



EXPERIENCIA  
ANDALUSÍ

GUADAJOZ CAMPIÑA ESTE CÓRDOBA

# Chronicles of the Andalusí Guadajoz

A journey through the living memory  
of the towns of Al-Andalus  
in the Guadajoz region  
of Córdoba.



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**GUADAJOZ y  
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# PROLOGUE

Carmen had set out early on her hiking route, following the course of the Guadajoz River and walking along a stretch of the Mozarabic Way. She walked alone, with only the constant murmur of the river, the whisper of the wind through the leaves of the trees, and the subtle sounds of wildlife among the branches and reeds as her companions.

At midday, she reached the Stone Bridge on the outskirts of Baena. The river flowed gently between the reinforced banks, and the eucalyptus trees offered a cool, fresh shade.

There she stopped. She spread her blanket on the ground and carefully took out the food her mother had lovingly prepared: an eggplant and zucchini salad scented with cilantro and citrus, and honey rolls filled with nuts. “Eat slowly and savor it,—her mother had told her—. These are Andalusí recipes, like the ones people ate centuries ago by this very river.”

So she ate unhurriedly, letting each bite bring her a little closer to that distant era.

The eggplants, lightly browned, tender and smooth, blended with the freshness of the citrus; the zucchini, with its fresh and almost crisp texture, added lightness, and everything was wrapped in the green fragrance of cilantro. Then came the honey rolls: the crunch of the pastry and the sweetness of the orange blossom honey combined perfectly with the earthy undertone of the nuts.

With her stomach full, Carmen let herself be enveloped by the coolness of the shade as a gentle breeze caressed her face. She lay back. She breathed deeply. The murmur of the water, the faint creak of the branches, the subtle hint of cinnamon still lingering on her palate...

Her eyelids grew heavier and heavier, and within minutes, she had fallen asleep.

# CHAPTER 1

## ESPEJO

Carmen opened her eyes and found herself atop a sober, austere construction that overlooked the countryside. What she saw before her was al-Qal'á, the old Andalusí fortress that today is the Castle of Espejo: a defensive tower, but without a city yet surrounding it.

A few steps away, a man in a light tunic, carrying a wooden staff, his face weathered by time, was silently gazing at the horizon. He did not seem surprised to see her, and Carmen was not startled by his presence either. It was as if she had been expecting him.

—You have arrived —he said without turning—. And you have arrived in time.

—In time for what?— Carmen asked, still not fully understanding where she was.

—To uncover the Andalusí secrets of the Guadajoz region of Córdoba,— the old man replied in a calm voice—. The wisdom of its people, the work of anonymous hands... and the stones we raised so that time would not forget us.

He turned toward her with a serene expression.

—I am Qāsim b. Aşbag, from Bayyāna. Jurist, historian, teacher of caliphs... and bearer of memory. But what I know I did not learn only from books, but also from the men and women who gave life to these lands. Come. This region still holds stories that deserve to be heard.

Carmen approached, both confused and fascinated in equal measure.

From above, the landscape unfolded with gentle hills, endless olive groves, and dusty paths that crossed like veins. In the distance, the bluish outlines of the sierras, and beyond them, the invisible line where the Nasrid kingdom began.

—We are in Espejo —Carmen said softly, almost surprised to hear herself—. I recognize it... but it looks different.

Qāsim nodded slowly, his eyes fixed on the horizon.

—It is, but not the Espejo you know. This is Espejo in Andalusí times: smaller and humbler, but alive.

—And what exactly was this place in your time? —she asked, her voice almost reverent.

—Al-Qal‘a, which means ‘the fortress.’ This was all: a tower, a courtyard, and an underground cistern. In Andalusí times, this hilltop was a watch bastion. From here three routes were controlled: to the north, Qurṭuba (Córdoba); to the east, Qāšruh (Castro del Río); to the south, Bayyāna (Baena) and, beyond, the old road to Gharnāṭah (Granada).

—The Caliphate Route? — Carmen said.

Qāsim smiled.

—That is what you call it now. A beautiful name. Along here passed the emir’s envoys, tax collectors, caravaners with their mules loaded with silks, salt, and spices. Soldiers too, of course. Sometimes ours, sometimes not.

—It is still used today— Carmen interrupted—. Though no one travels it like then. Today it’s a cultural route. It goes from Córdoba to Granada and passes through here, through Espejo. Some people even ride it by bicycle, machines with wheels that you pedal to move forward.

Qāsim regarded her closely.

—I like that. That people still use the old routes, even if it is on those machines with wheels.

He paused for a moment, as if arranging his memories before sharing them. Then he continued:

—This hill was chosen long before us. It was Ucubi in Iberian times, but it allied with Julius Caesar during the Roman civil wars and Pompey destroyed it. Later it was rebuilt and called Attubi. The Romans established their outpost here, their specula, but it was under the Umayyads that it took its current form: a fortified farmhouse, a sentinel of these lands.

Qāsim stopped in the center of the courtyard, where the arches cast curved shadows over the stone floor.

—The cistern is right below —he said, pointing to an opening in the pavement, protected by a stone curb.

They descended a staircase that led to the underground cistern. The air changed instantly: cooler, denser. The whitewashed walls gleamed with the moisture accumulated over centuries.

—Here we collect the rain —Qāsim explained as his footsteps echoed softly in the vault—. In a land like this, water is synonymous with life, endurance, and sovereignty. As long as there is water down here, the fortress can withstand sieges for much longer.

Carmen brushed the wall with her fingertips, letting the coolness run through her skin.

—This isn't the only cistern I've seen in Espejo —she said—. On the outskirts, near the old Roman road, there's another one, from Roman times. It's well preserved, restored, and open to visitors.

A brief silence followed. The echo of their voices seemed to fade among the stones, as if they still held the whispers of other eras.

—In my time —Carmen added, lowering her voice slightly—, some claim that this well is connected to secret tunnels. They say one of them leads to the Albuhera. No one has found them, but some still believe it.

