

لمثل هذا يذوب القلبُ من كمدٍ
إن كان في القلبِ إسلامٌ وإيمانٌ

*At the sight of such things, the heart would melt from grief and sorrow,
were there within it any Islam or faith left.*

Abū al-Baqā' al-Rundī

Contents

Map ... 9

Prologue ... 11

Wherever the Winds of Fate May Lead ... 17

Where Steel is Born ... 93

The Hour of the Masked Riders ... 163

The Verdict of the Sword ... 241

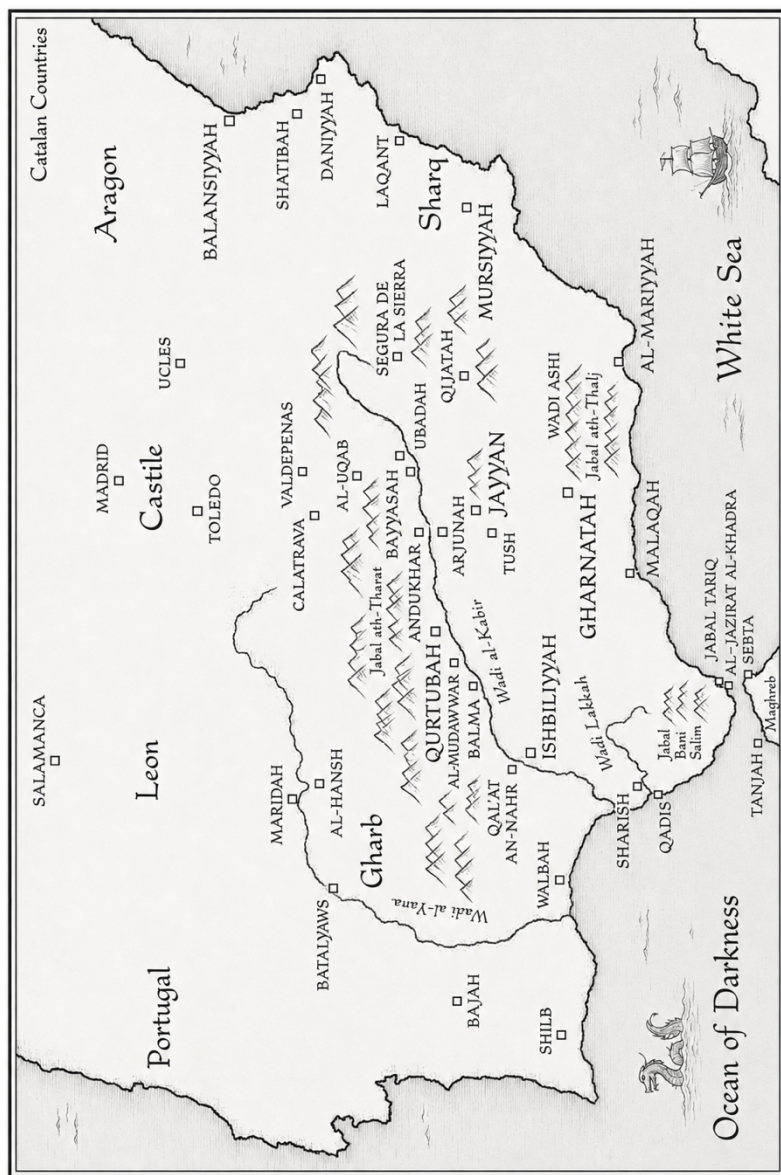
Historical Note ... 289

Chronology ... 293

Glossary ... 295

Toponymic Index ... 303

Further Reading ... 305



Prologue

Gharnātah, Muharram 678.

The first rays of the sun are only just rising from behind the mighty peaks of the Jabal al-Thalj. For nearly half an hour now, the strong, melodious voices of the *muezzins* have torn through the silence of the night, echoing from hill to hill — as if to remind us that here, we are still masters of our own souls. The morning coolness, sharpened by a light breeze descending from the mountains, gives no hint of the oppressive heat that will settle in within a few hours; a few hesitant clouds cling to the summits of the still snow-capped heights. Below, the city is already stirring.

The faithful, I imagine, spill from the great mosque into the narrow alleys, opening their shops, slowly filling courtyards, markets, and bathhouses. No doubt the *muhtasib* has just relieved the night watch and begun his patrol. Beyond the suburbs, cohorts of farmers will soon spread across the vast fertile plain, tending its orderly rows of olive trees, its graceful orchards, its lush gardens, its groves of orange, pomegranate, lemon, and almond trees, and its flowerbeds blooming along the banks of the Shanīl — whose waters impress few at this season. Here and there, hedges of cypress point the way to the finest residences, the estates of princes and nobles. Farther west, commanding the landscape, the palace of al-Hamra — where my sultan and nephew resides — imposes its majesty, steeped in the thousand and one mysteries its ochre walls seem to conceal, stretching toward the horizon into the white roofs of the

hill of al-Bayyāsīn. There, a lively throng of artisans, masons, street vendors, and students is already at work, their movements falling naturally into the blessed rhythm of the *dhikr* murmured by those who pass.

In a single word: life — that for which we have struggled with all our strength and with all our souls. And beyond, beyond the beautiful red hills scattered with pines and tall cedars standing like watchtowers of our realm, beyond the furthest reach of my sight, lie those lands we did not know how to defend, could not defend, or chose not to defend... lands that saw my birth, that were once ours, and where the *adhān* did not resound this morning. Farther still, where even the boldest imagination fears to venture, stretch the endless plains of Castile — the lair of the Demon, they say here — and the land of the Franks, and other cold and shadowed regions whose existence and names we know only through the tales of merchants, yet from which the fiercest warriors sometimes come to founder upon our shores in search of glory and plunder.

The air is cool and pure, the view magnificent, the hour well suited to contemplation. And yet the whole dilemma that torments my mind seems to be contained within this scene of near-idyllic calm. For several months now — since illness has kept me from mounting a horse and, all too often, even from walking — these questions have gnawed at me, stealing my sleep. Have we done enough in the face of the terrible ordeal that has befallen our people? How will history judge us, what gaze will our descendants cast upon our deeds? And above all, what will be the judgment of the One whose decrees alone are truly to be feared — what fate will He reserve for me on the Day

when there shall be no shadow but His? What could we have done, what should we have done differently? There comes a time in a man's life, when dusk lies closer than dawn, when the clash of arms no longer drowns the mind in its frenzy, when such existential questions cannot help but impose themselves upon his conscience.

All is written, and nothing and no one can escape the decrees of the Most High. I often tell myself this to put an end to this dissection of my own life, as though to absolve myself of my share in the matter. Yet my responsibility is not that of a humble nobody, swept along against his will by the torrent of time's upheavals, one of those countless wretches crushed beneath forces beyond their reach, expiatory victims of struggles that surpass them. I have led bands, then armies; I have inspired men — and even women — to fight and to die; I have captured, defended, and lost cities; I have shed blood in abundance, perhaps more than was ever required. I have given and I have taken, and the scars that adorn, almost proudly, every inch of my body stand as witness.

