

Star Seeker

Reason and Faith

René Jean-Paul Dewil

Book II. Jerusalem

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Chapter One. Antioch 1148

Antioch was a large town. It stretched out even beyond its old walls in a wide valley eroded by the Orontes River. The green of the pastures reminded me of my home village in France. The valley was fertile. Antioch huddled to the east and to the north against and up high Mount Silpios, up Mount Habib-an-Najjar. On this insurmountable chain of peaks throned also the high citadel of the town, and on the lower flanks of the mountain one could see large houses, the former villas of the wealthy merchants and notables of the city. To the west, Antioch was delimited by the Orontes, called al-Assi by the Syrians, the rebel river, and the river formed vast swamps to the northwest, breeding beds for large wasps in the summer. I felt certainly more at home here than in the deserts, the mountain gorges and the arid plateaus I had travelled through weeks ago. Mighty, grey hills lined the valley on all sides however, so that all that grew here and all that had been built by human force seemed puny, fortuitous and short-lived, despite a view that many found splendid. Nature at Antioch matched my mind, but I had no intention of staying here longer than necessary. Still, I needed time to reflect.

I passed the winter in idleness. I had no inkling to return to the castle where I had been assigned long ago, the Chastel Rouge, the castle forgotten at the border of the Frankish Principality of Antioch and the Saracen territory of the governor of Aleppo, the dangerous castle where the small garrison of Crusader knights might expect each moment an attack that could bring sudden death. My old friend Gormond had left that castle too, to live in Antioch's citadel, where he taught the art of combat to young men-at-arms. I had no desire to put myself at the service of the Châtelain of the keep of Antioch. I did not know what I wanted, so I wanted nothing and expected nothing. I might as well not have lived.

During my long travels along the coasts of the Frankish regions of Tripoli and Antioch, when I returned from the expedition of the Frankish army to the Hauran region, south of Damascus, I had not found out what my life should be. I was listless. I had enough money to live as I wanted, and that knowledge did not urge me to action either. I did not want to live among the crowds, so I hired a small house outside the mighty walls of the town. It was nothing more than a hovel, but it had a tight roof and a barn where I could shelter Awaj, as well as a pasture for the horse to graze in when the times were not too cold. The foul weather of that winter and spring, with its incessant rains that formed the wealth of the peasants of Antioch but were not particularly appreciated by me, did not help. The humidity of the valley, the rain showers swept by cold winds drowned me in despair, and I wallowed in self-pity and boredom. When it did not rain, the winds blew viciously along the river in such cold, that I hid in my hovel for days on.

Antioch's walls were huge, very old, partly old Roman walls with square towers. The walls slung themselves gracelessly, ominously, as heavy brown and grey masses over the hills. The Byzantines had completed the walls, thicker and higher than in their own town of Constantinople. More than three hundred towers were supposed to defend those walls, but I never counted them. I looked up with awe to the high citadel of Antioch, built on a slope of Mount Habib-an-Najjar, the citadel where the Prince

lived in his palace. The town was very well protected. The Orontes ran beneath the walls of Antioch on the west, the mountains hung to east and north. To the south, the fortifications faced a deep valley with steep slopes on which the walls and towers loomed, impossible to escalate. Antioch could only be taken by treason, and that was how the French, the first Crusaders, had captured it.

The town was large, but there was nothing elegant about the city. It was the drabest place I had seen in Outremer so far. Its alleys were tight-packed, extremely dirty and crowded with people. It had held many more people in the past, so vast gardens had been arranged within the walls, yet most of the houses huddled together around the ancient souks. Much of the population of Antioch was Christian, mainly Jacobites and Nestorians who lived here, with a few Jewish families and people of the Latin Church of Rome. Many Muslims had stayed after the capture of the city, mostly merchants, but other Muslims lived outside the gates. So these were my neighbours, though we hardly fraternised.

Caravans came and went along the main roads that entered the city. Many of them travelled from the direction of Aleppo, for the Orontes valley was a major thoroughway from Arabia and Syria towards the coastal cities of Rum, the territories controlled by the Roman Emperor of Constantinople. Along those coasts lay the great and ancient ports that still served the Mediterranean: Adalia and Ephesos, and so many others. The city of Antioch prided in a Catholic cathedral, too small for its population, a citadel complex with a keep, and the palace of the Prince of Antioch.

The only thing I knew I really had to do, though I supposed it was utterly futile, was to talk to the Prince of Antioch. The other thing I knew was that ultimately I would have to go to Jerusalem, with or without Gormond. I wanted to find the true God in Jerusalem, and understand why He allowed Evil in His creation.

I planned to leave the region in mid-spring and ride southwards in the better weather, before the scorching heats of summer.

I was very lonely that winter, but Marie was always at my side. My love Marie had disappeared in Vitry in the Champagne of now far France, killed in the burning of the church of the town the Royal Army had laid a siege to. Yet, I spoke to her, and she walked beside me when I went out of my door to feed the horse Awaj. My other friends, Abbot Suger of the monastery of Saint-Denis and Usama ibn Munqidh of the Shaizar, and the boy Yusuf, were also around me. I lived with ghosts and was keenly aware of it, but I preferred the ghosts to the living.

I rode to Antioch and asked at the palace for an audience with the Prince. The guards looked at my Arabian robe, the lack of a crusader cross anywhere on me, and I got no further than the first contingent of sentries. I returned three times to the palace to tell I had important information for Raymond of Poitiers, but I was rebuked each time. Yes, someone would tell the Prince. Where did I live? What was my name? I would be called.

After more than a month of waiting, a hobelar shouted one morning at the door of my house without dismounting. I opened, acknowledged that I was Sir Daniel du Pallet and the man told me the Prince deigned to receive me at the palace three days later in the afternoon. The man gave the message and rode off.

I walked to Antioch on foot. It took a while before I was let in the palace past the guardhouse and into the courtyard on which opened all the interior halls. Two heavily armed guards, eyeing nervously my Damascene curved sword, brought me to a reception hall where Raymond de Poitiers stood warming himself at a hearth. He was not alone. Five of his Barons stood by him, talking to him and joking, but I could easily make out the Prince. Raymond was the centre of attention and he was the most handsome of the men in the hall. He was not the tallest, but he had the richest surcoat and he had the most interesting face. He had much flesh on his cheeks, but his face was hard and toughened by exercise. A thin, black beard lined his chin. Broad shoulders, thickly muscled arms and stout legs denoted the man of action, the warrior. His eyes flashed around, hard and probing. They never remained long on one face, on one object. Raymond's head moved too, continuously, and his mouth drew nervously on his lower lip. I might have thought of him as a weasel, but he was far too big, strong in muscles and powerful for that image. He was a fine knight, a fearless warrior, and what I saw pleased me.

The Barons chose to act as if I did not exist, though they had all turned and seen me entering the room. I was not one of them, a non-entity. Raymond was the one looking towards the door, standing with his back against the hearth. He looked past the group of Barons, saw me advancing, and spoke the first.

'You must be Daniel du Pallet,' he said in a warm and deep voice. 'You asked to see me. What do you want? Be quick, man.'

'I would prefer to talk to you alone, Prince,' I replied, and waited.

Raymond was surprised. How had a common knight, probably one of his poorest men, for he had never seen me before, a man whose only value was to ride in the pack and get killed in the pack, the audacity to speak out this way. Something changed in his eyes however when he looked me briefly up and down and weighed me. I matched his gaze seriously.

Raymond ordered his Barons to leave with a gesture of his hand. The knights grudgingly and slowly left, watching me suspiciously. Raymond remained standing at the hearth, but he now stared in the flames and stretched his hands forward to warm them. He thus turned his back to me, proving he did not fear me.

He poked in the fire with an iron staff and without turning to me said, 'speak up, man.'

I told Raymond de Poitiers first that I was a Breton knight who had arrived a year or so ago at the port of Antioch, Saint-Siméon, to be a Crusader. I had been at Vézelay and heard Bernard de Clairvaux preach the Crusade, reading a letter of the Pope. I had been assigned by his Connétable to the castle of Chastel Rouge and had patrolled in the ravines of the affluents of the Orontes, looking for infiltrations of Turkish troops. I had been wounded in an ambush and captured by the Turks of Aleppo.

When I mentioned Aleppo, Raymond turned around suddenly, interrupting me by asking, 'you were imprisoned at Aleppo? How did you get free?'

I continued my story by telling him I had been wounded and healed in the Muslim hospital of the town, the captive of an Arab Prince of the Shaizar, Usama ibn Munqidh and later had been kept in Usama's house in Aleppo. Raymond again interrupted me by saying he knew Usama. He had met him in Jerusalem, when Usama visited the Kingdom of Jerusalem accompanying his master, Mu'in al-Din Unur of Damascus. I had now the attention of Raymond fully.

I told Raymond of Poitiers all that Usama had confided in me. Nur al-Din, the Atabeg of Aleppo and son of the deceased Turkish conqueror of Syria, Zengi, was as ambitious as his father. Nur al-Din's territory had been halved, for the regions of Mosul had been given to his brother. Usama was sure Nur al-Din would do all he could to gain more land, which could only be to the west and to the south, for his brother owned the lands east of him and the Seljuk Turks at his north were too powerful for him. Nur al-Din had to attack the Franks of Antioch and Tripoli on his west side and the Sultanate of Damascus on his south.

The Sultan of Damascus was lord of that part of Syria in name only, for the Vizir Mu'in al-Din Unur, Usama's friend, ruled Damascus. Usama feared Damascus would be attacked first, so that Nur al-Din could combine the forces of the two Syrian lands. Then the combined armies of Aleppo and Damascus would crush all the other rulers in the region, not only the Franks but also the small Arabian enclave of the Shaizar, where Usama's family ruled. Zengi had captured most of the former Frankish County of Edessa; his son would turn against the Principality of Antioch with a large army, and then overrun the County of Tripoli.

Nur al-Din could muster thirty thousand men at the very most and probably only twenty thousand now, of which less than ten thousand experienced warriors. He might crush the twenty thousand men that Damascus could bring in the field, but Nur al-Din surmised that when he displayed his power to the Sultan, Damascus might simply surrender immediately and join him.

Nur al-Din could not, however, defeat the Frankish army of Jerusalem plus the army of Damascus, exactly as in the past Jerusalem plus Damascus had made Zengi turn away. But after the expedition in the Hauran of the Franks of Jerusalem, territory of Damascus the Franks had hoped to conquer, the alliance between Damascus and Jerusalem had been broken. Nur al-Din thought that Damascus was left alone now to face his armies. If Nur al-Din gathered all his men to the last, and maybe received some troops from his brother, Damascus might be laid siege to and fall. Then, he could throw fifty thousand or more warriors at Antioch. So, the Franks had to ally with Damascus anew.

Raymond had listened to me at first arrogantly, almost absently, but at least he had listened. When I cited the figures, he blemished. His head sunk a little further in his shoulders. 'Tell me something I don't know already,' was his comment, but I was convinced he did not know the numbers. He whispered, but without looking straight at me, 'I could not tell how many warriors could be summoned by Aleppo. I did not know just how ambitious Zengi's son was. I thought I would have rest for some years.'

'Usama asked for two things,' I said. 'Mu'in al-Din Unur, the ruler of Damascus, wants to renew the alliance with the Franks despite the affront of the expedition in the Hauran. He proposes the new army of the Crusaders, the army that is coming from Christendom, the army of King Louis of France and of Conrad, Emperor of Germany, to attack Aleppo as soon as possible, together with your own forces. That way, Antioch would be saved, but also Damascus and the Shaizar. Nur al-Din would have to suck on his thumb for many years in Aleppo, discredited with the Seljuk Sultans and the Caliph of Baghdad, his masters. Usama seems to believe that the danger that the Franks would attack Damascus after the destruction of Nur al-Din's armies would be less than the threat that Nur al-Din is for Damascus. My guess is that in the event that Franks would nevertheless attack Damascus, Mu'in al-Din Unur would anyway

appeal to the weakened Nur al-Din to assist him, for between the Syrians and the Turks Nur al-Din would be hard-pressed to refuse.

‘Why would Jerusalem attack and capture lands of Damascus that would always remain hostile to the Franks?’ asked Raymond. ‘We are too few to be able to hold the towns and strongholds of Damascus efficiently for a long time. The expedition in the Hauran was a foolish venture, fed by greed and planned by stupidity. Aleppo is quite another matter! Aleppo is a smaller territory, to a large extent Christian, and as for Hama and Homs, the other large fortified towns of northern Syria, those places we can hold because they are on the Orontes and not so far from our own territories. Jocelin de Courtenay, the Count of former Edessa, however despicable, can re-occupy Edessa and the northern castles. I sensed this situation. I only could not tell for sure what Nur al-Din would do. I did not really know how the Saracens thought about all this.’

‘They are Saracens, but they are Turks,’ I said. ‘Turks are a tough race, admirable in their force, but they lust for land for their people, and for power.’

I told Raymond then all that Usama had explained to me about the rulers of Aleppo and Mosul and Damascus, about the only remaining Arab land of Shaizar and about other old Arabian princely families such as the ‘Ocqailides.

‘The Turks fight for power among themselves,’ I reminded Raymond. ‘The Turks of Qoniya are in open war with the Danishmendids, other Turks, to their east. Nur al-Din fights them on his northern border. He fights against the Ortoqid Amirs there too, which the Franks could also ally with, and to his south he tries to grab Damascus from the Mamluk Turk Mu’in al-Din Unur. The Isma’ilis fight everybody, Turk or Frank or Arab, but the Turks leave them wisely alone because they fear being assassinated in the dark. The Franks must use Turk against Turk, make and break alliances when necessary, but no alliance will ever be possible with Nur al-Din!’

As I talked, I saw Raymond change in attitude. He was obviously interested in such conversations, in schemes of intrigues and in counter-schemes. He said he had discussed these subjects with his Barons, but almost all refused to hear the evidence of the real situation.