They ascended back into the courtyard, leaving behind the dimness of the cistern. Inside the castle, Carmen let her gaze wander through the space, recognizing elements that in her own time were still preserved.

—Now they call it the Castle of Espejo, or the Ducal Castle. It was expanded centuries later by a Christian knight, Pay Arias de Castro. Towers, coats of arms, and walls were added... Today it belongs to a noble family. It is well preserved, with antique furniture, historic weapons, and restored rooms. It's a place that imposes its presence.

She paused for a moment, thoughtful.

—All of that is part of its history and has great value, but what you're showing me now... reveals another layer. It's incredible how much a structure like this can hide, so many lives overlapping in a single stone.

Qāsim nodded, a faint smile on his face.

—That's the fascinating thing about these places: they don't have just one origin, but many. Each era left its trace. And every layer speaks, if you know how to listen.

He turned toward the exit and raised his staff, inviting her to follow.

—Come. This has only been the beginning. Now I will take you to a place where stone turns into salt, and where the land still holds the taste of other centuries.

The path began to descend gently among the olive groves. The ground changed, becoming whiter, cracked, speckled with salt crusts that glittered under the morning sun.

After a short while, the terrain opened into a wide expanse. In front of them, a succession of pools and channels formed a shining mosaic. Some lay dry, while others were covered by a thin layer of water that reflected the sky like a mirror.

—These are the saltworks —said Qāsim—. They are very precious to us, for they represent stability. As long as salt flows, there will be something to preserve, something to trade... and something to protect.

Carmen approached one of the ponds. The surface was patterned with cracks from evaporation, and along the edges, old conduits appeared—just like those still preserved in her own time.

—These are the Duernas Saltworks —she said—. They are still active and produce nearly three thousand tons of salt a year. The water here is four times saltier than seawater. In the past, it was extracted with waterwheels pulled by animals, later with more advanced mechanisms. Today they use pumps, but many things remain almost the same.

—Then the cycle has not been broken—. said Qāsim with a serene smile—. This land has sweated salt since ancient times, and we too made use of it in Andalusī times. It was not only used to preserve food; it was also essential for the digestion of livestock.

He stopped by one of the dry pools and bent down to pick up a handful of crystals.

—We also used it as medicine: to clean wounds, to induce vomiting, or even to restore appetite. Ibn al-Bayṭār, a scholar of my time, says it can awaken the heart. Though he also warns that excessive use harms the eyes and the blood. Like all power, it requires balance.

—And is it easy to obtain?— Carmen asked.

—It is not scarce, but it is regulated. The State—the walī, the governor—usually controls its extraction. In some places, a tax is paid for each load. And in the souks, there is always a stall for salt.

They stopped at the edge of a large pool that still held water. The reflection was so clear it seemed like a doorway to another sky.

—Memory came here too —said Qāsim—. Some believed salt helped prevent forgetting. That is why, in certain tombs, a few grains were left—so the soul could remember the way.

—And yet —Carmen added—, almost no one knows that this already existed in Andalusī times. That salt was more than just a resource: it was part of a living culture.

—That is why we are here —Qāsim replied—. To see what remains, even if time has dressed it in another form.

A gentle breeze, laden with the dry, mineral scent of the saltworks, caressed their faces. Carmen and Qāsim exchanged a glance, and without another word, they continued walking.

# CHAPTER 2

## CASTRO DEL RÍO

The path descended along the curve of the river, skirting orchards and olive groves, until the land rose again, giving way to a beautiful town. From afar, Carmen could distinguish the unmistakable silhouette of a sturdy tower and walls gilded by the sun.

—Castro del Río —she murmured, as if the name had sprung directly from the landscape.

They climbed narrow, cobbled streets until they reached the upper part of the town. There, dominating the horizon, rose the fortress.

Qāsim paused for a moment, contemplating the towers cut against the sky.

—This is another of our keys —he said calmly—. A fortress from which the entire Guadajoz valley is watched. Compact as a clenched fist, flanked by four towers. In the depths of one of them we keep a deep cistern, built of brick and with an oculus open to the sky, giving us water even on the driest days. Do you see the walls? Rammed earth hardened, masonry layered over centuries.

—It's breathtaking...—Carmen whispered, stopping in the parade ground—. In my time it still stands, though with alterations. They call it a castle-fortress and say it preserves parts of this period, but also from later ones. It even has a keep.

—A what? —asked Qāsim, raising an eyebrow.

—A noble, central tower, a symbol of power. They rebuilt it centuries later, when this was no longer a frontier but a consolidated possession —she explained as she stepped forward, carefully observing her surroundings—. They added new structures, made modifications, restored it, but always kept building on what was already here. These rammed-earth walls —Carmen brushed the rough surface with her fingers —are still standing.

—That doesn't surprise me —Qāsim nodded—. When something is well designed from the start, there is no need to begin again. Look around you. The walls encircle the promontory like stone serpents. They don't follow straight lines; they adapt to the land. That is how true defenses are built.

He paused, gazing with pride at the battlement.

—Each tower has its purpose. Some guard vaulted chambers where sentinels rest between shifts. We've already built forty, and we are not finished. If the frontier demands it, more will rise. This place does not surrender.

Qāsim walked a few steps to the wall-walk, from where the town could be seen.

—All of this is one single body —he said, looking toward the houses sprawling down the hillside—. The castle, the walls, the houses clustered below. The narrow streets, the whitewashed walls, the plain wooden doors. This is where the city was born. We call it madīna.

—And we, many centuries later, call it the 'Barrio de la Villa' —Carmen added with a smile. —It still preserves this structure, though with different uses and customs. But it still beats with life.

Qāsim turned slightly, pointing to a street that descended between whitewashed walls.

—Come. You've seen the place from above. Now it is time to walk it.

The breeze drifted down the street as they entered the heart of the madīna. The land grew softer, and the walls were left behind.

Carmen looked around attentively. The whitewashed, humble houses pressed tightly against one another as if seeking refuge from the sun. The streets were narrow, sloping, and twisted sharply at certain points. Brick arches crossed from one side to the other, joining façades or forming shaded passages.

