Ibn Baṭṭūṭah

A World-Hopping Saga

Chapters 1-20

noorVerse

Chapter 1

The Strait of Beginnings

Of my own birth I remember nothing. A man does not step into the world with his eyes open, taking notes. He is tossed into it like a coin into a bowl, and only later does he learn what kind of metal he is supposed to be.

Tangier remembers for you. The city keeps your first breath in its salt. It keeps it in the gulls' screaming arcs and in the wind that never tires of testing doors and cloaks. Even now, after the long wandering, I can close my eyes and feel that wind worrying at the hem of my robe as if to ask, again, why I ever believed I could remain.

My mother used to say I was born on a cold night when the water in the harbor looked like dark iron. She said the midwife's hands were sure, and that my father recited the call to prayer close to my ear so that the first words I heard were the words that order a life: God is greater. Then she would smile, as if conceding defeat to my nature, and add, "Your fist closed around his finger like a traveler taking hold of a staff."

Perhaps she embroidered the tale. Mothers do. But it fits me well enough, and so I keep it.

I was born into a house where words were weighed.

My people were of the Lawata, Berbers whose speech had long been braided with Arabic. In Tangier a boy could cross one street and hear three accents. He could walk from fish sellers rinsing scales in seawater to perfumers crushing rose and myrtle, and believe the whole world was gathered in a handful of alleys. Beyond our walls the hills of the Rif rose green and steep; beyond the harbor the Strait narrowed toward al-Andalus, and on clear days the far shore lay like a bruise on the horizon. Ships passed through that narrow water as if slipping between two blades.

As a child I watched those ships as other boys watched horses.

Men came and went - merchants, sailors, pilgrims returning from the east with dust in their beards and light in their eyes. Sometimes Frankish vessels showed their tall sides and strange rigging, and the elders in the mosque would look away as if the sight itself were a test. Tangier sat on a threshold,

and thresholds breed longing.

My father was trained in Maliki law, and so were the men of my family. Ink and paper were as common in our house as oil and bread. When my father sat to read, his posture was almost prayer. Men came to our courtyard carrying disputes like burdens: a debt denied, a boundary stone shifted by night, a marriage soured, an inheritance pulled apart like cloth. My father listened until the quarrel exhausted itself, then spoke a sentence or two that made the law sound as unavoidable as weather.

On Thursdays he took me to the qadi’s court at the mosque. I learned early that justice, in the hands of ordinary men, is not a blade but a craft. I watched a merchant attempt to press a gift into my father’s palm, dates still warm from the sun. My father refused with the same calm he used for verdicts. “Keep them,” he said. “I have eaten.” The merchant’s face tightened in disbelief, and I understood, even as a boy, how rare the straight road is.

At home my mother corrected my recitation and my manners with equal firmness. “The tongue is a limb,” she said. “Train it.” She carried the Qur’an in her voice, and the stories of the Prophet - peace be upon him - in her memory. When she spoke of Medina her eyes softened, as if she were speaking of a relative’s home. Sometimes, when the wind rose at night and rattled the shutters, she told me of caravans crossing a desert under a sky so crowded with stars that darkness could not breathe.

In the mornings I went to the kuttab with other boys, slates under our arms, hair still damp from ablution. We chanted until our throats were raw. We traced letters until our fingers cramped. When a boy stumbled, the teacher’s cane corrected him - not from cruelty, but from conviction. A verse misread was a door misopened.

I learned quickly. The Qur’an was a map whose lines did not move. The law was a net thrown over the chaos of appetite and anger. If you knew it well enough, perhaps you could keep yourself from being dragged out into deeper water.

And yet, even then, the sea called.

It called in restlessness. When I sat in the mosque with books open before me, my mind slid eastward along the coast. When I heard a man speak with the accent of Tunis or Tlemcen, I listened as if he were reading from a precious text. I told myself it was scholarly hunger: knowledge of lands and

customs would make a jurist wiser. I told myself it was piety: to see the House of God, to pray in the Prophet’s mosque. Both were true. But there was another truth, harder to admit: I wanted my name to be worn smooth by travel.

When I came into my majority, my father began to speak of my future as if it were already written. Study in Fez, perhaps. A post, in time. Marriage. My mother began to weigh girls in the market with a discreet, careful gaze, as if choosing fruit. I laughed, and felt something tighten behind the laughter.

Then, near the end of Sha‘ban, pilgrims returned to Tangier from the Hajj.

Word ran through the city like fire. Men hurried to the mosque courtyard to greet them, to ask after the roads and the scholars of Cairo and Damascus. My father went, and he took me. The pilgrims looked like any travelers at first glance - lean, dusty, patched. But when one began to speak of the Ka‘ba, the crowd leaned in as if toward water in the desert.

He described the House draped in black, the flood of bodies circling it as if drawn by a hidden current. He spoke of Zamzam cooling the tongue, and of Medina’s hush settling on the heart like a hand. He spoke of the road: bandits and bargains, sickness and mercy, nights when the stars seemed close enough to touch.

As he spoke, something inside me answered. Not like a thought. Like a drumbeat.

“I want to go,” I said to my father when the crowd began to thin.

He looked at me for a long moment. In his gaze I felt our whole house behind me - books, duties, graves. Then he said softly, “Many want. Few go.”

“I will go,” I said, and heard my own arrogance even as I spoke.

He did not raise his voice. “The Hajj is an obligation for those who are able,” he said. “Ability is not only coin. It is strength and sense.”

“I have both,” I insisted.

“You have youth,” he replied. “That is not the same.”

That night sleep would not come. The wind worried at the shutters. I lay on my mat and watched darkness, and my mind ran eastward like a man fleeing. In the deepest part of night I dreamed of a road that was also a river,

black and silent. A light burned on the far bank. A hand gripped my shoulder and a voice said, “Walk.” I woke with dust on my tongue though I had not left my room.

After maghrib prayer two evenings later, my father called me to him. A lamp burned low beside him, throwing his face into sharp planes. He held a folded letter.

“I have written to a colleague in Fez,” he said. “If you reach that city, show him this. It may ease your road.”

A letter was more than ink. It was a rope thrown across distance. I took it with both hands.

My mother entered carrying a bundle of cloth. She set it down beside me and unfolded it: a heavier wool cloak, sandals with new straps, a small sewn pouch for coins. She had been preparing while I pretended not to tremble.

“Mother,” I began.

She lifted a hand. “Do not speak as if words will make it lighter,” she said. “If you go, go with God’s name on your tongue. Do not go with mine.”

“Pray for me,” I managed.

“I will pray,” she said. “Prayer is the one thing a mother gives without being asked.”

My father’s voice was quiet, but it left no room for pride. “Travel with others when you can,” he said. “If you find a group, join it. If you find a man wiser than you, listen.”

I nodded, while some stubborn part of me still wanted solitude as proof of sincerity.

Two days later - a Thursday - I rose before dawn. The city lay dark and cold, the air sharp enough to sting the lungs. I washed and prayed, my hands shaking not from chill but from the knowledge that every movement was a farewell. My mother stood in her doorway with her shawl pulled tight. My father sat on his mat with prayer beads sliding through his fingers.

I kissed my mother’s hand. Her skin smelled faintly of bread dough. I pressed my forehead to my father’s hand. His grip closed around mine, hard enough to hurt.

“Go,” he said.

Outside, Tangier breathed quietly. The sea murmured beyond the walls like a sleeping animal. I walked through alleys I knew by heart, yet every corner looked altered, as if the city had shifted while I was not looking. At the mosque I prayed again, not from obligation but because my chest felt too small for my heart. I asked God for guidance, protection, knowledge, a safe return - and even as I asked, a small voice whispered that return was a word whose meaning I did not yet understand.

When the first light bled into the sky, I left by the eastern gate.

The road climbs quickly, rising from salt into earth. Olive leaves held beads of water that flashed when the sun touched them. Behind me Tangier’s white walls caught the dawn and glowed like bone; beyond them the Strait lay pale and still. I did not look back again. I told myself it was courage. In truth it was fear: if I saw my mother’s doorway one more time, my feet might forget their purpose.

For hours I met only shepherds and boys driving donkeys. A lone traveler is common on any road. No one cares about your intention. By midday my legs ached in ways study never teaches. I stopped beneath a carob tree to eat flatbread and olives. The bread was stale, but it tasted like freedom.

A shadow fell across me. I looked up, my hand going to the small knife at my belt.

A young man stood there with a mule on a rope, firewood tied to its back. His skin was browned by sun, his eyes direct. “Peace be on you,” he said.

“And on you peace,” I replied.

He glanced at my food. “You eat like a man making a vow,” he said. “Where are you going?”

“To Mecca,” I answered, and felt foolish the moment the word left my mouth, as if I had announced I meant to walk to the moon.

He did not laugh. He nodded once. “Then you are going east,” he said simply. “My name is Yusuf - from the Rif. I am going as far as the shrine of Sidi Bu Shuʿayb. There is a khan there where travelers sleep.”

“I am Muḥammad,” I said, and added, “the son of ʿAbd Allah.”

Yusuf’s brows lifted. “A scholar’s name,” he said. “Do you travel alone?”

“For now,” I said.

He snorted, not mocking, only certain. “The road has teeth,” he said. “Come. If you walk alone, you will walk with your own thoughts, and they will exhaust you faster than these hills.”

My father’s counsel returned like a hand between my shoulders, pushing. I rose, fell into step beside Yusuf, and let my pride swallow itself.

As we walked, Yusuf spoke of practical things: which fork led to safer ground, where a spring ran thin in summer, which ridges were watched by men who preferred stolen coin to honest labor. He pointed once at a distant line of smoke. “Sometimes they burn brush to force travelers into a narrow pass,” he said, as calmly as if describing weather. “Keep your eyes open.”

Near evening we saw the shrine’s white dome on a rise and, below it, the low buildings of a khan and stable. Smoke rose from a cooking fire; the smell of lentils and onion tightened my stomach. A dozen travelers were already there with pack animals and bundles. Some wore the patched cloaks of pilgrims. An old man with prayer beads looked at me and said, “Young faqih?” in a tone that was half hope and half challenge.

“I have studied,” I answered.

He nodded as if the road had claimed me. “Then you will travel far,” he said.

At sunset we prayed on hard earth, facing east. The imam was simply the man with the clearest recitation. His voice rose into the cooling air, and for a moment the road itself felt like a prayer line, each of us drawn toward the same direction.

Afterward we ate from a common pot, tearing bread and dipping it into lentils. Men spoke of the stages ahead: of Tlemcen and its markets, of passes where robbers watched, of the larger caravans in the Hafsid lands. I listened more than I spoke, learning the pilgrim’s first economy: you trade stories for warning, and warning for life.

Later, as bedding was unrolled and bundles stacked, a shout rose near the stable. A traveler held up an empty purse, shaking it as if it were a dead thing. Accusations flared. The khan’s keeper spread his hands and said, “This

is a khan, not a fortress.” Suspicion jumped from face to face like fire.

An older pilgrim stepped between them. “Enough,” he said. “We do not spill blood on the first night.”

The argument cooled, but the air stayed sharp. Yusuf leaned close to my ear. “Keep your bundle under your head when you sleep,” he murmured. “In the city, theft goes to the court. On the road, it goes to the knife.”

I lay down on a thin mat, my bundle beneath my head, the ground hard under my shoulder blades. Sleep came in fragments. In the darkness I heard whispers about a small caravan leaving at dawn, and about a narrow pass ahead where travelers had been robbed. Every word ended in the same place: risk.

I thought of my father’s lamp and my mother’s hands. I thought of the Ka‘ba and of Medina’s hush. The distance between those holy images and this gritty floor felt suddenly enormous.

Just before dawn, Yusuf nudged my shoulder. “Get up,” he whispered. “They are gathering.”

Men moved like shadows, tying ropes, murmuring prayers. Outside, the horizon was a thin gray line. In the doorway the road fell away into darkness, eastward, unseen. Behind me, in my mind, Tangier waited with its walls and its sea and its unbearable tenderness.

Two worlds. One body.

“Are you coming?” Yusuf asked. I pulled my cloak tighter, rose, and stepped into the cold. “Yes,” I said. And when the first light touched the shrine’s white dome, we took our places among the others and walked toward whatever God had written beyond the hills.

Chapter 2

The Road Has Teeth

Dawn did not arrive like a blessing. It arrived like a verdict.

We left the khan beneath the saint’s white dome while the sky was still the color of ash. Men moved with the hushed speed of people who have learned that noise attracts trouble. Ropes creaked. A mule stamped once, its breath a small cloud. Behind us the last coals of last night’s fire collapsed into themselves.

I tried not to look back. Tangier was not behind me in distance alone - it was behind me in habit. My feet wanted the familiar stones of our lane, my hands wanted my father’s shelves of books. But the road, once it takes you, makes a different argument, and it does not stop arguing until you either return or become its creature.

Yusuf walked on my left, his rope coiled on his forearm, his cloak tucked up as if he expected to run.

“You dreamed badly,” he said.

“I slept badly,” I answered.

He nodded, as if the difference would fade with miles.

The caravan was small: merchants with pack animals, three pilgrims besides myself, and a couple of men bound for a shrine further east. The older pilgrim murmured verses under his breath as if he meant to wrap us in them. The youngest kept his hand too often on his knife.

When we came to the narrow pass that had been whispered about in the dark, the company tightened. We stopped speaking. Even the mule seemed to know. It lowered its head and picked its way as if the stones themselves were traps.

At the mouth of the pass, Yusuf bent and touched the earth, then brought his fingers to his lips.

“A habit from my mother,” he said quietly.

“I thought you said the road has teeth,” I murmured.

He flashed a grin without humor. “Teeth need ears. How else do they know where to bite?”

We went in.

The rocks pressed close. The air smelled of damp stone. Halfway through, we found what last week’s robbers had left behind: a strip of cloth snagged on a thorn, dark with old blood, and the broken hoop of a water-skin.

No men sprang out. No blades flashed. When we emerged into open light again, I realized my shoulders had climbed up near my ears. I let them drop with a breath that felt like surrender.

“The pass takes a tax,” Yusuf said. “Sometimes it is blood. Sometimes it is fear.”

Days became a string of the same beads: rising, walking, praying, eating, walking again. Hills softened into plains; the sea appeared, vanished, returned. At night we slept with our bundles under our heads and our hearts half awake. In Tangier a theft was a matter for a qadi and a witness. Here, it was a matter for whoever woke first.

When the wind began to carry more dust than salt, we entered the lands where cities stand farther apart and the men between them grow bold.

It was in those days that I first saw Tlemcen.

The city rose out of late-afternoon light, its walls the color of baked earth, its minarets sharp against the sky. We entered with the crowd at the gate: farmers with baskets, soldiers with dusty boots, boys herding reluctant goats. Inside, the air was thick with cumin and smoke. Here the Maghrib became what Tangier had only promised: a crossroads.

In the khan where we found lodging, two men arrived whose presence changed the room. One was older, broad-shouldered, his robe cut well; the other younger, scholarly in his bearing. Men rose. Voices softened. Someone hurried to offer water.

A pilgrim near me whispered, “Envoys from the ruler of Ifriqiya. They return east with letters and protection.”

Protection. Company. A road that did not depend on my own small strength.

Yusuf watched them and then watched me. “You are looking at them like a starving man looks at a pot,” he said.

“I am looking at them like a traveler looks at safety,” I replied.

“Safety is a fee,” Yusuf said. “If they accept you, you will pay it in obedience.”

That night I lay awake and argued with myself. My intention was pure: the pilgrimage, the tomb in Medina, the House in Mecca. Yet I could feel, like a second pulse, another desire: to walk where learned men walked, to arrive in lands where my name might matter beyond Tangier.

When a choice is heavy, we consult God not by bargaining but by seeking a direction. Before dawn I rose, prayed, and recited the prayer of guidance. I waited, half hoping for a dream, half fearing one. None came. At last I opened my Qur’an as my mother had done when my father faced a difficult verdict, letting my eyes fall where they would. The verse I found spoke of setting out and trusting. Whether it was permission or warning, I took it as enough; to hesitate longer would only be another form of choosing.

Then I approached the elder envoy and greeted him with the courtesy due to a man of learning.

“You travel east?” he asked, taking in the dust on my hems and the youth of my face.

“To the House of God,” I said. “And to seek knowledge where it is found.”

Something in him softened. “Then you are our brother in intention,” he said. “We leave today.”

“I will stay three nights to procure what I need,” I answered, speaking as if certainty were a garment I could put on.

Yusuf, when I told him, only said, “Then buy what your pride forgot.”

For three nights I moved through Tlemcen’s market with Yusuf at my shoulder, purchasing what keeps a man alive: dates, a second water-skin, cloth for binding wounds, a cheap leather pouch to wear under my robe so coin would not sing when I walked. Yusuf showed me how to tie knots so they looked simple but resisted quick fingers. I walked past books and made myself keep walking. My father’s library was behind me; if I carried all of it, I

would not carry myself.

On the fourth morning I left at full speed, riding after the envoys as if the road itself were chasing them.

We overtook them at Miliana, a town set in a valley where the summer heat sat like a weight. The judge traveling with the shaykh - the one called al-Nafzawi - and the pious shaykh al-Zubaidi were both weakened by travel and season. Within days, illness took them hard. We stopped in Miliana for ten nights.

Ten nights in a town is a small life. You learn the taste of the water. You learn which call to prayer carries farthest. You learn how easily the body betrays the mind.

When we left, the judge’s sickness worsened. We halted again by a stream a few miles outside Miliana. Reeds grew thick along the bank; insects whined in the evening air. The judge lay on a mat, his breathing shallow. His son, Abu’l-Tayyib, sat beside him with a face turned rigid by fear.

At midmorning on the fourth day, the judge exhaled and did not draw breath again.

The shaykh whispered a prayer. Abu’l-Tayyib made a sound that was not a word and then began to give orders with the sudden authority of grief. Men dug. Water was heated. The body was washed and shrouded. I found myself reciting the funeral prayer with a throat that tightened halfway through. I had learned the rules; rules do not teach you how it feels when soil strikes cloth.

When it was done, Abu’l-Tayyib and the shaykh returned to Miliana to bury the judge among people who knew his name.

I stood at the edge of the road with Yusuf and watched them go.

“You will wait?” Yusuf asked.

“No,” I said. My voice sounded harder than I meant. “Their grief is not my path.”

“The road does not pause for mourning,” Yusuf replied, not unkindly, as if stating a law older than any book.

I pursued my journey with a company of merchants from Tunis, men whose generosity was also calculation: a larger group survives more often than a smaller one. We reached Algiers and camped outside its walls for some days, waiting for the shaykh and Abu’l-Tayyib to rejoin us. From our tents I could see the curve of the bay and the white teeth of waves. The sea was there again, reminding me it had more than one road.

When the shaykh returned, we set out across the Mitija and into the Mountain of Oaks, where the road narrowed and climbed beneath dark branches. The oaks stood thick and twisted, their leaves whispering like a crowd. Now and then we passed men in the hills whose faces were unreadable - neither greeting nor threat, only watching. The merchants urged speed. Every pause felt like an invitation to someone else’s hunger.

At last we descended to Bougie, a town stepping down toward the sea, its harbor crowded with ships. The smell of tar and fish pressed close. Inside its walls, I saw my first clear lesson in the difference between law and power.

A merchant in our company had died, leaving a fortune in gold entrusted to a man in Algiers to deliver to the heirs in Tunis. The governor of Bougie, a man called Ibn Sayyid al-Nas, seized it from the custodian when he heard of it. The merchants spoke of it in low voices, their anger held back by caution.

“It is theft,” I said, before I could stop myself.

A merchant looked at me as if I were a boy shouting in a mosque. “It is authority,” he answered. “Do not confuse the two.”

Yusuf’s hand caught my sleeve. “Not here,” he murmured.

Not here. Not in a city where a governor’s men carried swords and a jurist’s outrage could be answered with a beating.

Then fever came for me.

It began as a chill despite the heat and rose into my head until even sunlight seemed loud. The shaykh advised me to remain in Bougie until I recovered.

“I did not leave Tangier to die in a bed,” I insisted, because pride spoke before wisdom. “If death comes, let it find me on the road, facing the Hijaz.”

The shaykh studied me. “Then travel light,” he said. “Sell what drags you down.”

With Yusuf’s help I sold my ass and the heaviest of my baggage. The market in Bougie smelled of sweat and animal dung and crushed mint. Men prodded my bundles as if weighing my life. When the donkey was led away, its ears flicking back once as if in complaint, I felt a ridiculous grief. It had carried my weakness without judgment. I kept my Qur’an, my prayer beads, and the barest necessities. The shaykh lent me another animal and a tent, saying it was better to be in debt to a pious man than dead with one’s own property.

We left Bougie with urgency, for beyond the city walls the road belonged to men who did not care for travelers’ intentions.

In Constantine we halted outside the town and were caught by heavy rain. It fell in sheets, turning earth to mud, soaking cloaks, making tents sag. In the night we abandoned them for shelter in nearby buildings, huddling like animals.

In the morning the governor of Constantine - a sharif named Abu’l-Hasan - came out to meet us. Seeing my clothes soiled by rain and my mantle torn, he ordered they be washed in his house, and he sent me a mantle of fine cloth in their place. In one corner, two gold dinars were knotted, hidden like a secret.

I held the gift and felt my throat tighten, not with fever now but with shame and gratitude braided together. This was the first charity given to me on the road without bargaining.

From Constantine we went to Bouna and lodged within its walls for some days. Then we left the merchants there because of the dangers ahead and traveled light and fast, pushing on night and day without stopping.

The fever returned with cruel faithfulness. My strength drained until I feared I would slide from the saddle and be trampled before anyone could stop. So I took my turban-cloth and tied myself to the saddle, and rode on, my head lolling, my mouth tasting of bile and dust.

Yusuf rode near enough that his knee sometimes brushed mine. “Do not sleep,” he said again and again. “If you sleep, you fall.”

At last we reached Tunis.

The city’s walls rose pale in the light and the sea beyond lay flat as hammered metal. Townsfolk came out to welcome the shaykh and Abu’l-Tayyib, for their names were known. Greetings flew from mouth to mouth. Men embraced. Laughter broke out, bright as water.

No one greeted me.

I stood among them, dust-caked and fever-stained, and understood with sudden clarity what it meant to be a stranger: not that you are unknown, but that your exhaustion is invisible. Tears rose, humiliating and unexpected. I wept there on the road outside Tunis as if I were a boy again.

Someone touched my arm.

An older pilgrim with kind eyes greeted me with the simple words that open a door. He spoke as if he had looked at my face and seen the foreignness in it. He asked my name, my origin, my intention, and his voice steadied me more than any medicine. When he learned I was from Tangier, he smiled as if that far western city were a story he loved.

We entered Tunis.

Within the city, streets twisted through shade and sunlight. Shops spilled their goods into the lanes: cloth, copper, spices - and books, bound in leather. I smelled ink, oil, and the sour sweetness of figs. I heard accents that carried traces of al-Andalus, as if the west had followed me here in another form.

The pilgrim who had greeted me pointed me toward a college where travelers lodged, a place tied to booksellers, where the sound of page and pen was as common as the sound of prayer.

Books. Even in fever, that word pulled at me like a rope.

I found a cell and lay down. Yusuf sat in the doorway, his knife across his knees, as if the city were merely another pass. After a while he said, almost reluctantly, “This is where I turn back. There is work here, and I have kin who will not ask why a man’s purse is light.”

“You will leave me,” I said.

“I found you on a road,” he replied. “I am not your shadow.”

Outside, Tunis hummed with a life that did not know my name. Somewhere men laughed. Somewhere a caravan-master shouted orders, and

the word “east” moved through the air like a scent.

In the courtyard below, voices rose - one in the rough Maghribi I knew, another with the softened cadence of al-Andalus. I lifted my head.

A woman’s voice, clear and guarded, said, “If you leave with them, leave with water - and with someone who will not abandon you.”

I could not see her from my cell, only hear the edge of her warning.

Yusuf’s gaze sharpened, following my attention. “You are listening like a man who has already chosen,” he said.

I lay back, my new mantle folded beside me, the two gold dinars hidden in its corner like a promise, and felt the pull of the caravan assembling beyond Tunis’s walls.

The road had brought me this far. Now it asked me whether I would dare the next mouthful.

Chapter 3

The Feast of Strangers

Loneliness has a sound: it is the sound of greetings meant for someone else.

At the gate of Tunis the townsfolk poured out like a tide, and all the waves broke on other names. They embraced Shaykh al-Zubaidi, and they pressed close to Abu'l-Tayyib, the son of the qadi who had died on the road. Questions rose, hands clasped, laughter rang. I sat on my saddle, fever still burning behind my eyes, tied in place with a strip of cloth so I would not slide to the ground.

Not a soul greeted me, for I knew none of them.

I told myself a stranger should expect nothing. Then my pride failed. Tears started and I could not stop them. I wept there in the street, ashamed of my weakness and even more ashamed that I cared.

One of the pilgrims - may God repay him - saw what the others did not. He came to me with the greeting of peace and spoke as we entered the city, steadying my spirit with friendly talk until the walls were behind us. I have forgotten his name. I have not forgotten that he treated a stranger as a brother for the length of a few steps, and those steps mattered.

They lodged me in the college of the Booksellers. Its courtyard was plain, but the air was thick with ink, paper-dust, and leather. Students moved with boards and tablets under their arms. A copyist bent over a page, reed pen scratching, his hand stained black as if he had been branded by words. When I first lay down in the cell they gave me, I heard pages turning somewhere below, and the sound felt like a rope thrown across water. Even in fever, that rope held.

Yusuf sat in my doorway the first night, knife across his knees, watching the city as if it were another mountain pass.

"This is where I turn back," he said at last. "There is work here. I have kin in Ifriqiya who will not ask why a man returns with a thin purse."

"You will leave me," I said.

"I found you on a road," he answered. "I am not your shadow."

For two days I could argue with no one, not even myself. Fever took what it wanted. Then it loosened its grip, and I began to walk again, unsteady but hungry for the world beyond my cell.

In those first walks through the city I heard not only the rough Maghribi speech of my own lands but also the softer tones of Andalusis who had crossed the sea before me. Tunis held merchants and jurists, sailors and craftsmen, and it held exiles. Under the Hafsid rule its markets were crowded with goods and with stories, and a man could feel, in a single afternoon, both the wealth of the city and the unease that comes from living under the gaze of power.

Tunis is not a town that lets a traveler pretend he is only passing through. Its streets pull you toward the markets and then toward the mosque, and from the mosque toward the circles of teaching that sit like islands under the shade of columns. I went to the great mosque they call the Mosque of the Olive. It was a forest of stone and voices: boys reciting, men disputing, teachers speaking as if the law were a living thing that could be fed.

After a Friday service I saw a jurist seat himself with his back against a column, and people came to him with their questions as if his lap were a court. He listened, asked, decided. It was said that when forty questions had been answered, he ended the session. Watching him, I felt the old hunger return - not for bread, but for the right to speak with that kind of certainty.

They told me the chief qadi of the town was Ibn al-Ghammaz, a man whose family had come from Valencia, and that Tunis had preachers and jurists whose names were recited with the same respect men gave to soldiers. One preacher, Abu Ishaq al-Rib'i, was spoken of as a man who had served under more than one reign; another jurist, Abu Ali Omar al-Qaddah al-Hawari, was praised for the firmness of his learning. I did not seek to meet such men - I was too new, too poor, too uncertain - but to hear their names in the mouths of students was enough to remind me that I had stepped into a city where scholarship was not an ornament. It was a pillar.

"Knowledge does not stop a knife," Yusuf muttered beside me.

"No," I said. "But it tells you what to do when the knife has cut."

He grunted, unconvinced, and yet he did not leave me then. Perhaps even a muleteer can feel the pull of a city where learning is worn like a garment.

In the college courtyard, between lessons and prayers, I heard again the voice that had risen the night Yusuf announced his departure - a woman's voice with the softened cadence of al-Andalus.

"If you leave with them," she said, "leave with water - and with someone who will not abandon you."

This time I went down into the courtyard instead of listening from above like a coward. A party of travelers stood near the well, their speech carrying traces of Spain, their faces marked by the quiet vigilance of people who have already been uprooted once. Women stood a little apart, veiled, but not invisible; children hovered close to them like birds near shelter.

The woman who had spoken crushed dried leaves between her fingers and tipped them into a boy's cup. He coughed, and she spoke to him with the brisk tenderness of someone who has learned that pity alone does not heal.

A grey-bearded man of their party noticed me. "You are the young jurist from the Maghrib," he said, as if naming me placed me in a drawer.

"I am a pilgrim," I replied. "And a student of law."

He nodded. "This is Maryam, daughter of Faraj," he said, and Maryam lifted her eyes at last.

They were the color of wet earth. Guarded, not cold.

"Peace be upon you," I said.

"And upon you peace," she answered. "Do not mistake speech for intimacy, jurist. I speak because silence kills faster on the road than gossip."

"You warned me about water," I said.

"Because men die of thirst and then claim God chose it," she replied. "Fill your skins. Count them. And choose your company with the same care."

"Why do you go east?" I asked, before sense could stop my tongue.

Her fingers stilled for a breath. Then she said, "To finish what we began," and gave me nothing more. In that small refusal I learned what sort of traveler she was: one who rationed truth as carefully as water.

The feast of the Fast-breaking overtook us while I was still in Tunis. The month of Ramadan had sharpened prayers and tempers alike, and when it

ended the city rushed into joy with a kind of relief that felt like laughter after illness. People put on new clothes. Sweet smells rose from ovens. Even the beggars seemed to stand straighter.

We went out to the praying-ground beyond the walls, the musalla, under open sky. The crowd assembled in brave show, rich and poor together, and for a moment I felt again that pinch of being surrounded and unclaimed. Men found their brothers, their cousins, their pegs in the earth. I stood like a post in a field.

Then the sultan Abu Yahya arrived on horseback, and the whole space changed. Guards and courtiers and relatives moved with him in a magnificent procession. I saw no more than the shape of power, but even that was enough: his name would be spoken in the khutba, prayed for by thousands, and the city would turn on his will like a wheel on an axle.

The prayers were recited. The sermon was delivered. The people rose and scattered into greetings as if affection had been held back by the prayer itself.

A hand touched my sleeve. It was the grey-bearded Andalusi. "Do not stand alone on a feast day," he said.

So I greeted with them. Maryam's words were proper, her gaze brief, but I felt the difference like warmth. To be acknowledged is not the same as to be loved, yet a stranger learns to value small mercies.

Not long after, the caravan for the noble Hijaz began to take shape. In Tunis a caravan is built by argument: who leads, who guards, who pays, who prays. The name of the Hijaz moved through courtyards and markets like a scent, drawing men out of workshops and alleys. Water skins were patched. Saddles were mended. Dried dates were bought and tied in bundles.

The shaikh of the caravan was named Abu Ya'qub al-Susi, a man of Ifriqiya with a sharp eye and a voice that could cut through noise. Most of the party were Masmuda, men whose speech leaned toward mine, and they put me forward as qadi of their company.

I hesitated. Youth is not a shield on the road; it is a target.

"You are learned," one of them said. "And you are not of our clans. You will not lean toward your cousin."

It was praise and warning in one breath. I thought of my father's pauses before judgment, as if listening for God between the lines.

"I accept," I said, and felt the words settle on my shoulders like a cloak that might also be a burden.

We left Tunis in the last days of the month before pilgrimage, when the heat had broken but the rains were beginning to make the earth heavy. At dawn the caravan moved out like a long animal waking: scouts, pack beasts, men, then women and children sheltered between loads. The minaret of the Mosque of the Olive shrank behind us until it was no more than a pale finger pointing back toward learning.

Yusuf walked with me for the first mile. He carried his rope and knife and nothing else, already cut free.

At the place where the road forked - westward back into the Maghrib, eastward along the sea - he stopped.

"Do not let your piety make you careless," he said quietly. "Men can smell gold even when it is hidden."

"It is only two dinars," I said.

"It is enough," he answered.

Then, without looking me in the eyes, he held out the small leather charm his mother had sewn for him. I had mocked it once, and he had not forgotten. Now he offered it like a rough sort of blessing.

"I do not say it will save you," he said. "Only that it will remind you someone once thought of your skin."

I took it. The leather was warm from his palm.

"May God return you to your people," I said.

"And may He return you to yours," he replied, and then he turned and walked away without looking back. The road swallowed him as easily as it had swallowed my old life.

The sea stayed on our left as we followed the coast road, changing color with the sky. On our right the land rolled low with olives and scrub, then flattened into salt and wet earth. The air tasted of brine. Birds wheeled over

the shore.

We reached Sousse, small but pretty, built on the seashore. We watered animals, repaired straps, prayed, and moved on. A caravan fears lingering early; it is too easy to turn back while the walls of home are still close enough to imagine.

Sfax came next, its walls rising out of the plain. Outside the town lay the grave of Abu'l-Hasan al-Lakhmi, the Maliki jurist whose book was known far beyond Ifriqiya. Men of our party went to his tomb as if to a teacher.

I went too. I placed my hand on the earth and asked God for a portion of the dead man's knowledge, if not his certainty. A traveler is always borrowing - bread, shelter, directions. Why not borrow from the righteous as well?

In Sfax I made a contract of marriage with the daughter of one of the syndics of Tunis. Ink and witnesses, lawful words spoken under a grey sky. I had not come east to collect wives like souvenirs, and yet the road presses its own logic on a man: ties can be shelter in a world where your accent marks you as surely as a scar. When it was done, Maryam watched me with an expression I could not read.

