Islamic lands and sold to us by non-Muslim merchants, but rather men of the same creed as those they enslave.”

During the qadi’s speech, I was thinking to inform him that this trade should not be encouraged, and that there are still women in the Harem who converted to Islam, but Qadi Ibrahim bin Malik added: “My invitation to you today has something to do with captives and slaves. Do you remember when I told you the story of the battle with Emperor Otto? I was told that the Emir`s soldiers captured many of their Patriarchs and took them as captives. They are still in prison here, and they asked to see me three days ago to enquire about their fate. I told them that no ransoms had been sent to free them or any correspondence, and if their kings continued to ignore them, we would sell them in the market as slaves.”

Up to this point I had not deduced the relationship between my invitation to dinner with the others and the Patriarch prisoners, but I gathered from the rest of the qadi’s story that he had told them about the presence of a traveler through the countries of the Franks to Reims, and that they wished for me to carry letters to the Pope in Rome, and to the kings and princes of the Christian countries that were on my route. I immediately thought that yet another person was taking the liberty of planning my itinerary, as Se'da had done.

“It is a good idea, it would be a good deed for the Patriarchs, and it may facilitate Suleiman’s journey.” My response to Abu Al-Na'im's words was that such an idea might end with them capturing me in exchange for a patriarch. “Would I be exchanged, or would the qadi leave me in their hands?” The attendees laughed and we started to discuss the steps that might ensure a safe journey.

We came to the conclusion that the content and the formulation of the letters would be my first guarantee, and my assessment of the situation at the time another guarantee, as I could ignore mentioning the letters at all, or disclose the appropriate ones when required to get out of an emergency. After consultation, we concluded that the qadi should ask the Patriarchs to write a letter addressed to the Pope without mentioning a name, due to the many changes in that position, and to write two letters addressed to ‘the Duke’, again without a specific name so that I could present them to any of the Dukes of the many principalities located on my way.

Moreover, they should write a letter to King Otto III or to his mother, who is the head of his administration, and the Patriarchs could choose the name or names and titles of the recipients.

As for the final letter, it should bear the name of the Bishop of Reims, Gerbert, and should invoke the authority to search for those who would redeem the Patriarchs, and of course a letter to Louis V, the King of the Franks on the western frontier. They should indicate on the letters that the bearer is a friend who Allah had brought to them by chance to convey their plea. I asked the qadi to tell the Patriarchs to write their letters in clear Latin so that I could read what they had written, and they should finish them as soon as possible because I was waiting for the first boat that would take me north, to Rome, Genoa, or Marseille.

In the days that followed our visit to Galas in the market, Se'da kept asking with her eyes if I had decided to take Samar with me, then she began to speak about Samar's misery in the harem and that she had met her there and had no intention other than of helping her. I ascertained that Se'da knew about the letters from the Patriarchs, either by listening to my conversations with Abu Al-Na'im or because my host did not hide anything from her, as she was the only person who lived with him.

I had still not decided to take Samar with me, or considered how I could do that, but I was convinced of the benefits which I would gain from accompanying her, and I told Se'da to inform her to be ready to travel at any time, and to cut her hair like a man’s, and practice sleeping like a man as well as binding her breasts because she had to look like a man if she wanted to accompany me. Se'da was very happy and she listened carefully to the rest of my conditions that Samar should be careful, not carry

anything with her that might lead to accusations of theft, but my last condition cut short her joy and happiness, as I asked her to tell Samar that she should immediately convert to Islam.

“If she converts to Islam now before the qadi, I will not be accused of stealing or kidnapping one of the harem members of the Emir’s brother, at most, it will be said that she ran away with her lover or something like that.” I explained the importance of this matter to me and to my personal position and my reputation, and I assured her that the most important thing was not to link my journey with her escape, and her conversion to Islam would be her guarantee if this was later exposed. “Se'da, you must know if we are found out it will immediately be obvious that you are the one who hatched the plan, and accordingly, they will cut your head off, and you will also cause great harm to the position and reputation of Abu Al-Na'im. So no gossiping and watch your actions, and ask Samar to be careful as well. It would be better to tell me now if you have spoken of this in front of anyone.” She paled as she understood the consequences of exposure, but she nodded her head, and denied having told anyone.