‘They all believe we are invulnerable,’ he admitted to me. ‘They believe that when we failed in the past that was only because we had not been smart enough, had not prayed enough, were not powerful enough, whereas now we were smart and strong. They believe God is with us now. They would readily confront any Saracen army, however strong, with my twenty thousand men – at the very most – even if the Saracens would bring ten times more men. Do we not have at Antioch the Holy Lance that Saint Longinus thrust in the side of Jesus? I believe we might defeat such an army, yes, but we would lose half of our knights and six months later there would be another hundred thousand Saracens facing us. And in the event that we were defeated, we would be annihilated, for there would be not one Frankish knight alive to defend Antioch. We would be finished forever. At the very best it would take two or three years before another Crusader army could be levied in Christendom, and in the meantime Antioch would be Saracen-ruled. We would be wiped out. Usama seems to understand that. Why won’t my Barons understand? Why doesn’t Mélisende, the Queen of Jerusalem, understand that? How blind and stupid are all those men and that woman! We should never, never, never confront with our sole and entire army a

comparable Saracen army. The risks are too great. We would only face annihilation, whereas the Saracens would merely suffer a temporary setback when they lose!.'

Raymond de Poitiers paused and walked around the hearth. 'This is true for Antioch,' he said, 'and it is true for Tripoli and it is true for Jerusalem.'

He asked then, 'what more have you learned? How do the Turks think? How do the native Syrians react? How many arms do they have? Where do they have their coins from? Have their harvests been good this year? How many caravans arrive at Aleppo each day? Are the men eager to go to war? Tell me!'

The Prince took me to a corner of the hall where a table stood and chairs. He made me sit down. He stepped out of the door, called to servants and asked for food. We ate bread, a roasted capon and cheese, and drank wine. I talked and talked until night fell. Raymond asked me about all the places I had visited, also the ones in the Kingdom of Jerusalem and the County of Tripoli. He inquired about the towns and the mountain passes, the wadis and the rivers. He urged me to tell what I had experienced in the expedition of the Hauran. He had heard more or less how that expedition had fared, but he was interested in how the Turks had feigned and attacked there. I could tell him firsthand how the Franks had retreated.

Raymond expressed warm feelings for King Baudouin III of Jerusalem. 'A fine boy,' he said, 'apparently the same image and wisdom of his father. A fine knight, a wise King. But he will need to shake off the influence of his mother one day and the sooner the better.'

When the night was well advanced, Raymond de Poitiers yawned and remarked he was tired. I also had told him everything I had to say.

'No, no,' he protested. 'There is much more you know. We must speak again'.

Raymond was a sophisticated man. His questions were intelligent and right. They showed his correct insight in all matters of rule and wealth of the land. I probed a little, but he knew little of philosophy. Raymond was a man of action, of rapid decision-taking, not a man of thought, though he knew he needed reflection. He was able to plot intrigues. His questions were often 'what if,' and at times he made so many conjectures that he got lost in all the possible combinations of outcomes. 'I must find simple solutions,' he said then, 'only simple solutions are the best, the ones in harmony with other decisions, the ones with actions my men can understand why they are necessary.'

Finally, Raymond stood up from the table that was now littered with the rests of the food, and stretched. He rather abruptly bade me goodbye. He said he would call me again, later. He knew where I lived.

Yet, Raymond's focus was Raymond de Poitiers, Prince of Antioch. He not once asked me where I really came from, who my family was, why I had come to Antioch, what I had done before. It never occurred to him to ask what I would do next. Such questions were irrelevant to the Prince of Antioch. And probably they were, I thought, certainly in view of what I had told him.

I returned to my house in complete darkness but for the shine of a weak moon. I should have remained inside the city; I had to grope for my path at times. Yet I was content: I had delivered my message, I had paid my debt to Usama, and the Prince had

listened. I doubted King Louis the Younger of France would have listened with the same interest.

After that day I expected to be called to the palace once more. Weeks passed however, without news. At the beginning of spring I considered waiting no more and ride south, to Jerusalem. I was on the point of talking to Gormond, convincing him to accompany me, when there was a great commotion at Antioch. The enormous Crusader army that had been expected for so long in Outremer had finally arrived at Antioch's harbour.

The French Crusaders led by King Louis the Younger did not arrive by the northern road, the road along the coast, coming from Cilicia, from the Armenian and Byzantine territories. King Louis arrived by boat at Saint-Siméon on the 19th of March of that year 1148. We heard of the disembarkation a day later. Raymond de Poitiers must have been aware that the army was nearing Antioch, but he hadn't told me. I didn't care too much and I certainly was not as excited as the townsmen and knights of Antioch, for these had fallen entirely in frenzy with the matter.

I was in town the twentieth and saw people dance in the streets. They cheered, embraced each other, hung out all the flags and badges of Christianity they could find. My neighbours, the Muslim farmers and some of the Jewish families continued to work, head to the ground, and said nothing, ignoring the news. They would have to till the ground anyway the next days, whatever happened and whoever ruled the valley.

I remained in my house afterwards and prepared to leave. I bought dried food and even a pack horse to carry all. The rains had stopped for a few days and the air warmed up. An old farmer told me there was always such a temporary period of better weather in spring and this year was no exception; he expected more rains later. The farmer had waited for this period eagerly, for this was the time to sow.

About a week after the arrival of the Crusaders I saw a dust cloud rising in the far. The French army was on the march from Port Saint Siméon to Antioch. A long column of knights and footmen dressed in mail passed. A camp of tents was set up by the garrison of Antioch under the walls of the city. The camp was vast, vaster than any I had been in. I compared it with the camp that had laid siege to Vitry in France, and estimated the size to hold about thirty-thousand men. That was much, but a lot less than I had expected. I had expected five times more, a hundred and fifty thousand men. Where was the rest? I supposed part of the army had marched to Jerusalem, together with the pilgrims. Another army might still be on the move over land, in the north, in Armenian regions.

A few days later a knight of Antioch rode into my courtyard and summoned me to the palace. He looked disdainfully at my hovel, and only said that if I cherished my life I had better be at the palace of the Prince the next day in the morning.

So I went, on foot again, to the city. By then I had given up caring for what I wore and since I lived among Muslims and Jews I was dressed only in a white burnous, no

mail and no surcoat, no cross, even no sword, but I had a long dagger under my robe and I held my hand on this dagger all the time I walked to the palace.

I had to wait at the guardhouse, and wait and wait. The courtyard was filled with people. There were many more knights than I had seen the last time in the palace, and I heard a lot more French spoken. New French knights lived in the palace. I saw a few of the King's Guards, but none I knew.

I was led to a much smaller hall. There were only four people in the room. I knew Raymond de Poitiers. I knew Queen Aliénor of Aquitaine. I also recognised the monk who stood at her side, for he was a monk of Saint-Denis, Eudes de Deuil. I could not tell who the last man was, a tall and slim knight entirely clad in grey. He wore a Crusader's cross on his surcoat, and he had a sword at his belt. Raymond was unarmed. The Queen and the men sat on chairs near a hearth, but no fire had been lighted. Raymond told me to come nearer and join him.

He said, 'come to us, Sire du Pallet. This is Queen Aliénor of France, Reverend Eudes de Deuil of Saint-Denis and Chronicler of King Louis, and Sir Thierry Galéran, Counsellor of the King. Sit down!'

The only chair available stood between Raymond and Aliénor. I saluted the Queen, then to the men, and sat. I deliberately avoided the Queen's eyes, so did not perceive any reaction or her face. I looked expectantly at Raymond de Poitiers.

Raymond said, 'I asked you to come, Sire du Pallet, because the Queen wants to know what the Holy Land is like and especially the northern lands: Antioch here, Edessa and Tripoli. She also desires to learn what the Saracens are like, how many they are, where they come from, how they live, how they are armed, how many men they have and who the leaders are. I have not enough time for her, because the French army and the King demand all my attention. I thought you were the best man around to explain to the Queen about the Saracens. You met Turks and Arabs and Syrians and you know the land and the people. Please tell the Queen who you are and all you told me before. I have to leave you however; I have to return to my duties. You will excuse me, my Lady niece Aliénor, but I have to go.'

We both looked at the Queen then, but Raymond hesitated, for we saw the Queen's face reddening, her wide open eyes, and the surprise on her face. Raymond looked at me, then beyond Aliénor to Eudes who was in the same line of sight, who stood beaming with joy in a broad smile.

I knew Eudes indeed very well. He had been a charming young man at the monastery of Saint-Denis near Paris. We often talked, exchanged scrolls, and walked together in the forests. Once, Gormond, Eudes and I had eaten together in my house and we drank too much and got beyond being tipsy and made much merriness. We sang rather rude songs and Abbot Suger, who had happened to pass in the village, had heard us sing in the yard. Suger reproached us for having been too happy and especially Eudes had been reprimanded. Eudes was intelligent, a good man, compassionate and cheerful. He was a good friend and companion. He was delighted to see me and smiled openly at me.

'What is this?' Lord Raymond asked. 'Do you know each other?'

I spoke first, saying, ‘Yes. I met Eudes de Deuil at the Abbey of Saint-Denis when I was Protector of Saint-Denis, friend of Abbot Suger and as Protector of the Oriflamme I also met Queen Aliénor.’

‘True,’ Aliénor hissed immediately, ‘and you left your place as Protector of the Oriflamme without asking us whether you were allowed to leave. And I have to meet you here, so far from Saint-Denis!’

Raymond ignored the Queen’s acid remark. ‘Well,’ Raymond said, ‘well!’ He took in the information but apparently did not know what to do with it. He then decided to dismiss it as nothing really relevant. ‘All the better then. I will leave you now.’ Whereupon Raymond stood and left the room.

I had an instant distaste for the man dressed in grey who was still with us, the King’s Counsellor. The man had a long, sharp face with a hooked nose and thin, bleak lips. His face was almost as grey as his clothes. I did not trust him, Counsellor of the King or not.

I said, ‘Lady Aliénor, I am a humble and shy man. I also have things to say of which you alone might wish to divulge them to others, at your discretion. I would like to talk to you alone.’

Queen Aliénor had gained her posture by then. She addressed Thierry Galéran, saying, ‘Sire Galéran, be so kind as to leave us.’

The knight protested, ‘Lady Aliénor, if this man has important information to give, then I am sure the King should be made aware of it. It is my duty to counsel the King in all matters here. I am also not sure a knight who deserted his duty in France would be worthy of your attention and your trust.’

Aliénor interrupted him there, and snapped ‘leave, Galéran, get out!’

Thierry Galéran remained seated however and prepared to reply still, but the Queen stood high above him and yelled viciously before he could reply, ‘do I have to repeat orders? Get out or I will call in my guards!’

Galéran shrank under the sudden venom poured over him, stood up so that he confronted the Queen insolently, then turned and went. He threw me a look of hatred and disdain. I had made myself an enemy at Court, but what did I care?

The Queen resumed, ‘I would like Eudes de Deuil to stay, Sir Daniel.’ She did not wait for an answer, for that was a direct order too, and she continued, ‘that vile man, Thierry Galéran! He loathes me but, though he is a eunuch, he also lusts after me. I can see it in his eyes. I hate that man. Thank you, Daniel, for having given me an excuse to get rid of him.’

She patted her robe as if she had struck a spider from the cloth, sat down again and said, ‘so, Sir Daniel du Pallet, we meet again. Again I ask for your assistance. I have been very angry when you left Paris without asking us permission. Abbot Suger of course excused you, but no one leaves our Court like that! I heard you had gone to Outremer, but even Abbot Suger did not know where you were. He received no letters from you. What has become of you? What odd chance brings you in my presence once more?’

I started talking. I told her that after having been on the King’s expedition against the town of Vitry I had continued to work at Saint-Denis. I had accompanied Abbot Suger to Vézelay and had been so impressed by Bernard de Clairvaux’ fine speech and call for a new Crusade, that I had left Saint-Denis surreptitiously to sail to Outremer. I told the Queen I had set off on my journey immediately after Vézelay, travelled by boat and reached Antioch many months ago. I had been a knight at the Chastel Rouge,

been wounded in an ambush and healed at Aleppo. I told her I had participated in the campaign of the King of Jerusalem in the Hauran, the region south of Damascus, but had returned afterwards to Antioch, to my friend Gormond.

Eudes de Deuil's eyes widened while I explained all I had seen and experienced these last months. I had both their interest now. I continued to speak. I told everything I had informed Raymond de Poitiers about a little earlier. I spoke and I spoke. Eudes asked many questions, the Queen fewer. She was particularly interested in all matters of power, of character of the leaders of the region, of the little I knew of how the present forces had come to be distributed as they were. I described in warm images the land, the peasants and merchants, the caravan roads of Syria, the goods they transported, and the women that worked so hard here. I explained the intricate mosaic of powers to her, the multitude of countries and people, the weaknesses of each, their grandeur and baseness, their noble character and their unrestrained ambitions.

While I spoke candidly to the Queen I also explained I did not appreciate much Jocelin of Courtenay, Count of Edessa. He had let Edessa, Rohais, insufficiently defended against the Turks of Aleppo. I despised Jocelin for much of what I had heard Usama and Yusuf tell me about how the County had fallen. It was quite another picture than the one drawn to me in France.

It had been all Jocelin's fault. He had left no garrison of any military importance in Edessa, preferring the sweeter and safer stronghold of Turbessel to settle his court in. When the Atabeg Zengi's troops set siege to Edessa, only the merchants and artisans stood on the ramparts. These were no experienced warriors, no Frankish knights in the town, so Edessa had been captured easily. Zengi had known the city to be so weak, of course. The Atabeg of Aleppo granted the people of Edessa their lives. He even allowed the Franks to deal with the rebuilding of the destroyed parts of the city and he favoured the caravans to Edessa. The city thrived better under Zengi than under Jocelin.

