

CHAPTER ONE

Early May, 1509, Evening

A cave on Diu promontory

I begin writing

I do not know why I am writing this, nor do I know to whom I'm writing. Beloved, I cannot yet set your name down on this paper, but I will, soon, soon. In the old days I wrote only when I needed to write. I used to write down detailed reports with occasional sketch maps about my voyages for traders and *shahbandars*. Or else, I would set down for my fellow navigators clean cold facts they could memorize with ease about that vast stretch of the world that I thought I knew as it were my salt toughened palm.

From behind me comes the faint human hum of Diu town, the only place I know to which I belong. But there, beyond, growls that savage beast that I now know can never really be tamed. Why do I use such a strange expression for the sea when I could use images from the Arabian and Persian poets who disliked the sea? An unstable element, they claimed, that unlike land can never be conquered. What I feel driven to write now is not poetry but the truth. Not really the truth, but a truthtry to understand my shattered world. Do not write poetry, my hakim had often warned me. For you, he had said, writing your story will be a form of healing.

For a month now I have been coming every day to this blackrock promontory when the sun is low and no longer burns my face, and when the wind turns around and a breeze blows soft from the west. It was my

friend, Malik Aiyaz, who made me accompany him every day to this commanding spot after our defeat.

I don't want to brood about what happened, Malik Aiyaz told me, I want to understand why it happened.

Why, why, Malik Aiyaz would ask, looking bitterly at the broken *sankalkot* lying lifeless in the bluegreen water, and then he would shake his fist at the smashed little seafort across the channel. He would look down at the jagged cave openings that ring the bluff in a half curve, and shake his head at the smashed remains of the Ottoman guns.

Why, why, he asked me again, why did those guns not keep the Portuguese out of my beloved Diu.

He would pace up and down in this cave where I now sit, then pause a moment to place his hand upon the barrel of the cannon.

Why, oh why did Straighthitter have to crack at the breech end, Malik Aiyaz would say, stroking the cannon as if it were alive.

I would keep quiet. An Ottoman gunner from Bandar-i-Turk had told me that the siege gun had been made of wrought iron that had rusted because of the monsoon winds.

He would say, don't offer me the usual consolation about kismet, that what is written, is written. Help me understand, Ahmad my friend, Malik Aiyaz would say.

And then he would ride off on his horse. And I would walk back to my house in the swiftly gathering darkness.

Why, why, asks Malik Aiyaz.

I too want answers to other painful questions that do not seem to trouble Malik Aiyaz. My friend wants to know why a handful of Portuguese could defeat the combined might of his people, of the Mamluks of Egypt and Syria, and of the Zamorin of Calicut. He is a practical man, a lovable human being, too, and he wants to understand his defeat so that the next time the Portuguese come he'll be victorious

again as he was at Chaul last year in March 1508, when he defeated Dom Lourenço de Almeida and the Portuguese fleet.

We had thousands of fighters here in Diu, Malik Aiyaz kept on repeating to me, a hundred ships and *fustas*. Our combined guns numbered fiftyfive. We had the *sankalkot*. I had thought no ship could smash through that chain.

He pointed to the sagging chain, now strung once again across the harbor entrance, and shook his head, trying to understand his defeat.

The Mamluk fleet with its guns and *maonas* was considered invincible, Malik Aiyaz said, it was the most powerful sea force ever seen on the Bahr-i-Hind. It was led by Amir Hussein Kurdi, he said, the most skillful of the admirals of the Mamluk Sultan of Egypt. Young Salman Rais also was there, the Turcoman corsair sent by the Ottoman ruler to help the Mamluks.

Malik Aiyaz still does not understand naval fighting. Perhaps he cannot. He is a commander of land armies. He does not belong to the world of the sea and of ships as I did. He does not realize that what we both had watched, standing that February morning on this blackrock Diu promontory, was not just a battle but a prevision of disaster.

João has told me that there are different modes of seeing.