—It looks a lot like the Jewish Quarter of Córdoba —she murmured—. That sense that everything is designed to preserve shade and coolness.

In a small square, several children played at tossing pebbles into a clay bowl. A woman leaned out from a low balcony with a basket of figs. Further on, an old man bent over a chair as he wove ropes.

—Here live the common people—said Qāsim—. Merchants, craftsmen, farmers. The ones who make all this breathe.

Carmen watched it all with a mixture of respect and tenderness. In that neighborhood, so different yet so familiar, she felt a disordered harmony, alive and beautiful.

—In the future, much of this is still preserved. The little streets, the white façades, even some of the arches. Travelers still lose themselves here, looking for a place to stay... especially the pilgrims who walk the Mozarabic Way of St. James.

At last, they stopped before a larger building, discreet yet solid. A strip of brick framed the entrance. To one side, a square tower of sober proportions rose above the rooftops, topped with blind arches that led up to the minaret.

—Here we are —said Qāsim—. The alḡāma. The Great Mosque of Qasr al-Riyya.

He gently pushed the door open, and they stepped inside. The interior was bathed in a dim light descending from small, high openings. The floor was made of simple slabs, and a scent of wood and lime floated in the air. From the adjoining courtyard, open to the garden, came the soft fragrance of orange blossom. At the far end, the mihrab opened like a carved shell, oriented toward Mecca.

—This is not only a place of prayer —Qāsim explained as he walked among the columns—. It is also a refuge for thought. Here, one listens to the voice of the

iman, but also that of one's own heart. And it is not unusual to see how every Friday this space fills with life: some come to pray, others to seek knowledge, and some only need to pause for a moment and breathe in a little peace.

Carmen gently ran her hand along one of the pillars.

—It's amazing how something of that still lingers....—she whispered—. Though it is no longer a mosque: today it is the Parish of Our Lady of the Assumption. Shortly after the conquest, in 1240, the mosque was transformed into a church. But the minaret remained... and they used it as a bell tower. From the outside, you can still tell.

Qāsim stopped, surprised.

—And what else remains?

—A few things. The building you see was greatly altered, especially in the 16th century, when it took on that Mudejar church form it still has. It has three naves, with side chapels, and a curious mix of styles. There is an Almohad horseshoe arch that survived on one of the walls... and some of these columns, which were reused from right here. Or even from Roman ruins.

—Stone does not forget —said Qāsim, touching the column with his fingers—. Walls may be transformed, serve other purposes, even yield to other beliefs... but memory never leaves them.

—This place is still very important to many. At Easter, one of the town's most beloved processions departs from here. And though the building has changed, it remains a place of gathering: people enter, look around, sit, pray... or simply keep silent, just as you said.

Qāsim gazed at the space in calm reflection.

—Perhaps not everything is so different within these walls, after all.

As they stepped out of the mosque, the light enveloped them once again. At that moment, a gust of air rose from the street, carrying with it a warm, toasty, spiced aroma. Carmen closed her eyes and breathed it in.

—Do you smell that? It's delicious. I'm getting an embarrassingly strong appetite.

Qāsim chuckled softly.

—Hold on a little longer. I know a house where they're surely cooking something wonderful at this hour. It belongs to a friend of mine; he lives with his family on an estate not far from here. His wife, Lubna, is an exceptional cook. And he works with olive wood, using the oil he presses himself at home. His family helps him with everything. Come on, it's not far.

# CHAPTER 2.1

## LLANO DEL ESPINAR

They left the streets of the neighborhood behind and exited the town along a dusty path that opened between small orchards and olive groves.

After a while, in the distance, a small estate appeared, surrounded by trees and enclosed by a low stone wall. The bleating of a goat and the rhythmic tapping of wood could be heard. Mixed with those sounds, the breeze carried the unmistakable aroma of something frying in good oil.

—This place... —murmured Carmen, a sudden look of recognition on her face—. It's Llano del Espinar. Of course. I didn't recognize it from afar, but now I do.

A middle-aged man, with weathered hands and a kind expression, came out to greet them at the courtyard gate.

—Muqaddam, brother!— Qāsim greeted him with a sincere smile as they embraced—. How long it has been!

Muqaddam nodded warmly.

—Too long, Qāsim. It was about time.

—This is Carmen —Qāsim added, turning to her—. She comes from very far away. Farther than you can imagine.

—Welcome, sister —said Muqaddam with a smile and eyes alight with curiosity—. Come in, come in. Lubna is just finishing frying the last ones.

At that moment, a woman came out from the kitchen carrying a steaming dish in her hands.

—I don't know why, but today I felt I should prepare a little extra food... and look at that.

It was Lubna, with a kind face and steady hands. She gave them a gentle smile and led them to the porch, where a low table covered with a simple cloth awaited in the shade of the dry reeds. There she set down a dish of small, golden, steaming meatballs, alongside a jug of cool water scented with mint leaves.

—Chicken balls with pistachio, breadcrumbs, a touch of cinnamon, and ground cilantro —said Lubna as she placed the plate in the center—. But the secret lies in the olive oil we prepare right here.

Muqaddam nodded with pride.

—And no invitation is needed to sit. Come, eat while it's hot.

After blessing the food with a brief "Bismillah," Carmen picked one up with her fingers, dipped it in a little lemon juice, and tasted it with an expression of surrender.

—I don't know if I'm in the past... or in heaven. You know, in my time, Castro del Río is famous for codfish, a fish from distant seas.

Lubna looked at her in surprise.

—Truly!—Carmen exclaimed—. It has become a symbol of the local cuisine. Every year a codfish food festival is held, drawing people from all over: there are competitions, wines, traditional products... A whole celebration.

Lubna smiled as she dipped one of the meatballs in lemon.

—That's good —she said at last—. Recipes change, but what always remains is the desire to eat well.

In the garden before them, Muqaddam's children played on the ground with small wooden dolls. Carmen watched them with a smile, surprised by the delicacy of the figures.

—How beautiful... where are they from? —she asked curiously.

—We made them together, in the workshop. Sometimes we work... and other times we play at working.