But later, the Armenians of Edessa betrayed their oaths to Zengi and took the city by surprise, driving the few troops that Zengi had posted in the town into the citadel. The Armenian Christians called for help to Jocelin, and the Count had indeed arrived with an army. But he had come unprepared, with too few knights, and without help from Antioch. When Zengi stood with a new army before the city, a mighty army, Jocelin fled. He fled with his few knights. The Christians, all of them, not just the Armenians but also the Jacobites and Nestorians that had remained loyal to Zengi and that had not participated in the re-taking of the city, fled then in Jocelin's wake, rightly fearing to be massacred by a revengeful Zengi. Jocelin's knights provided them no protection. Zengi's cavalry had cut the people of Edessa down in the narrow valleys and in the mountain passes. Jocelin's men abandoned the townspeople to their fate, the elderly, the women and children, the merchants and artisans that had almost no weapons. They fell easy prey to Saracen arrows.

Afterwards, the Turks of Zengi also killed all of Jocelin's army and Jocelin escaped alone. Zengi then massacred the people that had remained at Edessa.

Edessa was a deserted city now. The anger of Christendom should not be directed against Aleppo alone, but about as much to Jocelin de Courtenay.

I also spoke of the Queen's uncle, Raymond de Poitiers. I appreciated the Prince of Antioch better, I said. Aliénor frowned when I spoke of her uncle and she drew her mouth thin when I told her I found Raymond a strong and capable man, but not a

figure that could rally to his course all the Barons of his lands. I expected every moment the Queen to rebuke me for my candidness, but she made no remarks and bade me to continue. She gleamed when I spoke of the young King Baudouin and how he had enforced discipline in his troops in the Hauran. Of course I told her about Aleppo and what I knew of Nur al-Din and Damascus with Mu'in al-Din Unur.

Aliénor remained a long time seated, fixed and very straight in her chair, defiant and irritated. Gradually, however, she relaxed, and listened intently. She smiled sometimes and changed her attitude from open defiance to incredulity, and then to sympathy. She supported her chin in her hand when she got tired of a pose, moved in her chair, curved her body and she responded in anger and marvel along my story. Eudes de Deuil was much an open, generous man. He exclaimed his feelings with grand gestures of his arms and body, for which Aliénor threw him disapproving but benevolent looks. That held Eudes back for a few moments, but soon he was gripped again by the events of my story and reacted as before.

In this way, time passed quickly. We dined together, and still I talked and talked. It was Eudes who said first that we had to stop, for the Queen was expected at the King's.

Aliénor stood up from her chair and said, 'yes, Sir Daniel, I have to go. Can you come back tomorrow, same time, and ask for me? I will tell the guards to bring you to me.'

Aliénor took her leave. I stayed a while with Eudes de Deuil in the hall. We watched the Queen walk out of the room.

Eudes laughed, embraced me and said, 'Daniel, Daniel, we missed you! Abbot Suger told me so often how much of his good luck came from having you with him! He governs France now, you know, the entire Kingdom! Raoul de Vermandois and the Archbishop of Reims assist him, but Suger is twice as smart as those two. Why haven't you written? I am sure Suger would have read your letters to me. Oh! I forgot! You were a prisoner at Aleppo! Nevertheless, how are you now? We should see more of each other here! I would also like to meet Gormond. I am so happy to have two friends of Saint-Denis here.'

We walked to another room and there, Eudes de Deuil told me what had happened on the route to Antioch. It had been a disastrous march all along! It was all the fault of the Emperor of Constantinople, said Eudes.

The Crusaders' bad luck had started right after the French army had reached the imperial city of the Orient. The Emperor had been very kind and flattering to King Louis and to Queen Aliénor. The King and Queen had been received in the city with great pomp. They had been lodged in the finest parts of the Blachernae Palace, in the Philopation. The French court had been honoured with gifts, golden jewels in pieces of the finest artwork, delicious food and sumptuous feasts. Then the army had been transported without incidents on Byzantine ships to the other side of the Bosphorus, to Chalcedon. The Crusaders were no threat anymore to the empire, so the attitude of Manuel Comnenus changed. The Emperor acted in greed. He refused to provide food for the hundred thousand French unless the French Barons swore an oath of allegiance to the Emperor. Manuel Comnenus demanded that the Barons swear an oath that all the territories they would conquer would belong by law to Constantinople. That meant

those lands were for the Emperor to give and take, subject to the whim of the Emperor. The Barons would be vassals of the Emperor. Threatened with famine, King Louis had all his Barons accept the oath. Louis himself had refused, at least officially, but Eudes was not sure the King had not sworn the same oath in private to Manuel. Only then had the Crusaders moved to Nicaea, south-west along the coast.

The French had a surprise at Nicaea: Conrad III, the German Emperor, had retreated to Nicaea with his own army. That is, said Eudes, with the meagre rests of it. Conrad had refused to accept the proposal of Manuel Comnenus to march along the coast southwards to Outremer. Along the coast he would have marched under the protection of the Byzantine harbours and the Byzantine strongholds, cities garrisoned by Imperial troops. Conrad had advanced straight through the Seljuk territories of Qoniya, wanting to dash to the capital Qoniya itself and capture it. The Emperor had given guides to Conrad, but the guides had told the Germans that it would take only a few days to march to Qoniya. The guides had also provided food for only eight days, whereas it proved at least twenty days of marching to reach the capital of the Seljuks. After ten days, famine set in. The Byzantine guides fled in the night. Conrad was left with a starving army and thousands of women, children, old men, the pilgrims that followed his army without food, walking in the scorching sun through ravines and desert plateaus. When the German Crusaders reached the River Bathys, the Seljuks attacked the long, stretched-out columns. The Germans were hungry and exhausted, weak from sickness and hardships. Their horses would not charge.

The German knights were no match for the well-fed, fresh and swift cavalry of the Saracens. The enemy attacked and retreated. Thousands of arrows hit the Germans. Famine, thirst, exhaustion, sickness and the constant attacks of the Saracens who darted around any isolated group and killed them to the last man reduced the German Crusader army from seventy thousand warriors to merely one tenth of that number, and none of the followers survived. The remaining men, with their Emperor leading, joined the King of France at Nicaea.

Luckily, told Eudes de Deuil, a contingent of fourteen thousand Germans, led by the Emperor Conrad's brother, Otto von Freisingen, had followed the alternative route along the coast, under Byzantine protection. So there were only fourteen thousand Germans on the march south and about seven thousand at Nicaea, merely about twenty thousand men of the near seventy thousand warriors and a hundred thousand people that left Germany. The rest had been massacred or had simply disappeared in the regions of Qoniya. King Louis the Younger had wisely decided to follow the road Otto von Freisingen had taken.

I was glad for Otto von Freisingen. I had met him at a meeting of scholars at the monastery of Cluny, a few years earlier. He was a good, intelligent and wise man. He had chosen a better alternative than his brother Conrad, for he had sensed the danger.

The Byzantines were a perfidious and vindictive lot, emphasised Eudes. The Emperor of the West, Conrad, would not accept oaths of vassalry because he was legally the equal of the Emperor of the East, Manuel Comnenus.

By refusing to follow the coast, Constantinople could not benefit from the added income, for the Emperor was eagerly disposed to provide food to the Crusaders only in so far as the Germans and French paid handsomely. So Eudes suspected that Manuel Comnenus had struck a secret alliance with the Seljuks of Qoniya, given the

wrong guides and bad advice to the Germans and prepared the attacks in the harsh lands of Anatolia together with the Seljuk Sultan. What did the Emperor of Constantinople care for an army that would grant him nothing and be a constant threat to his own territories, even as far as Cilicia and Outremer? Manuel and his Court had sent Conrad into disaster and Conrad had marched into the trap eyes closed, unwilling to listen to his brother.

Eudes de Deuil reported that Conrad's German troops joined King Louis' seventy thousand warriors and the twenty thousand French pilgrims. I smiled, for Eudes called the horde of people that followed the Crusaders 'pilgrims'. I imagined that the pilgrims were mostly the wives and lovers of the many warriors. The whores, artisans, merchants and thieves, usurers and would-be murderers would also be in that lot. The rest, yes, few, were probably truly on a pilgrimage.

We followed not exactly the coast, Eudes mentioned, but we remained marching and riding in territories along it, all controlled by Constantinople. We suffered attacks from Saracen cavalry, but fended these off easily. The Byzantines made us pay high prices for food, but we had enough. We didn't starve though we ate foul bread, half-rotten fish, a few rare vegetables and the fruit we stole. We made good way. We defeated the Saracens at Antioch-on-Meander, Eudes said, but we were unable to set siege to the town for we had no siege-engines with us, no mangonels and no ballistae.

At Ephesos, Conrad III had his belly full of following us. Our French knights despised the Germans that had been so foolish to get decimated in the Qoniya. Conrad and his Barons couldn't take the mocking jokes of the French anymore. The Emperor broke off his crusade, leaving the pilgrims with the French army, and returned to Constantinople.

We advanced painstakingly through the Mountains of Pisidia, continued Eudes, and were attacked very hard by the Saracens there. Our vanguard lost contact with our main army at one time, because its leader, Geoffroi de Rancon, had marched too far, despite the orders of the King. Our main army was attacked by surprise while it came out of the mountain passes. We lost many men. Gaucher de Montjoie and Evrard de Breteuil, excellent knights and friends, were killed then with many other knights. We lost many men, yet we reached the port of Adalia.

There was not enough food at Adalia. We had to leave that Byzantine town rapidly. Luckily, there was an ambassador sent by Manuel Comnenus at Adalia, a man called Landulph. King Louis had walked far enough. He decided to take the advice of Landulph and do the rest of the route to Antioch by ship, over the sea. Landulph promised the necessary transport ships. But there were not enough boats. King Louis paid Landulph to care for the sick in the hospitals and monasteries of Adalia, and then he split the army in two groups. He loaded the ships to cracking with the men you saw outside the gates of Antioch in the Crusader camp. He left another contingent of knights and warriors at Adalia to defend the pilgrims, in all maybe twenty thousand people, and told those to continue on foot to nearby Cilicia, to march along the coast first under Byzantine protection and then into Christian Armenian lands. The Byzantines assured us that so near to Outremer they would be safe. King Louis left these in the command of Thierry d'Alsace, the Count of Flanders, and of

Count Archambaud de Bourbon. The Counts were on their way and would arrive at Antioch in a few weeks, claimed Eudes.

That story explained why I had seen only about forty thousand men or less at Antioch, and no pilgrims. I was less optimistic than Eudes about the fate of the men and women left at Adalia. The Saracens would continue to harass them on their way to Cilicia and even there the small army would not be safe. How many would survive? Even if another ten thousand could reach Antioch, that left only fifty thousand Crusaders out of the two hundred thousand that had been the pride of Christendom after Vézelay and that had reached Constantinople.

The figures of the dead and enslaved were staggering. I wondered how even Eudes de Deuil almost spoke of a victory of having arrived with fifty thousand at Antioch. The Crusade of Conrad and Louis the Younger, preached so ardently by Bernard de Clairvaux, was already a total catastrophe. Of course, with fifty thousand Frankish warriors Edessa, Aleppo and even Damascus could be captured, certainly if the Franks of Outremer joined them, but the odds were still not overwhelming. And who would guard and garrison the captured towns? Would not most of these French knights return to their homelands, return after their chevauchée against the Saracens? Usama ibn Munqidh had been right when he had assured me the new Crusaders would be absorbed by the Seljuks of Qoniya.

A few days later, Thierry d'Alsace and Archambaud de Bourbon indeed arrived at Antioch. But they arrived equally by ships, and only with a small part of the army of Adalia. Eudes told me later they had marched out of Adalia, had been attacked by the Saracens and lost so many knights and pilgrims that they had returned to Adalia. The Byzantines had promised more ships then, so the Crusader commanders had embarked.

I was appalled. The commanders had sailed first! They had not put the pilgrims on boats and defended the rear against the Saracens and Byzantines, waiting for the subsequent trips of the ships. Yes, that was what was done, answered a worried Eudes, adding that the pilgrims would soon follow. But the ships sailed away from Saint-Siméon, and never returned. The pilgrims and the rest of the French warriors simply disappeared. Much later, a few men did manage to reach Antioch by foot. These alleged all the French had been killed or captured. I had to shake Eudes de Deuil to his senses, to make him aware of the real extent of the disaster. The Saracens, and also the Byzantines, would have a supply of Christian slaves for ages.

I returned to the palace of Antioch for a new audience with the Queen. I wondered what I was going to add, for it seemed I had told all of some importance the previous time. Yet, I rode. I did not dress like an Arab anymore, for I expected vaguely to meet the King and his Counsellors. I dreaded to face the King. I wore my surcoat with the badge of Le Pallet, which showed a red cross like a Crusader's cross, but which had been sown in silk by Saracen hands at Aleppo.

The Queen was alone. Well, not entirely alone, for there were two ladies-in-waiting with her when the guard ushered me in, but she dismissed them immediately. I thought it was highly unlikely to be alone with the Queen, and quite unseemly. I was unsettled by the strange, mocking and flirting looks the ladies casted at me when they

passed by me, too close for my comfort. I supposed that the habits at the court of France had evolved since the times I frequented the King and Queen with Abbot Suger at Paris, and would be more informal here.

Aliénor did not greet me with the usual polite addresses. She made me sit in front of her and embarked on one question after the others on the events and situations we had already talked about the day before. She wanted other viewpoints. She challenged me. She forced me into assumptions that I had to refute. I did not understand well where she wanted to arrive at. She also avoided looking at me. Her eyes went to her lap, then to the ceiling, then past me to the walls. Her questions had no unique, real aim; she simply kept me talking, yet listening attentively, and she made me add details that were superfluous to her comprehension. She was nervous. She fiddled with her hands and fingers. Finally, she stood up from her chair and I thought she was going to dismiss me, a polite but unnecessary and uninteresting conversation over. I stood up too.

