

KNIGHTS OF THE CROSS

Chapter 1

It was a restless day for the dead. I stood in a grave before Antioch, and watched the Army of God dig the corpses of their enemies from the fresh earth where they had been buried. Men half naked and smeared with grime worked with passionate intensity to dispossess the dead, plundering the goods they had taken to the afterlife: unstrung bows curled up like snails, short knives, round shields caked with clay – all were dug out and hurled onto the spoil pile. A little further away a company of Normans counted and arranged more gruesome trophies: the severed heads of the corpses we had recalled from death. The day before, an army of Turks had sallied from the city and ambushed our foraging expedition; we had driven them back, but only with a great effort we could ill afford. Now we opened their graves, not from wanton greed or cruelty – though there was that also – but to build a tower, to watch the gate and keep them penned within their walls. We made a quarry of their cemetery, and the foundations of our fortress from their tombs.

The giant who stood with me in the grave shook his head. ‘This is no way to wage a war.’

I looked up from the tombstone that I was trying to dislodge and stared at my companion. An unrelenting season of cold and rain had returned his stout features to the sallow colour of his ancestors,

while his unkempt hair and beard were almost of a colour with the rusting links of his armour. Like all who had survived the winter horrors, his skin hung loose from his bones, his shoulders seemed too narrow for his mail coat, and the tail of his belt flapped from being drawn so tight. Yet still there was strength in the arms which had once seemed like the columns of a church, and a gleaming edge on the axe which leaned against the wall of the trench.

‘You’ve served twenty years in the Emperor’s army, Sigurd,’ I reminded him. ‘Would you have me believe that you never plundered your enemies, nor took booty from the battlefield?’

‘This is different. Worse.’ He wormed his fingers into the earth and began tugging on the stone, rocking it back and forth to loose it from the mud that held it. ‘Looting the fallen is a warrior’s right. Looting the buried...’

His arm tensed and the flat stone toppled out, splashing into the puddles on the floor of the pit. We crouched, and lifted it like a bier between us.

‘The Turks should have buried their dead within their walls,’ I argued, as though that could forgive such savagery. Why they had buried their losses from the previous day’s battle here, beyond the city and near our camp, I could not guess: perhaps, even after five months of siege, there were yet some barbarities they thought beyond us.

We slid the stone over the lip of the hole and hauled ourselves out, scrambling for purchase on the clammy earth. Standing, I tried to brush the dirt from my tunic – unlike Sigurd, I could not wear armour for such work – and looked at the labour going on around us.

They styled themselves the Army of God, but even He in His omniscience might not have recognised them. This was not the Divine Saint John's vision of St Michael and all the angels, clothed in white linen and with eyes like flames of fire: these men were the wasted survivors of untold ordeals, little more than a rabble, their eyes filled only with suffering. Their skins were as stained and torn as their clothes; they staggered rather than marched – yet fearsome purpose still consumed their souls as they dug and tore at the bones, stones and plunder of the Ishmaelite cemetery. Only the crosses betold their holy allegiance: crosses of wood and iron strung from their necks; wool and sack-cloth crosses sewn into smocks; crosses in blood and brutalised flesh painted or burned or carved into their shoulders. They seemed not the army of the Lord but rather His herd, branded with His mark and loosed to roam the Earth.

As Sigurd and I crossed the graveyard with our stone held between us I tried not to see the impieties around us. A small and lonely corner of my thoughts marvelled that I could still feel shame at this, after the myriad horrors that I had seen in the months since we arrived at Antioch. I turned my gaze away, to the impenetrable city barely two hundred yards distant and the broad, green river which flowed before it. At this end of the city the river was almost against the foot of the walls; further north it meandered away, leaving a wedge of open ground between the ramparts and the water. It was there, on marshy land and barely beyond bowshot of our enemies, that our army was camped. From the hillock, I could see the jumble of unnumbered tents strung out like washing on a line. Opposite, the many-turreted walls of Antioch stood as serene and

inviolate as they had for centuries past, while behind them the three peaks of Mount Silpius towered above the city like the knuckles of a giant fist. For five months we had stared at those walls, waiting for them to crack open with hunger or despair, and for five months we had starved only ourselves.