Later she said only, "A man ties knots where he can."

"It is lawful," I replied, hearing defensiveness in my own voice.

"So is hunger," she said, and left me with my justifications like stones in my lap.

From Sfax we traveled on to Gabes. Rains came in sheets and turned the road into mud that sucked at hooves and sandals. We lodged inside Gabes, grateful for walls, only to find the rain would not stop. We remained there over ten nights.

Those wet days taught me more about judgment than a clean lecture room ever could. Men quarrel when their clothes stay damp and their tempers rot. I was called again and again to hear disputes over space, over smoke, over whose animal had fouled whose corner. I tried to keep my father's cautions in my head: do not let your own discomfort become a verdict; do not let a loud man steal justice by volume. Sometimes I succeeded. Often I merely survived.

Maryam moved through the camp like someone trained by loss. She had remedies for coughs and fever, bitter brews that made men grimace and

then, grudgingly, breathe easier. She bargained for herbs in the local speech, and when tempers rose she spoke one sharp sentence that made grown men remember their shame.

On the tenth night the rain softened to drizzle. The caravan breathed as if a weight had lifted. Talk turned to the next stretch east, to Tripoli and the open country beyond, where roving Arabs watched slow prey.

Before dawn we left Gabes.

A troop of horsemen arrived to escort us for some stages - a hundred or more, spears upright like reeds. With them came archers, bowstrings kept dry under cloaks. Their presence changed the taste of the morning. Even jokes grew quieter.

Abu Ya'qub walked the line of animals and repeated the orders: stay close, keep your water, do not wander, do not answer a call from the scrub.

The caravan moved.

Behind us Gabes shrank into grey light. Ahead, the land opened into a harshness that made the olive groves of Ifriqiya seem like a dream. The sea was still there, but it felt farther away, as if it too were preparing to abandon us.

Maryam rode within her party, half hidden among loads. When the line tightened and we had to wait, she lifted her eyes and met mine. No promise, no warmth - only the same practical warning she had given in Tunis.

Water. Company.

The horsemen flanked us, hooves thudding like a drum. The archers kept their hands near their quivers. Somewhere out in the scrub, unseen eyes watched.

Then a shout came from the front of the line.

The horsemen slowed. One raised his hand.

And in the distance, where the road bent toward the empty east, a thin cloud of dust began to move against the sky.

Chapter 4

The Flag in Winter

Between Gabes and Tripoli, the land learns to speak with fewer words.

After the scout’s warning, no one slept as if sleep were a right. We lay in our blankets with our knives under our palms, listening to the damp wind tug at the tents and to the horsemen beyond the camp shifting in their saddles. When the call for the dawn prayer came, it sounded thin, as though the sky itself were tired of shouting over so much empty country.

In the grey light we broke our camp and formed again into a moving thing: men, beasts, bundles, children, the old and the stubborn, all stitched together by need. Shaykh Abu Ya'qub rode at the front with the banner-rod strapped to his saddle. The Masmuda men guarded it as if cloth could keep death away. I rode close enough to see the damp fibres of the flag’s edge, heavy with last night’s rain.

For some stages of that journey we were escorted by horsemen - a hundred or more, they said, as if a round number could be a shield. They were not like our pilgrims, who carried their fear in their eyes. These men sat their mounts as if they had been born already mounted, their cloaks thrown back, their faces darkened by sun and salt. They spoke little, but when they looked toward the low hills their gazes were sharp, like blades drawn slowly from a sheath.

Among our own company there was a troop of archers. Their bows had been wrapped against the wet, but they moved with a quiet confidence that changed the air around them. Men who had argued about whose turn it was to fetch water now walked with their shoulders set. Mothers pulled their children closer. Even the donkeys seemed to step more carefully, as if they understood that there were eyes beyond the ridges that did not belong to us.

“Roving Arabs,” people said under their breath, using the words as if they were a single creature. I had met Arabs in the cities - merchants with hennaed beards and poets with quick tongues - but here, on this road, the name meant something else: riders who could appear out of dust and vanish into it, who could strip a caravan of its wealth and leave it alive only to spread the story of their power.

The escorts and the archers did what words and prayers alone could not. We saw riders at a distance, small as insects on the horizon, but they did not approach. Sometimes we found the ash of old fires beside the track; sometimes we found the bones of a camel picked clean. Each sign pressed against my ribs like a finger, a reminder that law is a soft thing when no one is watching.

Maryam bint Faraj traveled with the women and the children, as propriety demanded, but need has its own permissions. When the caravan halted at midday and the tents were raised in their hurried, uneven ring, she would pass from shade to shade with her little bundle of herbs and cloths. I saw her kneel beside a boy with a cough that shook his whole chest, then rise and move on without waiting for gratitude.

Once, when a man from the Masmuda party came to me with a dispute - a waterskin cut by a careless knife, accusations rising like smoke - I had barely begun to weigh the testimonies when Maryam appeared at the edge of the men’s circle. She did not step in; she did not lift her eyes. She only said, to no one in particular, “The air is colder than you think. Keep your throats covered, or you will be arguing over graves.” Then she was gone again.

I told myself to be annoyed. A qadi does not take counsel from a woman who will not meet his gaze. But my annoyance was a thin cloak. Under it was something else: the knowledge that I had left Tangier with the pride of learning, and that the road had begun to teach me in a different language.

On one of those stages the Feast of Sacrifice overtook us.

It came not with the ease of a city festival, where streets are swept and hearts loosened by familiarity, but with the hard conditions of travel. We rose before sunrise and stopped on a patch of ground that offered a little shelter from the wind. Men unpacked what had been saved for this day: a sheep bought in earlier towns, a goat promised by one of the elders, a handful of coins scraped together so the poor in our company would not be excluded from the sunnah.

We performed the prayer in lines that wavered because the earth beneath us was uneven. The imam’s voice carried over the tents and the waiting animals, and for a moment the road itself seemed to stand still and listen. When the takbir rose - Allahu akbar, Allahu akbar - it mixed with the sound of the sea somewhere to the north, unseen but present, as if the world were reminding us that everything we owned was on loan.

Then the knives came out.

I will not pretend that the slaughter was clean. In the towns, butchers do this with practiced hands; on the road, even good intentions tremble. The animal's warmth steamed in the cold air. Blood soaked into the sand, dark and fast. Men murmured the Name of God, and their eyes were not only on the rite but on the horizon, because the Feast does not stop an arrow, and joy is not armor.

The meat was divided as it should be, with portions set aside for those who had little. Fires were kept low. We ate quickly, heads bent over our bowls, and the taste was both comfort and warning: the sweetness of fat, the bite of salt, and the knowledge that this was a day of obedience, not of safety.

I thought of my parents. In Tangier my mother would have been preparing bread with her sleeves rolled, her mouth moving in prayers as naturally as breathing. My father would have received visitors after the prayer, offering them tea and conversation, the rhythms of the neighborhood wrapping around him like a familiar garment. Here, I wiped grease from my fingers and watched a stranger's child gnaw at a bone, and the strangeness of my life struck me with such force that I felt, for an instant, as if I would tear apart.

"Do not let your heart go home without you," I told myself, and recited a verse I had learned as a boy, letting the words press the longing back into its place.

On the fourth day following that feast, we came to Atrabulus.

The city announced itself before it appeared. The smell of damp earth and salt grew stronger. The road hardened. Palm groves showed their fronds above low walls. Then the white line of buildings rose against the grey sky, and beyond them the sea lay like beaten metal under winter light.

Tripoli was not the Maghrib, and yet it was not the East that had haunted my imagination either. It was a threshold - a place where accents changed in the mouth, where merchants spoke of Alexandria and Cairo as if they were just beyond the next bend, and where men looked west with a wariness that suggested they did not entirely trust what lay behind them. I saw faces that could have belonged to Tunis and faces that carried something of Syria. I saw goods in the markets that had come by sea, and I heard men bargaining in tones that felt sharpened by long dealing with strangers.

We stayed there for some time. How long? In travel a week can feel like a month, and a month can vanish like mist when the road calls again. The main caravan hesitated. The cold was sharp, and rain fell in quick, punishing bursts that turned the streets to slick mud. Men who had crossed mountains without complaint now coughed into their sleeves and stared at the clouds as if they were an enemy they could not fight.

At night the wind came off the sea and worried at the shutters of our lodging. We slept in crowded rooms, bodies packed close for warmth, and the smell of wet wool and smoke clung to everything. The archers oiled their bowstrings with careful fingers. The horsemen who had escorted us had already turned back, their duty finished, their shadows swallowed by the road we had come.

I told myself that patience was a virtue. A pilgrim is not meant to rush as if the House of God were a prize to be claimed. But my heart had learned the taste of movement, and stillness made it restless. In the quiet moments I found myself listening for the call to depart the way a thirsty man listens for water.

It was in Tripoli that the matter of my marriage caught up with me like a rider coming from behind.

I had made a contract of marriage at Sfax, but at the time it did not feel like ink on paper. It felt like a thread thrown across a widening gap. A man on the road needs allies, and a young scholar with little money needs protection even more. The daughter of one of the syndics of Tunis - a man of standing, with connections and a name that opened doors - was offered in marriage, and I accepted, because to refuse would have been to announce that I did not understand the world I was traveling through.

At Sfax the contract had been a matter of witnesses, conditions, and ink. I spoke the words as a jurist, weighing each clause. The bride was not present; her father represented her. I told myself that this was normal, that marriage in our world is not a story of stolen glances but of families and obligations. Still, the pen trembled slightly in my fingers when I signed, and I hated myself for the trembling.

In Tripoli they conducted her to me.

It happened in a house where the women’s voices were behind a curtain like birds in a courtyard. An older woman - her aunt, perhaps, or a matron

sent by her family - spoke to me from the doorway, her tone brisk with the authority of one who had done this before. Men from my company stood in the outer room, pretending not to listen while listening with every nerve. The air smelled of boiled herbs and damp wool. Someone had burned incense to sweeten the cold.

Maryam was there, not at my side, but in the shadowed space that belonged to women. I knew it because I heard her voice, low and steady, giving instructions in a dialect that was not quite Tunisian and not quite Maghribi. The women answered her with short replies. She was being careful, I realized, to make herself useful without making herself seen.

When the curtain shifted, I saw my wife only in fragments: a hand with henna in the creases, a sleeve embroidered with a pattern that spoke of city work and leisure, not of road dust; the edge of a veil drawn tight as if it were armor. She did not look at me. I did not look long at her. We were strangers given a name that said we belonged to one another, and the weight of that name settled on my shoulders like a cloak still wet from rain.

That night I did what was required of me. I will not set down details. Let it be enough to say that in the darkness I understood how lonely a marriage can be when it is made between two people who have not chosen one another with their eyes. I spoke to her softly, offering reassurance that sounded thin even to me. She answered once, in a voice barely above a breath, and in that brief reply I heard fear and discipline braided together.

In the morning, when I rose for prayer, she was already awake. She sat with her hands folded, her gaze lowered, as if she were waiting to be told what kind of life she was now in. For a moment I resented her, not because she had wronged me, but because she made my responsibility visible.

Tripoli gave me little time to indulge resentment. The caravan leaders met and argued again over the weather. Some said we should remain until the rains eased, that the cold on the coast could kill a man as surely as a blade. Others said delay invited attack and sickness, that to linger was to become prey.

The Masmuda men looked to me. I was their qadi, and in their eyes that meant I was not only a judge of disputes but a judge of fate. Their expectation pressed against my ribs until breathing felt like work.

On a day when the wind struck the sea into white teeth, I walked to the market to buy what we needed - dried dates, flour, a little oil - and to hear what travelers were saying. A man sat in a corner stall with a stack of paper before him, his fingers stained with ink even though he was not writing. He watched the passing crowd with the sharp attention of someone who listens for opportunity the way others listen for danger.

“You are from the West,” he said as I paused, and his accent struck my ear with an unfamiliar music. “From the Maghrib.”

“From Tangier,” I answered.

His eyes brightened at the name, as if it proved something he had imagined. “Then you are far from your people. I am Farid, son of a man who copied books in Cairo. I copy too, when patrons remember that knowledge is worth paying for.”

His words were casual, but I heard the hunger under them. We spoke of scholars, of routes, of the Nile and the mosques of Cairo. He told me of the great city as if he were describing a thing he loved and feared: its wealth, its courts, its swarms of students. He spoke of men who could lift a young jurist with a single recommendation, and of men who could crush him with a single rumor.

“You will go there?” he asked.

“Inshallah,” I said, and felt the old thrill of the East tighten in my chest.

He smiled as if at a private joke. “Then do not arrive empty-handed. Cairo eats the naive. It respects only those who come with letters, with companions, with stories that make a door open.”

I left him with his paper and his eyes, and as I walked back through the wet streets I felt as if Tripoli itself were speaking through him: a warning dressed as advice.

At the end of the month of Muharram in the year seven hundred and twenty-six, I made my choice.

The main caravan remained in Tripoli for fear of cold and rain. But I could not bear the waiting. Perhaps it was piety, and perhaps it was pride. Perhaps it was the knowledge that a man who delays too long becomes a guest, and a guest becomes a burden. Perhaps it was simply that I was twenty-one and

thought that resolve could bend the world.

I gathered a party of the men of Masmuda who wished to go on, and I raised the flag and set out at their head.

My wife was brought with us, wrapped and guarded as propriety demanded. She rode in a covered conveyance, the cloth dark against the pale winter light. The women who attended her moved like shadows. Maryam traveled among them, quiet and watchful, her bundle of remedies tied close. When I saw her face for a moment as she adjusted the cloth over my wife’s hands, her expression was unreadable, as if she were holding back words that might cut.

Before we left, Shaykh Abu Ya'qub took my arm. His beard was beaded with rain, and his eyes were tired.

“You carry the banner as if it were a sword,” he said.

“And you keep it as if it were a wall,” I replied.

He gave a dry laugh. “Walls hold until they crumble. Swords cut until they break. May God make yours neither.”

He looked toward the gate where my men were gathering. “Remember,” he added, “the East does not love you for your learning. It tests you for your patience.”

“I have patience,” I lied, and he let me go.

When the gate of Tripoli fell behind us, the world opened again into road and sky. The sea stayed to our left, sometimes close enough that we could smell it, sometimes hidden behind dunes and low scrub. The land to the south stretched empty, a pale breadth that made the mind feel small.

We passed through Mislata, and then Misrata, places that were more names than towns in my memory, beads on a string pulled tight toward Egypt. The people watched us with the guarded curiosity of those who live where caravans are both blessing and threat. Dogs barked at our animals. Children ran alongside until their mothers called them back with sharp voices.

At Qusur Surt the ruins of old buildings rose like broken teeth. The place felt abandoned even when men moved through it. Wind whistled in gaps

where doors had once been. A well stood half-choked with sand. My wife’s attendants kept their heads down, and the men spoke less, as if silence could make us invisible.

It was near there that the dromedary-men of some bands of nomad Arabs sought to attack us.

At first we saw only dust, a faint stirring on the horizon that could have been wind. Then a cry went up from the front, and the line of our party tightened. Men reached for their knives. The archers unwrapped their bows and tested the strings with quick fingers. I heard my own breath loud in my ears.

The riders appeared, low and fast, their camels moving with that rolling speed that looks almost lazy until you remember how quickly it closes distance. They spread out, trying to find our weak side, their voices carrying in snatches - laughter, perhaps, or shouted signals.

My first thought was shame. Not fear - fear is natural - but shame, because in that moment I understood how thin the authority of a qadi is when faced with men who do not care for law. I could not argue them into mercy. I could not shame them with a verse.

“Ibn Battuta!” someone shouted. Not my name as my mother said it, but as the road had begun to shape it, a call to action. “Speak to them!”

Speak. As if words could stop hooves.

I rode forward until I was beside the archers. The flag snapped in the wind above us, a strip of cloth insisting on dignity. I lifted my hand, not in greeting, but in the gesture I used to still disputes among my own men.

“Hold,” I called. “Do not break the line.”

The archers held, their eyes narrowed. The riders hesitated. Perhaps they saw that we were fewer than a full caravan but more disciplined than easy prey. Perhaps they sensed that our resolve would make our blood expensive. Perhaps it was, as I later wrote, that the Divine Will diverted them.

A gust came off the sea, sudden and hard, flinging sand into faces and making the camels shy. One of the riders shouted, and the group shifted. Another gust followed, and in the momentary confusion our men stepped forward as one, bows raised, a silent threat. The raiders wheeled away, not in

panic, but in calculation, dissolving back into the open land as quickly as they had formed.

When the last of them vanished, I realized my hands were shaking.

I did not let anyone see.

By late afternoon we reached the edge of the ghaba - a belt of tangled growth that rose from the flat land like a dark answer. From a distance it looked like a promise of shelter. Up close it was a snare: low trees twisted by wind, thorns that caught at cloth, shadows that could hide a man until he was close enough to smell.

Maryam came to the boundary of the men’s camp as we halted, and this time she lifted her eyes.

“Qadi,” she said, and the title sounded like a warning more than a respect, “the forest is where you will learn how loud your prayers are.”

“Are you afraid?” I asked before I could stop myself.

She looked past me to the covered conveyance where my wife sat unseen. “Fear is a tool,” she said. “If you do not use it, it will use you.”

Then, after a pause that felt like a gate half-opened, she added softly, “Keep the women’s water close. And do not trust the silence.”

She turned away, slipping back into the shadowed world where men are not supposed to follow.

That night, as the sun bled into the sea and the first cold stars came out, we entered the ghaba.

The branches closed over the track. The air smelled of resin and damp earth. Our animals snorted, unsettled by the dark. Somewhere deeper in the thicket an owl called, and the sound made the hair on my arms rise.

I rode at the head of the line, the flag above me a pale shape against the trees. Every lesson I had learned in Tangier - every rule of prayer and law - felt suddenly distant, like a book left behind in a safe room. Here the only law was attention.

Behind me, my wife’s conveyance creaked. The men’s sandals whispered on leaf litter. No one spoke. Even the children were quiet, as if the forest

itself had placed a hand over their mouths.

Then, far ahead, a twig snapped - not the soft crack of an animal, but the sharp, deliberate sound of weight shifting carefully.

My horse’s ears pricked. An archer beside me inhaled, slow and controlled.

I lifted my hand again, the gesture of judgment, and the line of men tightened in the dark.

And in that tightening I felt, for the first time, that Egypt was not only a destination.

It was a price.

Chapter 5

The Pearl Between East And West

The ghaba is a word that tricks the tongue. In the Maghrib it can mean a wood, shade enough to hide a man and his intent. East of Surt it meant something poorer: desert that had learned a few trees and forgotten the rest. The land lay flat and wind-gnawed, and the trees came scattered, each one a lonely witness, its branches clawed by salt air.

We travelled with our flag raised, as if a strip of cloth could make the horizon less wide.

The Masmuda men who had chosen to go ahead from Tripoli filled the emptiness with noise: the clack of arrowheads, the cough of camels, the quick talk that pretends not to be fear. Their captain kept the archers close.

“String your bows at dawn,” he would say, and the men obeyed, not because he was learned, but because he had survived.

My wife rode apart in a curtained litter with the women when there was a litter, and on a padded saddle when there was not. She had been “conducted to me” at Tripoli, and I had set up my tent over her with the ceremony that makes a new union seem like a wall against the road. Yet the road rubs walls into dust.

Maryam bint Faraj travelled with the women, as she had since Gabes. She was not a servant in the way wealthy houses mean it; she carried herself with the practiced usefulness of a woman who knows how to keep herself fed. She knew the coastal dialects and the names of bitter plants that grew stubbornly in sand. She had powders for swelling and fever, and a small knife that never flashed unless she meant it to.

When the cold came, it came like a thief. Tripoli’s rain had chased us out under grey skies; beyond, the wind blew sharp off the sea. At night damp crept into wool and bone. My wife shivered inside her curtain, and the women whispered prayers into the cloth.

Maryam said, “This is not a cold that will pass with patience. It will lodge.”

“I will buy honey if God opens a hand to sell it,” I answered.

“God provides through hands,” she said, and disappeared back among the women.

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At Misrata we found a thin life clinging to the shore: brackish wells, low buildings, men with eyes narrowed against sand. They sold us coarse bread and dried fish. The Masmuda did not linger.

Beyond, the land emptied itself. We passed the ruined places of Surt—Qusur Surt, the caravan men called them, broken stone rising out of sand like old teeth.

It was there that the riders came.

Not a full charge, not the thunder of a settled battle. They appeared first as dots moving too fast to be mirage, then as men on swift dromedaries, their bodies swaying with the animals as if sewn to them. The Masmuda whispered a name for them—jammaza riders—and the word sounded like hooves.

The captain’s hand shot up. The archers spread. The camels in the middle groaned and crowded.

“Hold,” the captain said. “Let them see we are not sheep.”

The riders drifted closer, slowed, then veered away as suddenly as they had appeared. Dust rose behind them and the horizon swallowed them.

“God turned them,” one archer murmured.

Or perhaps bows and readiness did what steel does: persuaded hunger to look for easier meat. Either way, we rode on.

The ghaba began after Surt, a stretch of scrub and scattered trees that made the desert look almost merciful. The path was faint, more suggestion than road. Now and then we saw bones picked clean, and the sight tightened the men’s mouths.

On the second day within it we saw the fort.

It rose low on a slight height, a squat enclosure of stone, pitted and patched. Someone said, “That is Barsis. The anchorite.”

We did not go in as guests. We circled at a distance, cautious of traps and of the human kind of solitude. But I saw a movement at the wall’s edge—an old figure perhaps, wrapped, or only cloth caught on stone. The wind carried no voice.

By the next rise we saw a dome on the bare earth, white-washed and stubborn against the glare.

Qubbat Sallam.

We halted to pray and water the animals. I stood outside, feeling the wind press against my cloak, and watched the western horizon.

A dust cloud moved there—then the sound beneath it: bells, voices, the slow thunder of many hooves.

“The caravan,” someone said, and his voice held disbelief and relief.

They came on like a city in motion: long lines of camels, men in every kind of dress, packs and palanquins, the stream of pilgrims who had lingered in Tripoli through cold and rain and now had finally set their faces east. With them came news, arguments, laughter, the smell of cooking fat. With them came my marriage in another form.

My father-in-law arrived on the second evening, his beard oiled, his eyes bright with walking anger. He went first to his daughter’s tent, drew the curtain aside without asking, and made the women hiss protests. Then he called for me with a voice meant to carry.

“You took her into danger,” he said, wasting no greeting. “You left the main caravan. You marched her through that ghaba with men who would sell their own sisters for a skin of water.”

“These men are pilgrims,” I answered. “They guarded her as they guard their own honour.”

“Honour is hunger,” he snapped. “It lasts until the belly speaks. You are learned in the law. You know a husband’s duty.”

“My duty is to God first,” I said, because it was true and because it was safe. “Then to the pilgrimage.”

“And to the girl you took,” he said. “Do not dress your ambition in piety.”

We spoke until the stars rose and the camels shifted in their tethers. He demanded that she return. I argued, then saw that argument would only harden him, and did what a man does when a matter becomes poison: I cut it away.

We separated.

It is a clean phrase for an unclean feeling. It means that a woman who had been under my tent was no longer under it, that a bond written by a scribe could be unstitched by anger, that my journey had taken its first real payment.

When her litter moved away the next morning, she did not look out at me. Perhaps she had been told not to. Perhaps she did not wish to.

Maryam, packing her remedies, paused and then came to me with her gaze lowered.

“She left her scarf,” she said, and held out a folded strip of cloth.

It smelled faintly of rose oil and smoke. My throat tightened with a foolish tenderness.

“No,” I said too quickly. “Keep it. Give it to someone who needs cloth.”

Maryam’s eyes flicked up—pity, or contempt, or only knowledge—and she tucked the scarf away without a word.

• • •

The road does not pause for a man’s shame. Not many days after Qubbat Sallam we reached a station they called Qasr al-Za‘afiya, its name spoken with uncertainty, its walls more idea than protection.

It was there that I married again.

A talib of Fez had a daughter with him. He watched my dispute with my father-in-law as a man watches a market price shift, then offered me his solution as if it were a kindness.

Travellers marry for shelter, for alliance, for lawful warmth in hardship. Romance belongs to those who sleep in the same place long enough to grow it.

“Will you take her?” the talib asked.

I felt the caravan’s judgement like sand in my teeth. A man who cannot keep a wife looks unstable; a man who will not marry looks suspect. The road is full of mouths.

“I will,” I said, and told myself I was doing it for her protection as much as my own.

When she was conducted to me, she did not lift her veil. I saw only hands, small and steady, and a posture that spoke of obedience learned early. Her name, when I heard it, sat in my mind like a pebble: Amina.

I gave a wedding feast, as custom and pride demanded. I bought what could be bought and detained the caravan for a day, feeding them until their tongues had something better to do than feed on me.

Farid al-Misri found me at the edge of the cooking fires.

He was young and wiry, with the frame of someone who had carried burdens since childhood. His accent held the Nile in it—a softness my Maghribi ear recognized as foreign.

“I have walked this road,” he said. “From Alexandria to Cairo and back. If you need a man who knows where the wells are… and where the tax-collectors are… I can be useful.”

Useful men survive.

“I will remember you,” I said, and meant it.

Later Maryam murmured, without looking at me, “Egyptians offer help quickly. It is their trade.”

“And Maghribis distrust quickly,” I answered.

“It is our protection,” she said.

• • •

We travelled on, east and east, until the sea began to smell different, as if it had been seasoning itself with Nile mud. The sky grew softer. Birds appeared in greater numbers, and with them the strange sensation that the world might again contain green.

Then, on the first day of Jumada, the city rose.

Alexandria came at us like a revelation: walls, towers, minarets, a line of stone against the pale sea, and beyond, the thick smoke of cooking and industry. The Maghrib road led to the Gate of the Lote-tree, and we entered with Libya’s dust on our cloaks and salt on our lips.

In Alexandria I felt, for the first time, the true border of the journey: behind me, the lands where my tongue belonged; ahead, the lands where my tongue would have to learn to earn its bread.

The harbour astonished me. Ships stood there like buildings that had chosen to float—masts like a forest, ropes humming, sailors shouting in tongues that snapped and rolled. Merchants argued over bales and jars. The air was fish, tar, incense, and sweat.

I went to see the lighthouse.

Its doorway was high above the ground, reachable only by wooden planks laid from a facing building. When the planks were removed there was no approach. Inside, a guardian sat by the door, and within were chambers and a passage wide enough for a man to walk without turning his shoulders. The lighthouse stood on a tongue of land, the sea on three sides, and it could be reached by land only from the city. I remember thinking, even then, that a marvel can also be a warning: what is built high can be made unreachable.

Outside the city I saw the Pillar of Columns, a single great column rising above a grove of date-palms like a spear. Men told me a tale of an archer who climbed it by shooting an arrow with a thread tied to it, drawing up a rope, and hauling himself to the top. The story pleased the Alexandrians. It also pleased me. In a strange city, cleverness is a comfort.

In those first days I did what a traveller should do: I sought the learned and the blessed.

I met the qadi ‘Imad al-Din al-Kindi, whose turban was so voluminous it seemed to fill the space around him. I heard of Fakhr al-Din ibn al-Righi and the tale of his grandfather waiting for an omen at the gate, mocked by a keeper—only for that mockery to become a good sign. Such stories are maps for anxious men.

Alexandria also held exiles. People whispered of a deposed sultan from Ifriqiya lodged here by order of the sultan of Egypt—kept in comfort, watched

in comfort, as if a man could be honoured and imprisoned in the same breath. Hearing that, I felt the west tug at me like a sleeve: a reminder that power in our lands is a ladder made of men, and that a traveller’s safety can vanish with a change of command.

Among the devotees I was told of men whose sanctity made them speak gently even to rulers. One name returned again and again: Yaqut al-Habashi, the Ethiopian, a man of extraordinary gifts, linked by his teachers to Abu’l-‘Abbas al-Mursi and the famous Abu’l-Hasan al-Shadhili. I did not presume to judge such chains, but I felt their weight in the city’s reverence. When I saw Yaqut from a distance—his face dark, his eyes bright, surrounded by men who listened as if their hearts had ears—I understood why travellers seek saints: not to escape the world, but to be reminded that the world is not the only measure of a man.

Then my own chain of introductions carried me to the one who changed the shape of my thoughts. And I was led, by a chain of introductions, to a devotee they called Burhan al-Din the Lame.

His room was small. His leg was twisted beneath him, his face etched by fasting. Yet his gaze was clear as water. I stayed three days as his guest. He did not flatter me. He asked what I sought, and when I answered “the pilgrimage,” he nodded as if hearing a child recite the first line of a book.

On the third day he spoke as if continuing a conversation we had not started.

“I see that you are fond of travelling,” he said, “and wandering from land to land.”

“Yes,” I admitted, embarrassed. “I am fond of it.”

At that time I still thought of my journey as a line with an end: Mecca, the House of God, and then home. India and China were names for merchants’ boasts.

He leaned forward. “You must certainly, if God wills, visit my brother Farid al-Din in India,” he said, “and my brother Rukn al-Din Zakariya in Sind, and my brother Burhan al-Din in China. When you reach them, convey to them a greeting from me.”

The room seemed to tilt. Not because I believed every word, but because he spoke with the calm certainty of a man describing a road he had already

walked in spirit.

When I rose to leave, he pressed small silver coins into my hand.

“Travel-provision,” he said.

I wanted to refuse out of pride. I did not. A man who refuses a saint’s gift is a man who thinks he can feed himself forever.

Outside, Farid al-Misri waited with bread. When he saw my face he said, “What did the shaikh tell you?”

“He spoke of a Farid,” I said, and the coincidence of names struck me like a laugh that turns into awe.

Farid smiled, showing a chipped tooth. “There are many Farids,” he said. “Egypt has a thousand, and India a thousand thousand.”

That night I lay awake listening to the harbour creak under the weight of ships, turning the coins over and over in my palm until my hand warmed them. Burhan al-Din’s words returned, not as prophecy but as invitation, and I felt a new fear: not fear of raiders or thirst, but fear of how far the road inside me might go.

At dawn I went to the Gate of the Lote-tree, where the Maghrib road meets the roads of Egypt. Farid al-Misri stood there already, as if he had been waiting for my choice.

“The road to Cairo leaves soon,” he said. “If you hesitate, you will be left behind.”

I looked once more at Alexandria—its walls and smoke, its ships and saints—and then at the long road east.

Behind me, the Maghrib fell away.

Ahead, the land of the Mamluks opened like a book whose first page had just been turned.

Chapter 6

On the Wing of a Great Bird

Dawn makes every city look honest.

At the Gate of the Lote-tree the stones were still cool, sweating the night back into the air. Beyond the arch, Alexandria held its breath: the harbour creaked, ropes sang, men shouted in languages that snapped like whips. Behind me the walls rose pale with salt. Ahead, the Maghrib road thinned into the flatness of Egypt.

Farid al-Misri stood where he had stood the day before, cloak drawn close, eyes sliding to the men posted there: guards in quilted coats with spears grounded, and beside them a scribe on a low stool, tablet on his knees.

“Do not speak first,” Farid murmured. “Let them ask.”

It was not advice I was used to. In the Maghrib, a stranger proves himself with speech. Here, speech felt like a net. I touched the small silver coins Burhan al-Din had pressed into my hand in Alexandria, and closed my fist as if I could keep my fate from spilling out.

The women came last.

Amina’s litter was curtained in dark cloth that drank the dawn. Two men walked beside it with the patient faces of hired guardians. Maryam bint Faraj kept to the litter’s far side, head covered, hands busy, usefulness held up like a shield. She glanced once at me and then away, as if reminding me of the boundaries she kept.

The guard’s gaze touched the litter and hardened.

“From where?” he asked.

“From the West,” Farid answered.

The scribe looked up. “Names.”

Farid gave his. Then he nodded to me.

I spoke precisely. “Muhammad ibn ‘Abd Allah, of Tangier.”

The reed scratched. “Purpose?”

“The Pilgrimage,” I said. “To the House of God.”

The guard’s eyes flicked again to the litter. “And them?”

“My wife,” I said. “And a woman of our company.”

In that look I learned something about Mamluk Egypt: it does not ask whether you are righteous; it asks whether you are legible.

He waved us through.

Outside the gate, the road became damp earth, then a track between embankments, then a ribbon of beaten ground bordered by reeds. Canals lay everywhere, water disciplined into lines by men’s hands. It shimmered under the newborn sun, carrying reflections of palm fronds and egrets.

After Libya’s salt air and the ghaba’s thin trees, the Delta felt almost indecent in its generosity.

Farid spoke to muleteers in his own Egyptian tongue, and they answered quickly, relieved to have someone who sounded like them. Men worked in the fields with their garments hitched up, moving as if the land owned their bones. Boys shouted at birds. A child on a bank called out a joke that made the Egyptians laugh.

“What did he say?” I asked.

“He asked if Maghribi camels have two heads,” Farid said. “He has never seen men like us.”

I glanced back at the litter. “He has never seen women travel either.”

Farid only said, “In Egypt, even the road has an owner.”

We reached Kom Torouga when the sun leaned toward the west.