In one sudden step Aliénor was right in front of me. She hesitated, bit her lip, and then said, ‘I was so sorry, you know, about what happened to Marie de Vitry. When we laid siege to the town, I always assumed she would have been safe inside the castle. She should have been in the citadel. I was so sure we could not take the keep. I never could have thought she would have been in the town church when it was destroyed. It was an accident. I am so sorry.’

She was looking at me now, for the first time. I saw she spoke truly in distress, in remorse and with sincerity. I realised she had only made me come back to tell me what tore at her mind since long. Marie’s death in the fire of the church of Vitry, the death of my love was on her conscience, too. She was the Queen; apologies were hard for her to give. Regrets shown were a sign of weakness. She could have talked to me in Paris, years ago, but she hadn’t, and hid in arrogance. Had the burden become too heavy? Had she come to a Crusade for similar reasons as Louis? The words were out now, uttered with hesitation, but heartfelt and humbly confessed.

I answered, ‘yes. You are right. It was an accident. I have come here to make amends, too. I have forgiven the men that set fire to the church of Vitry, some time ago. I guess that while I was laying half-death in Aleppo and had the time to think, I forgave. I hope Marie forgave me, too.’

Aliénor inclined her head. She said, ‘I am sure she did. We did not seek her death. I gave the name of Marie to my first and only child, so that a birth might remind of a dead and expiate. Yet, I felt the guilt nagging. I want you to know that.’

I sighed. This need not have been said. Why was it mentioned?

Aliénor was then not the Queen of France anymore. She lowered her eyes again. She whispered, ‘I never thanked you for bringing us inside Vitry and giving France a victory. Yet, I promised to thank you. I thank you.’

Before I could react – and I don’t think I wanted to react – Aliénor brought her face up to mine and kissed me on the lips. We held the kiss. It was as wonderful as when I had kissed Marie. I felt the same thrill of love and desire as before. She circled her arms around me and I drew her body near. We kissed with closed eyes. It was as if I were still embracing Marie, but Aliénor’s lips were fuller and stronger, as soft, but more entreating, pressing, moist, warm, and our lips opened and the kiss was passionate, and her body clung to me so that the soft roundness of her breasts, her

hips, her belly, were on me. We did not separate and the kiss lingered with the hunger of feelings forlorn and regained.

We gasped out of breath and Aliénor disengaged. She kept holding me however, looking in my eyes, caressing my cheek and I probed in her dark blue eyes. I was bewildered and so very unsure of my feelings. I thought, was it this all the time, since the beginning? Who have I loved? Have I loved Aliénor since the first time I saw her? Was that why I always answered her to the truth, why I could not refuse to give her what she asked: the advice at Toulouse, the solutions to the capture of Vitry? Was that my true betrayal of Marie?

I sought in Aliénor's eyes and I found no haughtiness, no triumph, no betrayal there, but a great sadness. I held her at a distance. I said, 'we should not have done that!'

'No,' she answered wryly, a grim on her face. 'No, we should not have done that. But we have. I am so glad. I did not plan this, but it suddenly became so clear. Why do you think I called on you at Vitry? I knew you had answers, but I was always so glad to see you. I had to ask you. I have never been certain of anything as much as when I asked you to solve Vitry for us. I am certain of nothing in my life, but I am certain of you and of what you can do. I am at peace with you. I trust you. Not a single person else. Is that love? Love is a word I dare not use, not even with my child. I am not a woman that is allowed to love; love should not be for me. Yet I love. Was it that love that killed Marie? No, no, I would not have liked anything more than to preserve Marie for you. Vitry was an accident! You have to believe me!'

Again, she stepped close and kissed me, again and again, in short and tender caresses of the lips. We embraced.

I said, 'guards can come in, the King, Counsellors. We should not do this.'

'I don't care,' she replied, but withdrew. Aliénor made me sit again. She remained silent. She stood up again, took my hand and said, 'come with me. I promised to thank you. I am going to keep my promise.'

I let Aliénor draw me to an arched door in the room. When the door opened we were in a bedroom. We were in the Queen's bedroom. She closed the door and fastened the bolts. 'I told no one was to disturb us,' she said. She drew me on.

Later, we were both lying on the bed and her head rested on my chest. We had no clothes on.

Aliénor said softly, 'I longed so much for you. I was so jealous of Marie de Vitry even though I never laid eyes on her. I felt so much guilt. I told myself I had asked you to lead our knights into Vitry only because I was envious, but I realise now that was nonsense. So much was dark and confused until we kissed. I did not want to harm Marie. But jealous, I suppose I was. Marie was free, whereas I was a prisoner. She had love and I had only misery, with hatred and conspiring men around me, spying on me every moment. At first, I thought I could love Louis and I suppose the first moments I did. As I learned to know him better, I came to despise him. He is pious, oh so pious, but he is a hypocrite. He is unable to love, unable to be generous, unable of sincere feelings and he is callous. If he had cunning I might have forgiven him, respected him and understood him, for after all he is King and that is a heavy burden and a great duty. But he is simply stupid. He is a pretentious bastard, stubborn in his

ignorance. He knows not what goodness of the heart is. I cannot respect him. Do you understand what it is like, Daniel, to have to live with a man, bear his weight at nights, a man one cannot respect? I hate every moment I am with him. Yet, France needs a successor to the throne.'

Aliénor turned, spread on me and looked me once more, straight in the eyes, as if she might see a truth there, imploring me, 'do you love me, Daniel?'

I replied, 'yes, I think I do. I loved Marie. I am sure of that, but now I believe I also always was in love with you. I also have been asking questions in my mind. Why was I so familiar with you? Why did I always tell you the truth, when I would have better lied or told you half-truths? You were the Queen, but despite the arrogance that was normal for a Queen, I spoke to you as if you were a simple woman only. I was polite and formal, but so candid, as if you were entirely my equal. More so: I was more open to you than to the people that were closest to me. I asked myself, why do you speak thus to the Queen? Why do you not evade her questions, as you should and could have done? I did not feel particularly close to you then, but I seemed to speak to you as if I had been speaking to myself. I felt so much the same person as you. I thought it was ridiculous. I convinced myself of that I was a naïve idiot, as truly Abbot Suger told me once I was. Now I know that people in love are like that. I was like that with Marie. I was like that with you. Incredible! Can one love two women? Still, the image of another man bearing down on you is horrifying to me. This is not as I want love to be. I cannot but want my loved one for me alone.' I laughed.

Aliénor thumped me with her fist in my stomach. 'I only love one,' she said. 'The rest is unimportant. Love should be able to be stronger than the rest. I am glad you love me too. I think you do.'

We remained silent for a while. Aliénor moved on top of me, her head near my neck. I whispered at her ear, 'we have a love that cannot be. You are married. Both of us here is adultery. For adultery with a Queen I could be hanged. A Queen in adultery would be repudiated, maybe decapitated. We have to leave this room. Nobody must find out, especially not that Thierry Galéran.'

'We have still some time,' she answered. 'People are allowed to come in only after noon. Yes, we must be careful. But I am not going to give you up, my darling Daniel!'

We embraced again and it seemed too long a time for me when Aliénor stood from her bed in the glory of her nakedness, exposing her body unashamed to my looks. She dressed. We walked out of the bedroom and sat on the chairs, a table between us. Then we chatted casually, remembered silly courtiers of Paris, and I told her how the hospital of Aleppo had been. We were happy.

Someone knocked on the door. Aliénor opened. The Countess of Flanders moved inside, followed by Eudes de Deuil. Aliénor said she was hungry, so food was ordered. The four of us ate together. Aliénor beamed. She was happy; too happy for the scrutinising Eudes. Then, Thierry Galéran entered, only to find an innocent scene.

I left with Eudes de Deuil. The Queen told me to return in two days, for the next day the Archbishop of Jerusalem, Foucher d'Angoulême was expected to inform the King and Queen of messages written by the King of Jerusalem. Eudes lived in the palace, whereas I had to ride to outside the gates.

‘I have rarely seen the Queen so delighted,’ Eudes remarked. A guard brought my horse and Eudes shuffled with his feet. I did not look at Eudes. I patted Awaj and tested my saddle, my stirrups. Eudes waited for some reply.

‘Oh,’ I casually answered, while mounting, ‘I suppose seeing somebody she knew in Paris may have cheered her up.’

‘Yes,’ Eudes said, ‘it might be that. I did not remember well you were so familiar with the Queen of France.’

I rode off, wandering how much we had given away to Eudes. I would have to be more careful in the presence of other people. I was too dominated by the sweetest emotions to be other than optimistic, however. I had love with me again, at last. My soul was elated.

I was much more sober and less optimistic the next morning. Was I really in love with Aliénor? I would never have dared to touch her or even to expose my feelings to her, so the thought had not even entered my mind before. I had become aware of love only at the moment she kissed me. But were my feelings not the stupid vanity of kissing a Queen? If she had not kissed me I would not have realised how I truly felt about her, but just what did I truly feel for her? The notion of love would never have entered my mind in relation with the Queen of France. Then why did it now? Did I not say I loved her merely because she had said first she loved me? Was I not merely flattered? I despaired even more than at the death of Marie. Yet, while I racked my mind, I had to admit the love was real. I had not been deluding myself. I was honest. The love was honest.

Where would my feelings lead me? Aliénor would stay a few months at best at Antioch, the time to capture Edessa from Nur al-Din. Then she would leave with the King. God had granted me a second love, only to laugh as much and to take her from me soon, as Marie had been taken from me. Why was I given such intense happiness only to be thrown in despair so deeply? The fates had threaded a thin golden line for me, but that line could break so easily. Suffering was my lot.

Bitterness welled up in me, and self-pity, and though those emotions were the last I would surrender my being to - for I had so promised to myself and to Abbot Suger – I could not but walk with heavy legs, listless and in the sadness of heart of the desperate. I had to carry the weight of the distress and the aching. I came close to pitying myself, but then I saw the farmers on the land, their tiredness, the dirt in which they lived, and I knew I was anyway privileged, for I lacked nothing, was in excellent health and I could accept the love that so few people had ever known. At least I could cherish the memories of two extraordinary loves.

I rode back to the palace two days later, to be refused entry. The guards would not let me speak to the Queen. The Queen was busy and had given orders not to let Sir Daniel du Pallet in. Sir Daniel could see the Queen three days later, in the morning.

I rode back to my house, laughing bitterly. The Queen had already finished with her plaything! She was not disposed to provide a renewed expression of sweet feelings, which had most probably been feigned. The Queen had to wait a little until she was

once more in a sentimental mood. I definitely would have to put her out of my mind, regard the whole thing merely as a whim of a female of noble descent given to the songs of troubadours and to poems of courtly love, as her frivolous father had taught her. I rode off, and decided to talk to Gormond then and there, and prepare for our travel to Jerusalem seriously.

I passed my time in doubt and apprehension. Yet, three days later, I rode faster than I should have, back to Antioch. There was a lot of commotion in the courtyard of the palace. About fifteen horses stood ready to leave, with ten Royal Guards in haubergeon mail, lances and shields, ready for a Royal journey. Servants in livery held a few palfreys at the reins. I passed by the guards, drawing suspicious looks, for although they could see I was a Frank, I was dressed in Saracen robes, as I had come to prefer. My curved sword drew scornful eyes. I was led to the same room of the Queen and yes, Aliénor was there.

She was resplendent. She wore a short, red, but heavily brocaded shirt with short sleeves, lined with golden patterns. The yellow lily of France was stitched on her breast. She wore a fine chain mail over her shirt and silken breeches, not a robe. As soon as I laid eyes on her, all the dark feelings fled like a drop of water on a hot plate. She stood laughing with two of her ladies, radiating beauty and health. She was so very young still, but fully a woman now. I missed a step while entering and waited, daring to take in her profile, her curves, and I could not but imagine immediately my fingertips gliding slowly over her face and over the rest of her body, as I had done the single time we had spent in her bedroom.

Aliénor saw me coming. Her smile widened, her eyes beamed to mine, and I knew then her mood had not changed.

‘Ah, there he is!’ Aliénor exclaimed. ‘Sir Daniel! We have been waiting for you. You have met the Countess of Flanders, of course, and the Countess of Blois.’

The three women in the room were dressed as female Crusaders. The two Countesses wore equally light chain mail shirts under surcoats adorned with red crosses. Long, bejewelled daggers hung at a belt.

‘We want to ride to Port Saint-Siméon along the Orontes River,’ the Queen continued light-heartedly, ‘and see the landscape around Antioch. My uncle Raymond claimed you were a good guide. I want to visit the Church of Saint Peter, too. Please take us there first!’

I replied, ‘of course, my Lady Queen. I am at your service.’

The ladies giggled and walked into the courtyard. They used the stirrups to mount their horses like men, and in no time the courtyard filled with neighing horses trampling nervously around, prancing and biting and kicking at each other, eager to gallop out of the gates of the palace. I noted among the guards also Eudes de Deuil, who had changed his monk’s robes for a courtier’s coat and breeches for riding. The Queen and her ladies took a small shield from their servants and then Aliénor gave the sign to depart. She rode at a sudden gallop, which no guard would have approved of, for on the cobbled stones under the gate a horse might easily have slithered and fallen aside. Yet, Aliénor passed the gate gloriously, she in front and followed by the Countesses of Flanders and Blois, her friends, who wore a thin lance with white banners. Twelve Royal Guards followed. The pupa of the wonderful, majestic butterfly had transformed from a vulnerable young woman to a galloping Amazon.

What should I do with this Penthesilea? Eudes and me were so astonished, and also so amused, that we were among the last to pass the gates.

We rode more slowly in the larger main street that led from the palace to the city gates of Antioch. Once outside the town, Eudes and I passed the escorting guards and joined the three ladies. I pointed to the Queen we had to take another road to the Church of Saint Peter, back inside the walls of the city, though more to the west than to the east, so we changed directions.