I have known and walked among the greatest men of my age, of that I have no doubt. I cast my fate into the arms of Muhammad ibn al-Ahmar; I feasted at the table of the sons of the great Salāh al-Dīn; I rode beside Baybars and Sayf al-Dīn Qutuz; I crossed blades with Fernando of Castile and Louis of France and the Great Khan of the Mongols, and with so many others that to name them all would give this account the air of one of those tedious, endless inventories beloved of chroniclers.

But who am I, you may ask? History is written for sultans and kings, by scholars and priests; it meticulously

records the slightest deeds of men of power, triumphantly celebrates their feats of arms and their successes, yet remembers little — if anything at all — of the names of those who paid for them with their blood or their limbs, with their lives or their souls. Worse still, it holds nothing but contempt for the incorruptible, the idealists, the unclassifiable — and I have been, at least I like to believe, one of those. This troubles me little; I seek but one reward and fear but one punishment: that of the Most High. I have been called and known by many names, but the one my father gave me is Mūsā. Mūsā ibn Ibrāhīm al-Azdī al-Bayyāsī al-Andalusī, and this is my story.

It is a story of faith, of passion, and of hope. It is the story of a man and his destiny, forged of blood, sweat, and tears, of rage, bitterness, and vengeance, but above all of love — love for his Creator, for his land, for those who are his own; for love is, I believe, the only feeling that, when joined to an unshakeable and absolute trust in the One, can move mountains.

Wherever the Winds of Fate May Lead

وَبَشِّرِ الصَّابِرِينَ
الَّذِينَ إِذَا أَصَابَتْهُمُ مُصِيبَةٌ قَالُوا إِنَّا لِلَّهِ وَإِنَّا إِلَيْهِ رَاجِعُونَ
أُولَئِكَ عَلَيْهِمْ صَلَوَاتٌ مِنْ رَبِّهِمْ وَرَحْمَةٌ وَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ
الْمُهْتَدُونَ

But give glad tidings to the steadfast — those who say, when a misfortune strikes them: "We belong to Allah and to Him we shall return." Such are they on whom are blessings from their Lord, and mercy. Such are the rightly guided.

Bayyāsah, Spring–Summer 608–609.

Legend has it that our land draws its red colour from the blood of all those who, since time immemorial, have fought for its possession. I once raised the question with one of the scholars of the palace, who proved deeply sceptical on the matter. Yet I love this legend, and never miss an occasion to recount it, so perfectly does it seem to mirror my own life and story. And that story begins somewhere in the year 608, that cursed year the Christians call the Year of Grace 1212.

That year, spring was already well advanced, the sowing season had passed, and I was eight years old. Our land was still a province of the empire of the *Muwahiddūn*, who ruled from the far shore of the White Sea, in Africa. As far as we were concerned, we had little cause to complain of this foreign yoke — though I often heard my father, a flame in his eyes, extol the past glories of the Umayyad Caliphs of Qurtubah, whom our clan had served with honour and loyalty, and sometimes, too, brood over the loss of our independence.

My father was the *qā'id* of Bayyāsah. He was a hero of the last war against Castile, and the great Caliph al-Mansūr himself had granted him the title of *sāhib al-thaghbr* (Lord of the Frontier) and the fief of Bayyāsah in recognition of his feats of arms at the Battle of al-Arak, where he had, it was said, broken the lines of the enemy

infantry on several occasions. But my father never spoke of it. He was not a man to boast of his own deeds, and I would only come to learn of them much later, after his death, through the respect people showed me by virtue of my lineage.

If he cared little, out of humility and reserve, to dwell upon his own exploits, he was far more forthcoming when it came to those of our clan, the glorious Arab tribe of the Banū Azd. From their original Yemen, where they had founded the great kingdom of Sheba, my father would delight in telling me, our ancestors had ruled over Oman and Bilād al-Shām, conquered Iraq and Persia, and ground more rivals into the dust than he could possibly enumerate. He would recount these heroic tales and describe those distant lands with such detail and precision that one might have believed he had actually visited them — yet my father had never once left our peninsula. Like most Andalusis, he had not even made the *Hajj*; the journey to Makkah was far too long, costly, and perilous, and his military duties would have prevented it in any case.

Our ancestors had arrived in these western lands half a millennium ago, in the army of the great Mūsā ibn Nusayr. Here they had taken root, tilled the soil, built cities, taken wives, and established lineages. This land was now ours, and we had no other; over the centuries, we had grown into one with its earth and its people. Yet this land was coveted, and our clan had never enjoyed the luxury of setting aside the affairs of war — though we had been, in that regard, something of an exception. My father would thus often lament that so few Andalusis had maintained the same martial character as our family. He did not, however, hold

knowledge in contempt as Christian men of arms generally do; rather, he believed that the ideal man is one who weds learning to strength, body to mind, wisdom to courage. And it was this cast of mind that he naturally sought to instil in me.

And so my daily life as a young boy, from the age of five, led me unfailingly to the mosque, where we would sit cross-legged for hours around our teacher — who was also the city's *imām* — to learn the Word of Allah, the Arabic language and poetry, reading and writing, arithmetic and the sciences. We scratched away on smooth wooden tablets with our calames, sharpened reeds that we dipped in ink moistened with water so that the surface could easily be wiped clean and written upon again, over and over. The first duty of a believer, my father would always tell me, is to know the Qur'an and the Law; and the first duty of an Arab and an Andalusí is to write without error and to express himself with eloquence. Like all young boys, no doubt, I was nonetheless far more drawn to the excitement of combat, the clash of arms, and the fire of purebred horses than to mastering the finer points of grammar.

"That day will come soon enough, my son — sooner, even, than you might have wished, as you will one day understand. Be patient, complete your education, and I shall initiate you into the lance and the sword," he would say to me, with tenderness and equanimity, each time I raised the subject.

One day, when I pressed more insistently than usual to begin my military training ahead of its appointed time, my father thought to temper my ardour by quoting a saying of our Prophet, may peace be upon him:

“Do not wish for the encounter with the enemy, but ask Allah for peace...”

“...Yet if you do encounter him, be steadfast, and know that Paradise lies in the shadow of swords!” I added, with all the juvenile enthusiasm that was mine.

Much as he had always appreciated my flashes of wit, that was without doubt the only time I ever saw my father laugh with unrestrained delight, even as he warmly commended me for my diligence in learning the *ḥadīth*. Since my birth, I had known nothing but peace — or near enough — and that, without any doubt, is why war held such an attraction for me; for those who have tasted its horrors and its sorrows wish they had never made its acquaintance. The humiliation our army had visited upon the Castilians at al-Arak had been so complete that it had extinguished the enemy’s appetite for venturing onto our lands for fifteen years. But times were changing now, and my father knew it. Though he never showed his unease, I would sometimes catch snatches of his conversations with his lieutenants about it.