The village sat among fields like a knot tied in green thread. Its mosque was modest, its minaret short, but the call to prayer rose clean, and men appeared from alleys and courtyards as if summoned from underground. We were received with a courtesy that was practiced, not warm. Egypt does not squander itself on astonishment; it has too many strangers.

I enjoyed the company of its qadi, Safi al-Din, and its preacher, Fakhr al-Din, and a worthy resident named Mubarak whom they addressed as Zain al-Din. They asked about the Maghrib the way men ask about a distant relative: with interest and with the certainty that distance makes all things strange.

They gave me lodging with a man named ‘Abd al-Wahhab, zealous in his devotions and proud of his small corner of the world. His house smelled of bread and smoke. He apologized for the simplicity of his food and then served more than a simple man should have been able to.

“The Nile makes us shameless,” he said, and I did not know whether he meant generous or greedy.

Amina was taken into the women’s part of the house behind a curtain that might as well have been a wall. Maryam vanished with her. I heard their voices only as murmurs, like water moving through reeds.

After the sunset prayer, a man came with the brisk confidence of authority. He was called Zain al-Din ibn al-Wa‘iz, the local inspector of the finances, with the careful hands of a man who counts other men’s wealth.

“You are from Tangier,” he said.

“Yes.”

He smiled as if the word were a spice. “Tell me. What does your town yield in taxes?”

In the Maghrib, such a question is a provocation. Here it was asked as if it were the price of wheat.

“It is said,” I answered, “that it amounts to about twelve thousand gold dinars.”

His eyebrows rose. “Twelve thousand?”

He leaned forward. “Do you know what this village yields?”

I hesitated, and he took my silence for permission.

“Seventy-two thousand gold dinars,” he said, and watched my face for the pleasure of my astonishment.

Tangier, a port with ships and merchants, yielding less than this knot of fields and canals?

“How?” I asked.

“Because Egypt is written differently,” he said. “The land is the sultan’s. The revenues are counted as his right. The Nile feeds the Treasury, and the Treasury feeds the swords.”

Farid listened from the doorway and gave a small nod, as if to say: you see?

That night, lying on a mat, I thought of Egypt’s numbers and Alexandria’s saints. A man can be conquered by armies. He can also be conquered by abundance.

From behind the curtain I heard Amina cough softly. Maryam murmured, the sound of a remedy being mixed. I wanted to go to my wife. I did not. The road makes every tent a public place.

In the morning we set out again.

The road to Damanhur ran between canals that split and reunited like arguments. We crossed bridges of planks laid over water. Once, a ferry took us across a wider branch, the boatman pushing with a pole while the animals shifted and snorted.

Damanhur announced itself by the noise of its markets. It was a big town, the metropolis of the district of al-Buhaira, and it carried itself like a man used to being obeyed. Its entry was guarded. Names were asked again. Origins were noted. A man with ink-stained fingers glanced at my accent and wrote more carefully.

Farid’s patience with this amazed me.

“This is how they breathe,” he said. “They count. They record.”

In Damanhur I met its qadi, Fakhr al-Din ibn Miskin, a jurist of the Shafi‘ites. He received me with the courteous distance of a man whose city is full of petitioners.

“You are Malikite,” he said.

“Yes.”

He nodded. “Egypt has room for many schools,” he said. “But the road has room only for discipline. Do not make yourself a problem.”

It was advice to a stranger and also to a younger man. I thanked him and felt, for the first time, how visible my learning could make me here.

When we left Damanhur, Farid rode near me now, no longer merely a man who had offered help, but a man whose help had been accepted.

“You have heard of a saint near Fuwwa?” he asked.

“Shaikh al-Murshidi,” I said. In Alexandria the name had been spoken with the certainty men reserve for miracles: a saint who fed visitors from the unseen store, who lived alone and yet entertained emirs and ministers.

Farid’s mouth tightened. “He is real,” he said. “And dangerous.”

“Dangerous?”

“A saint can loosen a man’s grip on what he thinks he is.”

Maryam, walking close enough to hear, said softly, “Some men are held together by pride.”

I looked at her, and she met my gaze without flinching.

“I seek blessing,” I said, and heard the defensiveness in my own voice.

Maryam’s eyes flicked toward the road ahead. “Blessing is not always comfort.”

Fuwwa lay on the Rosetta branch of the Nile, a town that smelled of water and commerce. Boats were pulled up along the bank like sleeping animals. The river moved with a confidence that made the sea seem childish.

The retreat of the shaikh lay close by the town, separated from it by a canal. We passed through Fuwwa in the heat of the afternoon and reached the canal’s edge where a narrow bridge led to a cluster of low buildings and a single cell that looked too small to contain the stories told about it.

Outside the cell an amir had encamped with his troops.

Horses stood with their heads down, as if even animals were subdued by the place. Archers sat in the shade of a wall, bows unstrung but eyes alert. Men who had been loud in the town spoke more softly here, as if the air itself

demanded restraint.

Farid stopped me with a hand on my sleeve. “Go alone,” he said.

Amina’s litter waited on the town side of the canal among other veils and coverings. Maryam went to her, bent, spoke, received something small in her palm—perhaps a question, perhaps a prayer to be carried.

I crossed the bridge.

When I entered the shaikh’s presence—God’s mercy upon him—he rose to meet me. He embraced me, then called for food and invited me to eat. He was dressed in a black woollen tunic. His face was lean, his eyes bright, as if devotion had hollowed him out and filled him with something else.

Beside him sat the amir Saif al-Din Yalmalak, one of the officers of the sultan’s bodyguard, hands resting on his knees with the stillness of a man trained to wait for commands.

When the hour of the afternoon prayer arrived, the shaikh set me in front as imam.

For a heartbeat my pride leapt. To lead prayer while an amir and soldiers stood behind me was an honour and a test. I recited and kept my voice steady. I let the words of God fill the space where my vanity wanted to breathe.

When I prepared to sleep, he said, “Go up to the roof of the cell and sleep there.”

I looked at the amir, meaning to protest politely. “In the name of God,” I said.

“There is none of us but has an appointed place,” the amir answered, and the words fell like a seal.

I climbed to the roof. There I found a straw mattress and a leather mat, vessels for ritual ablutions, a jar of water and a drinking-cup. I lay down under a sky crowded with stars.

That night I dreamed.

I was borne on the wing of a great bird. It flew me first toward the qibla, then veered for Yemen, then crossed east, then south, then far east again,

and at last set me down in a land both dark and green, and left me there.

When I woke before dawn, my heart was beating as if I had been running.

If the shaikh can interpret my dream, I thought, he is as they say.

At the dawn prayer he bade me go in front again as imam. I obeyed. After the prayer the amir took leave and departed. Other visitors also left, and the shaikh furnished each of them with small cakes for the road.

Later, after I had prayed the forenoon prayer, the shaikh called me. He spoke as if my dream were already known.

I told him what I had seen.

He listened without surprise, then said quietly, as if stating a judgement already written:

“You shall make the Pilgrimage and visit the tomb of the Prophet. You shall travel through the lands of Yemen and Iraq, the land of the Turks, and the land of India. You will stay there a long time. And in India you will meet my brother Dilshad, who will rescue you from a danger into which you will fall.”

The room seemed to tilt. Pilgrimage I understood. Yemen and Iraq were roads I could imagine.

India.

The name came like the taste of a spice I had never tried: sharp, distant, impossible and yet real.

The shaikh returned with cakes and silver coins and placed them in my hands.

“Travel-provision,” he said.

I wanted to refuse. Pride rose, dressed as modesty. I swallowed it.

I kissed his hand and took what he gave. Then I bade him farewell and departed.

When I crossed back over the canal, Maryam watched my face as if reading it. Amina’s curtain stirred; I imagined her listening from within, measuring the road I was choosing for her without being able to question it

openly.

Farid took one of the cakes and broke it in half. “So,” he said. “You have been fed by Egypt.”

I slipped the coins into my pouch with Burhan al-Din’s. Two sets now. Two saints. Two invitations.

Maryam asked, “What did he tell you?”

I gave her the bare bones: the pilgrimage, the Prophet, Yemen, Iraq, the Turks, India.

Amina’s voice came soft from behind the curtain. “India is beyond the maps.”

“God’s earth is wider than our ink,” Farid said, and there was something like longing in his tone.

We left Fuwwa with the river at our side. The road grew busier: donkey carts piled with reeds, men driving flocks, soldiers riding in pairs. Now and then a barrier appeared where an official demanded to know who passed. Each time, Farid spoke, and we were let through.

Near sunset the air changed. It thickened with smoke.

Farid lifted his chin. “Do you smell that?”

“I smell cooking,” I said.

He shook his head. “People. Many people.”

We crested a slight rise and the horizon ahead was no longer empty. A haze lay there, brown-gold in the sinking light. Out of it rose shapes like fingers—minarets, towers, the suggestion of walls. The Nile’s breadth caught the last light like a blade.

Cairo.

At the last barrier before the road spilled into the city’s orbit, mounted men stopped us. Their horses were sleek, their armour well kept. One carried a staff tipped with metal; another held a roll of papers bound with string.

“Stand,” the leader ordered.

Farid greeted him with the ease of a man stepping into his own world. The leader’s eyes moved over our caravan, paused at the litter, returned to me.

“From where?” he asked.

“The Maghrib,” I answered.

“And your business in Cairo?”

“The Pilgrimage,” I said. “And study, if God wills.”

He nodded to the man with papers. “Your name will be entered,” he said. “You will wait until the clerk is satisfied. Cairo is not a road you ride into by desire.”

The sun slipped lower. The haze of the city deepened. Amina’s litter stood motionless, curtain hiding her from the men who could delay us. Maryam’s hands tightened around her bundle. Farid’s jaw worked once, as if swallowing anger.

I stood at the edge of Cairo’s shadow, with saints’ coins in my pouch and a city’s ink in front of me, and understood that the road could still be stopped by a clerk’s pen.

Chapter 7

The Mother of Cities

The clerk’s reed-pen kept its own pace, indifferent to the hunger of men and the impatience of beasts. He wrote as if the words were bricks and Cairo was the wall he meant to build: a line for each stranger, a mark for each pack, a pause for each question that might be used later.

We waited in the shadow of the barrier while the city breathed at us. The haze beyond the gate was not fog but life — smoke from cookfires, dust from hooves, steam from the backs of animals, the exhalation of a multitude. Farīd al-Miṣrī stood with his hands folded inside his sleeves, the posture of a man who had learned that stillness can be a kind of argument. Maryam bint Faraj kept her face lowered, but I saw the sharpness of her attention in the way she counted the guards, the way her fingers tested the knot of a bundle as if she could tighten the world against theft. Amina’s litter waited like a sealed room: the curtain still, the bearers shifting their weight as the sun climbed and fell and climbed again.

When the scribe finally looked up, his eyes were red-rimmed from squinting at ink. “Your name,” he said, as though he had not already taken it. “Your father’s. Your place. Your business.”

“My business is pilgrimage,” I answered, and felt the old heat rise in me — the same heat I had carried from Tangier, when my own name had seemed like a passport. Farīd’s breath hissed, a warning without a word. I swallowed the rest of what pride would have said and gave the clerk what he wanted: a chain of names, a city, a school of law, a destination that made sense to a man who thought in ledgers.

The clerk’s pen moved again. A guard with a quilted coat and a scar that ran like a seam across his cheek leaned toward the litter. “And this?” he asked.

“A wife,” Farīd said before I could. “And a woman who serves her.”

The guard’s gaze lingered on the curtain, then slid away, as if the cloth itself had authority. He grunted, and for a moment I understood something that made me uneasy: in this country even a man’s household could be a document.

The sun was past its height when the barrier opened. A hand — not gentle, not cruel — waved us through. We entered not as conquerors of distance but as tolerated figures in a city that could swallow a caravan and not notice the taste.

If Alexandria is a mouth open to the sea, Cairo is a body that refuses to end. The road did not lead to a gate so much as dissolve into streets, and the streets dissolved into markets, and the markets dissolved into a constant joining of villages and alleys so that a man could travel for hours and still feel he had not yet left the first noise behind.

The first thing that struck me was not the height of buildings but the thickness of life between them. Donkeys forced their way through crowds with patient brutality. Porters bent under loads that would have broken a camel. Water-sellers rang their cups and shouted, their voices rising and falling like the calls of the muezzins. Everywhere there were men with pens — scribes at benches, clerks at doorways, boys carrying folded papers as if they were bread. The Maghrib has its judges and notaries, but here ink seemed as common as dust.

Farīd took us by roads that were roads only because enough feet had agreed to use them. “Al-Qāhira is there,” he said, nodding toward a line of walls and towers. “And Miṣr is there,” he added, as if pointing to an older spine beneath newer flesh. He spoke of the city as two cities, and I began to see what he meant: the conquering capital with its citadel and its gates, and the older settlement by the river, wide and low and tangled, where the first conquerors had laid out their camps and where the smoke of craft fires still stained the air.

We found a place to set down the litter at a funduq whose courtyard smelled of straw and stale spice. The keeper, a man with hennaed beard and a calculating face, stared at me for the length of a prayer. His eyes measured my robe, my speech, the way Farīd stood at my shoulder. He said a price that made my stomach tighten, and then Farīd murmured a name — not a threat, not a boast, simply a name placed on the table like a weight. The keeper’s face altered as if someone had turned a lamp in a dark room. He nodded, and the price softened.

Inside the courtyard, Amina stepped down behind the curtain, unseen except by the women. I heard the rustle of her garments, the click of her bracelets, the small sound of breath taken after strain. Maryam guided her

toward the stair that led to the upper rooms. Farīd did not follow; nor did I. Men’s spaces and women’s spaces were not lines drawn in chalk here. They were walls built into the movement of a day.

That first night, I climbed to the flat roof of the funduq to breathe. Cairo’s sky was not empty. It was laced with smoke, threaded with the smell of baking and slaughter, and under it the city made a constant, restless sound, like water running over stones. In the distance, a line of lanterns marked the river. I could not see the Nile itself, but I felt it as a presence, as if the whole city leaned toward it and drank.

“Mother of cities,” I whispered — and even as the phrase rose to my tongue, I heard in it my own hunger for grandeur. A man comes to a place like this and wants it to justify him.

In the days that followed, Cairo taught me its scale by refusing to be mastered. I would decide to go to a mosque and find myself delayed by a procession of camels. I would set out to visit a scholar and find that the streets had turned into bazaars and the bazaars into alleys, so that my sense of direction became a joke the city told at my expense. Farīd, who had grown up with this confusion, moved through it as if the noise were a language. He knew which gate to avoid when the guards were hungry, which market to cross when the muḥtasib was not making his rounds, which alley belonged to which craft by smell alone.

On the third day, he led me to the river. We reached it through a corridor of shops where everything seemed to be for sale: bread still warm, sugar in cones, linen folded like water, copper bowls stacked like shields. Then the corridor opened, and there it was — a moving, living thing broader than any river I had seen in the Maghrib, carrying on its back the labour of a whole country. Boats slid along it like thoughts. Some came downriver heavy with grain and wood, others strained upstream with their sails pulled tight, bound for the south. Farīd pointed to the opposite bank. “Al-Rawḍa,” he said. “The Garden.”

We crossed by a small ferry crowded with boys, soldiers, and veiled women whose eyes watched everything from behind their cloth. The island was green and loud with pleasure. Families sat under trees. Men played games with carved pieces and argued over rules as if arguing over law. Vendors sold roasted nuts and sweet cakes, the smell thick as honey. I stood among them and felt, unexpectedly, a flicker of irritation: how could a people

take such ease when the road to the House of God still lay before me?

As if to answer, Farīd spoke of the Sultan’s recent fracture — a hand injured, a ruler made briefly vulnerable — and how the merchants had celebrated his recovery with a festival of decoration. “For days,” he said, “they hung rich cloth in their shops. Not out of love, always. Out of sense. A strong hand in the citadel is good for trade.”

Trade. Tribute. Protection. In Cairo, devotion and calculation walked together so often that they began to share a shadow.

From the river we went to Miṣr, the older city, to the mosque of ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ. I had heard its name since childhood as one hears the name of a first ancestor. The building I saw was not a tent of conquest but a vast, venerable space where generations had laid down their foreheads. Men passed through it as through a street — and Farīd laughed softly when he saw my surprise.

“It is a shortcut,” he said. “When the city is crowded, a mosque becomes a road. God sees the intention.”

I did not know whether to be shocked or humbled. The Friday sermon was delivered there, Farīd told me, and yet the everyday life of the city cut through its courtyards like a stream. I washed, I prayed, and when I rose I followed Farīd to a small cell on the western side where, he said, the imam al-Shāfiʿī had once taught. I am a Mālikī, born into the rulings of my fathers, but a jurist is not permitted to despise another jurist’s learning. In that narrow space I felt a strange kinship with men I had never met: those who had argued over law, those who had copied texts by lamplight, those who had asked, again and again, what God wanted of bodies and markets and desire.

Back in the courtyard, an old man with a white beard sat with a circle of boys around him, reciting. Their voices rose and fell, and in them I heard the same hunger I had known in Tangier — to be sure of God, to be sure of oneself. For a moment I wanted to sit among them and begin again, as if the road had not yet made me older.

But I had brought a household into the city. Hunger for learning does not excuse hunger in a wife’s eyes.

That evening Amina’s voice came to me through the curtain as if from another world. “You were gone long,” she said, not accusing, not forgiving. Weariness made her words thin. I heard Maryam moving in the room with her

— a bowl set down, water poured, cloth folded. I wanted to say something comforting, something that would make the city less vast, but comfort is not a coin a man can mint at will.

“I was at the mosque,” I said.

“A mosque,” she repeated, and the word held all the distance between us.

Maryam’s voice followed, low. “The city drinks men,” she said. “It drinks their hours. Keep yours.”

I looked toward the curtain, toward the invisible women, and felt the familiar irritation of being counselled by someone who would not give me the whole of her story. “You speak as if you know Cairo,” I said.

“I speak as if I know hunger,” she replied. Then she fell silent, and I knew I had pushed against a boundary and found stone.

On the seventh day, Amina’s cough returned, small but persistent, and Farīd insisted we go to the maristān — the hospital founded by al-Malik al-Manṣūr Qalāwūn, whose mausoleum rose like a promise of mercy amid stone. The maristān lay, Farīd said, “between the two castles,” near the great thoroughfares, and when we entered I understood why men spoke of it with wonder. Water ran in channels through its courtyards. The air smelled of vinegar and crushed herbs. Patients lay on clean mats in shaded rooms, attended by men who moved with the calm of practice. There were shelves of jars, each labelled, each holding some plant or powder that promised to pull a body back from the edge.

Amina did not come in. Women were tended elsewhere, Farīd said, and the arrangement of that tending was not for a stranger to argue against. Maryam spoke with a matron in a doorway, her voice measured, her hands showing the way she held herself. She returned with a small packet of dried leaves and a vial of oil.

“For warmth,” she told me. “And for the chest.”

“How did you—” I began, then stopped. It was not magic. It was Cairo: a city of gates and permissions, where a woman could pass through certain doors because she carried the keys of language and need.

That same week, Farīd took me to see one of the khawāniq — the convents built for the poor devotees and the wandering faqīrs. In Cairo they call it

khānqāh, and there are so many that a man can sleep beneath endowments all the way to the south if he knows how to ask. Amirs compete in building them, Farīd said, not only for God’s reward but for their own remembrance. Stone is a kind of prayer when it outlives the mouth that speaks it.

At the gate, a porter sat with a staff across his knees. He looked at me, then at Farīd, then at my hands — as if checking whether I had come to take or to receive. Farīd spoke quickly, the words of introduction. The porter called for the steward. A thin man emerged, his turban neat, his beard trimmed to a point. He asked me questions that felt like the questions of a judge.

“What country have you come from?” he said.

“The Maghrib,” I answered.

“What convents have you stayed in?” he asked.

“In none,” I said, and saw his eyebrow lift. In Cairo even devotion has its bureaucracy. The steward asked what my purpose was, what my school of law, who could vouch for me. Farīd’s name carried weight again. The steward nodded at last. “Enter,” he said, as if granting a favour, and the gate opened on a courtyard where men sat on prayer-mats that were clearly marked as belonging to each body, each devotion.

The dawn prayer had passed, but the routine of the place continued like a river in miniature. A reader recited from the Qur’an in a voice polished by repetition. Others followed, each taking a portion, each sealing his share as if closing a pact with God. Their lips moved with dhikr after, a murmur that filled the shaded air. I watched them and felt both admiration and unease. Such order can shelter the soul. It can also shelter the ego.

A bowl of food was set before me — coarse bread, lentils, a little meat. I ate and felt the shame of how quickly the road makes a man grateful for what he would once have judged plain. Farīd spoke with a man in a patched cloak whose accent carried the south. The man’s eyes were wary but not unfriendly, and when Farīd offered him a greeting he answered with the clipped vowels of Upper Egypt. He gave his name as Ḥusayn al-Qūṣī.

Farīd turned back to me, eyes bright. “Ḥusayn is from Qūṣ,” he murmured. “He says a party leaves soon for the Saʿīd. If you mean to go by the river road, this is your rope.”

The Saʿīd. Upper Egypt. The long spine of the Nile leading south toward the Red Sea road and the port they call ʿAydhāb. I had heard of that route in Alexandria, spoken of as safe under the Sultan’s protection and slow enough to show a traveler the country as if unfolding a carpet. It was not the quickest path to the Hijāz. It was, perhaps, the most tempting.

And there was another route. The Syrian road, men said, crossing Sinai to join the great caravans that came down from Damascus. It was a road with stations and wells and a rhythm that had carried pilgrims for generations. It was also a road crowded with men of rank, men with banners, men whose eyes measured strangers the way Cairo’s clerk had measured me.

To choose is to declare oneself. In Tangier I had thought of the pilgrimage as a single intention. Here, among Cairo’s gates, I learned that intention must wear a route like a garment, and every garment is judged.

That night, Farīd laid out the choices on the rooftop as Cairo’s lamps flickered below us. “If you go by Sinai,” he said, “you are one among thousands. It is safe, in the way a crowd is safe. If you go by the Saʿīd, you see the river, the towns, the saints. You go under the Sultan’s shadow, but you go farther from help.”

“And the sea from ʿAydhāb?” I asked.

Farīd’s mouth tightened. “Ships go,” he said carefully. “And sometimes they do not. The coast has its troubles. Men quarrel. Tribes grow bold.”

Maryam climbed to the roof with a tray of cups and set them down without looking at us. When she turned to leave, I stopped her with a question that had been pressing against my ribs for days.

“Why did you come this far?” I asked. “Not to Cairo. Beyond. Why did you leave the places where women can be hidden?”

Her shoulders held still. For a breath she looked older than her years. “Because hiding is also a road,” she said. “And sometimes it leads to a dead end.” Then she descended the stairs, and her footsteps were the only answer I was given.

Later, when the city had quieted to a dull murmur, Amina spoke again from behind the curtain. “Are we leaving?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said, and heard how the word made her inhale. “Soon.”

“For Mecca,” she said, as if reminding herself what all this suffering was for.

“For Mecca,” I agreed. But in my chest, the truth shifted: for Mecca, yes — and for the world that lay between, and for the man I could become by surviving it.

At dawn, Farīd returned from the market with dust on his hem and urgency in his eyes. “The Qūṣī’s party gathers,” he said. “They have hired guards. They have a small flag, so the checkpoints will know they travel under arrangement. If you hesitate, you will wait weeks. Or you will be forced to take the road you do not want.”

Below us, Cairo woke with the sound of shutters opening and animals complaining. Smoke rose. The river, unseen, tugged at the whole city like a hand at a sleeve.

I went to the curtain and spoke softly, so only Amina would hear. “Prepare,” I said. “Maryam will help you. We go south, by the river road.”

There was a pause, then Amina’s voice, small and steady. “May God make it easy,” she said.

I stepped back into the open air and looked once more across the roofs. Cairo sprawled to the horizon, limitless, indifferent, magnificent. It had tested me with ink and noise and wonder, and it had not yet finished.

Farīd waited at the stair, already moving. I followed him down, and with each step I felt the Maghrib fall farther behind — not as a place, but as a measure of what I thought the world could be.

By midday we were at the edge of the river’s traffic, where men shouted over ropes and a boat rocked against the bank. A small banner snapped in the wind, the colour bright against the brown water. The men of the Saʿīd were gathering — strangers, but strangers with a direction. One of them looked at me and smiled as if we had always been part of the same road.

I tightened my belt, set my hand on my pouch, and told myself what a pilgrim must always tell himself at the beginning of a new stretch: leave the argument behind, and step.

Then the boatman called for us to board, and the river opened its mouth.

Chapter 8

Up the River, Into the Refusal

The city does not release a man so much as it tires of holding him.

In Cairo I had begun to feel that even my prayers were counted. The funduq keeper watched my comings and goings with the care of a man guarding grain. At the khānqāh, the doorkeeper measured newcomers by their sandals and their accents. In the markets, mamluks rode through the press of bodies as if the crowd itself were a thing to be disciplined. Cairo could feed you, teach you, and bury you without ever learning your face.

So when the day came to go south by the route of the Saʿīd, I felt a strange gratitude toward the road. It was harsh, but it did not pretend to be a father.

Farīd al-Miṣrī found us passage before the sun had properly cleared the roofs. He came into the courtyard with a small bundle of papers and a longer list of cautions. “Do not argue with the river men,” he said. “Do not argue with the tax men. And if a man in a red cap asks your name, give it him like alms and move on.”

“You speak as though Cairo ends at its walls,” I said.

He gave me the look of a man who has seen a city reach farther than its own shadow. “In Egypt,” he replied, “the Sultan’s hand is long, and the Nile is longer.”

Maryam bint Faraj brought Amina down by the women’s stair. I did not see my wife’s face until the curtain of her litter shifted in the courtyard light; then I caught the edge of her jaw and the set of her mouth. Travel had thinned her, and Cairo’s air had sharpened her cough. Maryam’s pouch of dried leaves had become as precious as coin.

“We will go as far as we can,” I said softly.

From behind the curtain Amina’s voice came, steady but not warm. “As far as you decide,” she answered. It was not reproach. It was the plain statement of a world in which a wife’s road is the road her husband chooses.

We went down through Cairo’s waking: damp stones, the first bread-smell of ovens, donkeys blinking under loads. On the edge of Miṣr, where gardens

began and the houses lowered their shoulders, we found the river craft: broad-bellied boats with patched lateen sails and men born with rope in their palms.

A flag rose above our little party, a strip of cloth on a pole—pilgrims, under protection so far as protection can travel. I had marched under such a sign before, and each time it had seemed both comfort and danger: comfort because the faithful recognize it, danger because thieves recognize it too.

It was Husayn al-Qūṣī who made the flag feel less like a charm and more like a practical thing.

He appeared when the boatman began to argue over the price as if argument were a service. Husayn was not tall, but he carried himself with a sealed-letter caution. His beard was close-trimmed; his eyes sat deep under brows that did not soften easily. He wore plain wool and a belt that had once been fine.

“This is the man I told you of,” Farīd said. “From Qūṣ. Knows the Saʿīd.”

Husayn’s gaze flicked to my face, then to the litter. “And you are from the Maghrib,” he said, as if noting the wind. “The Nile makes strangers of us all. Even those born on its banks.”

He spoke to the boatman without raising his voice, bargaining not by naming men but by naming the river—how the current would help, how the wind would turn, how the boat could return with cargo. The boatman’s anger softened into calculation. They clasped hands. The price settled.

When we pushed off, Cairo did not look back. It spread behind us—minarets, smoke, the pale wedge of the Citadel—and the river carried us away as if it were glad to do it.

For days the banks remained thick with life: palms, wheat, cattle, children splashing at the edge. We lodged where officials wrote our names and keepers asked our origins with the manner of men taking inventory. Sometimes soldiers stood at the gate. Sometimes only the idea of soldiers.

On the first night after our departure we stayed at a great convent at Dair al-Tīn, built by Taj al-Dīn ibn Hannāʾ and filled with relics: a fragment of a wooden basin, a pencil for kohl, an awl for sewing sandals, and a Qurʾān attributed to ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib. Men pressed their fingers to wood and ink as if closeness could wash a journey clean. I felt the old hunger to be near what

was blessed; I also felt how quickly blessing becomes a kind of property. A relic can feed a hundred travellers, and it can make a gatekeeper into a prince.

Maryam did not enter the men’s hall. When I came to the women’s side after, she spoke through the half-open door. “Saints travel poorly,” she said. “Their blessings make men careless. Keep your eyes on the road.”

From there we moved by villages and towns—Munyat al-Qāʾid, then Būsh and Dālās with their linen, then Bībā and al-Bahnasa with gardens and wool. I could have filled pages with what I saw: looms clacking, flax rotting in pale heaps, merchants counting bolts of cloth like prayer-beads. But the river teaches a traveller a different lesson: nothing stays long enough to be owned.

Farīd’s strength faded the farther we went. In Cairo he could step into a man’s fear and find a bargain there. In the Saʿīd he was only another traveller with a city accent. Husayn, meanwhile, spoke to deputies and boatmen as if he had known them in another life.

We reached Munyat Ibn Khasīb, spread wide along the Nile. The people there told the old story of Khasīb—the generous man punished, then redeemed—as if the river itself had composed it: abundance, envy, cruelty, flood, forgiveness, and the water continuing regardless.

In that town I did something that made Husayn’s mouth tighten and Farīd’s eyes widen: I entered a bath-house at midday.

Steam turned men into shapes. And there, as if nakedness were a custom like the wearing of sandals, I found men sitting without cover. My stomach clenched. My mind leapt to rulings learned in Tangier: the boundaries of modesty, the protections against the devil’s whispers, the simple dignity that separates man from beast.

I went at once to the governor, Shams al-Dīn, and informed him. He did not laugh. He ordered the lessees of the bath-houses brought before him and had articles drawn up—formal, witnessed—making them subject to penalties if any man entered without a waist-wrapper.

I should have felt satisfaction. Instead I felt uneasy. It is easy to be strict when you will be gone tomorrow. It is easy to make a town obey you when you do not have to live with the obedience.

When Maryam heard, she looked at me for a long moment, her eyes steady as a scale. “You have the courage of a guest,” she said at last.

“And you have the caution of one who has stayed too long,” I replied, and regretted it the moment it left my mouth.

Amina coughed behind her curtain, a thin sound like paper tearing. Maryam turned away without answering. The river slapped the hull softly, unimpressed by our virtues.

From Munyat Ibn Khasīb we went to Manlawī, where sugar presses ran like beasts. I watched a poor man come with warm bread, throw it into the vat of syrup, and lift it out soaked and sweet. No one hindered him. In a land where governors can command bath-houses and qāḍīs can assign alms, that small custom struck me as mercy made ordinary.

At Manfalūṭ I heard of the minbar carved for the Sacred Mosque, and how the boat carrying it had stopped beside the town’s congregational mosque and refused to move. The Sultan had ordered it placed there. I saw it with my own eyes: tall, dark, severe, a staircase of authority. Men called it a miracle. I thought of it as a parable: even gifts meant for the holiest places may be claimed by the towns they pass.

We reached Asyūṭ, handsome and busy. There, men spoke of charitable endowments for travellers, and of a qāḍī nicknamed “Revenue nil,” because he told the poor again and again that nothing remained of the waqf monies. The joke had become his name. Egypt’s protection, I learned, is a thing built from paper and piety: endowments laid like stones across the river of need, officials tasked to distribute them, and travellers like myself taking what we can with gratitude and embarrassment.

That night on a roof above the river Farīd told me, “I will go back from here.”

“To Cairo?” I asked.

He nodded. “My ties are there. If I go deeper into the Saʿīd with you, I become only another fish. Husayn has his river people. You have your flag. I have only Cairo.”

“And when I return?” I asked.

“If you return,” he corrected gently. Then, softer: “When you return, you will find me.”

We clasped hands. In the morning he left, taking with him the Cairo language of gatekeepers and scribes. The river swallowed him as it swallows everything.

From Asyūṭ we went to Ikhmīm, solidly built and imposing, with stones that felt older than any ruler. There were sculptures and writings of the ancients that no one could read, and images of spheres and stars. I stood before a carved wall and felt my certainty wobble. The world is vast, and God has allowed men to build in it things that outlast their names.

At Hu we stayed in a college, and I saw after the dawn prayer the recitation of a portion of the Qurʾān, followed by the devotions of Abu’l-Hasan al-Shādhilī and the Litany of the Sea. The words rose and fell like the river itself—petition and praise, fear and trust—and for the first time since leaving Alexandria I felt my heart soften without suspicion.

In Hu lived a sharīf, Abu Muhammad ʿAbdallāh al-Hasanī, whom men counted among the saintliest. I went to him for blessing, carrying my ambition like a hidden knife. When he asked what I intended, I told him I meant to make the Pilgrimage by way of the Red Sea, through ʿAydhāb and Jidda.

His face did not change. He said only, “You will not succeed in doing that on this occasion.”

The words landed in me like a stone dropped into water.

“Go back,” he continued, “for you will make your first Pilgrimage by the Syrian Road and no other.”

I wanted to argue—wanted to show him my flag, my preparations, my determination as if determination could overrule decree. But his calm made my pride look childish. I took leave of him, and outside his door the world seemed briefly thinner, as if a veil had been lifted and then allowed to fall again.

Husayn walked beside me in silence until we reached the river. Then he said, “Saints speak like men who have already arrived.”

“And yet they are still here,” I replied.

“Perhaps that is why their words carry weight,” he said.