The moment of change is never quite visible, João had continued, cryptically.

What Malik Aiyaz saw from this promontory was not what I saw.

What Malik Aiyaz had seen, spread out here in front of Diu harbor that early morning of February the 3rd, just three months ago, were two powerful naval forces that met in battle in our Indian Ocean.

The Mamluk *maonas* and war galleys had come down slowly from Suez, a port at the head of the Red Sea in Egypt. They had stopped at Jiddah, the port for Mecca. They had then sailed warily through the narrow gullet that is the Red Sea, and rounded the strait of Bab el

Mandab. They had then traveled past Aden and, because they were oared Mediterranean galleys with lateen sails that didn't dare venture on the heavy seas of the Bahr-i-Hind, had hugged the coastline till they reached Chaul on the west coast of India where they had attacked the Portuguese fleet and killed its commander Dom Lourenço de Almeida in March 1508. They had then come back to Diu to celebrate their victory. A year later, on February 3, 1509, they awaited the Portuguese fleet led by the viceroy Dom Francisco de Almeida, who came from the Portuguese headquarters in Cochin in South India to destroy the Mamluk ships at Diu and avenge the death of his only son, whom he loved very much.

Huddled together, their sterns backed towards the shoreline below, with protective netting hanging from their mast tops, cannon fixed on their prows, level and pointing straight, the Mamluk *maonas* and war galleys awaited the Portuguese attack. Large Gujarati oceangoing dhows, each armed with two or three small guns, lay concealed within the inlet bend beyond the *sankalkot*, waiting to surprise the enemy. Innumerable Calicut *paraos* swarmed unsteadily together along the southern shore like angry black bees.

How, Malik Aiyaz asked me, how could just seventeen Portuguese ships, twelve big and five small, prevail against such a circling wall of our ships and guns.

Malik Aiyaz couldn't see what I had seen as we both looked down from the blackrock promontory.

What I had seen on that February 3rd morning was not just a naval battle.

I had looked down and I had seen two worlds meeting head on. I saw the old world that I had lived in clash with the new. It was a savage encounter. I looked down and I saw two naval powers confront each other. The semicircle of Portuguese ships became a concentrated explosive whirl. I heard the controlled thunder of their powerful guns.

What I really saw down there from the promontory was a powerful enemy fleet, armed with a new technique of sea fighting, bearing down on us.

Five of the Ottoman siege guns thundered at the Portuguese ships down below. But the Portuguese ships were not damaged at all. The five cave openings erupted into flame, for the guns had exploded killing our gunners. Malik Aiyaz could no longer depend on his siege artillery for support from land. The small guns of the Gujarati dhows, occasionally used to repel sea pirates, were no match against Portuguese cannon. Majestic when sailing before the wind, the dhows now looked like hens huddled together for protection. The black Calicut *paraos* were armed with bowmen. The stately *maonas* from Suez, their oars at rest now, their large lateen sails furled, thought they were still in the eastern Mediterranean. They relied on defense strategies used on an inland sea by slow moving galleys. They expected the Portuguese to use tactics of ramming and boarding. That's why the *maonas* had deployed netting from the mast tops. They were prepared for hand to hand fighting. Passively they awaited the attack, taunting the Portuguese as cowards with trumpets and drums, with shouts and yells.

The Portuguese had a different plan of action. Their tactics were new, put together for attack not on an inland sea with fitful winds like the Mediterranean, but on the oceansea. They ignored the taunts hurled from the *maonas*, ignored the carelessly aimed shots fired from the Ottoman prow guns by gunners who did not take into account the roll and dip of the seawaves. The Portuguese waited patiently for the noontime shift from a land to a sea breeze. For the dense smoke of the Portuguese guns would clear from their ships and drift towards the enemy ships to blind their gunners. Then the Portuguese ships swung in to attack, using sails that could be turned around to harness the blowing sea winds. They mounted an attack of broadside quickfiring guns, placed low in order to send shots skimming over the water. They

pounced, weaving between the anchored *maonas*, attacking from all sides, especially from the rear to avoid the stationary prow guns. They had worked out earlier how long it took for the enemy gunners to reload. Each ship captain targeted a *maona* to bombard and destroy.