Crossing a ditch, we climbed towards the low summit of the mound that the Franks had thrown up after the rudimentary fashion of their castles. A Norman sergeant wearing a faded tabard over his armour indicated where we should place our burden, while around us sailors from the port of Saint Simeon laid out planks of timber. At the bottom of the slope, towards the river, a screen of Provencal cavalry sat on their horses and watched for a Turkish sortie.

'I've suffered wounds for the Emperor in a dozen battles.' Sigurd's voice was brittle. 'I've struck down men within an arm's length of ending his life. But if I had known he would have me robbing graves to please a Norman thief, I would have cast aside my shield and hammered my blade into a ploughshare long ago.'

He leaned on the long haft of his axe, like an old man on his stick, and stared angrily at the land before us. 'That city is cursed. The city of the cursed, besieged by the army of the damned. Christ help us.'

I murmured my agreement. It was only as my gaze swept back down to the river that I realised what his last words had signified, what he had seen.

'Christ preserve us.' Where the river met the walls, a stone bridge spanned its course – the sally port that our new tower was intended to guard against. Now, I saw, the gates had opened, and

the drum of hoofbeats echoed from under the arches. Even before our sentries could move, a thin column of Turkish horsemen emerged and galloped forward. Their bows were slung over their shoulders, yet they did not hesitate in charging straight up the slope towards us.

‘Bowmen!’ shouted the Norman sergeant. ‘Bowmen! A bezant for any rider you can unhorse.’

Between what we carried and what we had dug out, there was no shortage of arms among us, but the appearance of the Turks struck panic into our ranks. Some threw themselves into the excavated graves or upon the stones in the shallow foundation trench; others surrendered every defence and fled up the hill behind us. I saw Sigurd snatch one of the round shields from the spoil pile and run forward brandishing his axe. His shame forgotten, the war cry rose from his throat.

He would have little say in this fight, though. The Provencal cavalry had spurred to meet the Turks, desperate to close within spear-length. But rather than engage them the Ishmaelites loosed a rapid flight of arrows and turned back towards their walls. I saw one of the Franks grasping his stomach where a shaft had penetrated it, but otherwise the Turks looked to have done little damage. It was no more than a prick, a gnat’s sting such as we had endured almost daily since investing the city. At least, it should have been.

But the swift retreat of the Turks had brought new courage to our cavalry, and they charged down towards the river after their fleeing quarry. Behind them, I saw Sigurd lower his axe as he slowed to a halt and started screaming unheeded warnings.

The Provencals would never listen to advice from an English mercenary in Greek employ, certainly not when presented with a broken line of their enemy to ride down. There was little Sigurd or I or any man could do save watch. As the Turkish horsemen reached the mouth of the bridge, they executed the drill for which they were famed and feared across Asia: at full gallop, they dropped their reins, twisted back in their saddles, nocked arrows to their bowstrings and loosed them at their pursuers. Throughout the manoeuvre they neither wavered their course nor slowed their pace. In an instant their horses had carried them into the safety of the city.

I shook my head in awe and anger. All winter, men from every nation had sought to mimic the trick, galloping up and down the meadows outside Antioch until their hands were raw and their horses half-lame. None had mastered it. Nor was it merely vain display, for I saw now that several of the shots had hit their mark, while the rest of our cavalry stood halted by the attack.

And, too late, they noticed how close they had come to the city. A hundred Turkish archers rose from the ramparts, and in an instant the air was thick with arrows. Horses screamed and reared while riders tried desperately to turn their heads to safety. I saw two animals go down, blood streaming from their sides: the rider of one managed to leap clear and run back but the other was trapped under the flanks of his steed and could not move. A fistful of arrows plunged into his body within seconds. His companion, on foot, was luckier: one arrow glanced off his coned helmet, another struck his calf but did not bite, while a third lodged in his shoulder but did not bring him down.