We went on to Qinā, a small place with agreeable bazaars, where the tomb of the pious sharīf and saint ʿAbd al-Raḥīm al-Qināwī drew visitors like water draws thirst. I prayed there, and I saw in the Saifiyya College his grandson, Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad, a young man with an old man’s composure. He spoke of his grandfather’s miracles with the matter-of-fact tone of someone describing a well: it is here, it gives, it does not need your approval.

From Qinā we continued to Qūṣ, a large town furnished with all manner of good things, its gardens leafy, its bazaars elegant. Here the Saʿīd felt less like a road and more like a country. Governors resided. Preachers drew crowds. Colleges stood with their doors open.

This was Husayn’s home. His shoulders loosened as we entered, as if he had been holding himself in a stranger’s posture and could finally set it down. He led us to a lodging where women could be housed without scandal and men could sleep with their bundles under their heads. There Amina’s coughing eased, and Maryam allowed herself a sigh that sounded almost like relief.

In Qūṣ I had to decide what I had been avoiding since Cairo: whether to drag my household into the desert, or to cut myself in two.

Amina did not plead. She spoke from behind her curtain, plain as law. “I can travel by river,” she said. “I cannot travel by thirst.”

Maryam added, “If you take her into that waste, you will either bury her or turn back with shame.”

Husayn answered my questions about the road without softness. “It is a road of camels and bargains,” he said. “You hire men who will not love you. You cross a land that will not remember you. If God wills, you reach the sea. If He does not will, you become part of the sand.”

So Amina and Maryam remained in Qūṣ, under the care of the lodging’s women and the protection of Husayn’s kin. I told myself this was prudence. I did not say aloud what I did not want to hear: that a man can call a decision mercy and still be feeding his desire.

With Husayn and a small party I travelled south: al-Aqṣur with the tomb of Abu’l-Ḥajjāj, then Armant and Asnā, then Adfū. Beyond Adfū we crossed to al-ʿAtwānī and hired camels. Men of a tribe called Daghīm came with us,

faces weathered, speech quick and edged. They joked about thirst the way city men joke about taxes.

We left the Nile’s green behind, and the world narrowed to sand and stone. In that waste, the protection of the Sultan was only a phrase carried on the tongue. What kept us safe was the Arab party’s reputation, our own watchfulness, and the thin thread of God’s mercy.

At one halt we encamped at Humaithira, where the tomb of Abu’l-Hasan al-Shādhilī lay. Hyenas prowled that night. Their calls were like laughter dragged through a throat. Men rose with sticks and stones. We drove them off again and again, the darkness pressing close, the stars sharp as nails.

When we reached ʿAydhāb at last, the sea did not greet us with coolness. It lay under a harsh sun, a sheet of light too bright to look at for long. The town was a meeting of worlds: people of the Bujah, dark-skinned, wrapped in yellow blankets with narrow headbands; merchants with dust in their beards; camels kneeling like supplicants. Men drank camel’s milk as if it were the only honest thing in the place.

They told us how the town was divided—one third belonging to the Sultan, al-Malik al-Nāṣir, and two thirds to the king of the Bujah, al-Hadrabī—and how power here was a shared knife. I visited a mosque men attributed to al-Qastallānī, famous for blessing. There were holy men here too: a pious shaikh called Mūsā, and an aged man, Muhammad al-Marrākushī, who claimed descent from al-Murtaḍā of Marrākush and said he was ninety-five years of age. I listened and thought how age becomes a kind of passport.

But the sea, which had been my imagined gate to Jidda and then to the House, was closed.

On reaching ʿAydhāb we found al-Hadrabī engaged in hostilities with the Turks—the Sultan’s troops—and that he had sunk the ships. The Turks had fled before him. The harbor was not filled with masts but with absence. The wind moved over a shore that offered no departure.

We stood with our provisions piled like an accusation: sacks of dried bread, skins of water grown warm, dates, and the careful preparations of men who believed the world would cooperate.

Husayn spat into the sand. “This is what I feared,” he said, and I heard in his voice not triumph but exhaustion.

I remembered the sharīf at Hu, his calm certainty: you will not succeed. Go back.

It was impossible to make the crossing. We sold what we could of the provisions, accepting poor prices because desperation makes a buyer greedy. Then we turned our faces back toward the river.

The desert did not mock us for returning. It merely allowed us to pass again.

When we reached Qūṣ, Amina’s curtain appeared in the courtyard like a sign that a life has not yet been cut. Maryam’s face, when she saw me, did not soften. She simply nodded, as if she had expected both the failure and my return.

We embarked and sailed down the Nile in the season of flood. The water was higher, broader, a brown strength carrying branches and whole islands of reeds. Eight nights we travelled from Qūṣ to Cairo, the river doing in days what the desert had made into weeks.

I lay on the deck under a sky crowded with constellations and listened to the water slap the hull. Ambition, I saw, is not only the desire to go far. It is the desire to go far by the way you choose, as if choice were worship.

When Cairo’s sprawl rose again on the horizon, I felt no welcome. I felt only the tightening of the net.

We moored at the edge of the city. Officials came with questions and seals. Farīd was there, as he had promised, waiting in shade as if he belonged to it. He looked at my dust and at the tired slump of my shoulders and did not ask whether I had crossed.

“Only one night,” he said. “Then the Syrian road.”

I looked past him at the city that had tried to count me and failed, and at the road beyond it that would count me in another way.

That night, as the call to prayer lifted over Cairo like smoke, I began to pack again.

Chapter 9

Across the Sands, Toward Damascus

A prophecy is a rope: you can hold it, or it can pull you.

I returned to Cairo on the river as a man returns to a judge: not to be welcomed, but to be weighed. The Nile had brought me down in eight nights, in the season when the water is fat with silt and strength, and yet my body felt as if it had been carried the long way—by doubt.

Farīd al-Miṣrī met us where the boats nudge into the city's edge and the officials gather like flies. He had a clerk with him, a reed pen already wet, and the clerk looked from my face to my sandals and back again as if dirt were an argument.

"Name," the clerk said.

Farīd spoke first. "Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd Allāh," he recited, and the rhythm of it—my name in Cairo's mouth—felt both protection and surrender.

"From where?"

"From the far Maghrib," Farīd said, with the careful tone of a man offering an object he does not wish to lose. "A pilgrim."

The clerk wrote. A seal thumped onto paper. A gatekeeper waved us through with the boredom of authority. Cairo swallowed us again, and I felt the net tighten on my ribs.

Only one night, Farīd had said, and he had not asked whether I wanted it. The prophecy spoken in Upper Egypt—no Hijāz for you by ʿAydhāb; you will go first by the Syrian road—had come to sit beside my pillow like an unwanted guest. I had thought myself a man who chooses. I began to suspect that I was a man chosen.

In the lodging where we had stayed before, the courtyard smelled of damp rope and old smoke. Maryam bint Faraj took Amina up the women's stair without letting her be seen by strangers. My wife's cough had returned on the river, sharpened by night air. When I heard it through the plaster wall, it made a knot in my ambition.

I waited below like a petitioner. This, too, is a lesson: travel does not free a man from household duty; it only teaches him to carry duty at a distance.

Maryam came down with a small bundle in her hands. She did not hand it to me at once. She held it as a person holds bread when there are too many mouths.

“Dried mint. And bitter leaves,” she said. “For fever. For the stomach when the water changes. Do not pretend you are stronger than the road.”

“You speak as if the road is a creature,” I said.

“It is,” she replied. “It eats.”

Her gaze flicked toward the stairwell. Amina did not come. That absence was its own message: she had obeyed the order of the world we were in, the order that keeps women safe by keeping them unseen, and keeps men righteous by giving them choices. I did not know which part of that order I hated more.

“Will you keep her?” I asked, and the question sounded like coin.

Maryam’s mouth tightened. “Do you think I would leave her with a door that does not latch?” she said. “We have women in Cairo who know the rules. We will be quieter than we were on the river. That is how you survive in a city that listens.”

“And if I do not return quickly?”

Maryam looked at me as if I had asked whether the sun would rise. “You will,” she said. “Or you will send. Or you will be spoken of. Those are the ways men return.”

I wanted to say: I am not like other men. I had said it in Tangier, and in Tunis, and on the road to Tripoli. The road had answered each time by making me more like other men.

At dawn Farīd came, freshened as if he had slept in a room without worry. He carried a strip of paper with seals and a length of cloth—a small flag, the same practical charm we had carried south. Protection, he said, as far as protection can travel.

“You go by the Syrian road,” he said. He did not ask; he named it.

“The shaikh at Hū spoke of it,” I answered.

Farīd’s smile was thin. “Holy men speak. The Sultan’s roads also speak. They say where you may pass and where you may be robbed. Come.”

We left Cairo by the eastern way while the city still yawned. The stone of the gate was cold under my palm. Beyond it, the land opened into the Delta’s green, and the air changed: less smoke, more water, the smell of mud and growing things. The road north is not a single road; it is a braid of paths between canals, fields, and villages. Donkeys moved like slow thought. Boys with bare feet shouted as if shouting were work.

Yet even in green country the Sultan’s hand was visible. At intervals we met guards and officials who asked our names, our origins, our business. Farīd answered with the ease of a man who knows how to make suspicion bored.

By midday we reached Bilbays, a town with walls and markets and a mosque where travelers fold their fatigue into prayer. It was not Cairo, but it wore Cairo’s habits: men with ink-stained fingers, soldiers with lacquered bows, keepers of lodgings who watched newcomers the way a merchant watches weights.

In the funduq that night I sat among Syrians, Egyptians, and Maghribīs, each group clustered around its own speech. I heard my accent bounce off their laughter and return to me. In Tunis I had learned what it is to be greeted as a stranger on the Feast of Fast-breaking; in Bilbays I learned another kind of loneliness—the loneliness of being one pilgrim among thousands, each sure that his own need is the center of the world.

The next day we pressed on to al-Ṣāliḥiyya, where the last fat of the Delta thins and the land begins to show bone. There were wells here, and post-stations, and a great lodge for travelers. Men loaded water-skins as if preparing for battle. Camel-drivers argued over fodder. A clerk sat at a table and wrote names until his wrist was a rope.

Here, on the threshold, Farīd became cautious.

“Beyond this,” he said, “the road is counted by stations. Do not stray from the line of travelers. Do not trust a man who offers you water too freely. And if someone calls himself your brother, ask what village your mother is from.”

“You are not coming farther?” I asked, though I already knew.

Farīd spread his hands. “My life is in Cairo,” he said. “A man must know where his net is. Yours is not there, not anymore.”

He helped me find a place among a group leaving for Syria: pilgrims, merchants, and men who had the look of soldiers without uniforms. Some carried bows. Some carried nothing but a staff and the stubbornness of the devout. The banner of the party rose above us, and I felt again the double edge of being seen.

When Farīd took his leave, he clasped my forearm hard enough to hurt.

“Do not let Damascus make you forget Cairo,” he said.

“And do not let Cairo make you forget Damascus,” I replied, and he laughed once, surprised.

“May God write you to the House,” he said, and turned back toward the green.

I watched him go with a sudden fear that I had just stepped into a life in which no one would say my name correctly.

We entered the sands.

The first hours were merely uncomfortable: dust in the teeth, heat rising from the ground as from a furnace door. But by the second day the desert began to show its character. It does not threaten. It simply removes. It removes shade, and landmarks, and the easy lie that a man is in control. The world became a flat page, and our caravan a line of ink that could be wiped away.

At the post-stations, low forts of stone and mud, we slept close together like coins in a purse. The guards were mamluks or men hired to imitate them; they watched the horizon with the practiced boredom of those who know that danger often looks like nothing. A man with a register took our names again and again, and each time I felt myself becoming less a person and more an entry.

At night the sky was not a ceiling but a depth. Stars crowded above us like witnesses. In that light, I thought of Amina behind the plaster wall in Cairo, of Maryam’s bundle of bitter leaves, of the way my wife’s cough had sounded like a question. I told myself that leaving her was necessary. I told myself that the Syrian road was safer for a man alone. I told myself that I would return.

A man can build a whole palace out of sentences he repeats.

On one stage the caravan’s archers rode spread wide, bows unstrung but ready, their eyes scanning the ridges where “roving Arabs,” as the officials call them, might appear. I had seen such men before on the road from Gabès to Tripoli, shadows with horses. Here they were more rumor than shape, but rumor can make the heart sweat.

Once, in the gray of morning, we found the tracks of a small party that had left the road and not returned: broken pottery, a torn water-skin, the imprint of a hand in sand as if the earth itself had reached up to grasp. The leader of our group spat and made a short prayer. We did not speak of it again.

When the sands finally loosened their hold and we reached the first towns of Palestine, it was like waking from a fever. Green returned—not the watery green of the Delta, but the hard green of olives and vines. The air held the smell of stone warmed by sun, and the sea’s breath sometimes reached us, salt on the tongue.

Here the road’s story becomes quick in my memory, as if the weeks ran together like rain on a wall. I remember the kindness of a lodge-keeper who gave us sour milk without asking for coin. I remember the crowded prayers in a mosque where the men’s shoulders pressed and the words rose like one breath. I remember the way each town called itself ancient, and perhaps each one was.

I visited al-Khalīl, Hebron, where the tomb of the Friend of God is honored, and in Jerusalem I prayed in the precinct of the Noble Sanctuary, my forehead on stones that have known a thousand foreheads. To stand there is to feel both small and claimed. The city itself is a knot of devotion and dispute, and the pilgrim walks through it as through a dream that belongs to someone else.

Whether I went to every place in the order my tongue later recited them, God knows. A traveler’s days are beads; when you string them afterward, you may not remember which bead came first. But I know this: the land between Egypt and Syria taught me that holiness is not a single point on a map. It is a chain of places, and the faithful are always moving between them.

Northward the road became busier. Merchants joined us for safety, their camels laden with cloth and soap and iron goods. Soldiers appeared more often, not always in uniform but always with the confident gait of men who

can demand answers. In certain towns we were lodged in supervised houses where a steward counted heads at night. The Sultan’s peace, I learned, is a kind of accounting.

Then, one afternoon, as we topped a rise, Damascus lay before us like a garden that had learned to speak.

It was not a city sitting on land; it was land turned into a city. Orchards rolled out in every direction, a sea of green broken by domes and minarets. Water ran in channels alongside the road, and the sound of it after days of dust made my chest loosen. The Baradā, they told me, feeds the city like a mother.

We entered through gates that had seen armies and caravans and poets. Inside, Damascus breathed in layers: the spice-smell of markets, the cool damp of stone alleys, the sweet rot of fruit, the sharp tang of tanners’ vats. Men hurried as if each had an appointment with destiny. Boys carried trays of bread on their heads, weaving through crowds without spilling a crumb. Learned men in clean turbans walked with books under their arms, and for a moment my heart lifted: here, at least, scholarship was not a rumor but a living thing.

I went first to the great mosque, the Umayyad Mosque, because a traveler must pay his respects where a city keeps its soul. Its courtyard shone with stone and light. Inside, lamps hung like small moons. I prayed, and in the prostration I felt the long road behind me and the longer road ahead. I was still only at the beginning of my pilgrimage, and yet I had already begun to suspect that pilgrimage is not a single journey but a habit of leaving.

In Damascus the pilgrim does not have to search for the Hajj. The Hajj searches for him. The city is a machine built to turn men toward the Hijāz: inns, markets for camel-saddles, sellers of water-skins, scribes writing contracts, officials counting caravans. There are madrasas and khānqahs where a stranger can find a mat and a bowl of soup if he knows which door to knock on. There are also men who sell influence as if it were a spice.

That first evening I sat in a lodge courtyard with travelers from Khurāsān, Anatolia, and the Maghrib, and listened to the talk that rises wherever men prepare to leave safety: which amīr will lead the caravan, where the wells are sweet, how the Bedouin bargain for passage, which scholar will ride in which litter, who has the Sultan’s favor, who has his anger.

A Damascene with a trimmed beard and a merchant’s eyes watched me from across the courtyard. After a time he rose and came to my mat as if he had decided something.

“You are the Maghribī jurist,” he said.

I stiffened. In Cairo, being known had felt like a trap. In Damascus, it felt like bait.

“I have studied,” I answered carefully.

He nodded, as if the exact words did not matter. “The caravan needs men who can write and judge,” he said. “And men who can pay. Come tomorrow to the office by the mosque. Bring what papers you have. If you do not, you will still go—but you will go where others place you.”

He left me with that, like a stone dropped into a well.

When the call to night prayer rose over Damascus, it sounded less like warning and more like invitation. I washed, prayed, and tried to quiet the calculations in my head. I thought of Amina again, of Maryam’s bitter leaves, of Farīd’s forearm grip, of the sands that erased tracks. I had crossed from the Maghrib into the Mamlūk world and now into Syria, and each threshold had made my ambition larger and my certainty smaller.

Sleep came late. Before it took me, I saw again the Damascene’s face and heard his words: If you do not, you will still go—but you will go where others place you.

At dawn, I rose and reached for my satchel.

It was time to learn what a city like Damascus demands from a man who wants to reach the House.

Chapter 10

Damascus, Water, and the Gate

In Damascus, even the air seems rinsed and returned.

I entered Damascus on a Thursday, the ninth of Ramadān, in the year 726. The fasting month teaches a man the weight of his own saliva. Yet the road had brought me from Cairo’s heat into a city that wore water like perfume. The first thing I heard was not a shout or a hoofbeat, but the constant, patient speech of streams—thin channels chattering along the edges of courtyards, the overflow of fountains, the unseen Baradā threading its way beneath the talk of men.

They lodged me at the Mālikī college called al-Sharābishiyya. Its gate swallowed the street’s noise and left me with the scrape of reed pens and the soft quarrels of students over a line of law. I was a stranger again, and yet not a stranger: men nodded at the cut of my cloak and the shape of my accent and knew at once where I came from. “Maghribī,” they said, not unkindly, as if the word were a passport stamped on the tongue.

In Cairo I had learned that a city can be an argument made of stone and suspicion. Damascus was a different kind of proof. It did not press itself on you by force. It tempted. Its orchards lay round it like a green garment—the Ghūṭa—so close and so wide that a man might forget he was in Syria at all and imagine himself in some river-country where God had been wasteful with shade. From the flat roofs you could see that belt of trees and gardens running toward the horizon; and from within the belt you could walk for hours under vines and mulberries, with the water gliding beside you, and never lose the sense that the city was breathing through leaves.

On the first Saturday I looked for work in the streets and found instead a pause, as if a hand had been laid on the city’s mouth. In Damascus, they told me, the people do no work on that day; they go out in the afternoon to the gardens, to sit and promenade, to let the week’s heat bleed off into laughter. I went too, not out of pleasure but out of hunger for understanding. Men spread cloths on the ground, boys chased one another between the trunks, and the branches above seemed to dance. It was a holiday without drums, an ease without forgetting God, and it made Tangier feel suddenly narrow.

I should have been content, having reached the city where the Syrian caravan gathers, but contentment is a small creature: it lives only when you feed it daily. I had left Amina in Cairo, in Maryam’s hands, with a bundle of her clothes and a few coins, and a marriage that still felt like a contract tied around my wrist. I told myself I would return with the blessing of the Pilgrimage and with enough standing to steady our household. It was an honest intention. Still, on that first night in Damascus, when the lamps were lowered and the college quieted, I lay listening to the fountain in the courtyard and found myself listening for Cairo in the sound of the water. Memory is disobedient. It brought me Amina’s careful silence, Maryam’s blunt counsel, Farīd’s quick bureaucrat’s smile, and the moment I had turned away from them, saying I would return soon, as if the word soon were a coin I could pay with. I recited what I could of the Qurʾān until my chest loosened, then slept and woke before dawn with my mouth dry and my resolve intact.

A man does not fast alone in Damascus. The city fasts like a great body: the markets thin at midday, the tongues grow sharper, the tempers shorter, then the hour of breaking comes and the whole place exhales. The call to prayer rises from a hundred throats; doors open; bowls pass from hand to hand; and the poor appear as if they have been waiting all day behind the walls. Every evening, I was told, invitations move through the city the way water does—by channels and by custom.

It was in one of those channels that I met Nizām al-Dimashqī.

He found me in the courtyard of al-Sharābishiyya on my second day, watching a student wash ink from his fingers at the fountain as though he were washing sin. Nizām wore a plain turban and a clean robe that was not quite new. He carried a writing board under his arm, and his beard was trimmed in the manner of men who sell their faces as part of their trade.

“You are the jurist from the far Maghrib,” he said, as if the phrase were a title.

“A student,” I corrected him. The word jurist tastes better than student, but I had learned on the road that names grow teeth when spoken in the wrong company.

He smiled. “In Damascus, student and jurist are brothers. Both need a place at someone’s table.”

“And you offer a table?”

“I offer the map.” He tapped the writing board. “Here there are colleges, khānqahs, cells in mosques, lodgings for strangers, and each has its gatekeeper. There is also the caravan. That gatekeeper has sharper eyes than any.”

He did not say, Give me money. He did not need to. The way he stood—close enough to be useful, not close enough to be accused—was the posture of a man who expects payment as naturally as a baker expects flour.

“I have not asked for your help,” I said.

“You will.” He lowered his voice. “The Hijāz caravan is not a prayer you make alone. Men are placed—high, low, protected, exposed. A Maghribī without patronage can vanish between the camels.”

The courtyard around us was full of young men reciting under their breath. One of them stumbled over a phrase and started again. In Tangier, my father had taught me that the law is a net: it catches the careless and spares the careful. Nizām was reminding me that roads are nets too.

That evening I went out to see the Cathedral Mosque—the Umayyad—because a man who comes to Damascus and does not enter that mosque has not truly arrived. It sits in the heart of the city like a chest holding the breath. Around it, the markets twist and multiply, each trade with its own smell: leather, cumin, lamp-oil, wet wool. When I reached the mosque’s great courtyard, the stone held the day’s heat in its bones. Water flashed at the fountain. Above, the minarets cut the sky into clean pieces.

Inside, the air cooled. There were Qur’ān reciters with chests before them, and worshippers in circles, and men pacing with rosaries sliding through their fingers like small animals. The mosque held many imāms, and each school had its place as if the law itself had become architecture. I thought of the mosques of my youth, the plain walls and the familiar voices, and I felt again that shock of scale: here everything was larger, older, more confident.

After the prayer, as I was leaving, a murmur ran through the crowd near one of the doors. Men pressed together as if pulled by a rope. I saw a figure in the distance—tall, bony, speaking with his hands. Someone beside me whispered a name I had already heard in Cairo and Alexandria, spoken with either reverence or anger: Ibn Taymiyya.

“He says things that make the jurists grind their teeth,” the whisperer added, delighted, as if he were telling me of a street performer.

I did not push through to the front. The crush of bodies is a trial even when you are eager. I stood on the edge and listened to fragments. Someone repeated a sentence like an accusation; someone else answered with a verse. Then the crowd shifted, and I saw the speaker step down from a raised place and make a gesture with his foot, as though demonstrating a point with the simplest tool a man owns.

A man behind me spat, though he was fasting and had to swallow it back. “May God guide him,” he muttered.

Later, in the college, the students argued about it with the appetite of men who cannot eat. Some said the preacher had compared the descent of the Most High to a man’s descent from a step. Others insisted it was slander, and that only enemies could hear heresy in a man’s zeal. I kept my mouth shut. I had not crossed deserts to become a judge in Damascus’s quarrels. Yet the story lodged in my mind like a thorn: the fear that a man’s tongue can undo his whole life in a city where tongues are sharp and listeners eager.

Two nights after that, the Mālikī professor Nūr al-Dīn as-Sakhāwī took pity on me.

He was older than I, and his face had the smooth seriousness of men who carry books in their heads. I had attended his circle in the college, listening more to the rhythm of his reasoning than to the words themselves, for the first days in a new city always make a man half-deaf. When the lesson ended, he asked me where I lodged. I told him. He asked who my people were. I gave him the names that matter: my father, my training, my intention.

“Then you will break the fast with us,” he said, as if it were decided by law.

“I am a stranger,” I protested, because that is what a man says when he wants to be invited twice.

“In Damascus,” he replied, “the stranger is the guest of God first. The rest of us only compete for the honor.”

So I went to his house at sunset, and the door opened on smells that made my empty stomach angry: lentils simmered with spices, bread fresh from the oven, dates arranged like jewels. There were other men there—jurists,

merchants, a few poor devotees with patched robes—and all of us sat on the floor as equals for the moment of eating. When the call to prayer came, we drank water, and it tasted as if it had never known dust.

I returned for four nights. On the fifth I woke with fever. It came like a thief and left my limbs heavy, my head filled with heat. I lay in my cell, listening to the college's sounds—pages turning, boys laughing, the fountain's patient chatter—and I tried to be pious about it, telling myself that illness is a cleansing. But piety does not lower a fever.

Someone knocked. A student entered with a message: the professor had sent him to look for me.

I was ashamed, as though I had failed a test of manners. I sent back excuses, speaking of illness, of weakness. The professor would accept none of it. In the end I wrapped myself in my cloak and went to him anyway, my skin prickling under the evening breeze.

When he saw me, his sternness softened. "Your body has its rights," he said. "But so does your intention. A man on the road cannot afford to treat either lightly."

He made me sit where the air moved. He sent for a drink mixed with something bitter. I took it without asking what it was. Maryam's voice, in Cairo, rose in my memory—her hands always smelling of herbs and vinegar—and for a moment the distance between us narrowed. I swallowed and let the bitterness settle in me like medicine and like exile.

In those days I learned a truth that Damascus keeps like a treasure: the city is built not only of walls and water, but of endowments. The poor are not left to gnaw at dignity like dogs at bone. There are stipends for Qurʾān reciters, for those who live in the mosques' cells, for Sufis in convents, for keepers of sanctuaries and guardians of orchards. A stranger can survive without begging, if he is willing to accept the city's terms. Even the weddings of the poor, I was told, have their patrons, and there are gifts set aside for those who cannot make the Pilgrimage, so that longing does not rot into envy.

This was not mercy alone. It was administration—the pious kind that makes a city run. In Cairo the sultan's hand was everywhere, heavy as a seal. In Damascus the hand was lighter, but you still felt it: in the order of the markets, in the watches at the gates, in the way men spoke the name of Tankiz, the sultan's governor, with a mixture of fear and grudging praise.

And always, beneath the city’s green, the caravan’s shadow lengthened.

The days of Ramadān slid by, each one a small hunger followed by relief. Nights were filled with prayer and with talk of travel. Men who could not go on Pilgrimage spoke of it with the longing of the poor for silk. Men who would go spoke of it with the anxiety of merchants before a storm. The Hijāz road is a line drawn through human appetite: for God’s House, for profit, for reputation, for escape.

Nizām appeared again when I was well enough to walk without swaying.

“You have seen the mosque,” he said. “You have seen the colleges. Now you must see the ledger.”

He led me through streets I would not have found alone, past rows of copper and cloth, past a gate where guards lounged with the boredom of authority, into a courtyard where camels knelt like exhausted ships. Men shouted numbers. Scribes wrote. A smell of dung and sweat and straw hung in the air, thick as fog.

“This is where names become places,” Nizām said.

I watched a clerk glance at a pilgrim’s face, then at his hands, as if counting his ability to pay. Another pilgrim argued, his voice rising. The clerk did not rise to meet it. He only waited, pen poised, until the man’s anger spent itself.

“Your Mālikī college gives you a roof,” Nizām went on. “It does not give you a position in the caravan. That is the work of introductions.”

“And you sell introductions,” I said.

“I trade them,” he corrected. “Selling is shameful. Trading is the way of the world.”

He pointed with his chin toward a group of men dressed better than most. They stood near a tent whose ropes were newly tightened, as if someone expected the wind. One of them held himself like a sword: straight, polished, dangerous.

“That is Saif al-Dīn al-Jubān,” Nizām murmured, and he spoke the name with care. “Commander of the caravan. The qāḍī is Sharaf al-Dīn

al-Adhruʿī—learned, sharp. There will be professors too, and not small ones. The Mālikī professor Sadr al-Dīn al-Ghomārī intends to go this year.”

At the mention of that name, I felt something like relief. A Mālikī on the road is a familiar landmark; even when you are alone, you are not entirely without kin.

“What do I do?” I asked, and hated myself for the need in my voice.

Nizām watched me the way a man watches a coin tossed into the air. “You attach yourself to a party,” he said. “You do not walk as a loose man. There are Bedouin tribes who travel with the caravan and guard their own. There are city folk who cluster around patrons. If you have no patron, you become a servant to danger.”

“Which tribe?” I asked.

He shrugged with elegant indifference. “The one that will have you.”

That night I prayed longer than usual. Prayer is not only worship; it is also negotiation with your own pride. I asked God to give me the Pilgrimage and to keep my household safe in Cairo. I asked Him to keep me from being made ridiculous among Syrians, for a man’s reputation is a garment, and the road tears it easily. I asked Him, too, to forgive me for the small resentment that rose in me whenever I imagined Amina’s face at the window, watching the street and waiting for a husband who had turned his back.

On the morning when men said the new moon had been seen, Damascus changed its posture. Ramadān’s tightness loosened. Shopkeepers laughed louder. Children ran as if released from a net. And outside the city, the caravan gathered like a moving town.

We went out to the outskirts, to a village called al-Kiswa, where the tents spread over the ground in ranks. Camels knelt and groaned. Women’s voices carried from behind curtains. The smell of cooking rose into the clean air. Flags appeared—colors snapping in the breeze—and the sight of them made my heart jump as if I were a boy again and had stumbled upon an army.

Nizām walked beside me, close enough that others might assume he was my sponsor. Perhaps that was the point.

At the edge of the camp we met a party of Bedouin—their faces brown as leather, their eyes quick. They carried bows as casually as city men carry

staffs. One of them looked me up and down and smiled without warmth.

“Maghribī,” he said, tasting my origin as if it were a spice.

Nizām answered before I could. “A jurist. A pilgrim. Under protection.”

The Bedouin archer laughed. “Protection is a word,” he said. “Water is a thing.”

He turned away, and I watched him go, feeling the ground shift beneath me. Here, beyond Damascus’s walls, the city’s endowments were only stories. Out here, the law of the road began to speak in its own language.

Later that day, a messenger passed through the tents calling names. Men rose and followed him toward the commander’s tent. The qāḍī’s assistants moved among them like birds, quick and watchful. I saw the Mālikī professor al-Ghomārī—a man with a grave face—step forward, and people made room for him. I saw amirs in polished mail, and merchants counting their bundles as if they were counting their own ribs.

Then the messenger’s voice reached me.

“Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd Allāh,” he called, and my name, stretched in a Syrian mouth, sounded strange and official.

Nizām’s hand pressed lightly at my elbow. “Now,” he whispered.

I went.

Inside the ring of tents, the air was darker, the sun cut by canvas and poles. A clerk sat with his pen ready. Another man—broad-shouldered, with a scarf wound tight—stood beside him. His eyes were the eyes of someone accustomed to deciding who belongs.

“This one?” the broad-shouldered man asked.

“A Mālikī,” Nizām said quickly. “A pilgrim from the Maghrib. He has studied. He has intention.”

The man grunted. “Intention does not feed camels.”

“I have money,” I said, because pride is useless when you need a place.

“How much?”

I named what I could spare without leaving my household naked in Cairo. The clerk’s pen scratched. The broad-shouldered man’s gaze flicked to Nizām, and for a moment I thought I saw contempt in it—not for me, but for the whole exchange, as if he were watching city rats bargaining over crumbs.

“Who takes responsibility for him?” the man said.

Silence opened like a pit.

Then a voice from behind us, rough and amused: “We do.”

A Bedouin stepped into the shade. He wore no mail, only a simple robe, but the men around him shifted as if he had entered with weapons. His beard was streaked with grey. He looked at me as if he had already measured my worth.

“Muhammad ibn Ranʿ,” Nizām murmured, and the name struck me like the first beat of a drum.

The Bedouin amīr—this Muhammad—tilted his head. “You will ride with al-ʿAjarima,” he said. “You will eat when we eat, drink when we drink, and pay what is owed when the tribes take their due. In return, no man will touch you without touching us.”

It was an offer and a chain in one breath.

Beyond the tents, I could hear the caravan’s noise: camels moaning, men shouting, the thud of loads, the thin cry of a child. Damascus lay behind that noise now, a city of water and learned talk. Ahead was the steppe and the long emptiness, and the holy places waiting at the end like a promise that might still kill you before it blesses you.

Muhammad ibn Ranʿ held my gaze, patient as a man who knows the road will decide anyway.

“Well, Maghribī?” he said. “Are you with us?”

Chapter 11

Basalt, Bread, and the Toll

The road south of Damascus teaches a different kind of law.

I said yes.

It is easy to make a vow inside a mosque, where the floor is cool and every voice is already softened by the thought of God. It is harder to make one in a field of trampled grass where camels snort and men weigh you like a sack of grain. Yet when Muhammad ibn Ranʿ asked, “Are you with us?” there was no other sentence in my mouth that did not taste of cowardice.

“I am with you,” I said, and the words closed around my throat like a collar.

His smile did not broaden, as if he had not offered kindness but a contract. He turned without ceremony, and his people opened to take me in. I followed, careful not to look back toward the tents of the Damascenes where the talk of water and teachers still lingered, still made a man feel safe.