A well directed cannon shot blew out the seafort's iron pillar to which the *sankalkot* was attached. Then the smaller Portuguese ships proceeded cautiously into the inlet where they attacked the Gujarati ships at close range. They did not need to bombard the Calicut *paraos*. They used swivel guns mounted at rail height. Chain shot and scatter shot wreaked havoc, for they could not miss that swarming cluster of black boats.

By evening the terrifying display of Portuguese power had ended.

Corpses and broken planks, severed arms and legs, torn banners and flags and sails choked Diu channel so that it was difficult for the tide to move in. Malik Aiyaz ordered his forces to stop fighting. Several white flags were raised. He sent his envoy, Sidi Ali, to negotiate terms of surrender and promised to deliver to the Portuguese Viceroy, Dom Francisco de Almeida, the ten hostages we had taken at Chaul in 1508. Malik Aiyaz even invited the Viceroy to land in Diu so that the keys of the city could be presented to him in a formal ceremony as an acknowledgment of submission. But the Viceroy, suspecting a trap and knowing that Portuguese power was strong on the sea and weak on land, shrewdly refused Malik Aiyaz's offer and returned in triumph to Cochin bombarding Muslim portcities all along the coast.

The setting sun transformed the sea, red already with blood, into a dazzling red.

Then night fell sudden and black, and all was quiet.

Malik Aiyaz does not know what I am slowly beginning to realize now as I keep staring from this blackrock promontory at the sea below. That what I had witnessed, three months ago, was not just a savage encounter

but also an event that has confirmed my growing fears that the Portuguese and their black ships are not just pirates but invaders who will change our world forever. My fears had begun as a slight premonition, eleven years ago, in 1498, when I saw the ships of Vasco da Gama and Paulo da Gama drop anchor in Malindi bay. The ships then were a black blur against the rapidly setting sun. And suddenly it was night.

I keep staring at the swirling currents of change in the sea below and I keep wondering why they are invisible to Malik Aiyaz. Perhaps the words on this paper will make them visible. Perhaps I am writing to tell my friend Malik Aiyaz that the movement of power is wavelike, that it goes up and then has to come down. Perhaps I want to make the entry of the Portuguese into the Bahr-i-Hind visible to my friend. Visible to myself too, so that we can understand the swift rise of the Portuguese to power. I have to make my own buried past visible too. For myself. For the two stories are connected and I am the only one who can put them together.

I need to explain myself to my self. Explain, that's the wrong verb.

One must accept things, Usha had said.

Usha accepted *samsāra*. Love, too.

There, my Usha, I have at last set down what I have not uttered for years, your name. I am beginning to tell our story. What I am writing is an act of love, this pen, like a *linga*, making its mark on this virgin white paper.

Love doesn't need words, you had said once as we sat with our arms around each other on Lamu beach in East Africa looking at the Bahr-i-Hind.

But I do, my Usha. I do need a bridge of words now to tell our love and to cross the silence of time, that destroyer of the past.

Stop, stop, Ahmad ibn Madjid, don't indulge in these flights of fancy. Just set down cold facts.

That's the voice of the cynic within me.
Thank you, my cynic, I reply, I will.

Being possessed by an intense need to discharge a coiled pressure within me, I told Abdul yesterday, the 8th of May, to buy the finest Ahmedabadi paper, white as cotton but rough textured because of the sand of the Sabarmati river, and to place a stool and a small table in the cave next to Straighthitter.

Today, May 9th, 1509, I walked from my house to the promontory, and viewed the familiar scene. Some fishing boats came swinging in to Bandar-i-Turk as graceful as a flight of white butterflies. The sea gulls that had been mewling and circling obliquely overhead sped straight in the direction of the boats. They would wait patiently at the promontory for the fish filled boats to return, and would fly in a circle and complain if I usurped their place.