Of late, the raids from the men of the North had resumed, and the frontier had stirred in a way it had not for a very long time. Two springs past, the knights of Calatrava had dug themselves into a formidable stronghold in the very heart of our territory and had launched a series of bloody expeditions against the farmers of those parts. My father had then been compelled to ride out on campaign for several weeks to lend his hand to our neighbours of Andūkhār and drive the Christian marauders from the surrounding lands. Nothing of the sort had occurred since the day I was born. Until then, so unbroken a calm had

prevailed that my father had needed to leave his district only to answer his annual summons before the governor of Qurtubah, to whom Bayyāsah answered.

As the danger showed no sign of abating, the following spring Caliph al-Nāsir came from Marrakesh with his vast army in its entirety — Amazigh, Arabs, Blacks, and even Turks, formidable horse-archers from the most distant reaches of the East, whose tongue was so strange to our ears that we could not understand a single word of it. My father had little love for al-Nāsir — “a heretic and a fool in equal measure,” he would say sometimes, with an air of contempt — yet he respected, and even cherished, the men who crossed the sea to fight at our side. The brotherhood of arms, as I was to discover in the course of my life, can be a far stronger bond than that of blood. Some of these men from the far shore were thus lodged on our estates. The regular imperial troops generally quartered in separate encampments in the immediate vicinity of the Caliph’s palace at Ishbīliyyah, but the tribal volunteers fared less well, and my father made it a point of honour to receive and properly feed one of their contingents on our lands.

Bayyāsah was not a very large city, and so that year we welcomed a small unit of some fifty horsemen from the Ghumāra tribe, together with their women and children — perhaps two hundred souls in all. On the far side of the White Sea, these people inhabited the mysterious and impenetrable mountains of the Rif, and their fierce bearing spoke more eloquently than a thousand words of the harshness of their way of life. Most of them, indeed, refused the lodgings we had offered and chose instead to sleep in their campaign tents and keep watch over their

herds, to which they were as attached as to the apple of their eye. Only the clan chief spoke Arabic, and that imperfectly; and from his conversations with my father I gathered that the Ghumāra had no greater fondness for the ruling power than we did — their fathers had even, in their time, launched a great revolt against the *Muwāhiddin*.

But they had come in the name of the defence of Islam, and that counted for more in their eyes than their quarrels and grievances with the Caliph. Besides, their lands were poor, and men skilled with the sword always found something to their advantage in the great campaigns waged by the sovereign...

My mother bore the responsibility of ensuring that this small army was properly fed, which was no small undertaking. As for me, I was frequently enlisted, alongside the children of our guests, to carry out whatever the season demanded: gathering and stacking firewood, harvesting olives and almonds by climbing the trees, or tending to the animals. Children of my station did not normally perform such tasks, and our estate was not lacking in hands, but my father wished by this means to teach me humility.

In his eyes, only contact with the earth and physical labour could prevent a man from sinking into pride — “and he shall not enter Paradise who carries in his heart the weight of an atom of pride,” he would add, quoting our Prophet, may peace be upon him. He abhorred nothing so much as the haughtiness of the urban elites, and it was no doubt for that very reason that he took such pleasure in the company of the Amazigh mountain tribesmen.

Be that as it may, I must confess that this way of life was not, at its core, displeasing to me. Occasions for escape

were plentiful, and our olive and almond groves stretching as far as the eye could see, our streams winding between the thickets, and our gentle hills offered ample ground for the kind of play that was happiness enough for me and my companions. Despite the differences of language, we had learned to understand one another well enough with the young Ghumāra to mount joint expeditions. Sometimes, despite my mother's disapproval, we would venture across the hills as far as the bank of the Wādī al-Kabīr, an hour or two's walk away, and when the heat grew too fierce, we would bathe there.

Naturally, it was war that we played at most often, with rudimentary wooden swords of our own making, which we tended with all the devotion a child can lavish upon his most cherished toy. These games would culminate in pitched battles between Andalusī and Maghrebi children which, more often than not, dissolved into general brawling and earned us a few minor wounds — quickly forgotten after lectures from our respective elders on the subject of brotherhood and a prayer said in common. It was there, in the small meadow adjoining our orchards and our guests' encampment, that I commanded my first army and drew my first blood.

My father did not play. Shortly after the arrival of the Ghumāra, at the close of spring, he had ridden out to join the Caliph's campaign with his men and our guests, leaving their women and children behind in Bayyāsah. The stronghold of the knights of Calatrava was dislodged in just under two months of siege, and after a triumphal procession through Ishbīliyyah, they were back by the end of summer. Another campaign, aimed at securing the frontier once and

for all, was planned for the following year, and the Ghumāra therefore remained on our lands throughout the autumn and the winter, which was exceptionally mild that year.

It was a happy childhood — at least, that is what I have kept of it in my mind. Modest Bayyāsah had none of the glitter of Ishbīliyyah, the prestige of Qurtubah, or the wealth of al-Mariyyah, but a young boy's spirit is little drawn to such things, and growing up close to the land, surrounded by those I loved, was more than enough for my happiness.

My mother, who had been born Maria in a small town in Castile but whom everyone in Bayyāsah knew by the name of Umm Mūsā, was a former captive whom my father had freed and taken as his wife. She never spoke of her past, yet I do not believe she greatly mourned her former life, so radiant with happiness did she seem to me. It is to her that I owe my blue eyes and my command of Castilian, which my father had permitted her to teach me from the earliest age — no doubt reasoning that speaking and understanding the tongue of the enemy would be a considerable asset for the great commander he dreamed I would become.

I could not say whether he loved her, but he treated her with respect and never raised his hand against her, and I believe that was more than enough for her. I have since acquired a sufficiently clear understanding of the societies of the North and of how women fare in those lands to appreciate why.

My mother never spoke of her former religion either, and I was in any case too young for such subjects to

be broached, but it seems to me that she had genuinely embraced Islam. This is not surprising: as I was to discover throughout my life, many Christians embrace our faith and trade the crucifix for the turban with genuine fervour the moment they are exposed to it without a priest's cassock or a knight's sword standing over them — but I shall return to this.

By his first wife, who had died before my birth, my father had had my three elder brothers: Yūsuf, Muhammad, and Ismāʿīl, all of them in their twenties and serving under his command in the cavalry. All three had been cast in the same mould as our father: tall, dashing, broad-shouldered, plain-spoken, dignity bred into their very bones yet free of that self-importance one finds all too often in men of consequence. Apart from my father himself, there was no one I admired more than them, with their black stallions, their fine armour, and their coloured turbans. As for my father, despite the weight of his responsibilities, he never missed his two daily appointments with his three youngest children — my little sister Zahrāʾ, my younger brother Yahyā, and myself. In the morning, when we prayed the *subh* before sharing a small meal, often little more than a few figs, and in the evening, when we ate together before making our way to the mosque, on the road to which he was always in good spirits. We were, I believe, the joy of an existence that was otherwise very austere.