Nizām walked at my shoulder until we reached the edge of the al-ʿAjarima camp. Beyond it, the caravan’s flags snapped, and beyond that the city’s orchards lay like a green promise—so close you could imagine returning at dusk. Nizām’s face stayed composed, but his fingers worried the edge of his sleeve.

“You have chosen the road,” he said quietly.

“I have chosen life,” I answered, and hated the piety in my own tone.

He made a small sound that might have been laughter. “Life is chosen for you out there. Remember what I told you: do not be a loose man.”

“And you?” I asked. “Do you go?”

He shook his head. “My work is here. A man who lives by introductions cannot afford to become dust on the Hijāz road.”

He stepped back as if he had already been forgiven. “When you reach the Holy House,” he added, almost too softly, “pray for those who stay behind. It is easy to praise the traveler. It is harder to praise the one who keeps a door open.”

Then he was gone into the crowd, swallowed by Damascus’s edge, and I was left among men whose names I did not know, under a sky that seemed suddenly larger.

The al-ʿAjarima did not treat me roughly. They simply did not treat me as an equal. Their amīr sat on a folded rug, with his spear near at hand, while a thin-faced clerk—one of the caravan’s scribes—bent over a board and wrote. Money passed, counted with the same indifference as dates. A man’s piety may be sincere, but the road prefers proof.

“What do you own?” the clerk asked without looking up.

“A little,” I said.

Muhammad ibn Ranʿ spoke for the first time since my assent. “He owns his tongue,” he said. “That is the first thing the Maghribīs bring east.”

A few of the men laughed. I forced my face to remain calm. Pride is a fine cloak in a city; on the steppe it becomes a bright target.

The clerk wrote my name, my origin, my legal school—Mālikī, as if that were a breed—and the amount I could spare. He asked who would answer for me if I broke the caravan’s discipline. The question was put as if a man could be held like a camel by a rope.

“We answer,” Muhammad said, and the sentence was both shelter and threat.

When it was done, they marked me not with ink but with knowledge. From that moment, the al-ʿAjarima men watched where I walked, with whom I spoke, whether I prayed at the first call or delayed. It was a lesson I had begun to learn in Cairo and Damascus: the road has its own jurisprudence, and its judges carry bows.

At dawn, the caravan moved.

From al-Kiswa the line of men and beasts stretched until it seemed to be a second horizon laid upon the earth. The commander of the caravan, Saif al-Dīn al-Jubān, rode where the flags clustered, and around him men with whips and staffs kept the order of departure. Near them, the caravan’s qāḍī, Sharaf al-Dīn al-Adhruʿī, had his own circle—scribes, petitioners, men who could not bear to take a dispute into the desert without first wrapping it in a legal phrase.

We went south into the Ghūṭa’s last green, and then out of it, as if the city’s breath ended at a line drawn by God. The orchards fell away. The water-channels thinned. The ground hardened to the black stones of the Haurān, and the villages sat on them like bowls placed on a dark table.

The al-ʿAjarima traveled tight, as if they feared their own bodies might scatter. Their women’s tents were set behind screens, and the men’s voices carried sharp and spare, not like Damascene talk that flows for the pleasure of flowing. They watched the edges of the column, the places where a rider might appear without warning.

They spoke of “Arabs” the way townsmen speak of fire: not as a people, but as a force that arrives, takes, and vanishes.

By midday we reached al-Sanāmayn.

If Damascus is a city that persuades, al-Sanāmayn is a place that endures. There were wells, low walls, a market that flared up like a small flame for the caravan’s sake. Men sold barley, rope, cheap knives, and dried bread hard as a jurist’s heart. A child with dust in his eyelashes offered cups of water for a coin, and the sight of him made my mouth ache.

I wanted to move among the pilgrims as I had in the cities, listening for learned talk, seeking a teacher’s name. But the al-ʿAjarima held me close. Their young men—two of them, brothers by face if not by blood—shadowed me as if I were a prize goat.

“You are the Maghribī,” one said, testing the word. “Do you know spells?”

“I know law,” I replied.

“Law,” the other repeated, and spat to the side. “Law does not stop hunger.”

Their contempt was not personal. It was the contempt of men who have learned that the desert does not care about a man’s books. Yet when the call to prayer rose, they fell into lines as quickly as any city folk. They prayed with the same seriousness with which they guarded, and for a moment I felt my heart soften. God’s worship is a bridge that does not always lead to friendship, but it prevents hatred from becoming easy.

In the afternoon we moved again, and by evening we were at Zurʿā.

The land rolled gently, fields giving way to open spaces where the wind ran without obstruction. The caravan made camp with a practiced impatience. Fires blossomed; the smell of fat and smoke rose; camels knelt with the long groan of surrender. Men argued over water-skins as if over inheritance. I watched the distribution closely, because it was the distribution of life.

A man shouted that his waterskin had been pierced. Another accused him of lying. A third—older, with a scar that split his eyebrow—lifted his hand and called for the qāḍī.

Sharaf al-Dīn al-Adhruʿī arrived with his scribes like a quiet authority. He listened, asked questions, and then ruled in a tone so calm it made the angry men look foolish. The pierced skin was examined. A boy confessed he had stumbled and fallen on it. The owner’s rage turned, as rage always does, toward the easiest target.

“Do you strike a child for the desert’s cruelty?” the qāḍī asked.

The man’s mouth worked. He looked around. He saw the caravan watching. He swallowed his anger like sour medicine.

I found myself staring, half in admiration, half in disbelief. In the Maghrib, a qāḍī’s court has walls. Here his court was a circle of dust and men with knives. Yet his sentence still held. That, I thought, is what power is when it is understood: it needs little theater.

Later, Muhammad ibn Ranʿ sat with his men and ate, and they called me to share their bread. I took it with the gratitude of a man who knows his own weakness. Their food was simple—flat bread, onions, dried meat—and their talk was simpler still: who had been seen on the ridge; how many days

to Bosrā; which tribes might demand their due farther south.

“What is the due?” I asked, because a jurist’s mind is a dog that will worry a bone even when it should sleep.

Muhammad looked at me as if I had asked what water costs in a dry land. “Whatever they can take,” he said. “And whatever you can pay without dying.”

“That is not law,” I said before I could stop myself.

He smiled then, a thin line. “It is law,” he said, “because it is enforced.”

I lay awake long after the camp quieted. Above me the stars were cold, as if God had placed them not for beauty but for measurement. In Cairo I had thought of suspicion as a city’s vice. Here suspicion was the beginning of safety. I thought of Amina’s face at the window, the tight patience of her mouth. I thought of Maryam’s hands tying bundles of medicine, her eyes refusing softness so that she could be strong for a household that was not, in law, hers.

I had left them. I had not left them. In the books, a man can keep two truths in one sentence and call it subtlety. On the road it feels like tearing.

We reached Bosrā the next day.

The city rose from the dark stones like an old story told in a different language. Its walls were not as proud as Damascus’s, and yet there was a heaviness to it, a sense of long-standing, as if it had been built to outlast men’s intentions. The caravan poured into its outskirts like water into a basin. Shops woke, voices sharpened, and the smell of bread grew thick enough to be a promise.

Bosrā was the place where the Syrian caravan always halted, and we halted there for days—waiting for latecomers, for stragglers, for the men who had sworn they would come and then discovered that swearing does not conjure a camel. Each day new parties arrived: men from Damascus with clean robes and anxious faces; villagers from the Haurān with straw still in their hair; scholars with books wrapped in cloth; old men who looked as if they had already made peace with dying on the road so long as it was on the way to Mecca.

The waiting was its own ordeal. In Damascus, waiting means conversation and shade. In Bosrā, waiting meant counting provisions and listening to rumors, each one a small poison that made the tongue itch.

“They say the tribes are restless,” a pilgrim from Hims told me, leaning close as if he were sharing a secret prayer. “They say the tolls will be double.”

“They say the governor’s men are stricter this year,” said another, and nodded toward a group of soldiers who watched the market like hawks at a slaughter.

“They say—” and here the words became so many that I stopped hearing them as sentences and began hearing them as the sound of fear arranging itself.

One afternoon, the caravan’s commander called an assembly. Men gathered around the flags, pressing forward, hands raised to shade their eyes. Saif al-Dīn al-Jubān spoke of order and obedience, of the necessity of keeping the column tight, of paying what must be paid so that the caravan might live. His voice was not honeyed; it was the voice of a man who has given too many commands to expect gratitude.

Then the qāḍī spoke, and the crowd’s posture changed. Men quieted, as if the law itself had stepped among them. Sharaf al-Dīn reminded them of intentions: that the pilgrimage is worship, not trade; that quarrels on the road are a theft from one’s own reward; that those who have wealth must not humiliate those who have none. His words were true. I believed them. And yet I watched men’s hands tighten around their coins all the same.

After the assembly, Muhammad ibn Ranʿ and his people moved through the crowd with an ease that was almost insolent. Pilgrims stepped aside. Some did so with gratitude, some with resentment, some with both.

“So this is your price,” a Damascene youth said, loud enough to be heard. He had a fine cloak and a face that had not yet learned caution. “You make the road dangerous and then sell safety.”

The air around us tightened. The al-ʿAjarima men turned their heads as one. A hand fell casually to a dagger-hilt. Muhammad did not move.

I felt the moment balance on a blade. In the courts of Tangier, a man’s insult is answered with argument. Here it might be answered with blood,

and the law would arrive afterward to sweep the dust.

The Damascene’s companions tugged at his sleeve. “Leave it,” one hissed.

But the youth’s pride was young. “Is it not true?” he pressed, looking at me as if to recruit my Maliki indignation. “You are a jurist, are you not? Tell them.”

My throat dried. It was not fear alone, though fear sat in me like a stone. It was the knowledge that every answer would make me smaller: to deny would be to flatter my protectors; to agree would be to betray them; to refuse would be to confess cowardice.

Muhammad ibn Ranʿ’s eyes met mine. They were not angry. They were patient. The road will decide anyway.

I chose the safest truth.

“The road is dangerous whether you pay or not,” I said. “But a man who pays must not imagine he has bought Paradise.”

The youth flushed. “And a man who takes the money must not imagine he has bought God’s favor,” he shot back.

“Nor does he,” Muhammad said at last, and his voice was mild. “He buys fodder. He buys arrows. He buys the sleep of his women. If you do not wish to pay, go alone. The desert is generous with lessons.”

There was a murmur—approval, contempt, and something like relief, all at once. The youth’s companions dragged him away. The moment passed, but it left behind it a taste like iron.

That night, I walked the edge of the camp and watched the city’s lights flicker. Bosrā felt like the last place where walls could matter. Beyond it lay the steppe and then the deep places—pools named on maps, forts perched like teeth, valleys where tribes waited with their own accounting.

In the morning, late arrivals still came, trailing dust. One of them was a gray-bearded scholar from the Maghrib, his accent a familiar hearth in my ear. He greeted me with the warmth of kin, then glanced toward the al-ʿAjarima tents and lowered his voice.

“Is it true you have attached yourself to the Bedouin?” he asked.

“It is true,” I said.

He nodded, half sympathetic, half warning. “May God make their hands a shade for you,” he murmured. “But remember: shade can also hide a knife.”

On the fourth day, the commander ordered departure.

The caravan stirred like a great animal waking. Tents folded, loads tied, fires stamped out. Men shouted, children cried, camels complained. The flags were lifted, and the sight of them made my heart jump with the old, foolish joy—because a flag is a promise of direction, and I was a man hungry for direction.

We moved out of Bosrā’s basin and onto the open ground. Ahead, the land widened. The horizon did not offer a city to aim at, only a pale line where sky met earth.

At the edge of the last cultivated fields, riders appeared.

They did not rush us. They did not hide. They sat their horses as if they had always been there, as if the road belonged to them by God’s decree. Their faces were wrapped; their eyes were not. They held spears upright, and behind them other men drifted into view like smoke.

A murmur ran along the caravan: the toll.

The commander’s men rode forward. Words were exchanged, too far for me to hear. Coins were brought out. The riders did not smile. They only waited, patient as hunger.

Muhammad ibn Ranʿ’s men tightened around me. One of the brothers muttered, “Do not look at them too long.”

“Why?” I asked, and my voice sounded foolish even to me.

“Because they will remember your face,” he said, “and faces are counted.”

I watched anyway. I could not help it. A jurist watches; it is his nature. But as I watched the riders’ hands and the way their horses shifted, I felt a new understanding settle into my bones.

This was the road’s court. This was its law. And its verdict could be delivered at arrow-range.

Behind me, a man began to argue—loud, indignant, certain that his money made him untouchable. A second voice answered, harsher. A bowstring twanged, not loosed, but tested.

The caravan held its breath.

And I, who had thought myself a seeker of holy places, realized that before God would judge my intention, the desert would judge my behavior.

Chapter 12

The Pool of Zīzā

Bosrā taught me the first lesson of the Syrian road: that even piety travels on a timetable.

For four nights the caravan sat outside its walls as if anchored, the tents pitched in ranks on the hard earth, the beasts kneeling with their legs folded like men in prayer. Latecomers trickled in from Damascus, faces drawn by haste and bargaining. They came with bolts of cloth stuffed into saddlebags, jars of oil, sacks of cracked wheat; they came with excuses and the smell of ink still on their fingers. A pilgrim is never only a pilgrim. He is a purse. He is a belly. He is a rumor of coins.

I walked the market that sprang up as naturally as weeds. Hawranis drove carts of onions and bunches of grapes; women stood apart, veiled, selling flatbread and sour milk through their sons; smiths hammered at tent pegs and mended rings of chain. Above it all rose the ancient stones of the town, and I was shown, as others were shown, the place where the Prophet’s she-camel had couched in the days before revelation, and the great mosque that later men built over that remembered kneeling. I touched the cool stone and felt, for a moment, as if my own dust might be accepted into a longer story.

But chains bind as well as connect. I had chosen, in Damascus, to travel under the protection of the bedouin called al-ʿAjarima, and that choice followed me like a shadow in noon light. Their amir, Muhammad ibn Ranʿ, rode when he pleased and dismounted when he pleased. His men moved with the loose confidence of those who do not fear distance because distance is their house. They were not ragged thieves of the stories told by frightened townsmen. They were organized: horsemen with lances, camel-men with bows, scouts whose eyes flicked over the horizon like hawks. The caravan’s archers nodded to them with wary respect.

Obligation was the price of my safety. I was a jurist, trained to believe that law is a wall: firm, straight, and higher than any man’s whim. On the road I learned that law is often a rope. It holds if enough hands pull together. It snaps if the hands let go.

On the morning we broke camp, the commander’s heralds beat their drums and called the ranks to order. Camel bells answered in a scattered chorus. The qāḍī of the caravan, Sharaf al-Din al-Adhruʿi, was visible for a moment amid his attendants, his turban clean despite the dust, his gaze taking the measure of men the way a judge measures testimony. The commander, Saif al-Din al-Juban, kept his own counsel, surrounded by mamlūks and clerks. It was said that he had power enough to make a man vanish into a fortress cell with a single gesture; it was also said that, on this road, even commanders negotiated.

We left Bosrā behind as the light strengthened, the land opening into a rougher country. Behind us lay cultivated fields and the last easy shade of orchards; ahead lay distances that did not care how learned a man was. The road gathered itself into a single ribbon of hoofprints and wheels. Dust rose, settled, rose again. I wrapped my face and breathed through cloth, tasting grit with every word of dhikr.

I thought of Cairo. It came to me not as the city of minarets, but as a room with low light: Amina’s hands moving over a bowl, Maryam’s voice correcting a servant’s mistake, the quiet negotiations of women’s spaces that a man only ever sees at the edges. I had left them there with as much order as I could arrange, yet order is a fragile thing when you walk away from it. I told myself that my intention was pure, that I sought the House of God, that the pilgrimage would polish my heart. Then the next thought rose like a bitter herb: if I died on the road, what would my intention feed?

* * * At midday, after long hours of measured marching, we reached the Pool of Zīzā.

It was less a pool than a promise: water gathered in a hollow of earth, edged by reeds and trampled into mud by the feet of men and beasts. From a distance the surface looked calm, a small mirror laid down by a merciful hand. Up close it was a battlefield of thirst. Camels surged forward, their drivers shouting, striking with switches. Water-carriers dragged their great leather tanks into place. Men with rank claimed space as if rank could command water to rise. The poor pressed in behind them, eyes fixed on the

dark shine and the wet mouths of animals.

The commander’s men imposed a kind of order. They marked out lanes. They stationed guards. They threatened the impatient with the flat of a blade. The qāḍī’s attendants cried reminders: do not trample your brother; do not steal another man’s place; fear God. For a time it worked, because the sight of armed authority still had weight this close to Syrian towns.

Then the first riders appeared on the rim of the hollow — half a dozen at first, then more, spreading like ink across paper. They did not carry the caravan’s banners. Their horses were lean and fast, and their faces were wrapped against dust. They watched the chaos at the water as if it belonged to them.

I saw Muhammad ibn Ranʿ lift a hand, and his men shifted, bows moving from slung ease to ready angle. I could not hear what was said at first. I only saw the changes in posture: the caravan guards tightening their line, the bedouin riders leaning forward in their saddles, the sudden silence of those who know that violence announces itself before it arrives.

A toll, I learned. Another tribe claimed the right to take payment for passage through a tract of open ground ahead. They spoke the language of “protection,” and I understood, with a small cold clarity, that protection can mean two opposite things depending on who holds the arrows.

The commander sent an officer. The qāḍī sent a scribe. Gifts were brought: cloth, a measure of grain, a purse that clinked. The riders refused the first offer. Voices rose. One of the bedouin drew his sword half a handspan and let it flash in the sun — not a strike, only a reminder. A caravan archer nocked an arrow and kept it pointed at the ground, as if to say, I am patient, but I am not unarmed.

In the middle of this, a man shoved past me and tried to force his waterskin under a camel’s muzzle. The camel jerked, the skin tore, and the man cursed loud enough for the angels to blush. The absurdity of it — piety and foul language, Qurʾān and greed, all swirling in the same muddy ring — made my stomach twist.

Muhammad ibn Ranʿ turned his head and looked at me. His eyes were neither kind nor cruel; they were assessing. He said a few words, low, and one of his men held out a small pouch. I understood. This negotiation was not only between leaders. It was between every protected man and the

world that could swallow him. If I wanted to be under their shadow, I would have to pay into the shadow.

I hesitated — just a breath. In that breath my father’s house in Tangier rose in memory: the certainty of rules, the clean lines of inheritance, the comfort of a court where men argued in measured phrases and the strongest weapon was a well-placed proof-text. Then a bedouin rider laughed, showing teeth, and the present snapped back into focus.

I loosened my own purse and placed coins into the pouch. Not many — enough to be seen, not enough to ruin me. The man who received them did not thank me. He simply nodded, as if I had done what any sensible creature does when it finds water: it drinks.

By late afternoon the toll was settled, or postponed, or transformed into a promise that would be demanded again in another place. The riders melted away as they had come. The pool stank of churned mud and sweat, but it had given life. We prayed, we ate quickly, and the caravan moved on.

That night, camped on rough ground beyond the pool, I lay awake listening to the small noises that make a wilderness: a camel groaning as it rose, a man clearing his throat, wind worrying the edge of a tent. I asked myself what I had purchased with those coins. Safety? Perhaps. But also silence. A man who pays for protection loses the right to speak loudly about principle.

At dawn we reached al-al-Lajjūn.

There was running water there, a thin stream threading through stones as if it were ashamed of its own generosity. The caravan greeted it with gratitude that looked almost like reverence. Women and servants — those few who travelled with the rich — washed cloth at the edges while guards watched the horizon. Men filled skins, counted them twice, and tied them with extra cord. The talk was of al-Karak now, the famous fortress ahead, inaccessible as a dream and as necessary as bread.

The landscape changed in degrees that the body feels before the mind names them. The green thinned. The earth rose into harsher shapes. Here and there a ruined tower stood like a broken tooth. I learned to read the road in signs: when the birds vanished, water was far; when the wind came warmer from the south, dust would follow; when the bedouin grew quiet, something was watching.

I rode for a time beside an older man among al-ʿAjarima, his beard streaked with grey, his hands scarred. He spoke of al-Karak as one speaks of a powerful neighbor — respect mixed with resentment. “Stone,” he said, patting the air as if he could feel the fortress from miles away. “Stone that demands.” He did not explain what it demanded, because I already knew: coin, obedience, time.

* * * By afternoon the fortress appeared.

It rose on its height like a ship made of rock, its walls plunging down into ravines. Men called it the Castle of the Raven, and from a distance it did seem perched, dark and watchful. The sight of it drew a murmur through the caravan: some in awe, some in relief, some with a hunger that was not for food but for the certainty of walls.

We did not enter. The caravan halted outside, at a place called al-Thaniyya, a slope where tents could be pitched and beasts could be watered and counted. The commanders said we would remain four days to prepare for the wilderness ahead. Four days: time enough for late arrivals to catch up, time enough for men to scheme, time enough for the road to remind you that it owns you.

On the first evening, as the light bled out of the sky, a delegation came down from the fortress or from the tribal camp nearby — I could not tell which, and perhaps it was both. They arrived not as beggars but as men who assumed the right to ask. Their spokesman wore a sword, but he spoke with the smoothness of a merchant.

He greeted the commander with exaggerated courtesy, praised the piety of the pilgrims, and then began to list what was “customary”: so many dinars for the passage; so much grain; so many lengths of cloth; a gift for the fortress gate; a gift for the tribe whose pasture we would cross; a gift, he added with a smile, for the men who would refrain from mischief in the dark.

It was not a demand delivered with shouting. That was what made it dangerous. It was delivered as if it were law.

The commander’s jaw tightened. The qāḍī’s eyes narrowed. The men around them shifted their weight. Somewhere behind me a camel bellowed, long and mournful, as if it understood exactly what was being asked of us.

I stood at the edge of the gathering, close enough to see, far enough not to be noticed. My status in this world was uncertain: a jurist, yes, but a foreign jurist; a pilgrim, yes, but a pilgrim under bedouin protection; a man with learning, but learning that could not stop an arrow.

Muhammad ibn Ranʿ’s men were present, not in the front but as a ring. One of them glanced at me and tapped his belt, where a dagger sat like a punctuation mark. The message was plain: Remember whose shadow you are in.

The negotiation began. The commander offered less. The spokesman insisted on more. The qāḍī spoke of justice, of the sanctity of pilgrims, of God’s disapproval of extortion. The spokesman agreed with every word and demanded the customary payment anyway. I watched and felt my certainty crumble in a slow, humiliating way. In books, arguments conclude. On the road, arguments circle.

And then, as if to sharpen the point, a shout came from the edge of camp: a scuffle, a cry, the thud of feet. A young pilgrim — Syrian, by his accent — had been caught trying to slip away with a waterskin that was not his. Hands grabbed him. Someone struck him. The offender and the offended both shouted, each claiming righteousness. The spokesman from al-Karak turned slightly and let his smile widen. Chaos, his expression said, is why you need us.

My throat tightened. I thought, again, of Cairo — of Maryam’s steady competence, of Amina’s quiet endurance. They had their own negotiations, their own dangers, in a city that could swallow women in different ways than a desert swallows men. And here I was, measuring dinars against dignity.

That night the delegation left with promises but no final agreement. The commander’s tent was a knot of whispered counsel. The qāḍī’s attendants copied lists and counted provisions by lamplight. Al-ʿAjarima lit their fires and watched the dark beyond the tents as if it were a living thing.

I went to Muhammad ibn Ranʿ’s fire.

It was a simple circle of flame, fed with brush and patience. Men sat close, their faces orange and shadowed. The smell of roasted meat mixed with the smell of horse-sweat. Someone made room for me without a word. Muhammad ibn Ranʿ looked up, and for the first time I saw the weariness

under his authority: the endless calculation of a man who must keep his people alive between forts and wells.

I said what a client says when he wants protection without admitting fear. I spoke of the road ahead, of the wilderness that begins beyond the last Syrian town, of my desire to reach the House in safety. He listened, then answered with the plainness of the desert.

“Safety,” he said, “is a pact. You take our name, and we take your burden. You will not shame us, and we will not abandon you. But if knives come in the night, jurists do not argue. They hold fast.”

The men around the fire watched me. In their eyes I felt my own life reduced to something simple: a body that could be kept or lost.

I wanted to say that I was a man of law, that my hands were made for books, that my intention was worship. I wanted to say that God is the true Protector, and that all these pacts are dust. But the road had already taught me that pious phrases, spoken at the wrong moment, can be a kind of arrogance.

So I nodded.

And as I did, a runner came stumbling into the firelight, breath ragged, eyes wide. He spoke quickly to Muhammad ibn Ranʿ. I caught only fragments: men in the dark beyond the slope; a quarrel in the commander’s lines; a warning that the “customary” payment would be demanded before dawn, with more than words.

Muhammad ibn Ranʿ rose. Around him, bows were lifted, straps tightened, blades checked with practiced fingers. The quiet of the camp changed shape. It was no longer the quiet of resting pilgrims. It was the quiet before a storm.

In the thin light of the stars, with al-Karak’s black walls watching from their height, I understood at last what it meant to leave Syrian farmland behind. The desert does not ask what you intended. It only asks what you will pay.

And somewhere beyond the slope, in the dark that swallowed the road south, an arrow sang once through the air — close enough that every man at the fire turned his head toward its whisper.

Chapter 13

The Pass of al-Sawān

The fortress of al-Karak watched us like a black bird perched on stone.

For four days we lay outside its walls at the place called al-Thaniyya, tents spread in ranks on hard ground. Above us the castle rose—one gate cut through living rock, shadow falling early as if to remind us that men could still build something the open sky could not undo. Below us the road thinned into scrub and scattered stone. Beyond that, the wilderness waited—silent, patient, without walls.

The camp did not march, so it had to be held together by sound. The commander’s drums beat at dawn and again at midday. Heralds walked the lines shouting that water-skins must be mended now, not when thirst had already begun. Clerks with ink-stained fingers counted beasts and bundles, as if numbers could keep chaos at bay. Mamlūks moved around the commander’s pavilion like a fence of steel.

The qāḍī, Sharaf al-Dīn al-Adhruʿī, was less visible than in Bosrā, but his name cooled arguments. “Take it to the qāḍī,” men said when tempers rose over a camel-strap, a borrowed pot, a patch of shade. Not because they loved justice, but because they feared delay. Delay, here, was its own punishment.

Yet law on this road was never only the qāḍī’s tongue. It was also the bowstring, the scout’s eyes, the rumor of roving Arabs who rode without banners and asked no questions. It was, above all, the bedouin’s knowledge of where water lies deep in the ground and where it is only a lie of light.

I had bound myself to that knowledge when I entered the camp of the al-ʿAjarima.

Their amīr, Muḥammad ibn Ranʿ, came to me on the second evening at al-Thaniyya. The sun lowered behind the ridge and the castle’s stones turned the color of old blood. He sat without ceremony on a rolled mat; his men crouched in a loose half-circle, bows laid across their knees as if even rest must be guarded.

“You are quiet,” he said.

“I am thinking,” I answered.

“Thinking is for towns,” he said. “Out here, the desert thinks for you.”

My pride wanted to argue—that intention shapes an act as surely as action shapes a day. But the road had already taught me its harsh arithmetic: a man can be right and still be dead.

“I am thinking about water,” I said.

That pleased him. “Water is not a prayer,” he replied. “It is a debt.”

He nodded toward the men working by a small fire, rubbing oil into cracked leather, stitching torn seams with coarse thread. “When we leave Maʿan,” he said, “there is no market to save you. There is only what you brought, and what your people will share with you.”

“My people,” I repeated, and heard the word scrape.

“You said you were with us,” he said simply.

I thought of Cairo—of Amina’s quiet after prayer, of Maryam turning scarcity into order with a few sharp decisions. I had left them behind with promises that sounded like certainty. On the edge of the desert, I felt how thin a man’s promises can be.

“What do you require?” I asked.

“For the wilderness,” he said, “we carry in common. If you are with us, you do not hoard. If you hoard, you are alone.”

The sentence sat between us like a stone.

“I will not hoard,” I said.

He reached for my waterskin and tugged the strap, testing it. The gesture was small, but it felt like a seal pressed into wax.

“Good,” he said. “Then when the desert takes from you, you will call it survival.”

* * * On the fourth day at al-Thaniyya, the camp smelled of leather and damp rope. Water-carriers sold a little water even here, where we still lay under a fortress’s shadow. A poor pilgrim handed over his last copper coins for a single filling and drank half at once, unable to wait. His friend cursed him, and I saw the future: thirst will make brothers into judges.

At midday the commander’s clerks came through our quarter calling for counts.

“How many camels? How many waterbags? How many mouths?”

Some men lied. Others lied badly. The pens moved all the same. Precision is a kind of magic performed against fear: a man believes that if he can count his skins he can count his days.

When the call came to break camp, it did not feel like release. It felt like surrender.

Drums rolled. Flags lifted. The caravan gathered itself and moved out. I watched the Castle of the Raven recede behind us until it was only a dark point on the ridge, then nothing.

We marched toward Maʿan.

By dusk we saw palms—thin at first, then thicker. Maʿan was not a city. It was a last held breath. Many houses stood empty, doors warped, roofs sagging; dogs moved through alleys like ghosts. Yet there were wells, and because of those wells the place held power over us greater than al-Karak’s walls.

Here, the caravan’s hierarchy became a staircase you could feel beneath your feet.

First the commander’s men went to the wells, then the attendants of the great amīrs. Merchants bargained for waterbags with the same smooth tongues they used for silk. Jurists with bundles of books waited with forced patience. The poor stood at the edge and tried to look as if patience could make water appear. Some pressed forward anyway and were shoved back with curses. No one drew swords. The desert had not yet stripped us of restraint. But the anger was there, coiled.

Muḥammad ibn Ranʿ’s men did not wait. They filled their skins quickly and did not linger to enjoy Maʿan’s meager shade. This was not a place to live. It was a place to prepare.

I went to the wells with my own skin. A water-carrier with arms roped by labor glanced at it and said, not as praise but as warning, “Fill it slow. New leather swells. Let it drink before you do.”

Then his eyes flicked south, as if he could see beyond the palms. “And when you descend al-Sawān,” he added, “hold your tongue. The desert listens.”

That night I lay awake under a sky that felt closer than any ceiling. Somewhere a man wept softly—fear, or repentance, or both. I remembered the proverb men repeat on this road as if it were a charm: he who enters the desert is lost, and he who leaves it is born. I had once believed birth was a single moment. Now I suspected it is a long labor.

At dawn we left Maʿan.

* * * The Pass of al-Sawān is not a gate with doors. It is a wound in the land.

We climbed first, a slow pull over rock that gave no spring beneath the foot. Then the road tipped downward and the world fell away. Flints covered the slope like spilled teeth. Camels clicked and slipped; men walked beside them, leading by ropes, speaking softly as if to calm beasts or themselves. When a camel stumbled and its load shifted, men surged forward to steady it. A fall here could mean more than bruises. A broken waterbag is a sentence.

Halfway down I looked up despite myself.

The Maghrib was not behind me as a place. It was behind me as a habit—my expectation that a town would appear around the next bend, my old ease with markets and walls. The landscape before me had no bends, only distance. The pass opened onto a stony plain that ran into the horizon like a promise made by someone who does not care whether you can keep it.

A man near me murmured the proverb again. Others answered as if in prayer: lost, born. Dust filled my mouth. I tasted fear.

We descended into the wilderness.

The first nights had no village lights, no trees, no walls—only tents pressed low and the dark shapes of beasts kneeling like prayerful men. Stars burned hard points. Water was measured in mouthfuls. A cup came forward; a skin tilted; a third man watched, counting drops as if they were dinars. Arguments sparked over nothing, then died quickly. No one wanted to begin the wilderness with hatred. But hatred grows where thirst lives.

The second day the heat struck like a hand. Men spoke less. Words require moisture. My tongue stuck to my palate and my head rang with the sound of my own breathing. I wanted to drink. I did not. The first day of thirst is a test of pride; the third is a test of God.

After a march of two days we halted at Dhāt Ḥajj.

There were no houses, no dome, no wall—only a slight depression in the earth and the promise of subterranean water-beds. Promise is dangerous. It makes men desperate.

They dug.

At first the digging sounded like ordinary labor—shovels biting, men grunting, rope rasping on stone. Then the sound changed. It became the sound of a crowd with one desire.

A man in a patched cloak tried to push his way to the front with a bowl lifted like a plea. Someone struck it from his hands and the bowl skittered over the stones. He lunged after it, and another man’s elbow caught him in the jaw. For a heartbeat I thought knives would flash. A mamlūk stepped in with the flat of his sword and separated them as a shepherd separates rams. The poor man’s mouth bled; he swallowed and stared at the bucket as if it were his only judge.

A rope went down into the first narrow mouth in the ground; a bucket came up with dark water tasting of earth. Men drank anyway. Someone shouted that the bed was deep, that there was more. More bodies crowded. A bucket spilled. A hand slapped another hand away. Voices rose—oaths, curses, pleas.

The qāḍī’s attendants pushed in, trying to make space, trying to keep order. The commander’s mamlūks followed with hard faces and hands on swords. The bedouin watched with a stillness that felt like mockery.

I stood back, my stomach twisting. I had never seen men stripped so quickly of politeness—men who looked at water as if it were inheritance.

Muḥammad ibn Ranʿ gripped my arm. “Stay,” he said.

“I must fill my skin,” I protested.

“You will,” he said. “When it is time.”