He leaned back slightly on the bench, his manner calm.

—Here we live from what the olive tree gives us —.said Muqaddam with serenity—. I work the wood and sell it to the local people; some even come from other alquerías just to order furniture or collect oil. The oil mill is just behind us, next to the oldest olive trees. It isn't large, but it's enough. We use a beam press, as our grandparents did: the key is to treat the fruit well and let time do its part.

Carmen noticed a corner of the workshop, where a carpenter's bench rested, tools hung neatly on the wall, and a couple of pieces were in progress: a chair and a small chest.

—In my time, Castro del Río is still renowned for olive wood. Even today, olive-wood furniture is crafted and sent to distant corners of the world. The best pieces are made from old wood, from trees that no longer bear fruit. They bury it in soil or sand for months to rid it of woodworm, and then they work it with bulrush.

Muqaddam looked at her with a mixture of surprise and satisfaction.

—Then it seems good craftsmanship has managed to stay alive. If we allow that to be lost, we lose more than just a system of production: we lose our roots.

Qāsim said nothing. He ate slowly, his eyes calm, as if everything in that courtyard—the food, the sun, the scent of orange blossom in the garden—was exactly as it ought to be.

Carmen lifted her gaze toward the olive fields.

—How curious. One travels centuries back to discover the past... and finds what the future ought to be.

# CHAPTER 3

## NUEVA CARTEYA

After the meal, they thanked Muqaddam and Lubna for their hospitality. The craftsman and his wife bid them farewell at the gate. Carmen carefully tucked away the small bundle of bread and dates that Lubna had given them “for the road.” Shortly afterward, they resumed their journey.

The path wound through gentle hills and fields rippling in the breeze. The sun, now high, cast glimmers among the olive groves, and the steps of the two travelers left a faint trace upon the dry earth.

They had left Llano del Espinar heading east, but Carmen suddenly stopped, her brow slightly furrowed.

—Here...—she murmured, stepping back a few meters—. Yes. This is Nueva Carteya.

Qāsīm looked at her with puzzlement.

—I don’t know that name.

—Of course. In your time it doesn’t exist. But in mine, there’s a town right here, in this valley. Nueva Carteya was founded much later, but every time I come, I recognize this hillside, this mountain profile.”

—That doesn’t surprise me —said Qāsīm—. This land has always been coveted. The Iberians, the Romans, even the Visigoths built fortifications here. We, in Andalusī times, made use of many of them. We reinforced them, or we

modified them to suit our needs. Here, people not only kept watch and defended, but also lived their daily lives.

Carmen nodded, gazing at the horizon.

—You know? Nowadays, people still travel through all this. But by bicycle —she added with a slight laugh—. There are organized routes that pass through the old fortified enclosures. They're popular rides, not competitions. They go along the paths that cross the Plaza de Armas, El Higuero... they even stop to rest among the ruins.

—A curious fate —said Qāsim with a half-smile—. But it is better to discover these fortresses on a leisure route than to risk your life conquering or defending them.

They continued walking, the terrain becoming more open, the hills more pronounced against the landscape's profile.

—In the town there is a museum— Carmen said—. A small one, but with great care for the local heritage from past eras. They keep objects that have surfaced over generations, some from Andalusian times. There are even coins and fragments of pottery.

Qāsim turned his head, visibly interested.

—So the people of your time still keep our things.

—Yes. Thanks to a citizens' association, the museum was opened a few years ago. It's called ACEPHACA. They take care of preserving, studying, and sharing the archaeological heritage. They've done it all with great love.

—That does them honor — Qāsim affirmed—. Not everything is lost if there are those who hold love and respect for the memory of the peoples.

The wind blew stronger at the top of the hill, and before them the silhouette of another rise began to take shape.

Qāsim stopped for a moment, his gaze fixed on the horizon.

—I want to show you the most important fortress in this entire region —he said in a different tone, almost reverent—. It is very much alive.

He pointed toward a hill further east, where the land rose in familiar shapes.

Carmen narrowed her eyes, following his gesture.

—I know which one it is —she replied—. You mean El Higuérón. I can't wait to see it in this era.

They resumed their walk, while the silhouette of the hill grew clearer with each step. There stood El Higuérón. From a distance, Carmen could make out the outline of the walls, the shape of the towers, and a subtle movement atop the heights.

When they reached the main entrance, a pair of armed men watched them from above a lookout structure. There was no hostility, but there was caution. Qāsim exchanged a few brief words with one of them, his tone firm yet cordial. At last, they were granted passage.

Inside the enclosure, what opened up was not a settlement, but an active garrison. The fortress, of Roman origin and reinforced by the Andalusí, was maintained as a control point. Soldiers patrolled the battlements, checked ropes and pulleys, and sharpened arrows on stone benches.

A deep voice approached from the side:

—You are far from the plain to come without load or weapons. What brings you here?

The man was tall, with a graying beard and eyes hardened by the sun. His cloak was gathered at the waist, and a short spear rested on his shoulder.

Qāsim inclined his head slightly.

—Curiosity... and respect. This land deserves to be walked with both.

The soldier frowned at the sound of his voice. He stepped closer, studying him carefully.

—Qāsim?— he asked, a mix of wonder and doubt. —Is it you, the son of Aşbag?—

Qāsim allowed himself the faintest smile.

—The very same. Though a little more weathered.

The man looked at him with renewed respect and lowered his spear.

—May Allah forgive me! It has been years since I heard that name around here. The sage of Baena! Teacher of emirs, and a headache for the jurists of Córdoba!”

Carmen allowed herself a discreet smile, surprised.

The soldier now regarded them both with a different air and pointed toward a wooden bench under an improvised awning.

—Come, sit. There’s bread, partridge, and artichokes. Eat in peace, and we’ll talk afterward.

Carmen and Qāsim sat down gratefully. A wooden bowl was offered to them, filled with partridge slowly cooked, seasoned with herbs and warm spices. Beside it, the artichokes, tender, carried the aroma of garlic and a mild vinegar. Wheat bread and fresh water completed the meal.

