

Chapter 1

On Friday, October 2, 1187, the citadel of Christendom fell. The resting place of beloved Jesus is in the hands of the infidel. Its proud walls gap like teeth broken in combat. Arrows, spears, and other shards of battle lie at its foundations like branches and leaves of tree tops scattered by tornado gales. Balooned bodies of men can be seen bloating under the hot sun burning the sky. Doors believed to be like iron hang from walls like sailors recovering from a drunken night of debauchery. Smoke rises from rubble like a witch's cloud climbing from her tub of poison. Women, no men, no both, wail like babes in the night without milk. Maidens whose flowers had been robbed wander aimlessly about with unseeing eyes as though in a dream. Crones crouch in corners where shadows cover terror with thin blankets of darkness. Hardened warriors pray with tears asking forgiveness from their sin of failing their Lord. A short, middle-aged man with a trimmed grizzled beard sits atop his horse to watch exhausted survivors of a brutal siege march by him. They flood by him in the aftermath of losing their holy city, Jerusalem.

This warrior, renowned throughout Islam, is Saladin. Feared by all in the Levant, he had traveled from a remote Kurdish background to Egypt where he became its supreme ruler. From this base, he spread his military prowess until he was master of the Near East. Jerusalem was his crowning achievement. The site where Muhammad arose to heaven was restored to Muslim control. No longer would his golden mosque be an accursed church. Its profane cross is gone. *Allah Akbar*, God is the greatest. Yet, as he says upon his entry into Jerusalem about the razing of the Church of Holy Sepulcher, "Let it stand because good Muslims venerate the holy sites of all religions."¹

This victory at Jerusalem concluded a brilliant campaign of many years that resulted in his conquering virtually the entire Holy Land. Even this last siege told of his military genius. Employing huge slingshots called *petraries* that hurled boulder after boulder against the northern walls of Jerusalem, the end was inevitable. Sappers further foretold this ending by digging underneath which further weakened the walls until they crumbled. Victory was assured. His counterpart, Balein of Ibelin, requested a parley to discuss terms for surrendering the city.

Balein was well known to Saladin. He had lived his entire life in the Holy Lands with renown as an honorable knight and worthy opponent. In fact, he had gone into the city only with permission of Saladin to rescue his wife under terms of chivalry, but had stayed on to assume command at the request of the besieged Christians. Again, as an honorable knight, Balein appealed to Saladin before accepting these duties. This change really amounted to nothing in terms of the final result, but Saladin respected the honor shown to him by his opponent, and permission was easily granted.

Ultimately, within days, Balein recognized the futility of resistance. He sued for peace and the safety of the city's occupants. This suit had not been an easy one to decide. When first approached, Saladin replied by making reference to the Crusaders' slaughter of the Jerusalem population during the First Crusade. "My wise men say that Jerusalem can only be cleansed with Christian blood. My counsel tells me to take revenge for those Muslims whom Godfrey slew in the streets and even in the Temple." In the face of this threat, Balein countered with a promise to destroy the entire city including everything Saladin held dear. The lives of every Muslim trapped in the city would be slaughtered once again as they had been 92 years ago. Saladin had no doubt about this promise. So, he replied, "I'll tell you what I will do. I will have mercy on your people in a way that will save my oath of revenge. They will surrender to me as if taken by force. I will let them keep their wealth and their property. Those who are able to ransom themselves I shall set free in return for a set price. Those who lack the means to buy their freedom will remain as my slaves."

¹ Reston, James. *Warriors of God: Richard the Lionheart and Saladin in the Third Crusade*. New York, NY: Anchor Books, Random House, 2001. Kindle Location 1462-74.

About 20,000 of these people either paid for their freedom or were granted liberty to pass by. The rest were sold into slavery. Compared to what could have happened, these were generous terms indeed.²

Thus was Jerusalem returned to Muslim hands that were to hold it for almost a thousand years. But, the future of this accomplishment was not foremost on his mind as he watched this sad progression of survivors. As his eyes surveyed this unfolding scene of history, his thoughts were elsewhere.

Allah, You have brought me here, and for that I will remember this day in prayers unto the last breath of my life. Such a glory for this poor man. It is truly more than one could expect even for one who would be truly heroic in Your eyes. The Dome of the Rock, where Your prophet ascended to heaven is no longer a desecrated Christian building, but once again, a shrine to Your Holiness. For this I thank you. Allahu Akbar.

But, now I worry. I fear my worst trials in Your Blessed Name have only begun. Certainly, the Christians from across the sea behind me will be returning in numbers greater than the sands of the desert. As blessed is this city to us, so is it to them. For their Christ died here, and they will not let us long control this land if they can do anything at all. And they will be fierce warriors. Although I have had great success against them (Blessed be Your Hand), their rampage a century ago will be only a gentle breeze compared to what they will bring now. They will be seeking not only restoration of this site unto themselves, but revenge as well. If they come and win this trial, the streets will remain forever red with the blood of Your followers.

Fortunately, I have a year at least to prepare for this trial. It will take several weeks at least for their pope to hear of Your great victory. From then, he will need time to convene his kings and organize them into a crusading army. This army, in turn, will need six months at least to travel here. So, Allah, give Your servant wisdom and guidance in preparation for this upcoming trial. Allahu Akbar.

With those prayers, he turned to organize his army for its triumphant entry into Jerusalem.

² Ibid. Kindle Location, 1431-1432.

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1. Reston, James. *Warriors of God: Richard the Lionheart and Saladin in the Third Crusade*. New York, NY: Anchor Books, Random House, 2001.