The Church of Saint Peter of Antioch was a cave, actually. The Apostles Peter and Paul had preached at Antioch right after Christ's death and resurrection. Peter had sought a place that was covered from the rains, a safe place some distance from Antioch. He preached in the large cave. Later, the Christians had built a splendid façade against the opening of the cave, so that the place had become like a church building. One saw the grandiose façade with the stone arches and windows, and did not immediately realise that the church was no more than a front. When Antioch had been captured by the Crusaders, fifty years ago, the Latin prelates had taken the church from the Jacobites and restored Roman rites.

We arrived a little later already at the church, for it was now inside the walls of Antioch, but at an open space. The church looked imposing enough, with its high front leaning against a massive rock wall, but I knew the place inside was not so vast. I had been to the church before.

We all thought the Queen wanted only to visit the site, but she dismounted and so did her ladies and the guards.

'I want to see the inner church,' Aliénor shouted. 'I want to go in alone, to pray. Eudes and Sir Daniel, please accompany me.'

The three of us passed under the massive arches of the doors of the church, pushed the old wooden panels open a little, and then we went into the cool cave. The church was empty of people but filled along the walls with statues and images. Aliénor walked to the end, near the altar, and she knelt there. She made Eudes and I kneel at her side. Aliénor folded her hands and prayed in silence. Suddenly, she started to speak and Eudes and I were appalled by the violence of her words.

Aliénor ordered, 'Daniel, give me your hand.'

I held out my arm and hand near her. She put her fingers on my flat hand, and continued, 'I, Aliénor, Duchess of Aquitaine, hereby state to Saints Peter and Paul and to the Heavens that I love Sir Daniel du Pallet, son of Pierre Abélard. I love him as a woman loves a man only once in her life. I ask for forgiveness for having consumed that love, but I consider the love a gift from the one God. I will cherish the love granted. I thank God for having allowed me to love, even though only for a short time. I ask God to help and accompany my love, Daniel, in all that he may do in this Holy Country. I ask nothing for myself, for I am doomed as an adulteress and no doubt many more crimes will be laid on me after my life. Yet, I cannot change my feelings, for they are strengthened every day. God knows I am not a bad woman and I try to do well, but I am continuously being forced into decisions that may seem harmful to many. I ask God to guide my decisions.' Aliénor paused, and then confessed, 'if I have been the cause of the death of Marie de Vitry, then I ask for

redemption of that sin, here, in Saint Peter's Church, for I meant no harm. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.'

Eudes de Deuil looked at me sideways, over Aliénor, with wild and wide open eyes, open mouth, almost fainting, and I suppose I looked as bewildered as he at this terrible confession.

The Queen stood, turned and walked off, but Eudes and I were as statues of stone struck in solid salt like Lot's wife.

Aliénor sensed we had not moved. She turned and said, 'you, Father Eudes, will keep this to yourself. Consider my words a confession. You may of course inform Abbot Suger, but Suger already knows. Come on, now!'

The order forced us to action. We stood, followed the Queen and left with her. The light of the sun blinded us. We missed a step, each of us, but slowly walked out of the church, Aliénor leading and Eudes and I following. We mounted our horses in silence. Our escort knew something important had happened inside the church. The ladies and the men remained silent too. We rode on.

It took all the way to Port Saint-Siméon for Eudes to regain some posture. The Queen uttered no word anymore, refusing even to answer her ladies. She looked straight before her, into the far, and rode stiffly on. Eudes and I did not exchange a word either until we reached the gates of the town. We rode behind the guards then, and Eudes spoke Greek.

'How can I keep this secret to myself?' he spat suddenly. 'What have you done, you miserable souls? Do you realise I am Abbot Suger's chronicler and the Royal chronicler? I was expressly sent by the Abbot of Saint Denis and Regent of France to write down every detail of what happened to the King on the Holy Crusade. Do you realise what you risk, your lives, your souls, as well as the perdition of the Kingdom of France? You put in jeopardy the holy pilgrimage of the Barons of France!'

I tried to stay calm but I was barely in a better state than Eudes. I still felt drunken from the terrible but oh so fine words Aliénor had uttered in the church, taking as witness Christ's Apostles.

I replied, 'Eudes, my friend, Father, you hear what the Queen said. She confessed and she confessed already to Abbot Suger. He knows. I suggest you either do not write at all about what you heard and saw, or keep what you heard private in separate texts for Suger alone. That is your duty as a priest. Please tell Suger I did not provoke any of this. I did neither seek nor wanted this to happen. But it happened, and if accepting a gift of God is a sin, then I too confess of the sin. The fates of Aliénor and me will surely separate soon. There will be no major incident for France started by me or Aliénor, that can endanger any initiative in the Crusade. So leave it. Let it be!'

Eudes answered, 'not only will I not write about this, I am pretty sure I will henceforth be unable to write anything whatsoever! I am shocked. So shocked! I can only pray for your wretched souls.'

Eudes was overly excited. I hoped his nerves would hold out, but his body trembled while he talked. I told him to calm down and we arrived in the harbour while I soothed him.

We rode to the keep of Saint-Siméon near the harbour. The Queen announced herself to the sentries there and ordered food for her company. The Queen, the Amazons, Eudes and me, walked to the harbour. Aliénor tolerated only four guards, and she ordered them at a distance. We looked casually at the transport ships, at the unloading and loading of goods, at the work of the sailors and the labourers. We walked a little away from the harbour. There was a short moment of chance when Aliénor and I were close and walked a little aside from the others. We touched hands.

Aliénor said, 'I imagined you these last days waiting for me and cursing me. The King and Foucher d'Angoulême did not give me one moment to myself. Nevertheless, Daniel, and despite what will ever happen, I love you. Do not doubt me, ever!' I replied, 'I confess I have doubted. I was a little jealous bastard. I am a bad egocentric man, I suppose. Yet, I did not stop loving you. I do not know what will happen to us, but I love you. My love Aliénor. I do not dare to look at you, for all of Port Saint-Siméon will instantly see my love.'

Aliénor laughed then, squeezed my hand but let it go rapidly, for Eudes watched us. She started to run suddenly, like a happy child, a young girl given a toy or a candy. We ran a few steps with her sudden elation. She stopped briskly. The Queen took over. She called her guards closer. We walked back to the ships and to the keep.

In the weeks that followed we lived a dream. I saw Aliénor every other day, sometimes less. We spent an entire night together, a sheer impossible feat in a palace where she was the centre of attention. Everybody knew I was in the palace that night, but all thought I was with the guards and with Gormond.

I sneaked out of the palace on foot the next morning. If we had held these encounters up, we would have raised suspicions, of course. Eudes de Deuil still disapproved. He avoided me but I sought him out and talked and talked and I explained how my life had been, my feelings. Time passed and I believe Eudes came to forgive us, as I hoped the Heavens would.

We started to wonder when the Crusader army would move against Aleppo. The army was still camped outside Antioch and waited. How long would the waiting last?

It was not the Queen who ordered me suddenly to the palace, but King Louis. I was filled with apprehensions, fearing to be imprisoned and killed. Yet, the King could have me murdered by his guards instantly, any time; so why would he summon me? I told Gormond the evening before that if anything happened to me he could have all my possessions. I showed him where my gold and silver was hidden. I asked him to bring Awaj back to Aleppo, one way or another. In the morning I started early, on foot, to Antioch. I was armed like a Crusader warrior, with long dagger and sword, chain mail and surcoat, but I wore no shield.

I had to wait for the King. I had to wait in the courtyard in the burning sun that bleached the large stones of the walls. I waited until past noon. By that time I had the impression the transpiration was streaming in my neck in little torrents. I felt awkward and humiliated. It seemed to me I caught a glimpse of Aliénor looking down from a window opening high up in the palace, but I might have been mistaken.

Finally, a guard took me to the large reception hall of the Prince of Antioch. I wiped the sweat from my eyes and face. The King stood in the middle of the hall, defying in his stance, feet firmly placed, one hand in a closed fist at his side. I discerned only the King at first, but he was not alone. There were no guards in the hall, but Raymond of Poitiers was present, as was the Archbishop and Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, the very old Foucher d'Angoulême. Thierry Galéran was present, Jocelin de Courtenay Lord of Edessa, the Patriarch of Antioch Archbishop Aymeri de Limoges, Renaud Masoier the Connétable of Antioch, and also Thierry d'Alsace Count of Flanders. Aliénor sat near the hearth. I remained standing at the door.

Raymond de Poitiers stepped up to me and said, 'come in, Sir Daniel. You know the King and the Counts here, don't you? You met the Queen.'

I saluted formally but remained at a few steps from the group of men, my hand on my sword. Raymond was angry and curt.

He explained, 'we are having an argument here, in fact an argument that has lasted a few days now. The Crusader army must move. We are all agreed on that. I always thought the Crusade was called at Vézelay to revenge the capture of Edessa and the massacre of the Christians there. So I also always assumed we would join forces and lay siege to Aleppo, surprise Nur al-Din and take back what we lost. However, it seems Jerusalem summons the King of France!'

Raymond jerked out these words with obvious disgust so that they sounded as a direct insult to King Louis, who equally reddened in anger.

Raymond continued, 'Jerusalem wants to attack Damascus! Damascus of all places, the only serious ally of the Franks against Nur al-Din! It is preposterous! That is where the whim of the Barons of Jerusalem, avid of treasures, and the Regent, the Queen Mother Mélisende, want to take the Crusader army! The Patriarch of Jerusalem, Foucher d'Angoulême, keeps wanting to deviate the King of France from his holy objective which is the recapture of Edessa and the destruction of Nur al-Din's power at Aleppo. I have explained and repeated to the noble men here what the situation is truly like in the Holy Land, how the forces are distributed and posted against each other in balance, but they do not seem to want to believe me or understand me. I told them you had met an Arabian Prince and Ambassador of Damascus, a man also tolerated at Aleppo, who has explained to you to what the Saracen armies amount to. The men here have not believed me. I have given up explaining to the King and to the Patriarch the disasters that await us if they attack Damascus. Now, will you please explain, slowly and in clear terms, once more, all you know and what Usama ibn Munqidh has confided in you?'

I was not a little relieved. Raymond de Poitiers took my sudden smile as delight to speak to the King. I beamed. I was not to be accused of being the lover of the Queen. Nobody knew. I had been called only to repeat for the so-manieth time what I knew about the Turkish ambitions.

I walked closer to the King, and sketched a vivid picture of the situation. It took a while for King Louis to recognise me as one of his one-time Royal Guards. He had forgotten my name and face already, but as I saw recognition clear up in him, his face hardened. He listened, though, for a long time. He was patient; I have to grant him that. I spoke slowly indeed, so that the King could easily follow the reasoning. He moved to the table and ordered me with his hand to follow him. He sat in front of

Aliénor. All the men stood in a circle around the royal couple. Aliénor never looked at me and I avoided her eyes, too.

When I was finished, the King paused in silence for some time. He weighed what I had told, though Raymond must have said the same things to him. He looked around to each of the men, then said, 'I understand well all you said, Sir Daniel. What you have told is much as Raymond de Poitiers told me. I understand the issues that are at stake. Nevertheless, I repeat what these knights already know, once more, once more. I proposed at Saint Denis, to our good Abbot Suger, to Bernard de Clairvaux and to the Pope, to go on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. I said I would visit Jerusalem and do penitence for my sins at the Holy Tomb. I will ask forgiveness for my sins there. I must help Jerusalem, the place where Christ died and resurrected. Jerusalem tells me my help is needed to destroy the enemies of Christ at that holy place. I am not in the Holy Land to serve the Frankish Barons, to win land for their territories, to add to their treasures. I am on a pilgrimage!'

The King paused, but continued rapidly, 'Moreover, the Crusader army has been reduced to one-third. Our knights are not acquainted with this country. I have been through many hardships already. From what I have experienced in this land, it is strange and tough and dangerous! I cannot lose more men. We will travel to Jerusalem, if possible by ship, and the main body of the army will follow the coast on horse and foot in Frankish territory.'

Louis the Younger is scared, I realised. He fears confronting Nur al-Din's experienced warriors. The Turks of Qoniya have taught him a lesson. He does not want that lesson to be repeated. He thinks the Turks of Damascus may be easier to handle.

Raymond cried, 'ho, ho! Help Jerusalem, is it? Attack Damascus, get stuck a few weeks before its defences, pay an armed visit to Mu'in al-Din Unur, the most rused warrior of Syria, who will never attack and always harass, and who is an old friend of Jerusalem! Unur will eat you raw and digest your army! Suppose however you win Damascus against all odds. You know what will happen then? Unur may rot in one of Mélisende's jails, the Sultan of Damascus will be finished with him, and Nur al-Din will be at your heels with the combined armies of Aleppo, Mosul and Damascus. Then you will know how defeat and disaster tastes! I say: attack Nur al-Din and weaken him so that he has trouble with his masters, the Seljuk Sultans, and with his brother. Take his towns near the Orontes River!'

'No, no! No!' Foucher shouted to Raymond. 'The Frankish countries can only be secured by a strong heartland. Jerusalem is the heart of the Holy Land, the pearl and the diamond of God. Jerusalem is to be protected. We are sure Damascus can be captured and held. The towns around Damascus are strongholds, close to the Jordan lands, which will surrender rapidly and pay homage to us. We can garrison them with few men. The northern strongholds like Hama and Homs will then not hold out for long. Aleppo will thus be isolated and weakened. Nur al-Din's brother will not support him, in fear of his brother becoming too powerful and greedy for Mosul. The Barons of Jerusalem agreed to have as the first objective of the Crusade the securing of Jerusalem, which means aiming for Damascus. We have a very powerful army at Jerusalem now. Emperor Conrad will join us. He is under way by ship from Constantinople with a Byzantine fleet. Joined with the French Crusader army we cannot lose!'