As they ate, Carmen observed the massive ashlar stones, the towers rising above the walls, and the steady gazes of the men who served there. At last, she spoke.

—In my time —she said thoughtfully—this place is an archaeological site. It is called El Higuero. Students, archaeologists, even families on excursions come to visit. It is known that there was an important fortress here... people speak of monumental walls.

The soldier who had welcomed them looked at her with interest, wiping his hands with a cloth.

—And they still speak of us?

—Very much. Though not everything is known, and excavations are still ongoing. Each discovery reveals another piece. The occupation here is documented from the 4th century before Christ... Iberians, Romans, and yours as well. There are even your structures

still preserved. Today, there is a museum in a nearby town where Andalusí coins and ceramics from this land are kept.

The man nodded, a mix of pride and satisfaction on his face.

—And it isn't only preserved in museums— Carmen added—. It's also traveled. There are cycling routes through the fortified enclosures of the area. I myself did it once. Though of course... by then this was in ruins.

Qāsim looked at her with a half-smile.

—Ruins? With a good story and a bit of imagination... ruins cease to be.

The conversation lightened over sips of herbal tea. When the shadow of the tower began to stretch across the courtyard, Qāsim rose calmly to his feet.

—Thank you for your hospitality —he said, bowing his head slightly—. We continue eastward. There is still much I want to show you —he added, turning to Carmen.

Carmen cast one last glance at the place. That active stronghold, steadfast, full of traces of the past yet still alive, would remain etched in her memory with a different light.

—Until next time — she whispered.

# CHAPTER 4

## BAENA

The afternoon sun fell over the slopes covered with olive trees as Qāsīm and Carmen reached the top of a hill. A white patch of houses spread across the hillside, crowned by the silhouette of an ancient fortress.

—There lies Bayyāna —said Qāsīm, stopping beside a rock and raising his hand—. ‘A great fortress upon a rise of the land,’ as al-Idrīsī described it centuries ago. Like a watchful sentinel among wheat fields, fig trees, and olive groves.

He paused briefly, then added with a half-smile:

—This is where I was born. And though my paths took me far— to Córdoba, to Baghdad, even to Mecca— I have always carried Bayyāna with me. For this is my land.

Carmen looked on in silence. The narrow streets that descended from the heights seemed to flow like veins between whitewashed façades, disappearing among uneven rooftops.

—All of this is the Almadīna —Qāsīm said—. The heart of the city. Walls on all four sides, with a castle at the top and, below, the houses, the workshops, the mosques... From here the river is controlled, as well as the roads that lead to the countryside and the lands to the east. It is a key point, both for trade and for war.

—Now it is called the neighborhood of ‘La Almedina,’ — Carmen commented—. Some stretches of wall still remain, along with old gates, and there’s even a tower with a Mudejar art hall.

—I am glad that a place like this still preserves its soul —said Qāsim—. Here life was woven in our time: the souk, the bread ovens, the oil mills, the school of memory and letters... It even became the capital of the cora of Cabra and had its own administrative district.

—And in my time, once a year, all of this changes completely— Carmen added, looking around—. During the Tamborada, the Almedina is transformed: hundreds of drums sound in unison, as if the whole town suddenly awoke. Men and women dress in black or white tunics, and for hours they beat their drums through the streets while the town trembles in an explosion of collective emotion.

—And what is celebrated?—asked Qāsim, gazing at her with curiosity.

—It's part of Holy Week, when the Passion and Death of Christ are commemorated—Carmen replied—. But beyond the religious aspect, it's a collective expression that transcends age, belief, or ideology. The sound of the drum is memory, identity... even catharsis.

—How wonderful —said Qāsim—. As you see, in Andalusi times the sounds were different: the call of the muezzin at dawn, the Friday prayers, the hammering of the coppersmiths, the murmur of storytellers in the souk at dusk... But if there is still something that makes the hearts of those who live here beat in unison, that means Bayyāna is still very much alive.

They walked along a cobbled street, and soon it opened into a small square: there was a fountain at the center, stone benches, and a few oil lamps flickering in the breeze. Beneath a flowering vine, a group of men and women listened in silence to a young man who stood reciting, his voice firm, his eyes closed.

—Here we recite poetry —Qāsim said softly, without interrupting—. Not in great halls of cold marble, but in the open air, enjoying tea and the music of the lute in the background. Some improvise zéjeles; others repeat muwashshahs learned by heart. Love, faith, desire, satire... everything has a place.

The final verse drew a gentle smile from the crowd and a restrained applause. The reciter bowed his head humbly, while another among the listeners was already rising, clearing his throat to take his turn.

Carmen stepped a little closer to Qāsim and murmured, almost to herself:

—This reminds me of the Cancionero de Baena. Though it was composed centuries later, it also gathers verses like the ones we hear here.

Qāsim looked at her curiously.

—The Cancionero de Baena?—he asked.

—Yes —Carmen replied—. It's a book that collects that tradition of both popular and learned poetry. Without Andalusi influence, it wouldn't be the same.

—So in Bayyāna not only stones endure, but verses too —said Qāsim with a smile.

They continued walking, and as they turned a corner, Carmen pointed to a lookout from which part of the plain could be seen.

—You know? Somewhere down there —she said —a Caliphal treasure hoard was found. Silver coins, dirhams. They say it was hidden during times of unrest, perhaps when Almanzor died.

—A hidden treasure, troubled times. No need for much explanation," Qāsim murmure—. And in troubled times, nothing is more valuable than a strong defense.

He lifted his staff slightly, pointing upward.

—The castle is near. Come. I'll show you why it is one of the most imposing fortresses in the entire Guadajoz region.

The path zigzagged among whitewashed houses. Some displayed dark wooden gates, others iron grilles draped with hanging flowerpots. On the corners, artisans sold their wares: baskets full of figs, pitchers brimming with fresh water, glazed ceramic pieces neatly lined up against whitewashed walls. The air carried mingled scents of freshly baked bread, warm spices, and worked leather.

They began the climb toward the castle.

—These stones have seen wars, haven't they?—Carmen asked.