For beyond that, my father had, in the end, but one great love: his fief. That fief he was bound to defend and to cherish — protecting the lands and those who worked them, watching over the welfare of those entrusted to his care, ensuring that the justice of the *qāḍī* was carried out,

keeping his small force ready for battle; in short, the civil and military administration of the district of Bayyāsah. Such was the sacred charge the caliph had placed upon him. It was a task without respite, and I cannot recall ever seeing my father surrender to idleness for so much as a single day. “The best of men is the most useful to others,” he would often say.

From a share of the city’s tax revenues — the *sihām* — he was responsible for maintaining a seasoned frontier garrison of thirty heavy cavalry and one hundred infantry, a hundred and thirty men in all, enrolled on the Caliph’s official *dimān al-jund* as regular soldiers drawing quarterly wages. All, or nearly all, were members of our clan, uncles and cousins of varying degrees of remove. In Bayyāsah, war was a family affair.

And then there was the volunteer militia: simple farmers and craftsmen whom my father would muster several times a year for exercises, and from whom he attempted, often with little success, to make soldiers worthy of the name. Some, driven by an unquenchable thirst for vengeance, had lost a brother cut down in a raid, a wife dishonoured, or a child carried off into slavery by the men of the North; others were simply inflamed by the prospect of fighting the enemy of Allah. Despite their goodwill and even the fervour of some amongst them, however, these men were more likely to find themselves assigned to the various logistical tasks — levelling roads, gathering provisions, hauling baggage, pitching tents — than fighting in the front line.

Some years before my birth, my father had overseen the construction of the fortifications of Bayyāsah: a solid

defensive wall of dressed stone, bristling with battlements, studded with a dozen turrets, and dominated by a powerful stronghold — the tower of Ubādah, eighty feet high and pierced by four forbidding arrow-loops from which hostile troop movements could be observed for dozens of miles in every direction. Bayyāsah did not lie in direct contact with the Castilian frontier, yet we were no more than four days' hard riding from Toledo for seasoned horsemen, and a small enemy force slipping through the passes of the Jabal al-Thārāt could easily descend upon the surrounding lands before we had time to call for aid from Qurtubah or Jayyān. In the decades preceding our victory at al-Arak, the region's farmlands had thus frequently been the target of devastating raids. When the power of our country's previous masters, the *Murābitūn*, had collapsed, Bayyāsah had even fallen into Leonese hands before being reconquered. For with its skilled craftsmen and its abundant output of olive oil, almonds, grapes, and wheat, Bayyāsah was prosperous and promised an enticing prize... but for now, my father kept watch.

We lived outside the walls, in a large whitewashed house set in the middle of our estate, a quarter of an hour's walk or so from the city gates and the mosque. "What manner of man would I be if I sheltered behind those high ramparts while leaving my people at the mercy of the enemy?" I had once heard my father reply to his cousin and right hand, the steadfast Tāriq, who was urging him to come and settle within the city for the sake of safety.

And then spring arrived, and the conversations of the adults grew more martial in tone. Our soldiers now spent the better part of their time in training. Unarmed

wrestling, sword duels, long-distance runs in full armour, javelin throwing, scaling the walls, mounted coordination exercises: my father drove his men hard and allowed them no respite. The Caliph had promised a new campaign, and everyone now waited to learn its target. My three elder brothers were beside themselves with excitement. The previous year's expedition had been nothing more than a rather tedious siege, and they were hoping at last to taste the exhilaration of a great battle — and, if possible, to see something of the world. The eldest, Yūsuf, who had always been captivated by the wealth of legends surrounding the Ocean of Darkness, wished for nothing so much as to march against Portugal. In his younger days he had even wanted to enlist in the navy and join the fleet at Sabtah, but my father had not permitted him to depart from the family tradition of the cavalry. I believe, too, that he feared the sea in the way men who have spent their entire lives on dry land are accustomed to do.

The news fell on a Friday. King Alfonso of Castile and his men, riding out from Toledo, had crossed into Muslim lands and were besieging the fortress of Qal'at Rabāh, where a friend of my father's, the *qā'id* Ibn Qādis, had bravely dug in and was holding them at bay with barely a few dozen men. At Ishbīliyyah, the Caliph, caught off guard, had decided not to march to the relief of his isolated garrison but rather to draw the enemy in and await them south of the pass that led down from the plateaus into the valley of the Wādī al-Kabīr. There, starved and exhausted by their gruelling march through the broken terrain, the Castilians would be easily crushed. So he believed; so we all did. As a sign of the urgency of the situation, however, the

Caliph had not summoned his troops to Ishbīliyyah, where he customarily enjoyed staging grand and lavish parades around his palace before showering his warriors with rich gifts and riding out on campaign, but to Qurtubah, as close to the front as possible; a telling detail that did not fail to animate the discussions that evening.

The general mobilisation had just been sounded, and there was no time to lose. Four days' march separated Bayyāsah from Qurtubah, and the Caliph's order was to join him without delay. The following day was given over to mustering the troops: several horsemen dispersed in every direction to ride through the many villages of our district, solemnly read aloud the Caliph's letter, and gather volunteers. In that peculiar frenzy that comes with every departure for war, the men remaining at the fort sharpened their swords and spear-blades, re-strung their bows, greased their crossbows, polished their armour, recited the Qur'an, or declaimed verses of martial poetry.

At evening we all made our way to the city mosque to perform the *Maghrib* prayer and remain there until that of the '*Ishā*', some hour later, calling upon our Lord for victory — a Sunnah of our beloved Prophet, may peace be upon him, that my father held particularly dear.

Then, on the road back, he drew me aside. I had never seen such grave solemnity upon his face, which would ordinarily break into a broad smile the moment he laid eyes on me. He bent his knees to bring himself to my height, placed his hand upon my cheek, was silent for a few moments, and then said:

"O my son, you know that I ride to war, and Allah alone knows whether I shall return to you. Do you swear

to listen carefully to what I have to say and to remember every word?”

“By Allah, O Father, I swear to listen and to obey!”

“O my son, you are still a young boy, but you will soon be a man, if Allah wills it, and you must conduct yourself as one. Honour your Lord and Creator, for there is no greater duty that has been laid upon man; obey His commandments and keep far from what He has forbidden, for therein lies the source of felicity in this world and the next. Complete your education and seek the company of the virtuous, for the sword without wisdom can only be that of the tyrant and the oppressor...”

He paused, and in that pause I saw something in his face I was not yet old enough to name, though I understand it now perfectly: the love of a man who knows he will not always be there.

“Protect those who are yours, at the cost of your life if need be: first, your mother, your sister, and your brother; then the people of Bayyāsah; and finally, our people and all the faithful. Be the shield and the sword of those who have none, for that is the only reason Allah grants strength to some of His servants. Prefer death to dishonour and to cowardice, for there is no good in a life lived in servitude and degradation...”

Around us, the night was entirely still. One could barely make out the chirping of crickets and the soft rustling of the olive trees in the evening breeze.