The arguments continued to fly to and fro between Raymond de Poitiers and Foucher d'Angoulême. They only confused King Louis and increased his indecisiveness. Eudes de Deuil counselled for Edessa and so did Jocelin de Courtenay, who wanted his cities back around Edessa; Thierry d'Alsace was in favour of an attack on Damascus. Thierry Galéran supported the Archbishop.

Suddenly, the Queen yelled with a strident voice that snapped through the men like a whip, 'stop it, all of you! Get out! Leave us! I want to talk to the King. Uncle and Sir Daniel, please stay. The rest of you, leave! Leave!'

She shouted so loudly and so high, standing at her chair, that all arguments stopped. Aliénor's anger and presence was so overwhelming, though she was the youngest in the hall and the only woman, that the men silenced. The knights obeyed. Jocelin was the first to leave, obviously insulted. It was clear who the real power behind the throne of France was.

Raymond and King Louis remained in the hall, seated at the table. I walked to a window from where I could see the two men and Aliénor without being observed by Raymond and the King. I stood at their back, remained at a courteous distance and made my presence discreetly be forgotten. Why did Aliénor want me here and now? What was I doing here among these figures of power?

Aliénor kept standing, but she ordered the King and her uncle to sit down, and they complied.

Aliénor paused, then she said, 'I hate to intervene in the kind of sterile dispute you had. Louis, I grant that you only wanted to travel to the Holy Land, visit Jerusalem, whisper your secret shortcomings to God at the tomb of Christ, ask for your multiple puny sins to be redeemed, spend as little money as you decently can, then return in a hurry to France. You have not expected one moment that Bernard de Clairvaux and the Pope would force you into a Crusade and make you march at the head of a hundred thousand men. That Crusade however, was aimed at Edessa, indeed, to revenge the massacre of the Christians by the Saracens. And so we arrived in a hornet's nest here, in a land of a delicate balance of powers where every warlord pricks his neighbour with pins of skirmishes and waits for the first mistake. Nobody can win alone here, unless mistakes are made and the first mistake gets punished severely, such as Jocelin of Rohais experienced. You are a coward however. Instead of graciously having confirmed yourself as the King and leader of the Crusade, you stick to your little scheme and you refuse to acknowledge the task invested in you by the Pope. My uncle Raymond is right. The French should destroy the strongest, the most ambitious, the most dangerous, the one that even the Saracens want out of the way, for such a man - together with his vassals - will always find a way to gather a large army, as long as he lives. This land, as the other lands of the world, is so full of jackals and vultures and they will flock to such a man, eager for victories and trophies and killing and bloodsucking. That man is Nur al-Din, the worthy son of his father, Zengi, who took Rohais. Damascus is rich and prosperous. Mélisende, Foucher and the Barons of Jerusalem, the Bishops and the Templar Knights, would with joy lay their hands on the gold and silver of Damascus. They will capture the town, pillage it, massacre its people with the Christians included of course, destroy the orchards of the town and then return in glory to Jerusalem. I don't believe the Barons will be able to keep Damascus and the smaller towns. They are simply not enough, and your own Barons will sail back to France. So Jerusalem will create a void in the region of Damascus and into this void will step Nur al-Din, and a little later Nur al-Din will

come for Antioch, as his father came for Edessa. Antioch will not be defended by Jerusalem, for in defending Antioch there are no treasures to be gained for Mélisende, and Baudouin is too young to curb the Council of his Barons. And after Antioch, Tripoli will fall. But you, Louis, you coward, you only want to get out unharmed as quickly as you can, preferably recuperating the money you ask every week of Abbot Suger, and return laden with the gold of Damascus to France, and oh yes, also with the fine memory of a few humbly spoken words with folded hands at the tomb of Christ, so that you can sleep better from oaths sworn but never held and the burning of a church filled with innocent people. Will you find redemption like that, Louis? I tell you, Louis, you can sail or march to Jerusalem, but I will stay at Antioch! I will not leave Antioch!’

King Louis might have been besotted with his wife, he had yet enough stomach to shout back at his wife, ‘you will not stay at Antioch! You will come with me to Jerusalem as an obedient wife! You have nothing to do at Antioch. Do you think I don’t know why you want to stay here? You want to rut with your charming, handsome uncle! You want to wallow with your lover, don’t you? Well, I despise your uncle, my dear, and I will not help your incestuous lover regain his power and the many cities he lost by his inadequacies ever since he became the Prince of Antioch. We march to Jerusalem!’

Raymond de Poitiers was so astonished he seemed frozen in horror to his chair. His eyes rolled from the absurdity of the King’s accusation. I expected him to burst at the King and demand retribution every moment. Aliénor however, brought a hand gently on Raymond’s shoulder, holding him in his chair. She closed in on Louis, who still sat, and she towered above him.

She hissed, ‘I despise you, Louis. I will divorce you. If you will not ask for a divorce yourself I will make you divorce me! I will make our marriage hell for you! Our marriage was wrong. We are parents, cousins in the fourth and fifth degrees. You are descended from Robert the Pious, the son of Adelaïde d’Aquitaine. Adelaïde was the daughter of Guillaume III of Aquitaine, from whom descended the Dukes of Aquitaine and I, Aliénor. The laws of the Church allow only parentage in the seventh degree. Our marriage is unlawful. Bartholomew, Bishop of Laon, proved our parentage beyond a doubt. We are forbidden to stay together as wife and husband lest our souls be damned! Pray for that in Jerusalem! You have to divorce me! Now go, and pray for that in Jerusalem! I will stay in Antioch.’

King Louis the Younger blemished and shrank in his chair. He was angry though, too angry to listen. He cried, ‘you will make an end to the incestuous relation you have with Raymond. You are the Queen of France and the Queen is ordered to stay at the side of the King. I will march with my army to Jerusalem and you will ride with us.’ The King threw his chair aside. The noise of the falling chair seemed to awaken Raymond from his stupor and he stood up, too. Louis took large strides towards the doors and left the hall, seething with anger, his face distorted with hatred.

Raymond and I quivered in shock at the outburst of so much verbal violence in so short a time. Aliénor remained standing like a statue of stone until Louis was gone. Then she bit her lips and was near to tears. I stepped forward, but she stretched out an arm to stop me. She still wanted Raymond not to know.

Raymond de Poitiers saw the gesture however, shook his head and spoke first, ‘you don’t have to hide for me. Do you think I am not aware of every little thing that happens in my own palace?’ He laughed at the absurdity of it all. ‘For heavens’ sake, how could that man ever suppose I would sleep with my niece and Queen of France? Preposterous! Oh, you are beautiful as none, my dear, but I am not such a bastard yet, and I did truly love my brother. I can very well understand why you sought a love, Aliénor. I wonder what kind of human could appreciate this Louis the Bigot indeed! Oh I liked it when you called him a coward! He is! Don’t fear! Your secret is safe with me and I have to say I am not a little flattered, too!’

Raymond said wryly, ‘Me, Raymond, aging and useless warrior, lover of the young Queen! All the ladies of Antioch will reconsider and try to be my lover now! I say thank you to you two!’

This time it was our turn to be surprised. Raymond waited, sat down again, looking at us with amusement. He said, ‘well, so that is it then. Louis will march with his army to Jerusalem. I will be left alone to fight Nur al-Din. Only the Lord knows where I am going to get the knights to confront the Atabeg. I have not nearly enough knights! I should start repairing the walls of Antioch, build more towers on the ramparts, make the Roman walls higher, have more mangonels, get in supplies. Where am I going to find the gold to do all that?’

Raymond checked his thoughts, looked at us and continued, ‘and what will happen to you? It is true that I like you two. It seems odd, but a niece means something to me. Do you realise you are at a dead point? You, Aliénor, as much as I like you because you are the daughter of my beloved brother, you cannot possibly consider divorcing from the King. Everybody knew you were in parentage to Louis when you got married. Suger and Bernard and every Bishop in France knew it. The Pope knew it! Your consanguinity was not a problem then, so it cannot be much of an issue now! You would not be the first Queen and certainly not the last to despise her husband. Do you realise what a scandal a divorce would be? A Queen does not divorce a King for something as elusive as love! By the way, the scandal must be out already. Did you really think, Aliénor that that sly bastard of a Galéran would not have heard what you shouted so loudly? And what would you do when you were divorced? You will be the prey of every Baron of France eager to steal the wealth of Aquitaine from you. Your knight here has no warriors to guard you. You may well be caught by force somewhere in a wood, imprisoned, forced to remarry under the violence not of words but of a dagger at your eye! Think, child, reconsider your foolish ideas! You too, Daniel, talk to her. I do not approve of adultery, but if you must love, then remain secret lovers may be the less bad solution. But we must leave. No, don’t say a word, Sir Daniel, just leave! I will leave too after a while, and then the Queen can go out.’ I hesitated, but Aliénor nodded to me. So I left.

I did not see Aliénor again at Antioch. A few days later, or rather a few nights later, King Louis the Younger sneaked out of Antioch. He fled with only a few guards, with Thierry Galéran and with the Queen – probably bound and forced to mount a horse – in the middle of the night. Louis’ army broke camp very early the next day and marched south. It had all been well prepared, though in a hurry. The tents were being folded and the knights were readying for the march the same day.

I rode to the palace at Antioch, but only Raymond de Poitiers received me. The King had fled like a thief in the night, in silence, in secrecy, without even announcing his departure, without official goodbye. Raymond seethed from that insult done to him. Yet, he was already thinking of defending his county against the Saracens and that worry was hard enough for his mind.

Raymond said to me, 'Louis insulted me. He will attack Damascus with Jerusalem. Since he left me like this, I will thwart his intentions. I do not know yet how, but I will. I will have to be subtle! I must think!'

Raymond laughed, 'you know, Sir Daniel, I should send you to your friend Usama and warn Unur and ask him how I can help. I should be the ally now of Damascus! That would do the least harm to Outremer! Imagine my men and Unur's men fighting Jerusalem and France. Unthinkable, but I should do just that!'

I met Eudes de Deuil too. He ran around like a chicken without a head. Eudes had been wakened by the noise that night, for he slept in the quarters of the King and Queen. He had seen Aliénor being literally dragged out of her room by Louis and Galéran, a guard's hand on her mouth, a cloak thrown over her nightgown. There had been horses outside the gates of the palace, not in the courtyard. The hoofs of the horses had been wadded with cloths to dampen the noise. The King and his guards had forced Aliénor on a horse and pushed Eudes down on the stones as if he were an insect. Then the King rode off to the gates of Antioch, to the Crusader camp. Eudes had been ignored. He had stayed behind.

Eudes did not know what to do: return to France or follow the army to Jerusalem. 'I do not dare to write one character on parchment,' he said. 'The things I can write suddenly seem of no importance anymore and what I should write I cannot, for so many spies might lay their hands on my notes. I dare not even write a letter to Abbot Suger. I am useless here!'

I could not help him. I said I would ride to Jerusalem immediately.

'I surmised you would,' Eudes replied. 'You want to see the Queen, don't you? Well, I must advice strongly against that, but I suppose that also is a useless advice, for you will not abide by it. I will go to Jerusalem too. If I cannot find a ship for Jaffa, can I travel with you?' I agreed with Eudes to travel together.

I took my leave of Raymond de Poitiers and talked to Gormond. Two days later Gormond, Eudes de Deuil and I rode on our horses south, to Jerusalem.

Chapter Two. Jerusalem 1148-1152

Eudes de Deuil, Gormond and I rode after the French army. We never tried to catch up with the marching columns. We sometimes rode behind the army, sometimes along the line of troops. I did not see the King, nor the Queen on the roads to Jerusalem. We moved fast along the coast, from Port Saint-Siméon to Laodicée, Jabala and Marqab. From Tortose we aimed for Tripoli; then we entered the Kingdom of Jerusalem and passed Beirut, on to Sidon and Tyre. We rode south to Acre and Jaffa and from there travelled due east along the tracks of the pilgrims for the Holy City.

We arrived at Jerusalem in the middle of April of the year 1148.

Had somebody asked me, until the day we actually arrived at the city, what Jerusalem could look like, I would have readily answered. I would have described a new heaven and a new earth. Jerusalem would glitter like a jewel made of crystal-clear diamonds. It would have sky-high walls and twelve gates. It would be a perfect square. Its walls would be studded with diamonds, the foundations of its walls covered with multi-coloured precious stones such as lapis lazuli, turquoise, crystal, agate, ruby, gold quartz, malachite, topaz, emerald, sapphire and amethyst, and the houses would be of pure gold. The gates would be filled with pearls and the city would bask in a bright light constantly. I had read that description over and over again in the Revelation of Saint John. I guess that was how many a pilgrim would have expected Jerusalem to be, too, but that Jerusalem was the heavenly city of dreams.

The real Jerusalem was not like that. It looked much like the other cities of the Holy Land, much like Antioch, or Hama, or Tripoli, or even Tyre, except that Jerusalem was inland. If there was anything that differed Jerusalem from the other cities, then it was that it was built on a hill, which made it look imposing. It was somewhat irregularly elongated from the west to the east, so it was definitely not in a square form. It might have been diamond-shaped in that direction, but then a roughly-cut diamond. The land around was arid, rocky, covered with small and big stones, a few small woods, here and there some tall grass. The colour of the area was grey to yellow-ochre, white on some of the rocks, and there were areas of pale green. The land offered very much a hilly view, an atmosphere of desolation, of a rocky mountain with spare, multi-hued patches of pastures and orchards. The sun shone with extraordinary brilliance here. Water was scarce. I discerned no rivers, but large and deep torrent-beds had been carved in the earth to the south, which probably led the waters of heavy rain-falls in winter and spring. I supposed the people of Jerusalem gathered the rains in cisterns and brought water from the mountains in aqueducts, hidden from my view, to the east. Yet, I saw small groves of olive trees and I discovered fig trees, sycamore trees, and bushes of many kinds. Later, I was shown the vineyards and the gardens.