My friend João, who sometimes accompanies me to the promontory, does not like them.

A seagull, he says, is half vulture, half dove.

But João, the seagull is not fierce, I tell him.

I don't care, João says, it doesn't belong to the sea or to the land. It's an inbetween, a hybrid. Like you, João would roar, especially when he was drunk.

And then he would yoke strange images together. João's observations, odd but somehow relevant, tend to jump into my mind at sudden moments. He is more than a friend. He is a part of me.

Jan Mirza, formerly João Machado of Lisbon, now a citizen of Diu, knows that he doesn't belong anywhere. The seagull can move between land and sea, but poor João cannot go back either to his country or to his religion. He is a *degredado*, a convict banished from Portugal, and because he had abandoned Christianity and turned Muslim, and adopted Jan Mirza as his name, he would be imprisoned and hanged by the

Portuguese if he returned to them. I have a matter of fact approach to seagulls. They would tell me that my ship was approaching land and that it was the end of my voyage. For me their cries were of welcome.

With their cries as omens I walked down the six steps into the cool of the cave. It was dark at first. But Abdul had placed my stool just right so that the sunlight fell exactly on my teak table, my favorite, with the top unpolished, its grain visible. From here I can look straight down on the Panikot, for Straighthitter could be trained on the middle of the channel between the seafort and the mainland.

Malik Aiyaz, who loves his Diu even more than I do, had planned very carefully. He had got together the best metalworkers from Ajmer, and they had forged a chain so strong that two elephants with the chain tied to their legs and prodded on by their mahouts in opposite directions could not break it. He had an iron pillar driven deep into the bowels of Panikot and had wrapped several rounds of chain around the largest boulder on the other side so that no dhow could get into the harbor. With great difficulty he had imported six great Ottoman siege guns from Suez, dynamited caves in the cliffs around the harbor, and set the guns in place so that they could blast out any ships that tried to sail in. Malik Aiyaz had tried to make sure that no pirates, specially the neighboring Sankhodaris, could penetrate his territory from the sea.

Sitting here now, looking directly at that wounded snake of a *sankalkot*, I bethink myself though I know that brooding will not help me understand the past.

But can one ever understand the past, asks my cynic.

I want to know who I was to know who I am, I tell my cynic.

Does it really matter, the voice of my cynic continues.

Yes, I want to reply to him, but am unable to. I keep silent.

Writing is a form of action. Perhaps this act of writing will allow me to define myself, I tell myself.

Why do I need defining. I only want to be loved as Usha loved me. Our love in 1497 had brought our world into being. Then, one day, in Anegundi, five years ago, in 1505, our world was shattered. One of the murderers hit Usha on the mouth to prevent her from calling out for help. Two of them held me down and gagged me. I saw blood drip from the beloved mouth on to the intertwined hands she placed on her stomach to protect our baby. They pushed me into a gunnysack, dragged me over rocks and stones, flung me into a bullock cart and then hurled my body into a ditch beyond Anegundi. The other two must have then killed Usha and our baby within her, and Layla too.

After the hakim rescued me from the ditch, he took me to a Golla village hut where he treated my wounds with herbal poultices and gave me *neem* water and *ricecanji* to drink. It took me three months to be able to walk. My hakim asked me what I planned to do after I recovered from my wounds.

I dont know, I said.

I have to travel north, my hakim said, to heal the sick of other villages.

I was silent for a long while.

It was a problem. My hakim hadn't asked, and I hadn't told him how I came to lie wounded in the ditch. Nor did I tell him about my total despair. I was so sure that Usha and our baby, and Layla were dead that I didn't want to return to Anegundi to find out. I couldn't speak any South Indian language and I did not want to go back to the Jain temple to find out from her uncle if they were really dead. Perhaps the uncle would not break his vow of silence. Perhaps I was afraid of facing the truth.

