

SIEGE OF HEAVEN

Requiem

The crowds gathered early: they did not have long to live. They poured out of their hovels and their plundered homes, lining the street for a full mile to see the corpse. Infants who would soon be orphans sat on their fathers' shoulders, while children who would not outlive the harvest chased each other on hands and knees through the throng. Some of the more cautious tied scarves over their faces or bound their hands with cloths, but most people did not believe the threat – yet. They climbed onto the cracked roofs of the old colonnades, raised themselves on broken pillars and crowded the upper tiers of the nearby houses to see better. Many would die in the coming weeks and months, but none would enjoy as grand a funeral as this. Many would be lucky to get even a marker on their grave. So they massed in their thousands, craning for the best possible view, and perhaps understood that this one, magnificent occasion would suffice for them all.

We knew the procession had set out when the bells began to toll. Mothers hushed their children and the crowd turned its eyes to the south. The August sun had climbed over the shoulder of the mountain above the city, and there was no wind to raise the dust that clung to us. I hoped the pall-bearers would not linger with the body in that heat.

Four priests swinging golden censers led the procession. Clouds of incense billowed from the wrought aureoles, hazing the fresh morning air and sweetening it. Next came eight more priests with long candles, their flames invisible in the brilliant glare of the sun. Following them, all alone, an oddity: a tall man dressed not as a priest but a pilgrim, the sleeves of his robe falling back where he raised his arms in front of him. He carried a golden casket inlaid with crystal and pearls, and his narrow eyes were closed almost to blindness by its dazzle. All in the crowd crossed themselves as he passed, for the casket contained the relic of the holy lance, the spear that pierced the side of Christ on the cross, and it was only by its divine power that we had conquered the city. So they believed.

Behind him, four knights carried the body on a bier. A white shroud wrapped it, studded with silver light where the shroud-pins fastened it. The sun breathed through the cloth and filled it with radiance, so that it became a gauzy nimbus around the corpse. I could see the outline of his body beneath it, the arms crossed over his chest. A bishop's mitre and a wooden cross were laid over him.

Unbidden, every man about me sank to his knees and joined the swelling antiphon chanted by the priests.

*May angels lead you to Paradise,
May the martyrs come forth to welcome you,
And bring you into the Holy City,
Jerusalem.*

Elsewhere, I could hear pilgrims invoking his name in whispered blessings and farewells. *Adhemar. God speed you to paradise. God bless you. Adhemar.*

A cool tear ran down my burning cheek. I had not known Bishop Adhemar well, but I had been with him when he died and had heard his last confession. I knew the efforts he had made to shepherd the Army of God, to hold together the bitter rivalries and ambitions that drove it. I knew the anguish he had suffered in that cause. That was what had killed him – and why so many men and women who had known him only by his sermons now wept. They mourned him honestly enough, but more than that they feared for what would come after him.

The prayers died suddenly. The catafalque had passed: behind it came a procession of men, each trying to outdo the others in the opulence of his funeral dress. First in rank and precedence came Raymond, Count of Saint-Gilles: a grizzled, one-eyed man with a grey beard that seemed greyer still as he hunched over his staff. He probably meant it to appear as a pilgrim's staff, a pious crutch, but it owed more to the illness that had recently threatened to speed him to the same fate as Bishop Adhemar. Behind him, almost treading on his shuffling heels and not hiding his impatience, strode a younger man, Bohemond. He stood a full head taller than any of the others; his dark hair was cropped short and his pale face was ripe with unencumbered pride. There was something about him that drew men's eyes and held them, not just his size but some aura of power or danger. Certainly not love: faces hardened as he passed, and several voices took up another anthem in defiant counterpoint to the

priests' chants. *The kings of the Earth are but dust.* Bohemond affected not to notice.

The third man in the party walked a little apart from the others, a fair-haired man with broad shoulders and a full beard – Godfrey, Duke of Lorraine. By most men's judgement he was the most powerful of the princes after Bohemond and Raymond, and more powerful still for being wise enough to keep out of their quarrels. He held himself stiffly, staring past the men in front of him and keeping his eyes fixed on the bier ahead.

The column passed on: counts and dukes, princelings and knights, bishops and priests. The crowds flooded in behind them as soon as they had passed. Ahead, the bier had reached the cathedral, and I could see the great, graven doors swing open to admit the body to the sanctuary. Above it, the church's silver dome reflected the light of heaven. The priests now had a new song:

*You made me of the earth
And clothed me with flesh:
O Lord, my redeemer, raise me up
On the last day.*

As the nobles took their places by the open grave under the dome, the mob behind struggled to squeeze through the doors. I was among them. A spiteful frenzy gripped them, more like rats fleeing fire than mourners entering a holy place, but I had earned my living long enough in the crowded streets of Constantinople and knew how to wield my elbows to good effect. Jabbing and poking, I crossed

the threshold of the church and jostled my way across the sanctuary until the sheer choke of bodies blocked any further progress.

At the far end of the church, the burial had begun. The body had been lifted off its bier and now lay suspended over the grave on silken ropes, while the assembled princes knelt by the grave. Count Raymond had clasped his hands tight before him and rocked back and forth on his knees; Bohemond bowed his head, though it still twitched with surreptitious, guarded movements. Beyond them, I could see two dark figures waiting in the shadows with spades upturned like reaping hooks – the gravediggers. They would have had an easy time of it, for the grave had been excavated only seven weeks earlier. The relic of the holy lance, now cased in its golden reliquary, had been found at the bottom of the hole, though some said it looked more like a roofer's nail than the tip of a spear. Adhemar himself had struggled to believe it, had been almost embarrassed to endorse its power. I did not think he would have chosen to spend eternity buried in its place.

A silent chorus of marble saints looked down as the body descended into the pit. A groan rumbled around the silvered dome as the lid of the sarcophagus was drawn into place. At the head of the grave, the patriarch of Antioch made the sign of the cross, then threw a sprig of laurel into the hole, while the congregation sighed a wistful farewell, like the sound of a sword sliding out of a dying man's chest.

'May God forgive his sins with mercy,' the patriarch intoned. 'May Christ the Good Shepherd lead him safely home. And may he

live in happiness forever, with all the saints, in the presence of the eternal King.'

Amen.

A spade rasped on stone as the gravediggers began filling the hole with earth.