We arrived from the west and saw the walls that surrounded the city from far. The walls built on the hill looked grand. Parts of them were very old, but new defences too had been erected. The walls were not made of diamonds, but of local common stones, some very large, but well-fitted. At the west side stood the citadel of Jerusalem, a

large stronghold built around the ancient Tower of David, at the place where the fight between David and Goliath had happened. The citadel was one of the highest places of the city. There were several towers on the citadel and though the fortress was not as large as some of the formidable Crusader castles I had passed on the road, it was sufficiently strong, thick-walled and provided with a mighty keep. I remarked other towers around the citadel, towers to the north and to the south ends of the walls. On the entire south part the hill was very steep, for there the torrent had cut a deep valley, almost to a rift in the earth. Jerusalem would be difficult to be laid siege to, indeed, but the Crusaders had captured it fifty years ago, so it was not invulnerable to a large, determined army. At that time Jerusalem had been a Holy City of Islam but not a capital as important as Damascus or Aleppo, whereas now a Frankish King lived here, with a large garrison of knights.

When we rode slowly down, from the Jaffa road, I made out a large, rectangular, flat space at the farthest end of Jerusalem. I suspected this to have been the site of the ancient Temple of Solomon, the temple of the Jews destroyed by the Romans. Between that space and the citadel rose several gleaming domes, probably church domes. These gave the town the truly oriental touch to me, for I was more used to high square towers with flat roofs or with an occasional pointed spire. Otherwise, it was hard to make out details of the buildings and streets. The gates were massive enough, especially the gate near the citadel.

We decided not to enter the town immediately. The Crusader camp had strewn its tents to the north-west. We sought lodgings in a small farm along the road. We found hardly more than a barn to sleep in, but the thatched roof was tight, and we had enough space for the three of us. We lived there for several days, unable to decide what to do next. Eventually, Eudes de Deuil rode to the Crusader camp. He returned only days later. He would leave us and join once more the Court of King Louis. Gormond also was nervous. He was a fighting man, eager to serve in a group of warriors and share the lives of such men. He spoke of seeking employment with one of the knights, not because I had not enough money to provide for both of us, but because I could not offer at that moment what he really sought: the companionship of fellow-warriors.

Eudes de Deuil and Gormond left the farm. After some time I decided to walk into the city on my own, glad to discover it alone. I wanted to see Aliénor, of course, so I had to seek the palace of the King of Jerusalem. I was exploring, since I knew nothing of the town. I asked everywhere how the streets and the buildings were called, as if I were a pilgrim that had just arrived at the Holy City.

I walked through the Gates of David, assessing and admiring the strength of the citadel built around David's Tower. The structure looked formidable enough with its high walls, towers, bastions and keeps. This would be the castle where the Châtelain of Jerusalem lived and which would have housed a strong garrison of knights and warriors of the army of Jerusalem. Somehow, I did not see myself living in such a castle. I had the taste now of the wide open plains and of the hilly landscapes of Syria. I wanted to move around, not be imprisoned between castle walls.

I walked due east, through a very busy, rather large street, which was appropriately named the Street of David. Jerusalem was a busy town, which was rather a surprise

for from the outside it had seemed almost abandoned. Most of the pilgrims arriving from Jaffa entered the city by David's Gate, and wandered to the centre along this Street of David, so there was a large crowd here. Merchants and artisans sold everything imaginable at stalls along the houses: cloth, linen and wool, jewels, candles, fruit, vegetables, olives and figs, spices, silver crosses, pots and pans, swords and shields, lances, mail, incense, and so on. I strolled along. I arrived at a place where the street ended, at a crossroads, from where alleys diverged north and south. I chose the street a little to the right in front of me, still walking eastwards. This was the Street of the Temple, as a water-seller told me. That road would take me to the palace of the King, he said. So I engaged that street.

I had only frayed myself through the crowd of pilgrims, when I was violently drawn aside by an unexpected pull. I jumped the other way, ready to kick with my left fist and to slice with the dagger that was instantly in my right hand, but I recognised the face of the man that had so suddenly grabbed me.

I exclaimed in utter disbelief, 'Jacob! Jacob? Is that you? This cannot be true! How in heaven are you here?'

I saw my old, former teacher, Jacob, now an old man, but ever strong and wily, holding me with his two hands at my shoulders, grinning and weeping at the same time. He was still Jacob. He had many more wrinkles on his face; his nose had fattened and bulked; his eyes were set a lot deeper; he had less and whiter hair; he was stockier than when we last met in Paris. He had shrunk in height, and he had a pot belly, but he was Jacob all right. He was the man who had taught me Hebrew and Arabic, the man who knew the three religions as well as Greek philosophy, poetry and music. We embraced. He was the last man I expected to see in Jerusalem. He drew me to a stall, apparently his, and then into the opening of the door of a house behind. He paused there; we did not enter.

'When you disappeared so suddenly for Outremer,' Jacob said, 'I continued to travel in France and to trade. But I got thinking, and that is always a bad thing to do. It leads one to foolishness. I said to myself, Jacob, what are you doing here, in France? Are you not a Jew? Should you not live in the land of David and Solomon and see for yourself where the prophets lived? The young fool you called your son has had the guts to show you the way. If he can go to Outremer, so can you. You will die soon, so don't wait and go to Jerusalem. Maybe you will find Daniel there! At least, you will be a Jew come home. So I took a horse, sold all I had in Provins and in Paris and a dozen other places, and set off for Toulouse to fetch my family. Then I travelled to Marseille. I changed ships four times, almost got captured by pirates near Alexandria in Egypt, but I arrived at Jaffa safe and well. So I came to Jerusalem. I have been here for many months. I bought a house near David's gate and I have this little space here on Temple Street to sell my goods, for I continue to trade, to buy and sell. The Jews have been expelled from Jerusalem, Daniel! I did not know that, actually, but a few Jews had anyway been allowed to return to the city and live here. I knew a dyer at Jerusalem, a man I had traded with. I had a name and I got some help. I paid well. There is a fortune to be made here if you are a Jew and know your ways, for the Jews go between the Franks and the Saracens and there are Jewish tribes everywhere, in every town and in all lands of Syria. Are you looking to trade with a place? You simply ask around which reliable Jew lives there, and you have a business!'

Jacob patted me and continued. ‘All these months, every day, I asked myself, Jacob, where is Daniel? I asked about in the city, among the Frankish knights and the footmen, but none had heard of you. Then, a knight told me a young man called du Pallet had brought the Frankish army back from a campaign in the east, but you had disappeared mysteriously. Every day I asked for you. I always looked out from my stall, hoping you would one day pass in this street. And miracle! Who bumps into me in Temple Street, pretending not to notice me? My Daniel!’

I forgot how many times we embraced, for I was terribly happy to have found one more old friend. Jacob handed over his stall to a servant. We entered an inn, drank and ate, and told all that had happened to us. I said nothing of Aliénor, but I mentioned I was looking for the King’s palace.

‘I will take you,’ Jacob decided. ‘It is not far. But you are walking entirely in the wrong direction; the King’s palace is not anymore near the former al-Aqsa mosque, on Temple Mount! It has been there, many years ago, so I heard. The palace is inside the David Citadel now. Nevertheless, if you have some time, let’s walk on to Temple Mount. The view there is fine, and we can talk some. Later, I’ll take you to the palace.’

We walked. Jacob told me a few things about the Temple precinct. Temple Mount, or Mount Moriah, or the Har haBáyit as the Jews call it, the Haram of the Saracens, was the site of the ancient Jewish Temple of Jerusalem, the site of Solomon’s Temple and of the new temple built after the exile of the Jews, destroyed by the Roman Legions of Titus. Long ago, the Arabs cleared the rubble from the space and paved it with large, flat stones. It was a fine square now. In the middle of the square stood a church, which had once been a mosque. This mosque was the Qubbat al-Sakhrah or the Dome of the Rock. It was a large octagonal building covered with white marble and beautiful blue earthenware mosaics. On its top was a wooden structure bearing a round dome, the roof of which was of pure gold. Since the Christians assumed this was the site of the Temple of Solomon, the new name of the Dome of the Rock became the Temple Church. Jacob pointed to the right and at the far side of the square I made out another mosque, and the former palace of the Kings of Jerusalem.

The Crusaders had first used the al-Aqsa mosque as their palace, but now that building was used by the Templar Knights. I walked to there with Jacob at my side, still chatting, walking over the large pavements and I looked up at the red Dome of the Rock, quite ill at ease with the thought that this highest emblem of the Islamic faith had been modified into a Christian church. Then, my eyes were attracted to the long, whitened buildings on the right, to the series of arches and walls topped with other domes.

Suddenly, a very heavy weight crushed on my shoulders. I fell and I found myself lying with my cheek on the paved stones, unable to move. I saw my arm and left hand before me, as if glued to the earth, but I could not move one little finger. I wanted to cry for help to Jacob, but I realised I could not cry. No sound came from my lips. I was paralyzed. The people I had seen in the Temple grounds kept on walking as before and they looked at me curiously. Their bodies started to convulse. Pustules and wounds appeared on their faces. The flesh of their arms darkened and rotted. Their bodies festered open. Pieces of flesh dropped from their hands, showing bare knuckles underneath. Eyes dropped from sockets, noses suppurated and putrefied. A stink like of an open sewer enveloped the air. I again tried to move to escape that stench, but I could not.

I saw men dressed as Crusaders thus pass me by, look at me in astonishment, but they all were sick with a plague. Some men were half skeletons as they walked on. A young man appeared, finely dressed in white silk, wearing thin silver mail, a surcoat of white coarse linen adorned with a red cross, and also wearing a brightly lit helmet of silver and gold. Around his helmet he wore a gilded crown. He came slowly to me, looked at me and bowed till his face was close to mine. He had only half a face and maggots ran over his torn lips. He stood up, drew his sword and brandished it to the skies, and the skies were on flame. Fire burst from the stones before me.

The white square was coloured red. I looked upwards, moving only my eyes, and I saw three giant banners in the sky. The banners hung on silver staffs. One of the banners was the red Oriflamme with the golden sun and flames, the banner of France. That banner clang against the two other ones. One of the banners attacked the Oriflamme and that was the Norman-English banner with the long, red, clawing lions of England. The other banner sided with the Norman banner, and that was the banner of Aquitaine. The banners thus fought in front of the flaming sky and the heavens turned deeper red from long veils of blood that descended from the banners. I heard a rumbling sound to my left. The earth trembled.

I could move my head then. I saw horse-riders approaching. Their mounts were caparisoned with steel and silver and coats of different colours. One horse was grey, another black, other ones were brown, all of dark shades. The horses had lion-heads and their tails were like snakes that swung around. I looked at the riders. They were terrible warriors with dragon-like faces. They were heavily armoured and armed with swords, shields and lances. The first of the riders was accompanied by hail and fire, but the hail was mixed with blood that was hurled around. The second rider threw lightning flames. The third sprouted blood; the fourth heaved his curved sword to the sky and the sun burst and stars fell from the sky. The fifth rider broke the earth under the hooves of his horse so that the stones of the Haram tore apart in long abysses into which people fell and disappeared, screaming unheard words with open mouths. Smoke and fire emerged from the wounds in the earth. The sixth horseman called on locusts and scorpions that stung the corpses on the square. The seventh rider pointed to the heavens and offered a scroll with his other hand. I could not grasp the scroll however, for I could not move. I remember how desperately I tried to grab that scroll, but my efforts were vain. The riders galloped above and over me and a terrible agony engulfed me for I feared being crushed by the hooves. The riders thundered over me and I could not see anything of the side to which they rode.

Then, I saw Aliénor advancing to me. She walked among the death and the stench on the trembling earth and she was so beautiful. She walked in a very long, light green robe and her arm sleeves were so long they almost fell to the ground. Very bright light surrounded her. The rest of the world seemed to vanish. I did not hear the noise of the riders' horses anymore, the pestilence and the blood receded. Aliénor too came to very close to me. She touched my face with love and pity, but her fingers were ice-cold. My heart stopped when her fingers touched my lips. As sudden as she had come she turned and walked off, with her back on me. I saw her walking away, and my heart broke. I watched her every step she made. I wanted to hold her, but I could not. She walked on. Finally, she disappeared from the Temple platform.

The light around me was normal again and I saw normal people walk in the place, looking at me astonished and annoyed, some with mocking eyes. I looked at my hand and saw my fingers moving. My arm moved and plied under my chest. I felt my body heave. My feet clung to the stones and pushed. I almost stood, but not entirely. It was still as if my mind was not one with my limbs. My soul took gradually control of my body. I saw Jacob, at the same place he had been a few moments ago. He was worried and put his shoulder under mine to support me for I had it difficult to walk and stand. I was hot, my face was burning. Had I suffered from a sunstroke? There was only one thought in my mind however and that thought grew stronger by the moment, the realisation 'I have lost Aliénor. I have lost Aliénor.'

'Are you all right?' Jacob asked, and I could hear his voice very distinctly. 'You are sick. You are pale. Your head is burning. Are you hurt? Why did you fall on the stones? Did you stumble? Come on, you have to walk. I will help you. We can go to my house.'

Jacob looked at me curiously. I had to take time to steady the earth under my feet. The colours of the square were still only turning to normal.

I answered to Jacob, 'I am fine now. I fell. I feel feverish. Thank you for helping me. I will walk with you. I think I am going to be sick.'

Jacob helped me through the Street of the Temple, on to David's Street. We caught many interrogating, puzzled eyes, but we reached a small house and Jacob pushed me in.