“Be fierce in battle, but show justice and kindness in victory, for it is thus that our ancestors always prevailed; and the strong man is not he who strikes another down, but he who knows how to master his own anger. Beware

of arrogance, for it has destroyed the nations that came before us and weakened our people to the point where their very survival is today in peril. Be true to your oaths and never break a given word, for that is an infamy that will cause you to lose the love of your Creator and of His creatures...”

He was silent for a moment, long enough for me to understand that what remained was the most important part.

“In all circumstances, place your trust in Allah and remember that He will never impose upon you a trial without having first given you the strength to overcome it. You may see difficult times after I am gone, but know that the Promise of Allah is Truth, and that He never abandons those who abandon themselves to Him. Do you swear to live by these principles, O my son?”

“I swear it, O Father, by Allah!”

“Good. A man is nothing if he does not live for a purpose; you therefore know yours. Engrave this code of honour in your mind and in your heart, and apply it at every moment of your existence. May Allah assist you and love you, O my son, for he who loses His succour shall find no other protector.”

I have turned these words over in my mind so many times that, seventy years later, I can still recall my father’s tone, his piercing gaze, the feeling of his hand upon my cheek, the light of the full moon upon his face. I could not say whether he could have imagined what would come to pass after his death.

No doubt he had sensed it, as the most clear-sighted men of our people had, or perhaps he simply knew that this

lower world is capricious and that nothing in it is ever assured.

And then, the following morning, the hour of departure came. My father cut a proud figure, erect upon his fully caparisoned destrier and clad in gleaming chainmail. Beneath his scarlet cape — the distinguishing mark of high-ranking commanders — and his quilted yellow and white tunic, there appeared an iron cuirass from Mursiyyah covering his chest and back, and a mail hauberk extending his metal protection across his arms and hands. Atop his gold-set helmet sat a white turban, and a large, heavy wooden shield painted in the same colour hung from a long leather strap girding his shoulder and waist. At his belt, a scabbard held a long sword whose shining blade was adorned with calligraphed Qur’anic verses, while in his hand he carried a heavy lance surmounted by a tapered iron blade, to which was attached the yellow banner ringed with white of the Banū Azd — carried, it was said, by our ancestors at the Battle of Siffin. Finally, a war axe and a short dagger suspended from his saddle completed this formidable arsenal.

My three elder brothers and the other regular cavalrymen, equipped and dressed in much the same manner, lacked only the cape and the splendour of the helmet and sword. The infantry, wearing their characteristic sleeveless leather tunics over their mail shirts, followed with their powerful crossbows, their gleaming single-edged swords with long wooden grips, and their sturdy white shields decorated with three purple tassels. They too were armoured from head to foot, or near enough, their visored helmets leaving visible only their eyes and cheeks. Most of

them had wound a yellow cloth about their heads — the mark of the Banū Azd and, by extension, of the people of Bayyāsah.

Our Amazigh guests, unarmoured save for their chief, were far lighter in their bearing — hooded burnouses, traditional leather shields, short sabres, and stubby javelins — yet they projected no less a raw, unadorned martial virility, untouched by pomp or ceremony. Our enemies in fact often feared these men who hurled themselves into the fray without the least protection, sometimes bare-chested, far more than us Andalusis encased in iron. All of them, moreover, had shaved their heads before riding out to battle, an ancestral tradition of their people that seemed to speak of their resolve to conquer or die as martyrs. Last of all, our militiamen, an undisciplined cohort of men dressed in every manner imaginable and armed with pitchforks, axes, and crude makeshift spears, brought up the rear alongside the donkeys and pack horses of the supply convoy. Bayyāsah was going to war.

For a time, the crowd of women, children, and old men gathered in the outskirts of the city to bid farewell to its heroes filled the air with a shower of prayers on behalf of our protectors. Then I watched them disappear over the horizon, and everyone dispersed to go about their affairs. In two or three months, we told ourselves, they would return covered in glory, as they had the year before. No one doubted it.

Three weeks passed. My mother spent her nights in prayer and her days displaying wonders of ingenuity to conceal her anxiety from us and persuade us that all was for the best in the best of all possible worlds. The news from

the campaign, which arrived in trickles, was not good, however. The Castilians, it was said in the city, had assembled an army the likes of which the world had never seen; Alfonso had allied himself with his neighbours of Aragon and Navarre and had enlisted every knight in the land, while hordes of volunteers had poured down from the land of the Franks to swell his ranks. The Caliph — an incompetent, as my father had rightly judged — had had his finest officers executed over trifles, and the morale of the troops had sunk to its lowest ebb. But my child's soul could imagine nothing other than my heroic father bravely triumphing over all his enemies, and it was that naive and comforting thought that accompanied me each evening as I lay down to sleep.

And then one day, as we had gone out to fetch some provisions at the market of Bayyāsah, a messenger came rushing into the square shortly after the *ʿAsr* prayer, the sun already well advanced in its slow and imperturbable decline. His dishevelled appearance, dust-caked hair, and haggard face gave little promise of glad tidings, and indeed it was not long before he had caught his breath and begun crying out in a loop:

“The army has been crushed at al-ʿUqāb! The Caliph is in flight! The enemy is marching upon you! All the faithful must take refuge in Ubadah without delay!”

We were dumbstruck. After a few moments marked by a silence so complete that one might have believed an angel had just appeared in the middle of the market, chaos instantly seized the scene. So many women pressed around the poor messenger that he nearly toppled from his horse. Each one, naturally, wished to know the fate of a husband,

a father, a son; and equally naturally, the man was quite unable to account for the fate of every ordinary soldier. But my father was a great commander, known and respected by all, and so I thought I stood a better chance of obtaining news of him. I cut my way through to the messenger, making use of my modest stature to slip between the frantic women.

“Do you know what became of my father, the *qā'id* Ibrāhīm al-Bayyāsī?”

“The *shahīd* Ibrāhīm al-Bayyāsī!” he corrected me at once, without concealing a note of admiration in his voice. “He charged with his men to cover the retreat of our regiments. Rejoice, O young boy, for your father and your clan have been honoured with martyrdom!”

I was eight years old, and my world had just shattered into pieces.

Ubadah, Summer 609.

They say that time heals all wounds. It does not. Those inflicted upon me in that terrible week never truly closed. To be entirely honest, I never sought to forget them either. I have tended them with all the passion of the blacksmith who nurses his fire with care to draw from it the strongest blade; I have carefully honed, polished, and sharpened them; I have made of them weapons against our enemies.

There was not a single moment to lose. The victorious crusading army was marching upon us, no troops remained capable of defending us, and the solid walls of Bayyāsah were of no use without fighting men upon the battlements. As for the neighbouring city of Ubadah, two hours' march away, it was not only better fortified, but above all — since it counted three times more inhabitants than Bayyāsah — it possessed a permanent militia that had not ridden out on campaign with the Caliph. This particular detail was why we were all urgently called upon to take refuge there. My mother hastily gathered all the provisions she could, filled several bags with dried fruit which she pressed upon us, and so it was that we set out — my mother, my sister, my brother, and I — in great haste, not without casting one last glance upon that pretty all-white house where I had been born and where I had known so much joy. I would never see it again, at least not as it had been.