His grip was firm. I realized, with a jolt of humiliation, that I was being protected from my own weakness. If I had gone forward, I would have shoved and begged like the rest. And then what would my learning have been worth?

The al-ʿAjarima waited until the first frenzy burned itself down. Then they moved. Men stepped aside. A bow does not need to be drawn for its meaning to be understood. Their buckets rose and fell. When my turn came, one of Muḥammad ibn Ranʿ’s men filled my waterskin as if it were his own.

A gift? No. A demonstration.

From Dhāt Ḥajj we went on to Wādī Baldah, a riverbed with no water, only stones smoothed by the memory of flow. Men spoke in low voices about Tabūk and its spring, as if it were paradise. I did not correct them. A man needs his illusions to keep his feet moving.

The next march brought us to Tabūk.

Palms appeared again and the smell of water came on the wind. Men hurried without meaning to. Even the bedouin’s faces changed, as if they too felt gratitude.

Tabūk is a place touched by the Messenger of God—God bless and give him peace. They told me, as we approached, that its spring once yielded only a scant supply, until the Prophet used it for his ablutions, and then it flowed abundantly and has continued to do so. On the edge of thirst, miracle feels less like argument and more like necessity.

When we reached the camping ground, the Syrians performed their custom. Men took up weapons, unsheathed swords, charged through the camp with a shout, and struck the palm trunks with their blades, crying that thus the Apostle of God had entered it. Steel rang on wood. For a moment the camp looked like madness. Then it settled into laughter and

breathless relief.

Ritual turns terror into something a man can carry.

We encamped near the spring, and the first drink of clear water felt like resurrection.

For four days we remained at Tabūk—to rest, to water the beasts, and to lay in supplies for the fearsome wilderness ahead.

This was where the water-carriers became kings.

They took up their positions along the spring with tanks made of buffalo hides laid on the ground like great dark reservoirs. From these they watered camels and filled the great waterbags sewn of many skins and the ordinary waterskins that hung at every pilgrim’s side. Coins passed from hand to hand. The work never stopped.

Each amīr, each person of rank, had his private tank—his own store from which his camels and his retinue were watered and their bags filled without waiting. The rest of the people bargained for a fixed sum: this much to water a camel, this much to fill a skin, this much for an extra bag if you could afford the future.

I watched the poor count their coins with trembling fingers. I watched a man sell his blanket for one additional filling. I watched a scholar in a clean turban pretend not to see a beggar’s cracked lips.

In Tangier I learned that charity is a pillar. On the road, I learned that charity is a choice made against fear. Many men do not choose it.

On the last evening before departure, Muḥammad ibn Ranʿ came to my fire. The camp was quieter now; the first frenzy of water had passed, replaced by the heavy knowledge that tomorrow we would leave the spring behind.

“From here,” he said, “we go night and day. We do not linger. We do not scatter. And you—” His eyes held mine. “You do not drift.”

He drew from his pouch a strip of cloth dyed a dull red and held it out. “Tie this to your saddle,” he said. “So my men will know you in dust. So if you fall behind, they will drag you forward.”

It was not a talisman. It was a leash.

My pride rose, hot and useless. “I am a man of law,” I began.

“You are a man of water,” he said quietly. “The desert does not care what you studied.”

I held the cloth. Rough. Smelling of dye and sweat. I thought of Cairo again—of Amina’s quiet, of Maryam’s sharp hands making order from scarcity. I thought of the House of God, still weeks away.

Then I tied the cloth to my saddle.

That night the spring of Tabūk ran in the darkness, a sound like whispered mercy. I lay awake listening, knowing that at dawn we would leave it behind.

When the drums beat in the black before dawn and the caravan began to move, I looked back once at palms and water.

Then I faced the night road, and the wilderness closed behind us like a door.

Chapter 14

The Valley of al-Ukhaidir

At Tabūk, the road learned to run.

The spring lay there like mercy laid open in the sand. We had crossed the pass and the stony emptiness beyond Maʿan, and when the palms of Tabūk finally rose ahead of us, men loosened their jaws as if they had been holding their breath since al-Karak. The first taste of water was not sweet - it was simply alive.

The Syrians had a custom at Tabūk. When the tents were set and the commander’s pavilion planted, a shout went down the lines and men seized their weapons. Blades came out of their sheaths with that honest, hungry sound of iron. Then they charged through the camp, striking at palm-trunks and calling out that this was how the Messenger of God - God bless him and grant him peace - had entered this place. It was half play and half prayer, a thing to turn trembling into motion. I watched it and understood: on this road, even joy must take a martial form.

I had imagined that pilgrims would enter holy places with lowered eyes. In the Maghrib we are taught to hide devotion like a coin in the sleeve. But the Syrian road had its own manners. Men displayed courage the way they displayed banners, because courage in a crowd can be contagious. Part of me judged them for it; part of me understood. A caravan is not a monastery. It is a city on hooves, and a city survives by noise as much as by law.

The commander’s authority was visible even in small things. His mamlūks kept a clear circle around his pavilion, and scribes with ink-stained fingers moved between groups, counting beasts and loads as if numbers could bind sand. When disputes rose - over a place at the spring, over a camel that bit another camel’s ear, over a waterskin thought to have been stolen - men spoke the name of the qāḍī, Sharaf al-Dīn al-Adhruʿī, the

way drowning men speak of shore. Not because the qāḍī could summon water, but because he could summon delay, and delay was death.

The spring itself had a story, and the story had teeth. The elders said that it had once been scant, and that when the Prophet came here on his expedition, he made ablution with it and God opened it wider. Whether the water ran because of miracle or because of rock and vein beneath the earth, it ran now, and no pilgrim cared to argue with gratitude. We drank, we washed, we filled skins until their seams groaned.

We remained four days. Those days were not rest; they were preparation shaped like rest. A camp of thousands learns quickly what will kill it. Leather was checked, stitching tightened, camel-loads shifted, and arguments were settled early because later there would be no strength left for anger. The qāḍī’s name moved through disputes like a cold hand: not because men loved judgement, but because they feared delay.

At Tabūk, the water-carriers became kings. They laid down their reservoirs - great tanks of hides - and from these they watered camels and filled the rawiyā, the enormous waterbags sewn of many skins, and the ordinary qirba that hung at a man’s side like a second lung. Coins clicked from palm to palm. The work never stopped. Even at night the line moved, shadows in a circle around mercy.

Each amīr, each man of rank, had his private tank. His camels and his retinue drank without waiting, and their waterbags were filled as if the future could be purchased outright. The rest of the people bargained for a fixed sum: this much to water a camel, this much to fill a skin, this much again if you wanted an extra bag to silence your fear. In Tangier I learned that charity is a pillar. On the road I learned that charity is a choice made against thirst.

On the second day at Tabūk I tried to buy an extra filling for my own skin, thinking of the long stage ahead. A water-carrier with narrow shoulders and quick eyes offered his measure. He did not flatter me with piety; he spoke like a tradesman. 'Two dirhams for the camel, one for the skin,' he said, and when I hesitated he tipped his chin toward the amīrs’ private tanks. 'Rank drinks first.' His name was Ilyās. At the time he was only another man counting coins, but I remember his hands: always wet, always sure.

That evening, when the camp quieted, I sat outside my small tent and watched men repair leather by lamplight. The smell of warmed hide, of smoke, of camel sweat, mixed with the faint sweetness of the palms. Somewhere a reciter chanted verses about the people of Thamūd, and his voice made the night feel narrower. I thought of my father’s house in Tangier, the clean scratch of reed-pen on paper. I had set out to become a pilgrim; I was becoming, instead, a student of hunger.

My own place in the camp was not my own. I moved within the shadow of al-ʿAjarima, the Bedouin whose protection had become my cord and my collar. Their amīr, Muḥammad ibn Ranʿ, rode with the certainty of a man who could turn an empty horizon into a tollhouse. His men watched me the way one watches a valuable beast: not cruelly, not kindly - possessively. They had taken my name into their account, and in return I wore their mark.

It was not only for my safety. It was for my standing. A lone Maghribī jurist in a Syrian caravan is a leaf on the wind; a Maghribī under a recognized banner becomes something with weight. I told myself that this was prudence, that God loves the prudent. Yet whenever I touched the cord around my camel’s neck, I felt the tug in my own throat.

On the fourth evening, the commander’s heralds walked the ranks and shouted until their throats were raw: mend your waterskins now, not when you smell death. Men counted their skins the way traders count dinars. The desert ahead had a name among them - ‘the feared wilderness’ - and every syllable of it tasted of sand. I could not help thinking of Cairo, of Amina’s quiet hands, of Maryam’s steady gaze. I had left them behind as if the world would hold its breath for my return. The world does not wait.

Before dawn on the day of departure, Muḥammad ibn Ranʿ’s men came to check our lashings. They touched the knots on my saddle, tested the seam of my waterskin, and said nothing. When they found a weak stitch, they fixed it without asking. The kindness of it unnerved me more than roughness would have. It reminded me that protection is a net: it saves you from falling, and it also holds you where you are.

We set out from Tabūk and pushed on speedily night and day. It was not piety that drove us into the darkness; it was fear. By day the sun hammered the camp into stupor, and by night the cold bit through wool and pride alike, but the command was the same: keep moving. The wilderness was a

thing that could be offended by slowness.

The night-march is a different world. The caravan became a long, breathing animal, its head hidden beyond a ridge, its tail vanishing into a sea of black. The only stars were those above us and those at ground-level: the little red eyes of lanterns bobbing at each beast’s flank. Camels complained with wounded dignity. Men muttered prayers as if their lips were stitching them into life.

Al-ʿAjarima moved through this darkness with the ease of men who had been born into it. One of them - a young rider with a scar that cut his eyebrow in half - rode close enough that I could smell the smoke in his cloak. ‘Keep your eyes on the rope,’ he said, meaning the rope that linked my camel to theirs. ‘If you lose it, you lose the road.’

Halfway through the wilderness between Tabūk and the next halts, the land dropped into a deep valley. The slopes rose high and harsh on either side, and in places the stone looked as if it had been burned and cooled in anger. Men called it al-Ukhaidir. The name means ‘little green place,’ but there was no green, only shadow and rock. Someone near me whispered the words as if they were a charm: it might well be the valley of Hell. God preserve us from it.

Here the air felt trapped. The wind did not pass over you; it pressed against you, as though the valley resented breath. Even the animals quieted. Our lanterns threw light against cliff-faces and made them seem nearer than they were, walls closing in. I heard the scrape of camel-hooves on stone and thought of a pen being sharpened - the road taking notes on every footfall.

Near one of the rocks, men slowed. Not because the place was safe, but because the story nailed them there. A water-carrier from Aleppo - I had seen him at Tabūk, his hands always wet and his eyes always counting - lifted his lamp and leaned close to the stone. ‘It’s written here,’ he said, and when he spoke his voice echoed oddly, as if the valley repeated and mocked it.

His name, he told me in a quick, practical way, was Ilyās. He sold water by measure and kept his own skin close as a mother keeps a child. He was not one of al-ʿAjarima, but he had learned to survive among men who took survival as a right. He traced letters with a finger blackened by lamp-soot and read, stumbling over the carved lines.

‘One year,’ he said, ‘the pilgrims suffered severe distress here. The samūm wind blew - poison, like breath from a furnace. Their water dried up. The price of a drink rose to a thousand dinars.’ He laughed once, a sound without mirth. ‘A thousand. But both seller and buyer perished. That’s what the rock says. That is what the valley remembers.’

I stared at the stone, at the grooves cut by some desperate hand. A thousand dinars for a mouthful. In the markets of Cairo a thousand dinars could buy a house; in this valley it could not buy one honest breath. I imagined a man clutching his coins, lips cracked, bargaining with another man whose own tongue was swelling. I imagined the greed that could survive until the last sip, and the justice that arrived afterward, silent and complete.

‘That was not our year,’ I told myself, as if the calendar were a shield. Yet the valley did not care what year it was. It cared what you carried, what you could pay, what you could endure. The story was a warning, and warnings on this road were not meant to be comforting. They were meant to keep you moving.

We climbed out of al-Ukhaidir and the night opened again, wide as a mercy that did not promise kindness. The caravan pressed on. Men drank by mouthfuls, counting swallows. Ilyās passed along the line with his measures, and more than once I saw a pilgrim look at him with hate and then with pleading, as if those were the only two emotions thirst allowed.

At one halt the amīr’s men called me over. Their leader was older, his beard threaded with grey, his eyes pale as washed stone. He spoke softly, which was worse than shouting. ‘You travel with us,’ he said. ‘You drink with us.’ He lifted a waterskin and held it between us like a contract. ‘Remember whose rope you hold.’

It was not an invitation. I took the skin, wet my lips, and returned it with my head bowed. In my schooling we spoke of obligations: contracts, oaths, rights. In the wilderness obligation is simpler and heavier. It is a hand on your shoulder in the dark. It is the knowledge that your safety has a price, and the price is never paid only in coin.

When dawn came, it came without tenderness. The horizon whitened, then flared. Men’s faces appeared again as if they were being pulled up from water. We halted at a vast basin, the Pool of al-Muʿaẓẓam, named for a king of the house of Ayyūb. In years of rain it collects water; in other years

it is a hollow promise. In our season it was mostly dust, a shallow scar in the earth, with only damp patches that smelled of old mud.

Pilgrims stood at its edge and stared as if staring could call water out of dry ground. A few scraped at the bottom with sticks until the earth oozed, but the commanders' men shouted them back. The caravan's order held for the moment, but I watched eyes and saw what al-Ukhaidir had carved into them: the knowledge that law is thin when thirst is thick. We moved on again. The days blurred into measures: a skin emptied, a skin filled, a camel stumbled, a man cursed, a prayer rose. On the fifth day after leaving Tabūk, the word went up the line like a gust: al-Hijr. The Hijr of Thamūd. The well was there, abundant, dark, and the first thing I learned was that no one would draw from it.

It was not because the water was poisoned. It was because the Prophet had passed this place on his expedition to Tabūk and refused its water, ordering those who had used it to make dough to feed that dough to their camels. The road of the pilgrimage is built of such memories, and sometimes the memory is a wall. Men craned their necks toward the well, swallowing, and then turned their faces away as if turning away could quiet the body.

I saw a young pilgrim - barely a beard on him - step forward, his waterskin limp and his lips bleeding. His hand trembled toward the rope of the well. An officer of the caravan seized his wrist before his fingers could close. No water was drawn. The young man sank to his knees and wept soundlessly, and the officer held him up with the same hand that had stopped him, like a man holding his own conscience.

Around us rose hills of red rock, cut and carved into doorways. These were the dwellings of Thamūd, hewn from stone so neatly that a man who did not know would think they were made yesterday. But inside them bones lay crumbling, pale against the shadow. The air smelled of dust and old death. I walked among those thresholds and felt my heart tighten, as if the stone itself were warning me to remember my end.

Between two hills lay the place where Salih's she-camel was said to have knelt. In the space there were traces of a mosque, and the pilgrims performed a prayer. The prayer sounded different here. In Damascus, prayer had echoed off marble and domes. In Cairo, it had mingled with the noise of markets. Here it went up into rock and silence, and the silence

seemed to listen.

As I bowed, my forehead against the earth, I thought of the valley of Hell behind us and the hollow basin that had offered us dust. I thought of the road ahead to Medina, to the Garden between tomb and pulpit, to the place where men’s hearts soften. Yet my chest felt hard as the rock around me. I feared that the wilderness was remaking me into its own image: a man who measured mercy by mouthfuls.

When we rose, the commander’s heralds were already shouting again. Do not linger. Do not take. Do not draw. The caravan would move. The haunted doorways watched us as we gathered our loads. The bones did not accuse; they only remained. I tightened my grip on the rope that linked my camel to al- ‘Ajarima’s line.

Behind us, al-Ukhaidir waited like a remembered nightmare. Before us, the road bent into harsher emptiness, and the name of Medina was still only a promise carried on dry tongues. As the first stars returned, and the caravan began once more to run, I understood with a sudden, cold clarity: in the night-march, retreat is not a direction. It is a fantasy.

Chapter 15

I left al-Ḥijr with my mouth dry and my eyes full of stone.

The well there was generous. Its water lay close beneath the earth and rose eagerly when the rope drew up the bucket, as if it wished to be given away. Men stared at it the way a fasting man stares at a dish of dates. Yet no one drank. Even those who had been cursing the road with cracked lips held back their hands, because the Messenger of God - God bless him and grant him peace - had passed this place on his expedition to Tabūk and forbade his companions to water from it. In a desert, memory can be stronger than thirst.

I do not claim that my piety was effortless. I watched the camels being watered from skins, watched the leather swell and empty, and my tongue felt like a strip of old cloth. Ilyās al-Saqqā stood near the well, not smiling, not mocking, only counting. He sold water by measure where water was permitted, and he withheld his own where water was forbidden. He had the hard face of a man who had survived too long to be sentimental.

"Do not look at it," he murmured to me, as if the well were a woman whose beauty could corrupt the gaze. "The eye drinks first."

Beyond the well, the red hills rose like the backs of sleeping beasts. In their flanks were the dwellings of Thamūd - chambers cut into rock with thresholds carved so cleanly that a man might believe the masons had put down their chisels only yesterday. Doorways opened into darkness. Wind ran its fingers along the stone and made a sound like breath through teeth.

Men told the story again, though every boy in the caravan already knew it: how Ṣāliḥ - peace be upon him - warned his people, how the she-camel came as a sign, how the camel was slaughtered, how the houses became graves. The caravan did not linger. It is one thing to recite a tale of punishment in a mosque and another to feel it under the soles of your feet.

Between two hills, in the space where the rock fell away, there were traces of a mosque. We prayed there, not because the stones demanded it, but because prayer is the rope by which a man keeps hold of himself.

When we moved out, it was on that half-day journey, or less, that I learned what it meant for a place to be called pleasant. al-ʻUlā rose out of the palms like a promise kept. After days of gravel and ash-colored ridges, the first sight of green was almost an assault. Gardens spread along the wadi, palm trunks banded with old rope, fronds clattering in the breeze. Springs threaded between stones, and the air carried the smell of wet earth. The village itself was large, with walls of mudbrick the color of bread crust and narrow lanes where shade pooled even at noon.

The caravan halted there for four nights, as is the custom of the Syrian pilgrims. A halt of four nights is not idleness; it is repair. Men who had been walking like bent nails straightened. Saddles were opened and aired. Ropes were checked, pack-frames tightened, the seams of water-bags inspected with a care that was almost tenderness. We provisioned ourselves, and we washed our clothes.

You do not know how filthy you are until you stop. The desert gives a man dust like a second skin. When I pulled off my tunic, the cloth held its shape with grit. I went down to the spring with a bowl, and the water took on the color of the road at once, and then ran clear again, patient and endless. I scrubbed until my hands stung. I watched the dirt lift and drift away like an accusation being dissolved.

There were women in al-ʻUlā, of course - there are women wherever there is life - but the caravan was a world of men and animals, and the women's world stayed behind walls. Once, at the edge of a garden, I saw a girl carrying a jar on her hip, her veil pulled low against the wind. She moved without hurry, and for a moment I thought of Cairo: of Maryam's steady hands measuring remedies, of Amina sitting silent in a borrowed room, listening to the city that had swallowed her. I had left them under a roof and under the care of others, as a man leaves valuables in a strongbox. The thought did not warm me. It only tightened something under my ribs.

At al-ʻUlā we also did what only a fool refuses to do: we lightened our loads. Any surplus of provisions - extra barley, sacks of dates, a bundle of hard bread meant for kindness and not necessity - was deposited with the villagers. The inhabitants of al-ʻUlā were known as trustworthy persons,

and in a road that taught suspicion as a craft, trust felt like a strange luxury. Men wrote marks on scraps of parchment, or tied knots in cords, or simply looked their host in the eye and said, "Remember." They took on with them only the amount of their strict necessities.

Muḥammad ibn Ranʿ and the men of al-ʿAjarima watched this with the calm of people who understand weight in a different way. For them, protection was itself a load they had chosen to carry and to sell. Their amir did not forbid me to deposit surplus. He only reminded me, quietly, that my safety belonged to his account.

"You will not deposit your gratitude," he said.

He did not raise his voice. He did not have to. Around us the caravan ground hummed with trade: knives being sharpened, cloth being measured, camels being led to water. Among the palms, a few Christian merchants from Syria had set up their wares. They had come as far as this and no further. Beyond al-ʿUlā, the road tightened into a corridor of fear and thirst where their faith and their protections would not purchase safety.

They traded in provisions and other goods with the pilgrims. Their speech was Arabic, but with a different music. One wore a small cross on a cord under his shirt; I saw it when he leaned forward to count coins. He glanced up and met my eyes without flinching. There was no challenge in it, only the quick assessment of a man whose life depended on judging strangers.

"This is the limit," Ilyās said beside me, and there was something like respect in his tone. "Not only for them. For everyone. After this, the road counts men without asking their names."

On the fourth night, the town fell quiet earlier than usual. Even the donkeys seemed to bray softly, as if ashamed to make noise in a place so near to the sanctified city. I lay awake on my mat, listening to the water in the channels and the murmurs of men reciting the Qur'an. A man's body can rest while his mind marches.

Before dawn, the caravan moved again.

We left the palms behind as a man leaves a lamp-lit room and steps into the cold. The air at first was kind. Then the sun climbed and the kindness withdrew, and the world became a furnace with no walls.

After the resumption of the journey we entered a valley whose name the guides pronounced in different ways, and no one agreed on its letters. Some called it al-'Itas, others something closer to al-Ttas, as if the tongue itself stumbled from heat. It was a place of violent burning, where even the wind seemed to come out of an oven. The samūm was spoken of there not as a possibility but as a lurking creature.

The road in that valley was narrow. On either side the ground rose, not in friendly hills but in slopes of dark stone that held the sun like a curse. Men walked with their heads wrapped, their eyes reduced to slits. The camels' mouths foamed. The skins of water on their flanks warmed until the water inside tasted like leather and breath.

The caravan's law, which in Syria had been made by the commander's voice and the qāḍī's pen, was here made by thirst. Water-carriers like Ilyās became a kind of minor nobility. The great men had their private tanks, rawiya-bags sewn from several skins, carried on camels with special care. The poorer pilgrims watched those tanks as if watching a sealed door in a burning house. When the distribution came, it came with shouting, with the clatter of cups, with hands outstretched like supplicants. Rank altered the odds of survival with an honesty that no sermon could soften.

Muḥammad ibn Ranʿ rode along the edge of the line, his men spread like a fence. Their protection was not only against roving Arabs - for here every Arab was roving, and every roving man was a possible threat - but against our own panic. They had a way of looking at the crowd that reminded me of a shepherd counting sheep before a cliff.

Ilyās came up to me once, his skin slung over his shoulder, and touched the back of my arm.

"Listen," he said. His voice was hoarse. "Do you hear it?"

At first I heard only the hiss of breath through cloth. Then, far off, something like a low moan. It might have been wind. It might have been men praying.

"In another year," Ilyās said, and he spoke as one who repeats a thing that has been repeated to him, "the samūm blew up on the caravan here. Their water supplies dried up. A drink of water rose to a thousand dinars. And both seller and buyer perished."

"A thousand dinars," I repeated, and the number was obscene in my mouth. A thousand dinars could buy houses in Tangier. It could buy a man rank in a distant court. Here it could buy a mouthful of wetness and then a grave.

"They say the story is inscribed on a rock," he went on. "And they say that year is called the year of the amir al-Jaliqi."

Muḥammad ibn Ranʿ heard, or perhaps he only sensed conversation, and he turned his horse's head toward us.

"Do not name the dead too loud," he said. "They like to be remembered. They follow the sound."

His men laughed, but it was not laughter of amusement. It was the laughter that shakes out fear like sand from a cloak.

We pushed on speedily, night and day, as the Syrians say, for fear of the wilderness. It is strange to be afraid of emptiness; yet in that valley, emptiness felt crowded with dangers you could not see. At dusk the caravan did not settle into a full camp. Fires were small, shaded, as if flame itself might attract a disaster. Men chewed hard bread without tasting. The commander's orders came sharp and brief. The qāḍī's authority was present in the way disputes were strangled before they could grow: a lifted hand, a word, a promise of punishment later. Later is a country that does not always exist in the desert.

In the night march, the stars looked close enough to touch. I walked beside the camel carrying my books - my small load of law and memory - and I thought of the Prophet's city ahead, of the rawda between his tomb and his pulpit that men spoke of as a garden of Paradise. I tried to picture it in my mind, but my mind had been filled so long with stone and water and bargaining that Paradise felt like a story told by someone else.

After that valley, we encamped at a place called Hadīya. It lay in a valley where there were no springs, only waterbeds hidden beneath the earth. Men dug pits in the sand and waited. Slowly, grudgingly, water seeped up, brackish as tears. We drank it anyway. We washed our mouths and spat and drank again. A camel will drink water that smells of its own sweat; a man does not have that simplicity, but he can learn it.

On the third day, the land changed.

At first it was only palms again, scattered, as if the earth was remembering how to be generous. Then the palms thickened, and the air grew softer. The horizon, which had been an empty line for so long, began to show a low sprawl of walls and roofs and minarets. Men began to talk more, not because they had recovered courage, but because they were afraid to arrive in silence. The sanctified city was ahead of us, the holy and illustrious.

We alighted outside al-Madīna before entering, as is fitting. There is an etiquette even to approach. The city is also called Tayba - the Sweet, the Pleasant - and for the first time since al-ʻUlā the name did not feel like irony.

When the sun began to fall, the commander gave the order. We entered after sunset.

I cannot write of that entry without feeling again the shift in my chest, as if a door had opened inside me. The road's law had been negotiated with coin and threat, with water and protection, with the sharp eyes of Bedouin and the sharper hunger of men in need. Here the law was older and gentler, though no less firm. Here the stones themselves seemed to know the names of the prayers.

We went first to the illustrious mosque.

We halted at the Gate of Peace to pay our respects. I had heard of it from scholars in Cairo and Damascus, from men who spoke of Medina the way drowning men speak of shore. Yet when I stood before the gate, all that learning fell away like an outer cloak. I was not a jurist then. I was not a traveler bargaining for survival. I was only a man about to speak salam to the one who had carried the Message.

I entered with my right foot, as is proper, and I kept my voice low. The mosque was oblong, a long body of shade and lamps, and the air inside was thick with perfume and breath. Men moved slowly, not because the space was crowded - though it was - but because haste would have been an insult. The Qur'an was recited in different corners, each voice like a thread in a woven cloth.

Between the tomb and the noble pulpit was the small Garden. A tradition says that between his tomb and his pulpit is a garden from the gardens of Paradise. I had repeated that saying many times without tasting it. Now I

stood within its meaning.

There was a pillar to which a fragment of palm-trunk was attached. They said that the trunk had once whimpered for the Messenger of God - God bless him and grant him peace - when he left it to mount the mimbar. I do not know if wood can mourn, but I have heard men mourn, and the sound of longing has many shapes. I kissed the fragment, not because my kiss could add anything to its honor, but because my mouth needed a place to lay down its thirst.

Then we came to the noble person.

There is a nail of silver, they say, on the southern side, opposite the place of the Prophet - God bless him and grant him peace. Men stand there in salutation, facing toward him, with their backs to the qibla. I stood as they stood. My heart beat so hard I feared it would be heard.

"Peace be upon you," I whispered. "O Messenger of God."

I spoke like a man speaking to the living, because the livingness of that place was undeniable. I paid the meed of salutation first to the lord of men, the intercessor for sinners and transgressors, Muḥammad of the tribe of Hashim, from the Vale of Mecca. Then I moved, as custom requires, to the right, to greet Abū Bakr al-Siddiq - God be pleased with him - and then to ʿUmar ibn al-Khattab - God be pleased with him. My lips formed their names with a care that felt like fear.

Behind me, somewhere, a man sobbed openly. Another murmured prayers so quickly that his words blurred. A Bedouin voice, deep and rough, recited salutations with the steadiness of a man reciting a debt he intends to pay. I wondered, briefly, whether Muḥammad ibn Ranʿ was among them. The thought startled me: that even a road-amir, even a man who made law with arrows, could stand here and be reduced to a supplicant.

When I stepped back, I felt lighter, as if some invisible pack had been lifted from my shoulders. Yet the lightness brought its own ache. I thought again of Amina in Cairo, of the way she had looked at me when I spoke of the Hajj as if I were speaking of fire. I thought of Maryam's quiet competence, the way she had taken responsibility for another woman's life without claiming authority. I had brought my own body to this sanctuary. What had I brought for them? A prayer. A name spoken in the rawda. It felt small, and yet it was the only coin that could be spent here.

We retired to our camp outside the mosque, rejoicing at the favor of safe arrival, praising God Most High. Men spoke softly as if still inside the sanctuary. Some sat up long into the night, repeating salutations, afraid that sleep would steal the sweetness from them.

I lay down under the open sky of Medina and tried to let my bones rest. The road, however, does not stop walking inside a man simply because his feet have stopped.

In the deep of the night I dreamed that I was again in the valley of violent heat. My throat was closing. The samūm came, not as wind but as a wall. I ran, but my legs moved through sand as if through water. Then, ahead of me, I saw palms and a white wall, and a gate with a simple name: Peace. I reached it, but before I could pass through, a hand caught my sleeve.

It was Muḥammad ibn Ranʿ.

"Do not think the sanctuary cancels the bargain," he said in the dream. His voice was gentle, and that gentleness frightened me more than threat.

I woke with my heart racing and the taste of brackish water still in my mouth.

At dawn, the caravan began to stir. Men were already talking of Mecca, of the rites, of the days counted by the moon. I heard the clink of harness rings and the low complaints of camels. Someone shouted for water. Someone shouted back that water was for the road, not for comfort.

In Medina, even the air smelled of prayer. Yet the road's law was waiting outside the palms, patient as hunger. And when the commander’s voice rose to order the line, I understood, with a clarity that was almost dread, that Paradise itself could be approached by a path where men demanded toll.

By midmorning the first camels were being loaded.

Mecca was ahead.

And the desert between had not finished teaching me what I was willing to pay.

Chapter 16

I did not leave al-Madīna as a man leaves a town. I left her as a man leaves a lamp-lit room, stepping backward, reluctant to let the darkness take the shape of what he has loved.

The camp lay outside the sanctuary, as custom demands for strangers and caravans, a field of tethered beasts and low tents stitched with repairs. Yet my heart kept walking those few steps back to the Prophet’s Mosque, to the soft crush of feet in its courtyard, to the murmur that never wholly dies in a place where millions have asked the same thing with different tongues: forgiveness, closeness, a sign.

At dawn I returned once more, alone. A man may have companions in a road and still be solitary in his intention. I washed at the cistern, my hands moving by habit, and entered with the humility a guest owes the Host. The green of the garden-space within, the Rawḍa, seemed to hold the morning in its palm. I stood where I could not stand long, because the press of bodies is a kind of tide. I offered salutations, as is proper, to the Messenger of God – God bless him and give him peace – and to his two Companions. I did not seek visions. I did not bargain. I only tried to make my heart behave like a heart in a holy place and not like a heart in a market, weighing profit.

When I stepped back into the dust of the camp, the world returned at once to measures: water skins, rope, saddle girths, coins wrapped in cloth. My conscience returned too, and with it the ache that had sharpened in me since Cairo. Maryam and Amina were not here. Their absence was a cord tied around my ribs. I had left them under a roof that was not ours, in a city that eats strangers by the dozen and calls it hospitality. I had told myself that this was a temporary separation, necessary, even merciful. Yet mercy that is chosen by the one with power can have the taste of excuse.

Ilyās al-Saqqā caught my look and made no comment. He had learned, perhaps before he learned to carry skins, that a man’s private regrets are heavy but not useful. He checked the mouth of a waterskin with his thumb, tested the stitching with a nail, and nodded to himself.

“The road will not soften because you are sad,” he said at last, not cruelly, but with the flat truth of a stone.

“And will it soften because I am pious?” I asked.

He lifted his shoulders, a small movement. “The road softens for coin.”

The caravan stirred. Men rolled up their bedding, shook sand from their cloaks, tightened head-ropes on camels that protested with wet-throated groans. Above the tents the Syrian banner lifted, and with it the invisible banner of the law: a commander, a qāḍī, scribes who counted, guards who watched. Outside that order, beyond the range of a shouted name, there was only negotiation.

We set out from al-Madīna for Mecca – God Most High ennoble her – and halted near the mosque of Dhū’l-Ḥulayfa. It lay not far, five miles by measure, yet the distance felt like a threshold rather than a journey. The boundary of sacredness has no wall, but it has weight. Dhū’l-Ḥulayfa is the miqāt of the people of al-Madīna: the place where the Prophet assumed the pilgrim garb, and where those who would follow him must decide, with their bodies, that they have entered a different kind of life.

The mosque itself was modest, a low square of stone and plaster, its shade a mercy to men who still carried the heat of the previous day in their bones. Not far from it ran the wādī of al-ʿAqīq, a thread of green where the ground allowed it. I could smell damp earth, and it struck me with a strange tenderness. In the Maghrib, the sea is always near enough to be remembered. Here, every patch of moisture is an argument against despair.

The rites of consecration do not wait for your convenience. They require a stripping down – not of pride, which is stubborn, but of the visible signs of ordinary life. I went to water and bathed, cold enough to set my teeth on edge. I washed the dust from my hair and the sweat from my neck, and with it I tried to wash away the calculations that had clung to me since I began to travel with men who sold protection. A man can bargain all day and still pretend at night that he is pure. The iḥrām does not allow that kind of

division. It asks for one face.