—Indeed —Qāsim replied—. Its position was no accident. This place was already strategic in the 9th century. 'Umar ibn Ḥafṣūn, the rebel who rose against Córdoba, seized Bayyāna. From here he defied the emir and extended his influence throughout the countryside. It became necessary to reinforce the defenses. The hill turned into a stronghold.

They passed through one of the gates and entered the interior of the structure.

—The fortress is square and powerful —he continued —with solid towers of rammed earth and masonry. Some, like the northeastern one, may date back to even earlier times. There is a gate leading out to the countryside, another connecting to the almedina, and several towers guarding each corner. The Tower of Secrets protects one of the most important entrances, and in the southwest corner rises the great keep. From its top, everything can be seen: the town, the roads, the olive groves... even the distant sierras on clear days.

Carmen swept her gaze around the perimeter.

—In my time, only a few stretches of wall and three towers remain: the Tower of Secrets, the Tower of Bells, and the Archers' Tower—she said—. Over the centuries, the castle was gradually altered. In the 16th century it passed into the hands of the dukes, and it slowly became a palace. They opened new windows, added rooms, covered courtyards, and built domestic quarters. Defense became secondary.

—That is what happens in times of peace —said Qāsim—. It is a good sign.

—Even so —Carmen continued —the castle remained a witness to great moments throughout its history. Gonzalo Fernández de Córdoba, the Great Captain, was once held prisoner here. Later, the Catholic Monarchs slept within its walls. And in the time of the civil war, they even built a bunker inside the fortress.

The evening light caressed the whitewashed façades, while a warm breeze carried the earthy scent of the countryside.

—Come —said Qāsim, pointing to a narrow descent between whitewashed walls—. We have not yet seen the soul of Bayyāna in its entirety.

They went down a stone street and soon reached an old gate in the wall. The structure was simple, with a semicircular arch and walls reinforced with rows of brick. To one side stood a tower of modest proportions, yet bearing the imprint of ancient times.

—Is that the famous Torreón del Arco Oscuro?—Carmen asked, recognizing the structure.

—That name must have come much later, but I am glad to know it still survives in your time —Qāsim replied—. This tower was one of the entrances to the fortified enclosure. Notice this bend: you cannot pass through in a straight line. This prevented anyone from charging in on foot or horseback. A discreet defense, made with intelligence.

They passed through, and a little further on the walls of a beautiful building emerged among the streets.

—The Great Mosque of Bayyāna —Qāsim said, his gaze deep and full of memories—. The heart of the community.

The façade was sober, of limestone and rammed earth, and the harmony of its lines and the dignity of its presence inspired respect.

The mosque's courtyard opened to the sky, surrounded by simple arcades and columns that cast fine shadows across the pavement. At its center, a fountain released a steady stream of water into a stone basin, where several men washed their hands, faces, and feet with composed gestures.

—It was built in the time of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān II —Qāsim said softly, as though unwilling to disturb the scene—. Not only for prayer, but also as a place of gathering and the transmission of knowledge. A center of social and communal life.

At the far end, from the base of the square tower, rose the long notes of the muezzin's voice. The faithful, in small groups, slipped quietly toward the prayer hall.

—The minaret is on the north wall—said Qāsim — pointing with a slight gesture—. It is not especially tall, but its purpose does not depend on height. The call can be heard from the souk, and when it begins, everything around it seems to step aside.

Carmen watched the calm movement of the men entering and leaving the prayer hall, wrapped in the serene stillness of the mosque.

—It still amazes me to think that this place, centuries later, will be a church —she murmured—. The prayers will change, the stones will be covered with plaster and altarpieces... but the building will still stand, welcoming the faithful. The minaret, for example, is said to remain hidden beneath the baroque tower that rises in my time.

They stopped beneath a side portico, where an old man was teaching children seated on the floor. They recited softly, repeating verses that barely broke the murmur of the water.

—As a child, I would sit like this, cross-legged, learning from the wise —said Qāsim—. Learning from the elders is a privilege one values more with age.

They stepped outside the mosque and remained in silence for a moment.

—Come —Qāsim added then—. There is another place I want you to see, older and more solitary.

They left Baena and followed a path that rose among rolling fields until they reached a rocky hill crowned by stone walls and a solid tower with rounded corners. From there, it commanded the countryside like an unmoving sentinel.

As they drew closer, the outline of the fortress became clearer: smaller towers flanked the entrance, and an access corridor ran along the eastern wall, guarded by arrow slits.

—This is the Ḥiṣn that protects the eastern borders of the Caliphate —said Qāsim—. A frontier bastion guarding the roads between al-Qabriyyīn and Bayyāna. But not all the stones were laid by us. This structure rises on ancient ruins, so old that even the elders know them only through legends.

Carmen looked at him in awe.

—Then... this is Torreparedones —Carmen murmured, finally recognizing the place she had so often visited in ruins, now alive and full of meaning.

Inside the enclosure, they crossed the parade ground. To one side, the hammering of a blacksmith rang out; farther on, a woman drew water from the cistern while children played between the stables and the kitchens. The castle vaults looked solid, the towers were joined by battlements, and a breeze moved the banners slowly.

—And who rules here?—Carmen asked, studying the walls reinforced with ashlar.

—A walī in the service of Córdoba, though it was not always so. This hill has had many names and many lords. The Iberians built up to three walls here; later the Romans arrived and left their mark in the form of columns, foundations, and tombstones. Even in the cistern—he pointed to the rectangular structure with a reddish lining—urns with Latin inscriptions were found; the most famous belonged to the family of the Pompeys.

Carmen leaned slightly, as if searching in the depths of the cistern for a distant image.

—Today the castle lies in ruins —she said calmly —but this entire hill has been rescued from oblivion. It is one of the most important archaeological parks in Córdoba. The tower still stands, and now visitors walk among Roman roads, ancient temples, and remains like this still-imposing castle.

Qāsim smiled faintly.

—As long as the stone endures and there are people willing to care for it, this wonder will remain alive.