As he passed beyond their reach, the Turks on the walls put down their bows and took up a great shout, praising their God and mocking our impotence. If they hoped by their taunts to provoke us into another futile charge they were disappointed, for the survivors of our cavalry were limping back to our lines. There seemed to be more horses than riders among them, and a dozen beasts and men were lying motionless near the bridge. A small party of Turks emerged from the open gate to plunder them. A few of the men around me grabbed bows and loosed shots, but they fell short and did nothing to deter the looters. Sickened, I watched as two of the fallen were dragged back into the city. There would be no mercy or ransom for them.

‘Fools!’ the Norman sergeant raged as the Provençals reached our position. ‘Knives and cowards! You lost good horses there – and for what? To hearten the Turks at the sight of your witless sacrifice? When my lord Bohemond hears of this, you will wish yourselves in the infidels’ houses of torture with the men you left behind.’

The Provençal leader’s eyes stared down from either side of the strip of iron covering his nose. His ragged beard sprang wild beneath his helmet. ‘If the men of Sicily could build this cursed tower and not waste time pillaging the dead, then the men of Provence would not have to waste their forces protecting them. That is what your lord Bohemond has commanded.’

I turned my attention away from them, for Sigurd had returned. He strode past the bickering officers, ignoring them, threw down the

plundered shield and stamped on it. Even his strength could not crack it.

‘Five months,’ he growled. ‘Five months and we’ve learned nothing more than how to kill ourselves.’

The clanking tread of men-at-arms silenced the recriminations. A company of Lotharingians were approaching along the muddy track, their long spears clattering against each other over their heads. I was grateful for the relief, for it had been a hateful day. By my feet the rubble of broken tombs was at last beginning to fill the foundation trench, but it would be a week or more before the tower was completed – if the Turks did not first find a way to destroy it. Even then it would take us no closer to the inside of those unyielding walls.

As the Lotharingians took up their watch Sigurd mustered his troop. They were Varangian guards, pale-skinned northmen from the isle of Thule – England, in their tongue – and most fearsome among the Emperor’s mercenaries. Yet today their bellicose posture was tamed and the usual clamor of their conversation silenced. Battle was their living; months of labouring, guarding, digging and burying had drained it from them.

The Provençal cavalry trotted away, and we followed them towards the boat bridge back to the camp. With only scant food and guilty dreams awaiting us we marched in silence, without haste. Around us, though, the road thronged with life. The peasants and pilgrims who followed the armies hurried about with whatever they had foraged that day: firewood, berries, roots or grains. One lucky man had trapped a quail, which he dangled from a stick as he

proceeded with a phalanx of triumphant companions about him. No less protected were the merchants who bartered with our army, Syrians and Armenians and Saracens alike: they drove their mules amid trains of turbanned guards, stopping only to force harsh bargains with the desperate and hungry. Grey clouds began massing over the mountain to our right, and I quickened my pace lest the rains come again.

We had reached the place where a steep embankment rose above one side of the path when I heard the cry. It was a place that had always made me nervous, for the ground rose higher than my head and any enemy from the west could approach entirely unseen; at the howl that now rose above the earthen parapet I froze, cursing myself for abandoning my armour. The slap of stumbling footsteps came nearer. Sigurd crouched well back from the embankment, his axe held ready. The rest of the company were likewise poised, their eyes searching the edge of the little cliff for danger.

With a stuttering shout, a boy reached the slope and plunged over it, flailing his arms like wings as his feet fell away beneath him. He was lucky we were not archers or he would have died in mid-air; instead, he collapsed onto the road and lay there sobbing, a heap of cloth and flesh and dirt. Sigurd's axe-head darted forward, but he checked it mid-swing as he saw there was no threat in our new arrival. His clothes were torn and his limbs daubed with mud; his beardless face seemed pale, though we could see little enough of it under the arms which cradled it.

He pressed himself up on his hands and knelt there, his head darting around to look at the fearsome Varangians surrounding him.

'My master,' he gulped, pulling a scrawny lock of hair from over his face. Recognising perhaps that I alone held no ferocious axe, he fixed his eyes on mine. 'My master has been killed.'