I divested myself of my tailored clothes. There is a moment, when you remove a stitched garment, when you feel not naked but unmoored. Cloth that has seams has identity: a sleeve that tells your arm where it begins, a collar that tells your throat what it is allowed to say. I folded my tunic and trousers with a care that embarrassed me, as if I were offering them to someone rather than storing them away. Then I took the two unsewn wrappers – the simple white cloths that make every man resemble every other man – and I bound myself in them. One around my waist, one over my shoulders. No button, no belt, no stitch to declare rank.

Beside me, men did the same. A merchant from Damascus, whose hands had counted silver for thirty years, stood with his fingers trembling as he tied his cloth. A youth who had boasted in the camp the night before now looked suddenly solemn, as if he had realized he could not boast his way through God’s rules. Even the Bedouin watchers, whose law had been arrow-range and bargain, grew quiet for a time.

I prayed two rakʿas, two bowings, on the earth. My forehead touched ground that had been touched by the foreheads of countless pilgrims. In that simple contact I felt, not certainty, but a kind of surrender: the admission that my own strength was small, and that the road was not the largest thing in the world.

Then I made my intention. I entered the pilgrim state under obligation to carry out the rites of the Greater Pilgrimage without conjunction. My tongue shaped the words, my mind tried to follow. I did not add the Lesser Pilgrimage to my intention. I held the larger vow alone, like a man who has decided to carry a heavy load without pretending it is light.

When I rose, the talbiya rose in me as if it had been waiting. Labbaika Allāhumma – here I am, O God. The phrase is simple enough to shame a scholar. It says nothing of jurisprudence, nothing of lineage, nothing of the cleverness by which a man can argue himself into a corner and call it a house. It is only presence.

I did not cease crying it through every valley and hill, rise and descent. The words became a rhythm that walked in my chest. When my breath shortened, they shortened; when the road opened, they opened. Men around me took it up, some loud, some shy, some as if they feared their own voices. The hills answered with echoes like a second congregation.

And yet even in iḥrām, the world does not become a pure chamber. The rules of consecration bind your hands: you do not hunt; you do not cut; you do not perfume yourself; you do not quarrel for vanity. But the road still contains men who live by toll and threat, and the caravan still contains men who believe piety is no excuse for unpaid debts.

At a bend where the path narrowed between stones, a group of riders waited, their spears upright, their faces wrapped against dust. They were not strangers to us; they had shadowed the caravan since the outskirts of Damascus, appearing and vanishing like the desert’s own thoughts. The al-ʿAjarima – those with whom I had placed myself under an amīr’s name – watched from their own cluster, calm as if the riders were merely another kind of landmark. Their amīr, Muḥammad ibn Ranʿ, did not move toward them. He did not need to. His protection was not charity; it was a contract, and contracts are enforced by reputation.

The caravan commander spoke first, his voice carrying authority like a staff. The qāḍī stood near him, a thin man with ink-darkened fingers, ready to turn dispute into words and words into record.

“We are pilgrims,” the commander said, as if the fact should be sufficient.

The riders did not laugh. That, in a way, was worse. “Pilgrims drink,” one of them replied. “Pilgrims pass. Pilgrims are alive. Life has a price.”

I felt a flush rise in my face beneath the white cloth, and I forced it down. Anger in iḥrām is a spark in dry grass. A man may tell himself he is defending justice, and find himself defending his pride. I watched as the negotiation took its familiar shape: coin laid out, coin argued over, coin accepted with reluctance that was itself a performance.

Ilyās leaned close, his breath smelling faintly of leather. “You thought the cloth would make them forget you,” he murmured. “It makes them remember you cannot fight.”

I wanted to deny it. I wanted to say that the pilgrim’s sanctity is a shield. But sanctity is not armor; it is a promise you make to God, and promises do not stop other men from calculating.

We continued until we came to the Pass of ʿAlī – upon him be peace – the narrow place where the road folds between ridges. We halted there that

night. The sky, untroubled by city smoke, spread in hard clarity. Stars looked close enough to be stones thrown by a child. Men lay down in their iḥrām cloths like white markers scattered on the earth. The talbiya dwindled to murmurs, then to silence. Even devotion needs sleep.

I did not sleep at once. In the dark, the mind becomes a caravan of its own: memories and fears, each carrying its bundle. The Prophet’s Mosque rose before me again, and with it Cairo’s noise and the quiet room where Amina had sat. I wondered what she was doing at that hour. I wondered if she had learned the sound of Cairo’s night, or if she still listened for the sea that would never answer. I wondered if Maryam, practical as a surgeon, had found remedies for homesickness.

A man in iḥrām is forbidden to cover his head, but he is not forbidden to be ashamed. I pulled the cloth tighter over my shoulders and tried to pray with my thoughts, but my thoughts were stubborn. They kept returning to the same question: what does it mean to say “here I am” when you have left others behind?

Before dawn we moved again. The talbiya rose once more, thinner in dry throats, and the road led us into the open. We encamped at al-Rawḥā’, where there is a well known as Bir Dhāt al-ʿAlam. Water draws men as surely as a judge’s summons. They gathered around the mouth of the well in a slow circle, careful of each other’s elbows. The rope creaked. The bucket came up dark with dampness.

The well had its own story, as all wells do. They said that ʿAlī – upon him be peace – fought the jinn there. The tale moved through the crowd like a small wind: some men scoffed, some nodded, some repeated it with a certainty that did not require proof. I listened without deciding. I have seen enough in deserts to know that unseen things are not always false, and enough in caravans to know that men will invent jinn when they do not want to name greed.

Ilyās measured water as if it were grain. He poured it into cups, into bowls, into the mouths of skins, his hand steady. Men in iḥrām spoke softly, as if the cloth around their waists had tightened their tongues. A child reached for the bucket and was smacked away, not cruelly but with the quick correction that keeps a camp from turning to chaos. The child’s cry was sharp. A man’s patience in holiness is tested first by small irritations.

We did not linger long. The caravan’s law is movement. We marched on and encamped at al-Safrāʾ, a cultivated and inhabited valley where there is water, palm gardens, buildings, and a fortified grange. After the naked hills, the valley felt like a held breath released. Green showed itself without apology. Water ran in channels. Palm fronds clattered in wind like a thousand thin hands applauding survival.

There was a large fort there, and in the neighborhood other forts and contiguous villages. The place was occupied by Hasani Sharifs and others, men whose descent carried a weight that even Bedouin spear-men acknowledged. Here, protection took a different form. There were gates and watchmen, not simply riders on open ground. There were lists, and lodging assigned, and an insistence that a stranger’s name be spoken aloud before he could sleep under a roof.

The commander went in first. The qāḍī followed with his ink-stained fingers. We waited, a line of white-wrapped men whose cloth declared equality but whose purses did not. When permission came, it came with conditions: where we might tie our beasts, where we might draw water, what fee must be paid to the fort’s keeper. Pilgrimage infrastructure, I learned, is not only piety. It is administration. It is the management of bodies in motion so that they do not become disorder.

In the evening, as the valley cooled, I sat apart with my back to a palm trunk. The talbiya still rang in the camp, but quieter now, threaded with ordinary talk: who had lost a sandal, who had cheated in trade, who had slept with his head turned toward Mecca by mistake and been corrected. Ilyās sat near, repairing a seam in a waterskin with a needle as thick as a date-stone.

“Do you miss Cairo?” I asked him, surprising myself. Perhaps I asked because I wanted to hear a man with no illusions speak of home.

He did not look up. “Cairo is a mouth,” he said. “It bites, but it feeds. A man can live in it if he learns which teeth to avoid.”

“And Tangier?” I said, as if naming my own beginning could make it less distant.

His needle paused. “Tangier is a door,” he replied, and for the first time I heard something like softness in his voice. “Some doors close behind you.”

I wanted to tell him that doors also open ahead. I wanted to tell him that Mecca lay before us, that the Kaʿba would make all this bargaining and dust seem small. But the road does not allow a man to spend his certainty like coin. If you spend it too early, you arrive empty.

We left al-Safrāʾ and encamped at Badr, where God aided His Apostle and extirpated the champions of the polytheists. The land itself held the memory of that day. It was a village with palm groves and a strong fort that could be entered only from the bed of a water-course between hills. There was a gushing spring, its water forming a stream. In a desert, a spring feels like a proof.

Men spoke in lowered voices, not because the place demanded silence, but because history makes even loud men cautious. They pointed out the site of the pit into which the bodies of the enemies of God were cast, now a fruit-garden. They pointed to the place of burial of the martyrs behind it. They spoke of the Hill of Mercy where angels descended, and of another hill like a long-backed sand-dune that the people said sounded with drums on the eve of every Friday. Whether drums or wind, the story was enough to make the night seem attentive.

I walked to the edge of the garden and stood there, looking at palms that had drunk from a spring while men fought nearby. It struck me that sacred space is not always a mosque. Sometimes it is a field where the world changed, and the change left a taste in the ground.

In iḥrām, I could not hunt a rabbit, could not pluck a green leaf, could not strike an insect out of irritation. The law of consecration tightened around my hands like a cord. And yet I had just watched men hand over coin to riders because the road demanded it. The contradiction burned in me, not as doubt, but as a question: how does a man keep his intention clean in a world that is not?

After night prayer, men drifted toward the spring with their cups, not because they were thirsty only, but because water in a holy place becomes a kind of proof that God has not abandoned the traveler. The stream ran clear enough to show pebbles at its bottom like coins. A few men whispered blessings as they drank. Others said nothing, as if speech might make the water less.

I watched the line form without command. Rank reveals itself most honestly when there is something finite. The commander’s servants filled

skins first. The qāḍī’s attendants followed. Then came the merchants and the craftsmen, each man trying to stand as near as possible to the front while pretending he was not pushing. The poor do not push. They wait, because waiting is what the world has taught them.

Ilyās stood with his needle and his skins, his eyes moving over the crowd the way a shepherd’s eyes move over sheep. When a youth tried to slip his cup beneath the ladle ahead of an older man, Ilyās caught his wrist and held it for a breath – not as a punishment, but as a lesson.

“In iḥrām,” he said quietly, “your hands are not yours alone.”

The youth’s face reddened. He looked as if he wanted to argue – to insist that he had meant no harm, that he was only quick, that the world belonged to those who seize. Then he glanced at the white cloth around his own shoulders and seemed to remember, with a kind of shock, that he had promised God not to live that way for these days. He stepped back.

A man near me muttered, “If only cloth could tame all wolves.”

The qāḍī, passing by, heard him. He paused and looked at the speaker with tired eyes. “Cloth does not tame,” he said. “It marks. It reminds. Whoever is tamed is tamed by fear of his Lord.”

“And whoever is not?” the man asked.

The qāḍī’s gaze moved, briefly, to the darkness beyond the fort, where the open land began. “Then God will judge him,” he said, and went on.

I thought of the riders on the road, and the way their spears had been held upright without haste. Fear of God is not the only fear that moves a man. Fear of hunger moves him. Fear of humiliation moves him. Fear of being the one whose wife and children wait in a village while he lies unburied in sand moves him.

Later, as I lay on my mat with my sandals placed near my head, I heard the murmur of men recounting Badr’s story again – the pit, the martyrs, the angels, the drums. Some spoke as if battle were a clean thing: truth on one side, falsehood on the other, victory descending like rain. Others spoke with more caution, as men who had seen blood in their own time. I knew that holiness does not abolish the world’s sharp edges. It only asks you to walk them with care.

When the messenger came from the commander’s tent, his warning did not sound like a new thing. It sounded like a truth that had been gathering all day, the way clouds gather on a horizon you pretend not to see.

That night, as we made ready to sleep near the fort, a messenger came from the commander’s tent, moving quickly among the bodies wrapped in white.

“Keep close,” he said. “Do not stray. There are men ahead who know that pilgrims will not fight.”

I felt the talbiya die in my throat for a heartbeat, as if fear had put its hand over my mouth. Then, stubbornly, it returned. Labbaika. Here I am.

But in the darkness beyond Badr, the road waited like an open palm – and I could not tell whether it offered shelter, or demanded payment.

Chapter 17

Badr fell behind us as a story falls behind a man: not forgotten, never truly finished, but carried now in the muscles of the road. The palm groves and the fort, the spring that made its small brave stream, the place where men pointed and said, Here, here, as if the earth still held the heat of that day - all of it receded into dust and white cloth.

In the night I had listened to the old men speak the battle again as though it were a prayer, each line ending in certainty. In the morning, certainty was what the road demanded and what it refused. We were in iḥrām; we were in fear. I wore the consecrated cloth like a banner and like a shroud, and I tried to keep my heart from doing what hearts do when they smell danger: counting, bargaining, excusing itself before the sin has even been committed.

Ilyās al-Saqqā walked beside my camel with the slow precision of a man measuring the world. He had patched skins in Damascus, in Bosrā, in the fort-shadow of al-Karak; he had watched men drink as if they could swallow their dread. At dawn he checked knots and seams without speaking, then looked up toward the riders ahead - the escort, the archers, the Bedouin who were our protection and our tax.

“Your tongue is working,” he said at last. “But no sound comes out.”

“I am repeating the talbiya,” I said, and then I realized it was true only in part. My lips moved, yes: Labbaika Allāhumma, labbaik. But other words hid beneath it - words I did not want God to hear.

He nodded once, not in judgment but in recognition. “A man can carry two caravans at once,” he said. “One on the road. One in his skull.”

We left Badr and went on into what the guides named the Flat of al-Bazwa’. The word “flat” was a kindness. The land was broken as a tooth

is broken, ridged and pitted, a wilderness between coast and mountain where the eye lost its measure and the mind lost its confidence. They said the guide wanders there; they said friend has no thought to spare for friend. It sounded like a proverb until the wilderness itself seemed to recite it.

For three nights the caravan moved as though pursued. The commander pressed the pace; the qāḍī's attendants urged men to swallow complaint. We marched by moonlight and by the pale ghost of dawn, then halted in the heat, tents crouched low, camels groaning as they knelt. Each halt was an argument with thirst. Each start was an argument with exhaustion. In iḥrām the smallest irritations become loud: the cloth chafing at the shoulder, a stone in the sandal, a fly that will not be shaken off because your hands are busy with reins and rope.

There were watchers on the ridges more than once, silhouettes against the sky. They did not charge. They did not need to. Their presence was a reminder. The road was not a road because a man walked it; it was a road because men had paid to walk it.

On the second night an argument rose in the camel-line like a spark finding dry grass. A merchant from Aleppo claimed that a skin had been cut, that his water had been stolen. He spoke too loudly, and Bedouin heads turned. A man in iḥrām is told to leave quarrelling, but hunger and thirst have their own pride; they make a man believe his need is a crown.

The officer rode back, cursing softly, and the qāḍī was called. He did not shout. He looked tired, as if he had been appointed judge not of men but of sand. "Bring proof," he said. Proof, in the night, in the wilderness. The merchant pointed at a porter, thin as a reed. The porter protested, stammering, and his words came out wrong, as words do when the tongue is scared.

One of the al-ʿAjarima leaned forward and spoke to the officer as if they were equals. I could not hear the words, only the tone: You need us. Remember that. Coins changed hands, not loudly. A skin was handed over, not ceremonially. The merchant's grievance was smoothed, not solved. The porter was told to move on. The caravan moved on. The law of the road had been satisfied; the law of God was left to settle itself in the unseen ledger.

When the argument was behind us, Ilyās said, "Do you see? In consecration you are softer meat."

“Then why does God command it?” I asked, more sharply than I meant.

He shrugged. “Perhaps so you will know what you are when you cannot bare your teeth.”

The saying lodged in me. I remembered Cairo - the borrowed rooms, the women left behind. Maryam with her guarded remedies; Amina with her quiet endurance. I had told myself that the pilgrimage would cleanse what the road had dirtied. But consecration did not make me clean. It made me visible.

When at last the third night loosened its grip, the land opened into the vale of Rabigh. Pools lay in the hollows where rain had gathered and refused to vanish, dark mirrors in a country that rarely offered reflection. Men knelt to drink, cautious at first as if the water might bite. Then caution broke. Cups appeared. Hands reached. The water-carriers worked without rest, shouting for order that no one wanted to obey.

Here, they said, is the point before al-Juhfa where pilgrims from Egypt and the Maghrib enter the pilgrim state. It startled me, though it should not have. I had taken my iḥrām at Dhū’l-Ḥulayfa with the people of al-Madīna. Yet to see men strip away stitched garments here, to watch them fumble with white cloth and tie knots like boys learning a new trade, was to see myself repeated and made strange.

A cluster of Maghribis stood close together, their speech sharp with the consonants of home. One of them caught my gaze and looked away quickly, as if my face might oblige him to remember Tangier and the door he had closed behind him. To be among Syrians is to be a guest; to be among Maghribis is to be a mirror. Mirrors can be cruel.

The al-ʿAjarima moved through the camp with a proprietary ease. Their amīr was not always visible; his authority was, in the way others made room. One of his men touched my shoulder as if to claim me. It was not an embrace. It was a reminder that protection is a rope: it may keep you from falling, but it also ties you to the one who holds the other end.

We set out again in the cool of night, leaving the pools behind like a dream of abundance. After the stages that led us onward, we reached Khulays. It lay among channels and cultivated plots that looked almost indecent in this country of restraint, as if someone had spread green cloth across the bones of the earth. There was a built fort on a hill, and on the

plain below another fort in ruin, a reminder that power too can be a campsite. A spring gushed there, and the water, led by channels, made its arguments with the soil until gardens obeyed.

They told us that the lord of Khulays was a sharif of the Hasani line. Whether one believed the genealogy or not, one believed the authority; it was written in the way men spoke his title and lowered their eyes. Bedouin held a market there. Sheep bleated in pens; fruits were piled in baskets; condiments were traded with the seriousness of jewels. Even in iḥrām men bargained as if bargaining itself were a rite.

Ilyās brought me dates bought with coin, not taken by hunting. “Eat,” he said, and I obeyed. A man can pretend to be a saint when his belly is full. When it is empty, he becomes honest.

From Khulays we marched to ʿUsfān, in an open plain between hills. There were wells there, and men spoke of them with reverence, attributing one to ʿUthmān ibn ʿAffān - God be pleased with him - as if a caliph’s name could cool water. They spoke also of a laddered way, a narrow pass where the road became steps and old building-traces clung to stone. Some pointed out a well attributed to ʿAlī - peace be upon him - and claimed he had made it. The road is full of such claims. A thirsty man will bless any name that promises him a drink.

At ʿUsfān there stood the remains of an old fort and a tower of solid masonry weakened by decay. I looked at it and thought of cities I had left behind - Damascus with its orchards, Medina with its sweetness. Here the tower was a finger pointing at nothing, insisting on a lesson: in the desert, even stone grows tired.

That night the Bedouin demanded their due more openly. They asked with smiles and soft words, which is how a man asks when he knows his knife is already at your throat.

An al-ʿAjarima came to our line. “You are under us,” he said, as if reciting a formula. “The road is ours. The water is ours. The night is ours.”

“The night belongs to God,” I said before I could stop myself.

He smiled wider. “Then tell God to pay.”

Heat rose in me, an anger that wanted to claim righteousness. I looked toward the commander’s men, thinking they would intervene. They did not.

Their faces were set in disciplined emptiness: ordered not to see. Ilyās touched my elbow, a small pressure. “Do not,” he murmured. “Quarrels in iḥrām are remembered longer than prayers.”

So I swallowed my words and gave the Bedouin a coin. It was enough to make him nod. Humiliation has its own price, and it is always more than money.

We reached Marr, also called Marr al-Ẓuhrān, a fertile valley with many date-palms and a spring that flowed as if it had never heard of scarcity. Fruit and vegetables were brought from here to Mecca, and in the camp men spoke of it the way hungry men speak of a feast promised since childhood.

We set out again at night from Marr al-Ẓuhrān, hearts pulled forward as if by a rope tied to the House itself. The talbiya rose around me in waves - one man chanting, another answering, a third taking it up when the second’s breath failed. The words became a kind of marching drum. Even men who had paid tolls with clenched teeth now cried, Labbaika, as if sound could undo surrendered coin.

Near dawn the mountains of Mecca appeared, low at first, then suddenly high, enclosing the valley like the walls of a bowl. The air changed. It carried smoke, sweat, dung, the faint sweetness of dates - the smell of a crowded place where the world’s sins and prayers are packed together. I had imagined Mecca as a pure idea. The valley taught me otherwise. Holiness, it seemed, had a smell.

We entered the City of Surety in the morning. Pilgrims moved in every direction, a confusion that was not confusion but a different kind of order, made of intentions. Syrians with disciplined ranks, Egyptians with their banners and songs, Yemenis, Iraqis, men from farther still - all pulled by the same center, all convinced their pull was the truest.

When at last I reached the threshold of the Sacred Mosque, my breath caught as if someone had tightened a cord around my ribs. We entered by the gate called the Gate of the Banū Shayba. The space widened, and the Kaʿba stood before me, draped in black, its corners sharp against pale stone, the Black Stone set in its angle like an eye that has watched the world grow old.

My mind, so busy with fear and tolls and thirst, suddenly had nothing to do. It stopped, like a camel reaching water after a long march and forgetting to groan. I had come from Tangier, from courts where men argued over points of law as if they were pillars of the world. I had come through rain and cold, through heat and threat, under banners and under other men’s protection. All that distance collapsed into a single step on the mosque’s pavement.

I did not weep at once. I stood too stiff for tears. The tears came later, like rain that waits for the cloud to fully gather.

I joined the circumambulation, turning my left shoulder toward the House, letting the current take me. Seven circuits. Knowing and doing are different worlds. The crowd was thick enough that my steps shortened; at times I moved only when the men around me moved, stopping when they stopped, as if the rite were not mine but ours. I smelled breath sweet with dates and sour with fatigue; I heard supplications in tongues I could not name. And over it all, the murmurs and the roar - a sound like the sea, if the sea were made of worship.

When I came near the Black Stone, I did not fight to reach it. I raised my hand and saluted it from where I stood, and in that restraint I felt both humility and a small sting of pride. Even in the sanctuary a man finds ways to admire himself.

After the circuits I prayed, then drank from Zamzam. The water was handed out in cups and jars, cooled and carried and guarded by those whose duty it was to keep it flowing. Men crowded around it as they had crowded at Rabigh, but here the crowd had a different hunger. They drank with their eyes closed, as if tasting not water but mercy. The water was water - cool, slightly strange, as if it carried stone in its mouth - yet when it went down, I felt the road loosen in me. Not disappear. Loosen.

The Meccan season revealed itself quickly, like a market opening at dawn. Lodging was a struggle. Every house had become an inn, every courtyard a camp. Men argued over prices; landlords smiled and raised them. Pilgrims who had traveled months found themselves haggling for a corner of shade as if it were a luxury item.

The hierarchies of the road did not dissolve at the mosque’s gate; they merely changed their clothing. The Syrians had their commanders and their scholars; the Egyptians their officials and their pride; the Maghribis clung

together like reeds in a current. The poor slept wherever they could - under porticoes, beside walls, in alleys where the smell of refuse was the price of proximity.

Ilyās found me after the first rush of rites, his face damp with sweat. “We have a place,” he said, as if reporting victory.

“Where?”

“Near the Gate of Ibrāhīm,” he said. “A room. Not large. Enough.”

Enough. I followed him through lanes crowded with pilgrims and sellers, past water-skins for hire and mats for sale, past men offering guides and men offering stories. We reached a house where other Syrians had settled, their bundles stacked neatly, their servants moving with purpose. I felt again that pressure of being a guest in another people’s order.

That night, lying on a mat, I tried to pray with my whole heart. My mind kept drifting to Cairo. Were Maryam and Amina safe? Did they have money? Did they curse me? I had left them in a city that eats strangers and calls it hospitality. Now I was in Mecca, and the distance between the two places was not measured only in miles. It was measured in obligation.

On the third day after our arrival, as I stood near the edge of the courtyard watching the flow around the Kaʿba, a young attendant approached. His beard was just beginning to take shape; his eyes were alert in the way of someone trained to notice trouble.

“You are from the Maghrib,” he said, not as a question.

I hesitated. In Mecca, identity is both pride and vulnerability. “From Tangier,” I said. “I travel with the Syrians.”

“And you are a man of fiqh,” he added.

“I have studied,” I said, neither boasting nor denying.

“There is a matter,” he said. “A dispute. The keepers of the House will hear it in the sanctuary. A witness is needed - a stranger, not tied to Meccan factions.”

A stranger. I almost laughed. I had been a stranger for months. Here, it was suddenly a qualification.

“When?” I asked.

“At the opening of the Holy Door,” he said. “On Friday, after the prayer.”

The Kaʿba’s door. Opened. I felt a tremor in me, half awe, half desire. Ilyās, hearing the last words, stepped closer. His gaze moved from the attendant to me. “Chosen things are carried,” he murmured. “Sometimes by their own necks.”

The attendant waited. Around us the courtyard flowed, indifferent. The House stood, indifferent. Only my heart thrashed.

I looked toward the Kaʿba, black against the sun, and realized the road had not ended at Mecca. It had only changed its walls.

“Very well,” I said. “I will come.”

The attendant nodded and vanished into the crowd, as if he had never been. I stood there, the talbiya echoing from some unseen throat, and felt the days of the pilgrimage loom like a mountain. The rites were near. The sanctuary was near. And already I could taste the cost.

Chapter 18

The attendant did not return by daylight. In Mecca, daylight was spent too fast: the hour between dawn and the first press at the Sanctuary, the hour when a man might still hear his own breath.

I woke before the call and lay still on the thin mattress in our hired room near the Gate of Ibrāhīm. Somewhere in the alley a donkey snorted, and somewhere else bread baked in a courtyard oven. Under the bread lay perfume - amber, musk, crushed leaves - drifting from a women’s passage like a taunt. We were in iḥrām. Even the air felt like temptation.

Cairo came to me as it had every night since my arrival: not its sprawl or its Nile, but a corner of a house where Amina’s veil would hang from a nail, and Maryam’s hands would be busy with thread or herbs or the small, stubborn work of survival. I had left them on promises shaped like prayers. I had not said how long a man can live on such promises before they turn to dust in his mouth.

Ilyās al-Saqqā slept by the door, rolled in his cloak like a guard. He woke when I rose.

“Today?” he murmured.

“Today,” I said, and the word tasted like a judgment.

The noon prayer had barely ended when the attendant found me near the Station of Ibrāhīm. He moved through worshippers as if the crowd belonged to him.

“You are from Tangier,” he said.

“A student,” I replied, and heard the vanity in my own correction.

“Come.”

He led me toward the Kaʿba’s door. A bench with steps had been rolled close - a wooden thing like a mimbar, its legs set on rollers so it could be drawn up against the wall. The curtain over the door hung heavy, stirring slightly. Men in clean white stood nearest: the Banū Shayba, guardians of the House, spoken of in Mecca as one speaks of a lock and its key.

Beyond them, under a patch of shade, sat the qāḍī of Mecca, Najm al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Ṭabarī. His gaze was calm in the way of a man who can listen to panic without letting it stain him. Beside him stood the khaṭīb, Baha’ al-Dīn al-Ṭabarī, alert as if already halfway into a sermon. Two scribes waited with reed pens. Notables stood behind them. Behind the notables, the crowd leaned in as if a dispute were a festival.

The attendant inclined his head. “This is the stranger.”

Najm al-Dīn’s eyes found me. “You have no tie in this city. No household, no patron.”

“No,” I said, and thought of the rented room behind me.

“Good. Then your tongue may be clean.”

Two men were brought forward. One spoke in a Syrian accent, his anger barely leashed. The other was older, fine-robed, dust at his hem in the way of those who live at the edge of wealth. Between them lay the small object that had summoned all this gravity: a strip of black cloth, richly woven, fringed at one end.

“They offered it,” the Syrian insisted. “A blessing. A piece of the old curtain. They took my dinars. Then they called me a thief and seized my sleeve.”

The older man’s mouth tightened. “Lies. He and his companions pressed to the House and pulled at the covering like bandits. The guardians restrained him. We took nothing.”

The crowd murmured. In Mecca the boundary between gift and theft is thin when the thing being taken is holy.

Najm al-Dīn asked questions in an even voice. Then his gaze returned to me.

“You were present at the opening,” he said.

“I was summoned,” I replied, and felt the absurdity of it: as if the Kaʿba’s door were a courtroom.

“Did you see this man tear cloth from the House?”

The Syrian’s eyes were hooks. I felt, suddenly, the weight of faction in the courtyard: Syrians proud of their commanders and their candles; Meccans proud of their honor and their livelihood. A stranger could be crushed between them like a date between teeth.

“I saw hands,” I said carefully. “Many hands. I saw the guardians push men back. I did not see cloth torn. But I saw this man with his arm raised as if to pull, and I saw him struggle when the guardians seized him.”

The scribes wrote. The khaṭīb watched. The Syrian inhaled sharply, as if struck.

“And did you see dinars exchanged?” the qāḍī asked.

“No.”

Najm al-Dīn sat in silence, then judged. “The House is not a market-stall. Its covering is not a merchant’s cloth. Whoever tears from it tears from his own account with God. As for bribery, there is no proof. Let the cloth be returned to the guardians. Let the Syrian be warned, and the Meccan be cleared of accusation. God knows best.”

It satisfied no one fully, which meant it was probably the best a judge could do in Mecca.

“Stay,” the attendant murmured to me. “You will see.”

The bench was drawn close. The chief of the Banū Shayba mounted the steps with the key in his hand, held not like a tool but like a relic. The doorkeepers drew aside the veil. The silver plates of the door caught the light and flared. The chief opened the lock, kissed the threshold, entered alone, and closed the door behind him.

A hush rippled outward. Men stretched their hands toward the dark opening as if toward a wound in the world. I found my own hands raised without knowing I had lifted them.

When the door opened again, the people surged.

It was not a gentle surge. It was hunger with feet. Men shouted the takbīr. Others cried, “O God, open unto us!” The bench shuddered. The guardians pushed and shouted. A man slipped; another’s elbow drove into my ribs. I tasted blood where my lip split.

Ilyās caught my elbow and dragged me back.

“Not for you,” he said, low. “Not today.”

I wanted to insist that my desire was devotion, not vanity. The press of bodies answered for me. When the rush ebbed, the courtyard looked storm-scoured: sandals lost, a water-skin burst, a strip of cloth trampled into dust. The Syrian stood pale and did not look at me. The older man vanished into a knot of Meccans. Somewhere a child cried until a woman’s voice soothed him - the sound of home inside the most public place on earth.

“Now you know,” Ilyās said as we moved away. “Even the House has a door, and doors have hands.”

In the days that followed, Mecca’s sanctity sharpened as the season turned. On the twenty-seventh of Dhū al-Qaʿda the Kaʿba’s curtains were girded up, drawn high to protect them from greedy fingers. From that day, men said, the House would not be opened again until the Standing at ʿArafa was accomplished. When the month of Dhū al-Ḥijja arrived, drums and kettledrums sounded at the hours of prayer, morning and evening, announcing the blessed days like a herald.

On the seventh day, after noon, the preacher instructed the people in the rites and warned them of the day of the Standing. Around me men nodded solemnly, then argued about camels and camps and rank. Even sermon and sunna became another measure of place.

At dawn on the eighth day the valley emptied toward Minā. The road was packed with pilgrims, their talbiya rising and falling in waves. Dust clung to sweat. Men in iḥrām walked with the stubborn dignity of those who cannot adjust their clothing to comfort. I felt the strange equality of it, and then I saw the canopies of the amīrs and remembered that equality is a story men tell themselves.

That night Minā glowed. Candles burned in clusters like constellations dragged down to earth. There was a contest of ostentation between the

Egyptian, Syrian, and Iraqi contingents, and, by common consent, the Syrians won; their camp made a small city of light.

I watched and felt my heart split.

“Do not pretend you are made of stone,” Ilyās said, as if reading my face. He was counting pebbles into a cloth pouch. “Envy lives even in iḥrām. You can kill it or feed it.”

On the ninth day we left Minā after dawn and moved toward ʿArafa, passing through the ravine called Wādī Muḥassir, where men quickened their pace in obedience to the Prophet’s practice. Beyond it, the plain of ʿArafāt opened wide, mountains hemming it like walls. At its far end rose the Hill of Mercy, stony and solitary. The air shimmered with heat. Water passed from hand to hand, each sip negotiated with a look, a coin, a curse swallowed in the throat.

Men spoke of boundaries and warned against being driven early into the Bottom of ʿUrana. Camel-drivers, they said, frightened the ignorant into moving before sunset and so nullified their pilgrimage. The warning sounded like the road’s old law in sacred clothing: the strong profit by the weak man’s fear.

So I held myself in place like a stake driven into earth.

It was Thursday: the day of my first Standing, in the year seven hundred and twenty-six. I remember it because the world seemed to sharpen around it. I saw the commanders’ camps: the Egyptian caravan led by Arghūn the dawādār, lieutenant of al-Malik al-Nāṣir; the Syrian caravan under Saif al-Dīn al-Jubān. I saw, too, covered howdahs passing with the careful distance of power. People whispered of the Sultan’s household and their pilgrimage. I thought of Amina behind her veil in Cairo and felt the old guilt flare - then I smothered it with supplication, because guilt can become vanity as quickly as pride.