Memories of moments of chaos and panic are often blurred and confused, and so it is that my recollection of the details of that flight fails me. I only remember that we took to the road shortly after sunset, that we walked through the night with the rest of the people of Bayyāsah by the light of a few torches, and that Zahrā', my little sister, was terror-stricken.

Clearer in my mind is the unspeakable tumult upon our arrival at Ubadah. The valley of the Wādī al-Kabīr was, at that time, prosperous and thickly peopled: one could not walk two hours without encountering a town of some consequence with its own market and several shops, and so Ubadah was filling with thousands of wretched souls arriving from the surrounding villages in clusters of women, children, and old men that the city's militiamen, overwhelmed by their numbers, struggled to shepherd. The mosques and houses of the city were already full of refugees, and the newcomers had begun to pile into the streets; some were sleeping on the bare ground. Praise be to Allah, I retained some memory of the approximate location of the *qā'id's* residence — a friend of my father's who was likewise reported missing — and we managed, as best we could, to make our way there, where his wife received us warmly.

After a night marked by such an uproar that it drowned out the call to the dawn prayer, I slipped away from the *qā'id's* house, overrun with weeping women, to explore Ubadah with all the excitement of a country child discovering the great city. I had already been there two or three times with my father, during the courtesy calls he paid to his local counterpart, but I had been younger still on

those occasions and had little opportunity to wander its streets. Abandoned before the arrival of our ancestors, as I was later to learn from a scholar native to the city, it had been refounded by the Umayyads under the name of Ubadat al-‘Arab; and from that time it had always been a stronghold of Islam and of the faithful.

The city wore its reputation as a prosperous trading hub with quiet pride, and the appearance of its paved streets, its perfectly whitewashed houses, and its countless shop fronts confirmed as much. Despite the motley crowd it had drawn to itself against its will, Ubadah breathed wealth and abundance. The palm trees that escaped from interior courtyards to reach toward the azure sky, the flowering vines that carpeted the alleyways in an orgy of colour, the fruit trees of every kind that generously offered their succulent harvest to those who passed by must, in times of peace, have only added to this impression of a little paradise on earth.

For the moment, however, Ubadah had taken on the appearance of something closer to hell. The faces marked by grief and despair, the weeping of children, the piercing cries of women learning of the death of a son or a husband, the wounded soldiers dying in their mail coats at the corners of the streets, the blood flowing in macabre rivulets from the makeshift infirmary established by the exhausted physicians of Ubadah... never shall I be able to erase from my memory my first encounter with war. And above all, fear, everywhere: raw, naked fear — the fear of those humble souls who had been forced to abandon their homes in the middle of the night not knowing whether they would ever find them again, the fear of those young women

draped in white who knew only too well what fate would await them should the city fall, of those courageous mothers clasping their wailing infants to their breasts, of those old men old enough to remember the horrors of the previous conflict.

It was there that I understood that for us Andalusis, war was not merely a chivalric duel between men dressed as for a parade and eager to prove their heroism and their boldness, as I had always imagined it while watching my father ride out on campaign. War was a matter of life and death for an entire people, with its rich and its poor, its strong and above all its weak.

Seen from outside, Ubadah gave the impression of an impregnable stronghold. Its walls, which enclosed the entire city, rose to a full twenty-five feet in height at six feet thick. Surmounted by a narrow wall-walk, upon which we crowded to observe the movements in the surrounding country with unease, and by some twenty large octagonal towers projecting outward, they were formed of several layers of rammed earth mixed with straw and lime to reinforce their resistance — a technique that had given them their characteristic ochre colour, also found among our neighbours in the Maghreb.

But fine workmanship is worth nothing without men to defend it, and the volunteer militiamen of Ubadah were scarcely more impressive than those of Bayyāsah. A hundred at most to hold two or three miles of ramparts, most of them were equipped with nothing better than axes, pitchforks, and other implements more suited to tilling the earth and working a craft. Only one man in four or five possessed a sword worthy of the name. There was no doubt

that despite their fervour, these men knew little of war and would be quite incapable of standing up to the armies of the ferocious Alfonso.

Everyone in Ubadah understood this well enough, and so the hopes of the frightened populace rested entirely upon the arrival of survivors from the battle capable of organising a proper defence. But while such survivors did arrive, they came in trickles and in the most pitiful condition. The Andalusi soldiers had all fled toward their respective home regions, and so only men from nearby garrisons — or garrisons already fallen to the enemy — were presenting themselves at Ubadah; those who could stand upright and walk without any form of assistance were the exception.

As for the imperial troops, we would learn later, they had received orders to fall back deeper into the interior and regroup around Caliph al-Nāsir at Jayyān. Strategically, the idea was sound enough: the army had just suffered a memorable rout and could not, in its present state, risk facing Alfonso again without sustaining another thrashing. What remained of their fighting strength had to be preserved for the next engagement. But behind an apparently sound strategic decision taken in the comfort of a ruler's tent there always lie human lives, destinies, fears, and hopes — ours, in this instance. And so, the Caliph had quite simply abandoned us to our own fate.

Through the accounts of the fugitives, the course of the battle of al-'Uqāb was taking shape in our minds with ever greater clarity. Instead of appearing where the Caliph had expected him, advancing from the north, Alfonso's armada had caught our troops off guard by threading

through narrow mountain paths to emerge upon our rear. The Caliph had then apparently lost his composure, triggering a dramatic breakdown in the chain of command. Every survivor described orders that were incoherent, contradictory, or simply absent altogether. The tribunal of war had therefore rendered its verdict very swiftly, and it was irrevocable.

The charge of the enemy chivalry had thrown the first two lines into near-immediate rout — the light cavalry and the infantry, most of whom had gone unpaid and refused to die for so miserly a sovereign. Only the units of the third line had held their ground: there stood those known as the *jund* and the *ansār* — the seven Amazigh tribes that formed the pillar of the regime — as well as the Turkic regiment, the Black Guard, and the Andalusí cavalry units of Ishbīliyyah and Qurtubah, whose vanguard was led by my father. But they were far too few to hold the field and avert disaster, and one final breakthrough by the Knights of Santiago and the Navarrese had reached the very approaches of Caliph al-Nāsir's tent, whereupon he had instantly taken to his heels — not without ordering the cavalry regiments to mount a counter-charge to cover his retreat.

And so my father had sacrificed himself without a second's hesitation to save the wretched life of a man he despised, a coward who had abandoned his soldiers upon the battlefield without so much as a backward glance. Yet he had sworn allegiance to that man, and he could not even conceive of surviving beneath the disgrace of having failed his oath. Thus dies a man of honour. There could scarcely have been a finer illustration of the final words he had left

me as an inheritance on the eve of his departure for the campaign.