I stood silent before my hakim not knowing what to say.

Come, my hakim said, come with me until you can decide what to do.

For five years now I have lived in a numb state beyond despair. For five long years I've locked our story tight within myself. I told it to no one. Not to my hakim. Not to my friend, João. Not even to my self. Now

I am driven to gather together the pieces of our shattered world in order to recreate it.

The act of writing will heal you, my hakim had said.

Hence these words on paper.

I was born some thousand miles away from here, in Julfar opposite Hormuz. The announcer on formal occasions adds al-Julfari to my long ancestral name. But Julfar is not my home. I don't remember my mother at all. She is a name that my father and grandfather occasionally mentioned. For me she is like fragrant incense that lingers in the folds of clothes washed and stored away. My grandfather and my father took me away with them when they were *rubbans* who piloted merchant ships through the Red Sea. I was only twelve then but my father wanted me to continue the hereditary calling.

I came to know, young as I was, the small world of the Red Sea with the Straits of Bab el Mandeb at its southern end and Suez at its head. Suez then was a small barren port not the naval dockyard they tell me it has become today. It had nothing, no wood, no copper, no iron, no cloth for sails, no provisions. Everything had to be camelbacked from Cairo. At twelve I learned how to steer through the narrow gullet of the Red Sea, how never to sail at night because of the many shoals, and I learned also to take into account the shifting crosswinds and the many deeps and reefs that made the Red Sea so dangerous for large ships.

I used to be proud of my piloting skills, proud also of my tribal group. My name really is Shihab al-Din Ahmad bin Madjid bin Muhammad bin 'Uman bin Fadl bin Duwaik bin Yusuf bin Hasan bin Husain bin Abi Ma'laq al-Sa'di bin Abi Raka'ib al-Najdi. But now the flow of family names does not matter. I have my father and grandfather in my bones. I have learned from them and with them. The world they lived in, the Red Sea, about which they composed navigational poems, has changed. It is no longer the world they and I knew.

I admired my father. A stern taskmaster, he taught me navigation. From him I learned about tides, sea currents, the look and changing shapes of islands on the route, the coasts and their landfalls, the different signs, mud, grass, animals, the fish and birds, that mark the nearness of land.

He taught me all he could about his little world which he knew so well that the pilots named one of the islands of the Red Sea after him. He once ventured beyond his world, to the island of Socotra in the Gulf of Aden, but was bewildered by the strange winds and currents that are part of *al Muhit*.

Al Muhit, the Encompassing, the encircling oceansea, that was the world I wanted to conquer by knowing it as my predecessors never did. And I came to know it all. The circle of my universe began at Sofala in East Africa, and went on to Mogadishu, to Aden, to Hormuz, around to Diu, to Chaul and to Calicut in India, and then to the region that stretches below the wind, that world of cinnamon and cloves that lies beyond Cape Comorin, and ends at Melaka.

I began to improve upon all branches of navigational science. In my pilot book, the *Fawa 'id*, I set down basic principles every pilot should know. He should be proficient in the theory of routes and latitude measurements. He has to be aware of landmarks and signs, and see to the wellbeing of the ship and the people in it. He has to know the compass, know when the Pole Star is at its lowest culmination, know the rising and the setting of the important stars, know the route he is sailing, know about the prevailing winds and the monsoons, and be skillful in the running of his ship.

I cannot bear to reread my *Fawa 'id* now. I had called it the book of profitable things concerning the first principles and rules of navigation. I wrote it for my fellow navigators and for posterity, so that my name

would never be forgotten by those who traverse the Encompassing. I loved to write pilot books, and in the old days I used to spill words on paper with ease. I have more than twenty books that I still preserve in one of the large Martaban porcelain jars in the four corners of my living room. I had more than fifty, but I discovered that my friends would forget to return them. Some of the Rahmani publishers, who produce works for navigators to purchase and take to sea, have swindled me. They have copied some of them without paying me for a single one. But they have made me famous, and my name is on the lips of sailors all along the coasts of India, Africa, Persia, and Arabia.