Carmen turned her gaze toward the tower, trying to imprint the beautiful structure into her memory.

—It is time to continue— said Qāsim, breaking the silence gently—. I still want to show you something that transformed our way of cultivating this land.

# CHAPTER 4.1.

## ALBENDÍN

They descended from the hills into the fertile plain of the Guadajoz, where the river, serene and ancient, wound its way among groves, orchards, and sown fields. The path narrowed as they approached the banks, and the murmur of the water grew clearer.

It was then that they saw it, as they rounded a bend in the path: a great wooden wheel turning slowly, biting into the water with its paddles and lifting, in its ascent, small vessels that poured their contents into a channel held aloft by stone pillars.

Carmen stopped abruptly and looked at it as if recognizing an old friend.

—That's it!—she exclaimed—. It's the Albendín waterwheel. In my time there's an identical replica. My parents used to bring me to see it when I was little. I was fascinated watching it turn; there's something hypnotic about it.

Qāsim stepped up to one of the stone abutments that supported the axle of the waterwheel. He rested his hand on the structure and followed with his eyes the course of the water along the channel, attentive and silent. Then he turned his face slightly toward her.

—It is ancient wisdom: technique placed at the service of necessity. We call this wheel that turns without rest *na'ūra*. And it was not born here: its origins go back to eastern lands, to Syria, to the valleys of Mesopotamia, to the engineers of the Tigris and the Euphrates. But here, in al-Andalus, we perfected it, adapting it to our rivers and our needs. And thanks to it, this land flourished.

He walked a few steps and pointed to the azuda, the low weir that redirected the river's flow into a narrow channel.

—Look: everything begins with the azuda, which serves to guide the water. Its structure of stakes, stones, and earth diverts part of the current into the canal. The water then flows here, where the gate—the aguatocho—is opened or closed, and as it strikes the paddles, it sets the wheel in motion. No animals or slaves are needed to turn it. Only the strength of the river.”

Carmen stepped closer, watching as the cangilones—small ceramic containers fastened to the rim of the wheel—scooped up the water at its lowest point and, as the wheel turned, lifted it until they poured it into a stone channel supported by an elevated structure.

—And that channel?

—It is called the añaquil. It's like a small aqueduct. The water poured there is carried by gravity through ditches that cross the orchards. In this way, the entire plain is irrigated. Each plot receives its turn. There is a calendar and a water master who oversees it. Everything is ordered.

—And is this common?

—Very much so. From the Guadalquivir to the Segura, from the plains of Granada to smaller rivers like this one. The waterwheels allow lands that were once barren to be irrigated, freeing many hands, since the noria works day and night without rest.

Carmen turned, looking at the fields stretching beyond the waterwheel. Farmers worked the furrows, children ran along the dirt paths, and women filled pitchers at the channels. Everything revolved around the great wooden wheel.

—As you can see, it is the heart of the alquería —said Qāsim—. Where the river does not reach, the ingenious wheel does. Thanks to these waterwheels, agriculture ceases to be merely a means of subsistence and becomes a source of wealth. They make trade possible, ensure the supply of cities, and even allow for export. Behind this structure there is science. There is hydraulics. There is engineering. There is precision in every one of its movements.

—And that sound...—said Carmen, pointing to the monotonous creak of the buckets as they poured out the water.

Qāsim smiled.

—It is the moan of the nā'ūra. In Arabic, the name comes from nawa'ra, 'the one that moans.' That groan is its mark, its voice. It is part of the landscape.

—And to think that, centuries later, they would build a replica. So it would not be forgotten—Carmen added, with a trace of tenderness.

Qāsim nodded silently, his gaze still fixed on the constant turning of the buckets. For a few moments, they said nothing and simply enjoyed that melody.

After a while, they resumed their walk.

# CHAPTER 5

## VALENZUELA

The sun was slowly setting, tinting the hills covered in vineyards and olive groves with amber hues. The heat of the day was beginning to wane, yet a lingering warmth still floated in the air, as if the earth refused to release the light completely. The soil, reddish and fertile, had been diligently worked.

It was clear this was no forgotten corner: signs of life were everywhere. A group of women harvested vegetables by a riverside, while children carried water in pitchers from a spring that bubbled among the reeds.

—This place is Valenzuela —said Carmen, looking at the landscape with a spark of recognition—. Well, what is Valenzuela today. In my time, there’s a village here —small but alive. It has narrow streets, a church, white houses, and a magnificent view of the countryside...

—I’m not surprised —replied Qāsim—. This land is full of life in our time. There are no great fortresses, but many houses, gardens, and workshops, with people who know how to work clay, water, and fire.

They walked among carefully marked-out fields and soon came upon a cluster of humble buildings. From within came white smoke from kilns, the echo of hammers striking stone, and the distinct scent of wet clay.

A man with rough hands and a serene gaze greeted them. He wore a short tunic dyed ochre, and his arms were smeared with clay up to the elbows.

—Peace be upon you — he said, without stopping the turn of the potter’s wheel—. You arrive with the last light of the day, and with it also comes the time for details.

Qāsim inclined his head. —We seek to learn. May we watch?

The craftsman nodded. Around him were pieces in various stages: bowls still fresh, newly thrown jugs, and plates awaiting glazing.

—How do you achieve such perfection?—Carmen asked in awe.

—It is the clay that allows it, if one knows how to listen to it —the man said—. You must read it with patience. Our soil here, red and earthy, holds just the right moisture. First, I let it rest, then I knead it well, and only then do I take it to the wheel. Afterward, I let it dry in the shade, and when it is ready, then I fire it.

He pointed to a low kiln, fed with olive branches. Beside it, some vessels rested, covered with a greenish glaze.

—This is glazing—he explained—. We make it with calcined lead and fine sand, and sometimes we add oxides: copper for green, manganese for darker tones. The mixture melts with the heat and creates that shiny layer that protects and embellishes.

With a faint smile, the craftsman looked at the pieces, satisfied with the result.

—It's not just to make them look pretty. The glaze makes the piece durable, preventing it from absorbing water. That is why we use it for tableware, but also for tiles and floor pieces, to cover walls and fountains.