By the hour of the *Dhuhr*, it was already over, and the Caliph, leaving behind even his own personal standard, had fled the battlefield with such haste that he had reached Jayyān before sunset, though the city ordinarily lies two full days' march from al-'Uqāb. In the aftermath, the hunt had continued deep into the night, the exultant Christian victors mercilessly slaughtering all the defeated on foot. The crusaders, it was said, had gathered a phenomenal spoil of war, and sixty thousand of our men lay dead upon the surrounding ground. Sixty thousand! That was more than half of all the fighting men that al-Andalus and the Maghreb could put under arms. In Ubadah, despair had now become universal. Everyone had understood well enough that no relief would come, though human nature being what it is, the mood of the discussions swung ceaselessly between irrepressible anguish and unreasonable hope.

I recall distinctly the enthusiasm that seized the crowd when we saw a soldier of the Black Guard appear with his long javelin, his padded turquoise tunic, and his empty quiver slung across his shoulder; but the poor wretch had simply lost his way and was not the advance scout of the Caliph's army we had wished to believe he was. As for me, I spent the day at Ubadah's main gate, hoping to recognise a member of my clan: an uncle, a cousin, and why not — O wild hope of a child! — one of my brothers or even my father. All in vain.

In place of my family, it was the vanguard of the Christian armies that soon took shape on the horizon: first

a few isolated horsemen, then a shapeless mass of men on foot advancing with no apparent form of order, and finally a forest of flags and standards of every kind and every colour surmounting a wall of iron that shimmered with a thousand fires beneath the heavy summer sun. It was the first time I had seen the banner of the Kingdom of Castile: a blazing red standard struck with a golden castle of three towers. Christians are fond of emblems, and every noble family worthy of the name, every city, every guild of craftsmen possesses its own coat of arms emblazoned on its shield according to a system of extreme codification. The flag of red and gold stripes, a boy of my own age told me (he had accompanied his merchant father on his travels into Christian lands) was that of the Catalan princes, while the King of Aragon bore a white cross on an indigo blue field, and his neighbour of Navarre displayed a golden cross in the form of dotted lines on a scarlet red ground. The white pennants struck with a red cross he did not know, but I would soon learn that these were the emblems of the formidable brotherhoods of crusading knights: the orders of Santiago, of Calatrava, and of the Knights Templar.

It was also the first time I saw, in flesh and blood, the *almogavars*, about whom we had heard all manner of legends that our mothers would recount to discourage us from venturing too far from home. These men without faith or law, we had been taught from our earliest years, had chosen to live outside any form of human society. They lived in the wild like savage beasts in the forests and mountains, had neither home nor family, fed themselves on field grass and insects, and would burst without warning upon isolated villages to dishonour the women before

selling them into slavery, hack the men to pieces, and boil the children in cauldrons. These demons in human form were now here by the thousands, before my very eyes, beneath the walls of the city where we had taken refuge, settling themselves a thousand feet from the ramparts — beyond the range of our crossbow bolts — to sleep under the open sky while the regular troops established their encampment further back.

The city's granaries still overflowed with grain and Ubadah had provisions enough to sustain two to three weeks of siege, even with a population multiplied tenfold as was the case here, but that was evidently not what Alfonso and his henchmen had in mind. The loyalty of Christian troops and their many commanders was always uncertain, as was the supplying of forces during a siege, and it seemed plain that the Castilian would want to bring matters to a swift conclusion by launching a rapid and decisive assault.

Another night of dread passed, and the following morning at dawn the horn of the Christian sentinels answered the voice of our *muezzins* to signal the coming of day. We had barely had time to perform our *subh* prayer when the horn rang out again through the Christian camp, this time accompanied by the symphony of the *buisines*, sounding the muster of the troops. Driven by a purely childlike curiosity, I slipped away from my mother's watch to rush to the ramparts and observe the scene, concealing myself behind a battlement.

The Castilian crossbowmen, dressed and equipped more or less like our own, though wearing a kettle hat — a helmet with a rounded cap and a wide, flared brim —

advanced first and loosed several volleys of bolts with a diabolically mechanical speed and precision. Several militiamen collapsed around me almost at once, one struck in the arm, another pierced clean through, and some, stone dead, crashing noisily down upon the crowd massed below. Within the city, a deluge of screaming rose from the streets closest to the walls: crossbow bolts make no distinction between militiaman and infant, soldier and old woman.

And then the hoarse sound of the horn rang out a third time. It was the signal for the assault. Behind the crossbowmen, a swarm of *almogavars* bearing neither cuirass nor armour knelt for a brief prayer before rising and striking the stones of the ground with the tips of their spears, letting out their terrifying war cry, to which the surrounding hills sent back an echo: *Desperta ferro! Desperta!* — “Awake, iron! Awake!” That was the only intelligible phrase I managed to distinguish from their vociferation, for a clamour of primitive cries carried on piercing voices then made these men seem like a mass of raving lunatics. Some brayed and whinnied, others barked like dogs or poured forth oaths interspersed with prayers to God, the Blessed Virgin, and all the saints. The rest of the army showed no sign of advancing. No doubt King Alfonso judged that he had lost enough men at al-‘Uqāb and wished to commit his own regiments only if absolute necessity demanded it. Besides, the *almogavars* lived on plunder alone, and they had to be rewarded for their service in this victorious campaign.

Our few crossbowmen were of no use in stopping the headlong charge of that shapeless mass, and to the cry of “*Deus aia!*” one ladder, then two, then a score were thrown against our walls. The *almogavars* beginning their

climb up the ramparts were now so close to me that I could smell their filth, see their scars, almost reach out and touch them. Being nothing but an unarmed child, I ought to have taken to my heels and fled as far as my legs would carry me, but I must confess that I was paralysed. Then I felt a hand seize me by the arm and drag me with all its strength toward the narrow stairway leading off the wall-walk. It was my mother, who had searched for me desperately through the alleyways of Ubadah until her maternal instinct had led her to where I stood.

Despite their blatant amateurism, our militiamen fought, I believe, with undeniable courage, and overturned several ladders laden with enemy combatants, but they were under constant fire from the crossbowmen and were very quickly overwhelmed by numbers. Soon the enemy had gained a foothold at several points along the ramparts and secured these bridgeheads, and a squad of *almogavars* covering one another with their shields managed to fight their way at lance-point to the gate nearest to us and force it open. The siege was already over.

We saw a forest of pikes appear, from which nothing protected us but the last square of our soldiers — perhaps thirty men who deployed into formation to oppose the enemy with what remained of their strength and their projectiles. This final act of honour bought us enough time to take refuge in the inner courtyard of a house where two wounded soldiers already lay on the ground, surrounded by women of a certain age; a stoic old man stood apart, in the shadows. No doubt these people had had the foresight to evacuate or conceal, by some means or other, the younger members of their household — those who were of most

interest to the slave merchants. The house must have belonged to a wealthy trader, as the fine, well-kept basin, the splendid mosaics of coloured faience tiles, the furniture of the noblest woods skilfully worked, and the scent of orange blossom still clearly discernible all bore witness.