But I no longer care now for either fame or money. I have written *rajaz* poems, poems called *qasidas*, a long poem about the coming of the Portuguese. And a book that lives by itself in one of the four jars in my house, a book of poems to the dawn.

That's the only book I now want to leave for posterity, not my elephantlike *Fawa 'id*. I now see that my pilot book, the work I thought was so great and encircling, is just a pause in the onward flow of time. The facts and observations I had set down in my *Fawa 'id* are obsolete now, as tasteless as stale rice. The *al Muhit*, no longer the Encompassing, has shrunk into the Bahr-i-Hind, the Indian Ocean. My nautical instruments will no longer do. The Portuguese have the astrolabe, and a vastly improved version of the compass. My instruments have now become primitive tools. My skills, my use of the *kamal*, my technique of measuring *'isba* and of taking finger latitude, have become obsolete, even though hundreds of pilots still use them. My fellow pilots do not yet realize that their world is about to come to an end. That the new science is a wedge of destruction. The word science, my friend João tells me, implies a way of precise knowledge.

My world, Usha, has been smashed. The only encompassing, encircling world I now remember is what your embracing arms told me

without words. That the outer world, *samsāra*, always changes. What is lasting and real is the world of encompassing love.

Where am I. You have taken me to the faraway, and I need to get back to the world of time and place, to the world of facts, to the smell of this earth that Abdul disturbed when he watered and leveled the floor of this cave to set down my table for me to write our story.

Through the cave opening I can see some straggling boats swing in to land their catch. A boat with a carved square Portuguese stern has just made harbor. It must belong to Malik Gopi of Surat who admires things Portuguese and employs a Portuguese deserter to advise him on the building of ships in the Portuguese manner. In the distance is Bandar-i-Turk, the section of Diu now termed *Vila dos Rumes* by the Portuguese. The three hulks that Malik Aiyaz thought would prevent the enemy ships from penetrating into Diu harbor are washed up on the fortresslet. The whole scene looks so peaceful that I can't bring myself to think that the furious battle of February the third ever took place.

I am also trying to forget what happened to me, Usha mine. I know what happened, but I see what happened as a blur.

Why, oh why, I look up at the sky and ask, silently. But unlike Malik Aiyaz I do not want simple answers.

João has a very simple answer. What will be, will be, he claims.

João has lost the faith he had in his Christian god. He lives from moment to moment.

I just am, he says.

I want to find out who I am, I want to tell João, even though he's not here in this cave where I have begun writing this account. João is the only one to whom I have told a few fragments of my past. I did mention Usha casually once to João, and told him I wanted to write our story. Of late, he has drifted away from me, and seeks the company of Ishak Khan with whom he goes riding.

João is a very good polo player, Abdul tells me. João also practices shooting with Ottoman *tufengs*.

I am what I am because of Usha, I want to tell João. Before she came into my life I did not have a true self. I was a pilot. I used to consider myself a poet. And I belonged to the Bedouin tribe of Qais 'Ailan.

What does that mean, I now ask. What is my true self I ask, looking at the sky above.

Usha is silent.

I must stop bringing in your name at every other moment, Usha, for it will distract me from the facts about the past I have to set down. I must try to be calm myself, and not swing around from fact to event to detail as I have been doing.

But I cannot, not yet.

Adrift on that great ocean, *samsāra*, I am trying to sail back into the past, against the onward flow of time, where to I do not know.

I am calming down.

It is always difficult to know where to begin a story of what happened in the past. In the first chapter of my *Fawa 'id* I ambitiously traced the onward history of navigation from Noah, the first builder of ships, and I kept tacking along, veering around, telling stories about places and people instead of traveling straight to the basic principles of the art of navigation.

I must write the way I used to sail, cutting a clean line of white through the water.

I hear the thunder of hoof beats above this cave.

It must be Malik Aiyaz.