He bent down and carefully lifted one of the pieces.

—Many think this is just decorated clay. But behind it there is science and much experience. Here we combine ancient knowledge: from Syria, from Persia, from Rome... All of it has reached us, and we have perfected it.

Another craftsman, younger, approached with a tray of tiles. On each one were geometric designs of exquisite precision: interlaced circles, stars, and stylized vine leaves.

—Sometimes they tell me this is only decoration. But it is not. Every line has meaning. It is our way of honoring the order of creation.

—And do you always use these motifs? —Carmen asked.

—In the homes, yes, though in religious objects we avoid any figures. But in domestic settings, there is more freedom. It's not unusual to find fish, gazelles, and birds, sometimes carved into washbasins or lamps.

Qāsim carefully picked up one of the tiles.

—They say art is the way a civilization speaks to itself —he said, his eyes fixed on the piece.

Beside the kiln, a woman was shaping small bowls for oil. Her fingers were stained with white glaze, and she worked patiently. The warm, fading light of the afternoon highlighted the veins in her hands, hardened by years of practice.

Carmen watched her in silence, touching one of the already-fired bowls.

—In my time, pieces like these are found all over Valenzuela. They are studied, classified, and even reconstructed when possible. But above all, they are admired.

—Truly?— the woman asked.

—Yes, in the local museum there is an entire display case dedicated to this period, even with some coins. Many people come to see these little fragments of history firsthand.

At that moment, another woman who had been working by the potter's wheel called to them with a friendly gesture. Her apron bore traces of flour and honey.

—Come —she said with a smile—. Work cannot be sustained without food. Today we're serving amaniya with briwât. It's no palace banquet, but it fills the soul.

They settled under a low vine, ready to eat. The aroma was enveloping: meat glazed with spices, toasted nuts, and crispy pastries filled with cheese.

—It's shoulder of lamb—the woman explained as she served—. We coat it with rosemary honey and cook it with lavender, cinnamon, and saffron. Then we let it rest with walnuts sprinkled on top.

—And these... —she added, pointing to the pastries —are briwât. Filled with fresh cheese, cumin, and parsley. The secret is frying them quickly, so they crisp without soaking up oil.

Carmen tasted the lamb slowly, savoring the contrast between the sweetness and the intensity of the spices. She closed her eyes for a moment. Then she picked up one of the briwât, bit into it carefully, and the light crunch of the pastry gave way to the freshness of the cheese.

—It's spectacular how everything combines —she murmured, still half-speaking with her mouth full—. Sweet, salty, mild, intense... all at once.

Qāsim glanced at her sideways, amused.

—Andalusi cuisine is refined —he said as he served himself a little more lamb—. With the arrival of products from the East, such as rice, sugarcane, or eggplants, we also brought new ways of cooking. We learned to serve dishes separately, one after the other, to care for presentation, for rhythm at the table. Eating with elegance became a way to display culture, to practice civility.

He took a pinch of cumin from the nearest bowl and calmly rubbed it between his fingers.

—But cooking is also memory. Every spice and every combination comes from afar. The tableware was perfected, ovens improved, the gestures of the hands refined. Everything counts: from the clay of the plate to the order in which the food is served.

—And much of that still remains in my time —said Carmen.

As they ate, the sun sank behind the hills, and the sky took on a warm tone, somewhere between copper and amber. Carmen lifted her gaze, distracted by a shape in the distance.

—That's Cerro Boyero!

Qāsim followed her gaze and observed the outline of the plateau cut against the twilight.

—Yes. It is an ancient construction from the late Bronze Age. It was a túrdulo oppidum, an Iberian fortified town.

He remained silent for a moment, as if reviewing the landscape in his mind.

—The plateau is fortified. The walls were raised centuries ago, and though many stones are ancient, men have reinforced them with new ones. There are watchtowers and storehouses carved into the rock. Springs run down the slopes, and thanks to them we cultivate olives, barley, and vegetables.

He turned his gaze toward Carmen.

—From there you can see the entire Guadajoz countryside. It is a good place to live... and a difficult place to conquer

A faint smile crossed his face.

—Many have walked its streets: Túrdulos, Romans, Visigoths... We only add one more chapter to its history.

Carmen gently set her plate aside and let her gaze drift toward the hill.

—Today it is an archaeological site —she said without taking her eyes off the fortress—. It is protected as a Site of Cultural Interest. Beneath those olive trees, history still sleeps. In a recent excavation they found a cistern carved into the rock, like a bathtub. Also remains of ovens, coins, smelting slag... Some call it the Numancia of Córdoba. And they are not wrong.

Qāsim raised his eyebrows, intrigued.

—Numancia?

—A city that resisted to the very end, and that everyone now remembers.

Qāsim nodded in silence, while the last ray of sun caressed the hillside. The wind carried aromas of hot oil, earth, and dry leaves. Nothing moved, except the shadows, which slowly grew longer.

# END

—Well—said Qāsim, lifting his gaze toward the west—. The sun has set, and soon night will take its place. The journey has reached its end... and the hour of farewell has come.

He fell silent, as if the words carried weight.

—I have learned much with you, Carmen. And I am certain you too have gathered things of value along this path.

Carmen looked at him, moved.

—I don't want it to end —she said softly, her voice almost trembling—. I have seen things I never imagined.

Qāsim smiled tenderly. His expression was serene, yet profoundly human.

—This journey does not end upon waking, Carmen. It is only the beginning.

Without another word, and with a knowing smile, Qāsim took a step back. The outline of his figure blurred little by little, along with the entire surrounding landscape, as though light and wind were gently carrying everything away to another place.

Carmen awoke.

It took her a few seconds to recognize the spot once again, but the murmur of the Guadajoz softly brought her back to reality.

She rose slowly, still disoriented, with the feeling of having returned from a long journey. Then she noticed something in her pocket. There she found a small olive-wood horse and recognized it instantly: it was one of the toys belonging to Muqaddam's children.

She held it between her fingers, smiling, and set off once more.