And then the tumult of clashing iron and answering war cries fell silent, and I understood that our militiamen, faithful to their duty, had all breathed their last arms in hand. The mass of the assailants was heard pouring into the alleyways of Ubadah like a pack of famished wolves, and the sounds of battle gave way to the screams of terrified women.

The voices drew closer and closer, speaking a tongue I struggled to follow, though it struck me as more or less familiar: the *almogavars* are most commonly from the Catalan lands, a country to the east of Castile belonging to the crown of Aragon. I would later learn that there were also among them mercenaries from the land of the Franks — the most brutal and immoderate, it was said.

Three thugs suddenly smashed through the heavy carved wooden door and entered the courtyard, their lances levelled at us. They reeked of a nauseating mixture of filth and wine. All three wore short patched tunics stiff with grime, narrow leather hose that clung to their legs, and heavy shoes covered in fur upon which blood mingled with dust; hanging from their belts were a whetstone and a broad-bladed knife with a slightly curved tip. Barely had they burst in when they finished off the two wounded soldiers without so much as a flicker. At the sound of the lance driving mercilessly into their chests, my mother stifled a cry of horror.

The three armed scoundrels then turned toward the man who appeared to be the head of the household and bellowed at him in approximate Arabic: “*Mujawharat! Dhabab!*” Of course. They wanted gold and jewels. The poor old man pointed to a spot with trembling hands and immediately suffered the same fate as our two soldiers, with the sole difference that the crack of his pierced chest was this time accompanied by the sniggering of the band, revealing their toothless jaws. My mother had not lied: these men were indeed monsters in a (thin) disguise of humanity. In less time than it takes to tell, they had already turned the entire house upside down, tipping their precious plunder into the grimy leather satchel in which they also kept their provisions. This was but the first phase of the pillaging, that in which the predators fling themselves upon the most luxurious and easily portable goods. Only afterward would the furniture, the carpets, the provisions, and the more cumbersome articles be seized.

Our three ruffians were apparently so elated by their spoils and so drunk on euphoria that they had forgotten our presence entirely. But as they made toward the door to continue their work of devastation elsewhere, the eyes of one of them came to rest upon my little sister with a lascivious look that left little room for doubt. The man stepped forward to seize her by the arm; my mother tried to place herself between them and plead for mercy in Castilian, but the *almogavar* did not let her finish her sentence and cut her throat with a single swift, precise stroke. He threw out an insult as he went, I believe, and what followed is blurred in my mind; I have retained of it only fixed images, detached, almost weightless.

The blood on my mother's long white robe. Her gaze lost in the void, eyes wide open. My last embrace of her lifeless body, my uncontrollable tears. My father's words echoing in my head. My run through the alleyways to throw myself upon my sister's abductor. *Zahrā'* seizing the moment to escape. The handle of something crashing down upon my skull. And then oblivion.

How long had I remained unconscious? I could not say, but judging by the position of the sun, the day was now drawing to a close. I was woken by a hymn in Latin: the victors had struck up a thunderous *Te Deum* to give thanks to the one they held as their lord — Christ — for having granted them success. I was lying in a cart covered with straw, outside the walls of Ubadah, wrists and ankles bound with rope pulled so tight that I had the sensation they were broken. I was surrounded by a dozen or so children of all ages who nevertheless seemed to share one common characteristic: the richness of their dress. In front of us, a man stood guard while singing at the top of his voice. Encased in iron from helm to spurs, one could make out nothing of him but his grey-blue eyes. His arms and his attire resembled those of my father, save that his tunic and cape, entirely white, were emblazoned with a striking stylised red cross in the shape of a sword. He was a knight of Santiago, as I would soon learn.

Around us, the chaos was no more. As far as the eye could see, the plain separating the city from the Christian camp had filled with clusters of women and children, most of them chained to one another by the neck in interminable lines. They were no longer human beings, but scarcely more than beasts of burden to whom a few scraps of bread would

be thrown along the way to keep them alive until their destination. Carts buckling under the weight of goods of every kind, overflowing with sacks of provisions, fabrics and tools, clothing and furniture, completed this sorry landscape. Fair Ubadah had been stripped to its bones.

Of adult men, I could discern almost none among the captives. No doubt they had all perished: the young, because they had borne arms and fought to the death, and the old, because they would have held no value on the slave markets of the North and had therefore been coldly murdered, like the old merchant I had watched breathe his last before my eyes. Only those arms capable of serving, of tilling the earth, of raising fortifications could hope to be spared — and what a wretched life awaited them! Such is the sordid law of war.

A strange atmosphere settled over the scene once the singing had ended, the sobbing of women torn from their loved ones mingling with the laughter and raised voices of soldiers well into their cups and the cacophony of the herds of cattle, goats, and sheep plundered from the surrounding countryside. I recognised no face among my companions in misfortune. I was alone, desperately alone. My brother and sister had vanished in the tumult and I secretly hoped they had managed to escape, and so I did not wish to draw attention to them by asking after them.

While the squires and a whole crowd of servants set about breaking down the Christian camp in great haste, several dozen men armed with torches advanced to give the city over to the flames and reduce the surrounding fields to ashes — a message of what awaited the rest of our land. A few Castilian units would remain behind to pull down the

fortifications to their very foundations. King Alfonso had apparently decided not to press his luck any further and to bring his campaign to a close while he could still boast an undisputable victory: we were taking the road north.

Under the insults and whip-cracks of the Castilian militiamen acting as overseers, tens of thousands of captives set off on their painful march. Why was I not among them? Who would give my mother's bruised and charred body a dignified burial? What fate awaited me over there, on the other side of the frontier, in Castile? Were Zahrā' and Yahyā even still alive? As these questions piled up in my mind unanswered, I felt rising within me a mingling of shame, sorrow, and rage. Shame and sorrow, because I had lamentably failed to honour the promise made to my father and to protect those I loved. And rage, because that was, in any normally constituted human being, the only feeling that the sight of our people being led into servitude could provoke, driven like a flock of sheep to the slaughterhouse, that whole multitude of resigned, broken, prostrate souls, their eyes extinguished, obeying their gaolers' orders without showing the least sign of revolt, the smallest spark of life.

Perhaps I have rationalised it after the fact; but it was there, I believe, in the prisoner columns of Ubadah, that the flame of defiance which animated me throughout my life rose from the deepest part of my being.

I was eight years old, and I had just lost, one after another, my family, my home, and my freedom. But the true prisoner is, in the end, only he who wallows in his enslavement and loses even the memory that a world exists beyond his gaol — physical or mental. If Allah had visited

this ordeal upon me, it was because I was capable of overcoming it; if He had allowed me to live, it was because He judged that I could still serve His cause. Such was the thought — and many others besides — that accompanied me as the smouldering ruins of Ubadah faded on the horizon in the rosy glow of dusk, and the men of the red cross carried me toward unknown skies.