At sunset the plain convulsed. The multitude surged in the rush, earth shaking under hooves. Dust swallowed sound. I was caught between bodies and nearly spun to the ground. Ilyās grabbed my shoulder; I grabbed his sleeve. For a moment we were only hands, clinging.

We reached Muzdalifa at the time of the last night prayer and there performed the sunset and night prayers combined, as the Prophet had

done. Sleep in Muzdalifa is not sleep. It is collapse. Men lay in rows like spilled grain. Before dawn we rose, halted for supplication at al-Mashʿar al-Ḥarām, then moved toward Minā again, pebbles in our pouches like small, cold responsibilities.

In Minā we cast our stones at the Pillar of the Defile. Men threw with a fury that startled me, as if they could bruise the unseen. I threw my seven and whispered, “O God, accept,” because anything else would have been performance.

After the stoning came the sacrifice. The air thickened with blood-smell and smoke. I had no camel. I joined my coin with others and trusted the butcher’s honesty. When the blade cut and the animal sagged, my stomach twisted - not with horror, but with the clarity that devotion is always paid for by something that bleeds.

Then we shaved our heads. Hair fell in damp clumps onto dust. The razor scraped. When it was done, the sun touched my bare scalp and I felt exposed, as if my thoughts were visible.

Most pilgrims then went down to Mecca to perform the circuit of the outpouring, and we did the same. At the Sanctuary the crowd was a living wall. I pressed into it and made the circuits, seven again, the Kaʿba’s black cloth close enough that my shoulder nearly brushed it. I did not reach for it. I remembered the Friday cloth and the Syrian’s humiliation. I remembered the qāḍī’s words: the House is not a market-stall.

When the circuits were done, I stood near the Station of Ibrāhīm and felt, for a breath, the quiet I had expected on my first night. It was not a thunderclap of certainty. It was simply a loosening, as if a knot in my chest had been untied by hands I could not see.

On the Day of Sacrifice I saw the curtain of the Kaʿba brought from the quarters of the Egyptian caravan and laid upon the roof of the House. Men spoke of it with pride, as if Egypt’s sultan stitched holiness with his own hands. They said al-Malik al-Nāṣir charged himself with the covering and with the Sanctuary’s needs in candles and oil. On the third day after the sacrifice, the Banū Shayba draped the new black silk over the House, its embroidered band shining white against darkness. Even cloth here was power.

After the rites, when the city’s air tasted less of sweat and more of ordinary dust, Ilyās brought me news.

“They are gathering,” he said in the alley outside our lodging. “The caravan of al-ʿIrāq. They will depart soon.”

“And the Egyptian caravan?” I asked, though I knew.

“They will not wait for your conscience.”

If I returned now, I could stand before Amina and Maryam and say, It is done. I have completed what I set out to do. A man can stop traveling and still be a man.

If I did not return - if I joined the Iraqi caravan - I could tell myself a hundred justifications: knowledge, scholars, God opening a path. Beneath them was something simpler and more dangerous. The road had entered my blood. Mecca had not cured it. Mecca had, in some way I could not name, sanctified it.

A knock sounded. Ilyās opened the door a crack. A man stood outside, dust-stained, beard trimmed in an Iraqi style, eyes quick and amused. He spoke to Ilyās in a dialect that made my ear work harder, then glanced past him into the room.

“This is the Maghribī,” he said. “The one who spoke at the door.”

My stomach tightened. The Friday dispute had not vanished into air; it had become story.

“My name is ʿUmar,” he said. “From al-Mawṣil. I travel with the caravan of al-ʿIrāq. We have need of men who can keep their tongues steady under pressure.”

“Need?” I repeated.

He smiled slightly. “The road to Kufa is not made of prayer alone. There are stations and water and tribes and bargains. There are also men who like to turn a pilgrim into a purse. Come to our encampment at dawn. Listen. Decide.”

He did not step over the threshold. He did not remove his sandals. He did not presume. That restraint, more than any courtesy, made me wary.

When he left, the alley’s darkness seemed to press closer. I stared at my own hands, rough from rope and travel, and wondered when they had become the hands of a man who could not go home.

At dawn the caravan of al-ʿIrāq would be a line in the sand. If I stepped over it, I would leave Cairo farther behind than any distance could measure.

I lay down without extinguishing the lamp, as if light might hold me in place, and listened for sleep. It did not come. What came instead was a slow, steady awareness, like the talbiya returning after a pause: Here I am, O God. And the question that followed, sharp as a knife: Where will You take me next?

Chapter 19

The Iraqi Caravan

The sanctuary does not loosen its grip quickly.

Even after the last stone had been cast at the pillars of Minā, after the last blood had soaked into the dust, Mecca - God Most High ennoble her - clung to my senses as if she were a scent caught in wool. The crowds thinned without ever becoming thin; they only changed their shape, turning from rivers into eddies. A man could still feel the talbiya in his ribs, like a drumbeat that would not quiet.

I had thought - and I confess it with the candor of age and ink - that once a man has looked upon the Kaʿba, once he has circled it as the moth circles the lamp, he will be satisfied. But satisfaction is a short guest. It eats, praises the host, and slips away before dawn.

On the morning after the Feast, I went at a quiet hour into the Sacred Mosque. The stones were damp from washing, and the air carried rose-water and sweat, lamp-smoke and camel. I stood by the Multazam, where men press their chests against the wall as if to make their hearts heard, and I tried to hold two images at once: the House before me, and the house I had left behind in Cairo.

Amina’s face came to me not as it had been on the road - wind-bitten and sleepless - but as it had been in the courtyard where Maryam found her lodging, under the shade of a lattice. Amina had watched me with the steadiness of a woman who has learned that asking does not always bring an answer. She had not wept when I left; she had only lowered her eyes, as if to hide a thought she did not wish me to read.

Maryam, too: hands smelling of herbs; speech quick with port-dialects; a guarded heart that opened only to let the wind through. I had promised both of them that I would return after the pilgrimage. I had said it the way

men say “God willing,” and believed that the saying itself was a kind of binding.

Yet even here, in the shadow of the House, roads tugged at the hem of my robe.

The caravans were gathering. The Syrians spoke of Damascus and its waters, of the Bedouin tolls counted at arrow-range. The Egyptians spoke of Cairo with the impatience of men returning to their own river. But there was another current among the crowds - sharper, colder, like the smell of metal before rain - carried by tongues that rounded their words in the Iraqi fashion, and by Persian speech threaded with Arabic like silk with gold.

They spoke of Kūfa and Najaf as a man speaks of a beloved he has not seen in years. They spoke of a road laid out in stations like beads - cisterns and reservoirs, watchmen and ledgers - a road whose very name carried the memory of a woman’s piety.

The Darb Zubayda.

I told myself I went for knowledge. I told myself I went to visit the righteous, to pray in places where prayers were answered, to widen my understanding so that I might judge more justly when I returned. These were not lies. But they were not the whole truth.

There was also the restlessness that had driven me from Tangier: a fire that fed on movement. There was also pride, which whispered that to return at once to Cairo would be to fold up the world too early. And there was, if I am honest, a desire to slip out of Mecca before a small quarrel hardened around my name.

When the Holy Door was opened on a Friday, the crowd surged like a wave against rock. In the crush, a dispute arose - over a shove, over a missing pouch, over whose hand had been where it should not. I was asked to bear witness. In bearing witness, I made enemies among those who wanted the truth to bend.

So I stood with my hands on the wall and asked God Most High to guide me. I asked, too, for forgiveness - not in the broad way one asks forgiveness in prayer, but with the specific sting of a promise remembered.

When I withdrew, I found Ilyās al-Saqqā waiting in the pooled shade of an arcade. He had been my water-carrier on the Syrian road, a man who

knew the weight of a full skin by the sound it made when it struck a camel’s flank. In Mecca he made himself useful among all pilgrims: carrying jars, finding shade, coaxing a sip of Zamzam when the cups were few.

He took one look at my face and said, “You are counting roads.”

“I am counting obligations,” I replied.

“Obligations leak,” he said. “Then men blame the skin.”

Before I could answer, a stranger approached: middle height, broad-shouldered, beard trimmed in the Iraqi style, robe plain but belt of good leather. His eyes missed little.

“Are you the Maghribi student of law?” he asked.

“I am,” I said, wary of titles that become burdens.

He smiled. “My name is ‘Umar. They call me al-Mawṣilī, for Mosul is my home. I travel with the caravan of Iraq. We have need of a man who can read documents and speak when station-keepers press too hard. And you—” he glanced at Ilyās “—have need of a man who knows the Darb.”

Ilyās narrowed his eyes. “We have need of God’s protection.”

“God’s protection travels by means,” ‘Umar said easily. “Come with us. There are reservoirs at the stations, and guards. It is not like the Syrian road where the tribe is the law and the law is an arrow.”

“And what do you ask in exchange?” I said.

“Only that you travel,” he replied, “and that you remember my name when you speak of the road.”

Names are small hooks. They pull men into other men’s stories.

That night, in a corner of our lodging where the lamp-light would not spill into the alley, I made my decision. I counted what remained: coins worn smooth by many hands, a few cakes hardened by dryness, a small jar of ink, and the folded paper on which I had written, before, the names of those I might seek in Damascus and in Mecca. There was no paper with Iraqi names. That, too, was a kind of temptation.

I wrote a short letter to Maryam, for she was the one who could read it and act. I wrote that I was safe; that I had completed the pilgrimage; that I

would send money when I could; that Amina should not fear; that my delay was for knowledge and blessing. I ended with the phrase that has carried many men across many stages: God is sufficient.

The next morning I pressed the letter into ʿUmar’s hand. He said he would send it with a messenger returning with the Egyptian caravan as far as Cairo. Whether it reached them, God knows. A man on the road speaks as if he can command distance. Distance laughs.

We set out from Mecca in the last days of Dhu al-Hijja. Outside the city, the caravan of Iraq gathered with the unruly patience of beasts being harnessed. Camels groaned as loads were shifted; women’s litters were tied down with ropes that creaked. Men argued over places, over who had paid and who had not. A banner rose above the press - not the great embroidered flag of a sultan, as on the Syrian road, but a simpler cloth that marked the caravan’s center. Around it clustered those who mattered: commander, clerks, guards with bows slung loose as if they were part of the body.

There were more merchants here than I had seen among the Syrians: men with bales of cloth and packets of spice tucked into saddlebags, men who spoke of profit even as they spoke of pilgrimage. There were also students, their ink-stained fingers betraying them. And there were faces hard in a way devotion does not soften - men who had come, perhaps, not for God but for what the road could hide.

ʿUmar moved through the knots of people as if he had lived his whole life in caravans. He found us a place near the middle, where the dust of the front would not blind us and the stragglers at the rear would not drag us into trouble. He spoke to a clerk, produced a small document, and nodded toward me.

“This is the Maghribi student,” he said, letting the word do its work.

The clerk glanced up, took me in, and made a mark on his tablet.

So a man becomes a line in another man’s book.

When the caravan began to move, it did so not with the suddenness of a horse but with the slow gathering of a river. Dust rose in sheets. Mecca fell behind us, the mountain walls swallowing the last glimpses of the Sanctuary until it was no more than a memory pressed into the mind.

By night we camped in Wādī l-ʿArūs.

They call it the Valley of the Bride, though the name has the bitter humor of roads. Fires flickered. Lentils boiled. A thin voice recited Qurʾān into the open air. Elsewhere, men quarreled - not over sanctity now, but over water, over who would watch while others slept.

Near a shallow seep, a line formed. A merchant pushed forward. An older man caught his sleeve. “Do you think your rings will draw water?” he snapped.

“My rings bought the camel that carried the skin that carried the water,” the merchant retorted. “Stand back.”

It was nothing. It was everything. In the wilderness, piety is weighed against purse, and the scales are not always kind.

Later, as the camp settled, ʿUmar sat beside me and shared a strip of dried meat. “You have left Cairo,” he said softly. “Your face still looks west at night.”

“My obligations are there,” I said.

“And your ambition is here,” he replied. He said it without malice, as if naming a fever.

He pointed into the darkness beyond the camp. “Do you know why the Darb is feared?” he asked.

“Because it is long,” I said. “Because water can be stolen by wind.”

“Because it is governed,” he answered. “On the Syrian road, a tribe can be bargained with by flattery and gifts. Here, the station-keeper has a ledger. He will take your name and your coin. If you have neither, he will take your dignity.”

Before dawn we rose. The cold bit through wool. Stars still sharpened the sky when the caravan moved out and the land opened into the wide, bare character of Najd. The plateau held no villages to break the eye, only stone and gravel and a horizon that sat far off like a promise that never comes closer.

Our march settled into a rhythm: travel, halt, pray, drink, sleep. The sound of the caravan became its own music: creaking saddles, the soft thud

of hooves on grit, the occasional groan of a camel complaining to God and man alike. Ilyās kept us from wasting water by habit, and more than once he slapped a thirsty hand away from a skin with the authority of a father.

At ʿUsayla, the road's governance showed itself plainly.

There was a stone-lined reservoir, dark water lying still as glass. Beside it stood a small building half fort and half storehouse, and at its door a scribe sat with a reed pen and a tablet. Guards kept the pilgrims back with staves. Water was drawn by measure. Coins passed. Names were spoken and written.

A poor man, robe patched in three places, held out an empty bowl. The scribe did not look up. "Name?" he asked. "From where?" Then, without raising his eyes, "Coin?"

"I have none," the poor man said, his voice cracking.

"Then wait," the scribe replied.

Wait. A word that can kill.

Before I could stop myself, I stepped forward. "He is a pilgrim," I said. "The road is made for pilgrims."

The scribe looked up at last. He measured me with his eyes, and I felt, in that moment, how reputation becomes a currency on the Darb. "And you are?"

"A man of the law," I said, and heard my own pride in it.

The scribe nodded toward a guard. "Let him drink," he said - not out of tenderness, but because a jurist's displeasure carries weight among those who keep accounts.

When the poor man drank, his eyes were wet. I turned away, embarrassed by gratitude offered so publicly. Pride makes even charity into theatre.

As we prepared to leave, ʿUmar told me the story every man on the Darb knows. "In the days when Baghdad was the lamp of the world," he said, "the wife of the Commander of the Faithful set her heart on this road. Zubayda. She did not walk it, but she spent on wells and reservoirs what other women spend on jewels. Men remember her because thirst

remembers.”

I listened and imagined a woman in distant Baghdad commissioning stone and water for strangers she would never meet. My mind wandered, unbidden, to Amina in Cairo, left to wait while I chased roads. Women’s piety builds; men’s piety travels. I did not know which God values more.

After ʿUsayla the emptiness deepened. The season was kind, but the land was relentless. Rumor moved through the caravan like fever: the next reservoir was low; no, it was dry; no, water would be sold at the price of gold.

“Gold is cheaper than dying,” someone muttered.

Ilyās tightened our straps. “Do not drink because others drink,” he warned. “Drink because your tongue is a stone.”

Toward evening we reached Naqīra.

From a distance it looked like nothing - a low rise, a faint line of wall - but the smell of dampness reached us, that faint miraculous smell that makes men quicken their pace despite fatigue.

The reservoir was there, stone-lined as at ʿUsayla, but the water lay low, far below the parapet, like a miser hoarding coin. The station-keeper, lean and watchful, called out, “By measure. By name. By coin.”

The line formed. Arguments sparked.

Then shadows detached themselves from the dusk: horses, men on horses, silhouettes sharp against the last red of sunset. Bedouin rode in without hurry, bows strung, lances upright. Their leader’s face was half hidden by his headcloth. They moved as if the camp belonged to them.

The commander of the caravan went to meet them. I could not hear the words at first, only the tone: polite, then strained, then sharp. The Bedouin leader laughed once, a short sound that made my stomach tighten.

“Tribal men,” ʿUmar murmured. “They know how much water is here.”

“What do they want?” I asked, though the answer was already in my mouth like dust.

“Coin,” Ilyās said. “Or blood.”

The Bedouin shifted their horses to block the path out of the station, and the message was plain: pay, or do not pass. A youth near me whispered, “Are we not in the land of Islam? Is there no law?”

“There is law,” ʿUmar said. “It is written on arrowheads.”

The qāḍī of the caravan stepped forward with hands raised, speaking of God and pilgrims and the sin of harming those who seek the House. The Bedouin listened as one listens to wind: acknowledging its presence without being moved by it.

Behind their line, the darkness thickened into the unknown stage ahead.

The press at the reservoir grew tight. A guard struck a man’s shoulder with his staff. The man stumbled, and water spilled into the dust from a cracked bowl. Several people cried out as if they had seen blood.

I felt anger rise - anger at the Bedouin, at the commander, at the road itself. Beneath it lay fear: not of death, which a traveler makes peace with early, but of humiliation - of being reduced, again, to a bargaining chip.

Ilyās leaned close. “Our skins are half full,” he said. “If we stay, we drink. If we leave without their leave, we die. They know this.”

ʿUmar drew out his purse and counted without shame. “If we pay quickly, we leave quickly,” he said. “If we argue, the night grows, and the water grows less.”

“You are eager to surrender,” I snapped, hearing my own pride.

He looked at me with calm that stung. “I am eager to live,” he replied. “And eager to reach the places where bargaining is done in courts, not in dust.”

A cry cut through the camp: a man had tried to draw water without paying. A guard seized him. The man struggled. The guard struck him across the face. He fell, blood mixing with the spilled water at his cheek. The Bedouin leader laughed again.

When the commander returned from his parley, his face was set. “Each man will pay,” he announced. “By family, by group. The toll will be collected now. Those who refuse will be left.”

Left. Another word that can kill.

Around us, men whispered of the stages ahead - of wells uncertain, of stretches where even jackals carry their own water. And threaded through the fear ran another rumor, bright as a bead on a string: “Beyond the next stations is Iraq. Kūfa! Najaf! You will see the dome shining like a pearl.”

Longing tightened in my chest. Courts and shrines. Scholars and saints. The world widening again.

I reached into my pouch and felt the coins there - smooth, familiar, shameful in their power. I thought of Mecca’s wall under my hands that morning, cool and unmoving. I thought of Cairo’s courtyards and Amina’s lowered eyes. I thought of Maryam’s sharp voice, and of promises written in ink that might never arrive.

Then I stepped forward and spoke my name to the scribe as if the name itself were a toll.

As the coin left my hand and vanished into the road’s machinery, a wind rose across the plateau. It carried dust, yes - but also the sharp scent of emptiness ahead, the true wilderness stage where even courage feels like a weight.

Ilyās lifted the edge of one skin, sniffed, and his face tightened. “Listen,” he whispered.

“What?” I asked.

“The water is turning,” he said. “Stale. If we do not reach the next station soon—” He did not finish.

Beyond the low walls of Naqīra, the night-march waited like a mouth opening. The commander’s banner dipped forward. The Bedouin on their horses shifted aside just enough to let the caravan pass, and their shadows fell over us like a net.

Ahead lay Iraq’s rumors - Kūfa and Najaf, learning and danger.

Behind lay Mecca, and beyond her Cairo, and the faces of women I had asked to wait.

Between them lay night and stone and thirst.

The caravan moved.

Chapter 20

Zubayda’s Road

Night has a way of turning all travellers into one nation: the thirsty.

By the time we passed the low walls of Naqīra, the stars had hardened into cold points and the desert had found its voice again—wind in the rope-work, sand in the seams, camel-breath in the dark. The commander’s banner leaned forward like a spear-tip, and the file of beasts and men followed it with the obedience of fatigue.

Ilyās walked near my knee with a water-skin slung against his hip. Now and then he lifted its mouth and breathed in, as if scent could tell him what taste could not.

“The water is turning,” he murmured.

It had already turned. Stale water is not only a taste; it is a warning. It tells you that what you carry is not enough. In the sanctuary a man measures himself by prayer; on the road he measures himself by how much wetness he can keep alive in leather.

We marched until the rim of the east paled. No one wasted words. On such nights even speech feels like a thing you should save. When daylight came, it did not warm; it only revealed a level stretch of country running out to the sky. Yet the air had a sweetness in it that surprised me—Najd, men called it, and they spoke the word as if it were mint.

The tanks of al-Qarūra announced themselves before we saw them. The line slowed; the animals sensed water the way men sense danger. Then low walls rose from the plain and beyond them dark cistern-mouths rimmed with stone. Around them moved figures with poles and buckets, and above them stood a watchman with a staff, his posture saying plainly: this water is not ownerless.

Urgency loosened the caravan’s order into small violences. Men who had prayed shoulder to shoulder in Mecca now jostled for a place at the draw. A boy no older than twelve clutched a skin to his chest and stared into the cistern as if it were a miracle that might vanish.

“Easy,” someone called. “Easy, in God’s name.”

It was ʿUmar al-Mawṣilī. He slid between tempers like a man used to crowds. He spoke a word to the watchman, and the watchman’s eyes flicked to me, measuring—my clothes, my accent, the neatness of my beard.

“Name?” the watchman demanded.

On this road a man becomes his name written down, the name becoming a claim, and the claim becoming a debt.

“Abū ʿAbd Allāh,” I said, and gave the rest. The watchman scratched it onto a tablet and made a mark beside it. Paid. Drew. Owed.

That mark unsettled me more than the thirst had. In Tangier, my teachers had spoken of endowments—pious foundations that outlive the body. Here doctrine had become stonework: cisterns, stairways, guards, and a scribe counting draws like sins. Even mercy, it seemed, could be made to stand in line.

“Zubayda,” I heard Ilyās mutter, as if invoking a saint.

They said this road bore her name: Zubayda daughter of Jaʿfar, wife of a caliph, a woman whose generosity had put water into the throat of the desert. I knew only that without her, this caravan would be a string of corpses.

The water tasted of rain held long in stone. It was cool. It made my tongue feel human again. I drank slowly, as if the body could be persuaded to be grateful instead of greedy.

A guard held out his palm. “Fee.”

The word stung. ʿUmar did not argue. He paid, took a stamped clay token, and handed it to Ilyās as if charity required receipts.

“Is it always so?” I asked him under my breath.

“It is always something,” he replied. “On the Syrian road you pay the tribe. On this road you pay the keeper. Either way, the thirsty learn arithmetic.”

From al-Qarūra we went on to al-Ḥājir, where there were tanks—empty, their mouths swallowing light. Men swore. The station-keeper pointed at the ground.

“Dig.”

They dug wide, temporary wells, uncased wounds in the earth. The first scoops came up dry, the next damp, and then—if God willed—a thin seep that had to be coaxed into a trickle. The line formed without being told. Every man watched the digging as if his eyes could make water appear.

A quarrel flared when one group tried to claim the first bucket. The commander’s archers shifted their bows so that the quarrel could see them. It did not vanish; it only learned to speak more carefully.

Ilyās tied cloth over the mouth of our skin and poured through it, letting the grit stay behind. The water was bitter, but it was wet. Men accept a great deal from wetness.

A pilgrim beside me—thin as a reed, his lips split—swayed and nearly fell. His companion held him by the elbow, pleading for room at the bucket.

“For God’s sake,” the companion said, and the words were not pious decoration. They were a price.

I hesitated with my own skin in my hands. My mind produced arguments like a jurist: you must preserve yourself to preserve your intention; you cannot help others if you die; charity begins with discipline. Then the man’s knees buckled.

Ilyās saw my struggle and clicked his tongue. “A sip,” he said. “Not a river.”

I let the companion tilt the mouth of my skin to the thin man’s lips. Two swallows, three at most. The man’s eyes fluttered open as if returning from another world. I tied the skin again with shaking fingers and felt immediately the shameful sting of loss.

The desert teaches you that generosity can feel like self-harm. It also teaches you that a heart that will not open will eventually crack.

As I swallowed my own mouthful, Cairo rose in my mind: Amina pouring water into a basin, Maryam snapping at her not to spill, not to waste. In the desert, wasting water is a sin that needs no jurist to explain.

“Keep owing,” ʿUmar said when he saw my face. “It keeps you careful.”

From al-Ḥājir we halted at Samīra, a low patch of ground with a kind of fortified, inhabited enclosure. The water there was plentiful and drawn from cased wells, but it was brackish. Men drank and grimaced and drank again.

Bedouin tents clustered near the enclosure, and commerce arrived as reliably as thirst. They brought sheep, melted butter, and curdled milk—and laughed at the pilgrims who offered coins. They demanded pieces of coarse cotton cloth and would take nothing else.

Coins, I learned, are words that only towns understand.

ʿUmar opened his pack and produced rough cotton as if he had known the rule long before we reached it. He traded quickly. I watched a Persian with a hennaed beard stand baffled with silver in his hand, unable to buy bread.

“You planned for this,” I said.

“A man who travels without cloth travels without speech,” ʿUmar answered. “Silver is bright, but cloth is warm.”

I had one extra strip of coarse cotton—saved for bandaging or for some future need I could not name. I laid it on the Bedouin’s palm and received, in exchange, a lump of butter wrapped in hide. When I ate, the salt of the brackish water and the fat of the butter made my stomach settle, and I understood why men become practical on pilgrimage: the body does not care how pure your intention is if your belly is empty.

After Samīra the road became a chain of names and fatigue: the Hill with the Hole where wind whistled through rock; Wādī l-Kurūsh, waterless in spite of its promise; then a night march driven hard by the commander until dawn came raw.

It was in that dawn that we reached Fayd.

Before we saw its walls, we felt the change. The caravan tightened. Archers moved where they could be seen. The commander ordered a formation, warlike enough to make the watchers outside understand we would not be easy prey.

Fayd stood on a level plain: a large fortified enclosure with a suburb beyond. Inside was smoke, trade, noise—the smell of bread and animals after days of stone. The inhabitants lived off pilgrims, selling and bargaining. Here the road turned market again.

I saw pilgrims arriving from Iraq on their way to Mecca leave portions of their provisions in storage, to be reclaimed on the return. They tied sacks with knots that looked like vows and handed them to keepers who marked tablets.

Again the ledger. Again the mark that meant trust.

A man near us argued with a keeper over a bundle of dates, insisting on a better mark, a clearer witness, a promise sealed by more than a scratch on wood. I felt my old self—the student of law—stir at the familiar shape of dispute. Yet the keeper only shrugged.

“Come back alive,” he said. “Then we will argue.”

ʿUmar guided me through the crowd to two men seated with the posture of authority, horsemen and foot-soldiers gathered behind them.

“Fayyāḍ and Ḥiyār,” he murmured. “Sons of Muḥannā ibn ʿĪsā.”

The amirs greeted the commander loudly, displaying zeal for the caravan’s protection. Their men brought camels and sheep for sale. Pilgrims bought what they could afford; the amirs watched what they could take.

One of the amirs’ attendants—young, with a hawk’s eyes—let his gaze rest on me too long.

“From where?” he asked bluntly.

“Tanja,” I said.

He repeated the word as if rolling it on his tongue. “Maghrib,” he decided, and then smiled, and the smile held no warmth. “Far. Far to come and far to go.”

It was not praise. It was a reminder that strangers are always noticeable in places where power keeps its own count.

Later, in a scrap of shade, ʿUmar said, “From here they claim an easy road, furnished with tanks. Twelve days to Kūfa.”

Kūfa. The word carried the weight of stories—learning and quarrel, law and blood. My chest tightened with anticipation and dread.

“And Najaf?” I asked, and regretted the eagerness in my own voice.

“A place of tombs,” ʿUmar replied. “A place of hospitality. A place where tongues must be watched.”

In Fayd, with the clink of trade all around me, Cairo tugged at my conscience like a hook. Maryam and Amina were far, yet the desert made distance intimate; at night the mind walks where the body cannot.

I wrote a few lines on a scrap of paper—no eloquence, only a sign of life—and pressed a coin into the merchant’s hand along with it. “If it reaches Cairo,” I said, “buy ink, and let them know I did not forget.”

The merchant weighed the coin, weighed me, and shrugged. “If the road allows,” he answered.

That answer followed me as we left Fayd.

We halted at al-Ajfur, then in the open desert, then marched by night to Zarūd, a sand plain with small dwellings and wells whose water was unpalatable. Men drank anyway. Necessity has no palate.

From Zarūd we came to al-Thaʿlabiyya. A ruined fort crouched on one side; opposite it yawned an enormous reservoir reached by a stairway. Rain-water enough for the whole caravan lay below, and the sight of abundance made men frantic.

“Pay, then draw,” the guards barked. “Pay, then draw.”

Coins flashed. Tokens passed. A scribe marked payments as if he were counting sins. A thin man tried to slip past without paying; a staff struck his

shoulder; the crowd surged; the stairway bucked and swallowed. For a heartbeat I felt my feet leave the stone, and the world narrowed to the smell of sweat and wet leather.

Somewhere behind me a man screamed my name—perhaps Ilyās, perhaps my own fear giving itself a voice.

Ilyās hooked an arm around my waist and yanked me back. “Do you want to die in a well?” he hissed. “Keep your feet. Keep your skin.”

When my turn came, I descended into cool shadow, dipped the skin, and felt the sudden delicious weight as it filled. Above, a man cried out and the cry ended abruptly. I did not look back. In the wilderness you learn quickly what sights you can afford.

At the top of the stairway I pressed my palm to my chest, not in prayer but to remind myself I was still solid. ‘Umar’s eyes met mine for a brief instant and I saw in them something like satisfaction—part pity, part calculation. A man who has almost fallen is easier to steer.

As we left, Bedouin tents clustered near the reservoir, selling camels, sheep, butter, milk. Their faces were calm. They watched our thirst the way men watch a spectacle.

“From here,” ‘Umar said, tightening the knot on his own skin, “there are fewer natural watering-places. Keep your water as if it were your soul.”

We halted at Birkat al-Marjum, the Pool of the Stoned. In the roadway stood a tomb with a great heap of stones upon it. Everyone threw a stone as he passed. Men told a story of an old dispute, of a man killed by stones, and the heap grew like a monument to anger.

I held a stone, remembered Minā, and felt the difference between a rite and a hatred. Still, custom is a rope that catches the foot. I dropped my stone onto the heap and did not feel clean.

From there we halted at al-Mashqūq, where two reservoirs held fresh sweet water. There men did a thing that startled me: they emptied out what water was still in their possession—stale, warmed, familiar—and refilled with sweetness.

Ilyās made me do the same. “Better to lose a little than to poison your belly,” he said.

As my old water darkened the dust, I thought of guilt and promises and the way a man insists on carrying what turns sour inside him. I told myself I could pour it out later, when the road was kinder. The road, of course, never becomes kinder—only different.

We halted at al-Tanānīr, then made a night march, and after sunrise arrived before Zubāla—an inhabited village with a fortified grange, reservoirs, and many wells. After the naked plain its walls looked almost luxurious. Men washed their faces as if trying to become new. The accents around me shifted; I heard Iraq in the mouths of pilgrims, and my ears leaned toward it like a plant toward water.

From Zubāla we halted at al-Haythamān, then below ʿAqabat al-Shayṭān, the Devil’s Pass. In the morning we climbed it—the only steep place on that road, and not difficult, though the name frightened men before their feet ever found the slope.

Beyond, we halted at Waqīsa, a fortified grange with reservoirs. “Last of the natural watering-places,” ʿUmar told me, and his voice carried strain. “After this, until Kūfa, no conspicuous water except the watercourses derived from the Euphrates.”

At Waqīsa the horizon changed. A line of figures approached not to threaten but to welcome—men of Kūfa, with donkeys burdened with flour, bread, dried dates, and fruit. The travellers congratulated one another on their safe journey. Hard-eyed men smiled like men waking from illness. A few wept openly, not from piety but from relief.

Bread passed into hands. Dates softened tongues. Someone clasped my forearm and said, “You have come far, brother,” and the simple word brother warmed me more than the sun.

But with the warmth came a new pressure. The law of the road—arrow-range bargains and staff-blows at reservoirs—did not vanish, but another law drew near: the law of cities, of scholars, of reputations ruined without a blade.

We pressed on, halting at Lawrā, then al-Masājid, then at Manārat al-Qurūn—the Tower of Horns—standing alone in the desert, crowned with gazelle horns, no habitation around it. The horns caught the light like a warning: even emptiness keeps trophies.

When we halted next at al-ʻUdhayb, the world changed so suddenly my eyes stung.

It was a fruitful valley covered with dwellings and cultivation, surrounded by pasture. Green—real green, not mirage—spread along the watercourses. Palm-groves lifted their fronds like hands in prayer. The air smelled of damp earth and animals and cooking fires.

“This,” ʻUmar said softly, “is the edge of ʻIrāq.”

He spoke as if we had crossed a threshold that could not be crossed twice.

Someone in the caravan spoke into the dusk: “Tomorrow, al-Qādisiyya.”

The name fell like a drumbeat, carrying old stories of conquest and empire, of Muslims and Persians, of a battle that made a world.

And beyond that name—beyond palms and water—another name waited, unsaid but present in the way men glanced north as if toward a light: Najaf.

I sat that night with my back against a palm trunk and listened to water running in the channels. The sound should have comforted me. Instead it made my conscience louder.

In Cairo, Maryam would be locking the courtyard gate, counting bolts as if they were prayers. Amina would be lying awake, measuring my absence by the sound of other men’s footsteps in the alley.

Here, the road had delivered me to the promised land of rumor and learning.

But as the water ran, I understood with a clarity that felt like fear: the road does not end at a shrine. It only changes its price.

And in the darkness beyond the palms, Iraq waited to collect.