I remained for weeks at Jacob's house. I hated abusing his hospitality, but I was indeed sick. The fevers lasted for days and afterwards I was very weak. Jacob took care of me, and there were always two heavily veiled women around the house, a young woman and an elderly lady. When the fevers lessened I told Jacob where my things were, where my treasure was hidden. I wanted my horse retrieved, and Jacob promised me he would do as was needed. I had confidence in Jacob and I let myself sink into a lethargy that lasted. I remember the faces of Eudes de Deuil over me on certain days, and Gormond's, but the fevers came and went. I stayed at Jacob's until the summer, but already by June I was much better.

In June of that year a Council of the Barons of the Frankish territories, without Raymond de Poitiers, decided to attack Damascus. The most formidable army of Crusaders marched out of Jerusalem and took the direction of the capital of the Vizir Mu'in al-Din Unur. I had not declared myself at the Court of Jerusalem by that time. I was still lying on a bed in Jacob's house, dazed and morose. I also did not want to engage in a campaign that I knew was stupid and that Aliénor had resisted vehemently.

The campaign was a disaster, of course. The old Mamluk Vizir Unur called in all the reinforcements of Turcomans of his provinces and towns. The Crusaders were stuck before Damascus, surprise was lost. Unur defended his town using all his cunning. He gained time for his reinforcements to arrive.

To the west of Damascus are vast gardens, irrigated by a complex system of man-made watercourses that bring the water from the mountains to the fertile plain. The gardens are a labyrinth of walled spaces where vegetables and fruit were grown. The Crusaders captured those gardens at first, conquered after costly skirmishes against

the Saracen archers. Then they made the crucial error to abandon these orchards and gardens, estimating them too difficult to defend. They took position to the south side of the city, where they lacked the food and water guaranteed by the immense fertile gardens they had left. The Crusader army starved and got very, very thirsty.

The Vizir of Damascus, Mu'in al-Din Unur, appealed to Nur al-Din of Aleppo and to Saif al-Din of Mosul. The two brothers raised an army in no time and marched south. They waited eagerly at some distance to enter Damascus, which would have been the end of the independence of the Sultan of Damascus and have meant the unification of all the Syrian forces under Zengi's sons. Louis VII and Conrad III wisely decided not to confront the three Saracen armies together. They abandoned the siege of Damascus.

The splendid Crusade, preached with such grandeur at Vézelay, thus suffered an inglorious end. Over a hundred thousand French and German men, women and children had died, and nothing honourable achieved. The French Crusaders of course blamed the Franks of Outremer for treason. This might well have been true, for no Baron of Antioch or Tripoli in the army at Damascus wanted Aleppo and Mosul to be reconciled with Unur. So the Crusader army had to retreat and leave Damascus unscathed, but Aleppo and Mosul did not join with Unur. It were the Barons of Raymond de Poitiers and of the County of Tripoli who proposed to King Louis and to Conrad to leave the gardens of western Damascus and attack from the south, which proved the one crucial error not to make. The French said the Franks had been bought by Unur, but that had not even been necessary: the Frankish Barons of Antioch, Edessa and Tripoli knew what had to be done. Unur thanked Nur al-Din but positioned his forces insolently in his front, between his army and Damascus. The Atabeg understood and withdrew.

I got better from my illness in September of 1149, after a hot summer of fits of raging delirium, fevers that ate away my determination and strength. I healed however, and the fevers subsided. I remember the two women constantly at my bed, but as I got better only Jacob brought me food and made me drink and eat medicines. When I could stand, my spirits improved. I had to see Aliénor.

So one day, after much hesitation, I walked up to the palace in the David Citadel. I expected to be rebuked, maybe hoped for it, but a guard lazily strolled off and went inside. Energy was not an obvious quality in Jerusalem.

Knights entered and left the palace, but I knew no one and none gave me an interested look. The palace of Jerusalem was not a very large place, but it was a busy place. The guard came back quite a while later. He announced me with some deference that the Queen could not see me just now, but she would be free in the evening, at sunset and I was supposed to announce myself by then. So I walked on and returned around that time.

A sentry brought me immediately to a narrow hall. Aliénor sat at a table, accompanied by ladies-in-waiting. She dismissed her companions and showed me to a chair. We sat.

I felt the distance. There was to be no hugging, there were to be no embraces. Time had passed and things had changed.

Aliénor was also not a woman to leave things unsaid.

‘We got separated suddenly,’ she started. ‘Louis forced me to ride out of Antioch at night. Men wield that, violence and coercion and force. They have the power of knives and daggers and fists. I heard from Eudes where you were. I know where you lived and that you were sick in a Jew’s house. Eudes visited you often and the Jew let him know how you were. Since you left that house I have been expecting you.’

I answered, ‘thank you, Your Majesty. You are so kind.’

‘Don’t use sarcasm on me, Daniel,’ she retorted primly. ‘I could not possibly get to you. Yet I feared for you!’ She whispered, ‘do not doubt my feelings! They have not changed.’

‘Nor have mine,’ I replied. ‘Yet, the world has changed around us.’

‘Yes,’ she replied. ‘I knew you would have felt that too. We cannot be together like I wanted. We have to be careful. Louis will return to France soon. Nothing has been accomplished here, but he is satisfied, for his pilgrimage is fulfilled. The Crusade has been costly. In money I mean, of course, for he does not care about the men and women that were lost. He wants to return, but I believe he will stay until Easter. I promised him to be a loving Queen in all until we are back in France. Then he will allow me a divorce. I suspect it may take years before I can divorce and until that day we cannot be together, you and I.’

‘Will we ever be able to be together?’ I asked. ‘I have thought a lot. It is impossible that we would be together in your world. You are the Duchess of Aquitaine. You possess lands many times vaster than the lands of the King. Your destiny is to live with the most powerful men of Christendom. How long could I remain alive married to you, or as your lover? How long before I would be poisoned, assassinated, drowned in a river? How long before you would be ravished, raped, forced to marry again?’

She said softly, ‘I have strong castles, Daniel.’

‘There is more,’ I confessed. ‘I have had a vision. I saw your banner fight France. Your destiny will be grand, Aliénor. But there is no destiny for me with you. Another banner fought together with your banner against France, but that banner was not mine!’

‘Are you so quick to give me up?’

‘I would not quickly abandon the woman I love. Yet, what I saw is the future and in your future I have no place. My love will not wane, but whatever I do I will be separated from you. That is what is in the future; that is our destiny.’

‘So you give up now,’ she repeated sadly and disappointed.

‘I do not know what to think about what I saw. I am torn between conflicting desires: to hold you in my arms and stay with you and await my fate, on the one hand, and to accept fate immediately, on the other. I believe I have seen our destiny and it is not together. What good can it be and what use would it be to defy fate?’

‘Yes,’ she conceded. ‘That is probably the resignation that has oppressed me too these last months. A change has come to be in our fates, a wave that ripples through the air, into our minds. Do you believe in such changes that may happen suddenly in the constellation of people and events?’

‘No. I believe in something like the Qur’an states, that our lives are written in God’s book. God has a purpose for us. That purpose we cannot avoid. Although we are free people, God can see what our future will be like and sometimes He unveils something of that to me. I am sad for us, but I am also immensely happy because we had a love and so few people experience that kind of love. The love has enriched me beyond any rationality. Even if the love remains unfulfilled for the rest of my life, I am extremely grateful.’

‘We will never forget and never really be separated,’ Aliénor said. ‘But do you realise what you lead me into? This world is a strange place, Daniel. It is filled with the best and the worse. My best is you. My worse will be to be Queen, living among vultures, murderers, the greedy and the rapists, intrigues and conceit. The world can also offer love, goodness, beauty and grace, passion and compassion, but if you leave me I will have not only to cope with the worse but be like the worse. I will be with ugliness and violence and I will have to be more ruthless than the basest of the Counts, Barons, Bishops and the entire rigmarole of men I cannot esteem higher than animals. I know you must leave me, Daniel, but then henceforth you will leave me to become a monster!’

‘You will never be a monster, Aliénor,’ I said. ‘Ruthless you will be, yes, but only when necessary and never out of pleasure. You will be intelligent enough to realise that. And the beautiful things of life: a song, a poem, the smile of a child, the light shining in a ruby, a finely painted book, will always happen for you to cherish, at precious even if at rare moments. When you have those, please think of me and think of how I love you.’

‘Will I then never see you again?’

‘I do not know what my destiny is. I don’t know how long I will stay in Jerusalem. I have not yet had the time to seek God here.’

Aliénor laughed wryly. ‘Louis only stayed a few moments in the Holy Sepulchre and he told everybody he had found God.’

I managed to offer a smile too. ‘I need more time than that, Aliénor. Maybe I will need a lifetime before God is revealed to me. Maybe I will never find Him. But I promise you I will come back to France one day, if I am not killed here. Then I will come to you and tell you what I found.’

We could have talked much more, but all was said that had to be said. We remained silent for a long time, just looking at each other.

I looked at Aliénor until I was sure I could imagine every line and every colour of her face. Then I stood. Aliénor came to me and we embraced. It was a long and tender embrace, no kiss, but an embrace in which we felt the weight of the rest of our lives and from that embrace we delved the confidence to live on. Finally, I drew Aliénor’s arms down and hurried to the doors without looking back. I heard her weep like a wounded animal. I drew the doors close behind me.

Louis VII and Aliénor left Outremer after Easter of 1149. They embarked on a ship and sailed from Saint-Jean-d’Acre, accompanied by several other boats.

In June of that same year Nur al-Din, assisted by auxiliary troops of Damascus, attacked strongholds of Antioch on the east banks of the Orontes River. Raymond de Poitiers hurried with a small, rapidly gathered force of four hundred knights and a thousand footmen to relieve his castles. Nur al-Din could place more than six thousand cavalry in his way. At the ensuing Battle of Ma’arratha, Raymond, Prince of Antioch, was utterly defeated. Raymond was killed in that battle, decapitated, and his head brought in triumph to Nur al-Din. The Atabeg of Aleppo then captured all the territories of Antioch east of the Orontes River: Harim, Afamiya and many other places. Nur al-Din also laid siege to Antioch itself, but the Latin Patriarch of the town,

Archbishop Aymeri de Limoges, refused to surrender the city and when Baudouin, the King of Jerusalem, marched towards him with a relief army, Nur al-Din withdrew.

Only a few months later, the remnants of the County of Edessa came under attack. The vultures gathered to pick at the last rests of the unfortunate County. The Saracen Lords that lived around Jocelin de Courtenay's castles all wanted a piece. The Seljuk Sultan of Qoniya, Mas'ud, first charged on Mar'ash. Renaud Lord of Mar'ash, a courageous and valorous knight, had been killed at the side of Raymond de Poitiers at the Battle of Ma'arratha and Jocelin had left only a weak garrison at the place. Mas'ud's son, Qilij Arslan, took Mar'ash. Mas'ud then put a siege to Turbessel and Jocelin only saved his capital by accepting to be Mas'ud's vassal.

A little later the Ortoqid Amir of Kharput, Qara Arslan, assaulted the Gargar Region of Jocelin's County and captured it.

In May of 1150, Jocelin travelled to Antioch but fell in a Saracen trap at night. He was taken prisoner and brought in chains to Aleppo where he would remain imprisoned for nine years.

Mas'ud of Qoniya then attacked Kaisun and Behesni and captured the places. He fell on Turbessel by surprise. Beatrix, Jocelin's wife, defended Turbessel successfully. She knew however she would not be able to hold out much longer, so she considered in earnest the offer of the Byzantine Emperor to buy the rest of her fortified places. King Baudouin of Jerusalem permitted her to proceed with the selling of her lands to Emperor Comnenus. The Byzantines lost all to the Saracens within a year. The Frankish County of Edessa was no more.

Vizir Mu'in al-Din Unur of Damascus died in August of the year 1149. The new Atabeg of Damascus was Mujir al-Din Abaq, Unur's son-in-law. Abaq was a dissolute, cruel, narrow-minded brute who was however also keenly aware of the danger that presented Aleppo to Damascus, and who therefore continued the political visions of Unur of alliance with the Franks of Jerusalem.

Two years later, Nur al-Din attacked Damascus twice, but Baudouin III of Jerusalem rushed with a Frankish army to fend off the attacks. Baudouin and Abaq chased the last troops of Nur al-Din from the Hauran together, and reinforced the old alliance between Damascus and Jerusalem against the Zengids. Baudouin thus secured his long eastern border – or so he thought.

The alliance with Damascus re-forged was the only good news in those times, for in less than two years after King Louis's and Emperor Conrad's expedition on Damascus, the Principality of Antioch had lost all its lands east of the Orontes River and Raymond de Poitiers was killed; the County of Edessa was no more and Jocelin II de Courtenay rotted in a prison. Much worse was the knowledge for the Saracens that a Crusade from Christendom could be defeated easily, and that such a Crusade was only a temporary affair of a few months. From that time on, the initiatives of The Saracens became bolder in their actions of war against Frankish Outremer.

In the year of 1152, Raymond II of Tripoli was murdered by Isma'elite assassins at the gates of his city. Nobody found out who instigated the murder, but Raymond had been in dispute with his wife Hodierna and her supposed lovers.

Therefore, in that year, the four Frankish Counties in Outremer came to be ruled by women.

Hodierne ruled at Tripoli for her twelve-year old son Raymond after the assassination of her husband.

Constance, the twenty-five year old widow of Raymond de Poitiers, ruled at Antioch for her son Bohemond who was only a few years old.

Countess Beatrix held and then sold Turbessel and the remnants of the County of Edessa in the name of her imprisoned husband Jocelin II.

And Mélisende ruled at Jerusalem for her son Baudouin III.

Hodierne and Mélisende were sisters, daughters of King Baudouin II of Jerusalem and the Armenian Princess Morfia. Constance was the daughter of their other, third sister, Alix, who had been Princess and Regent of Antioch before.

When Baudouin III became twenty-one years old, he was crowned King of Jerusalem. That displeased his mother, the Regent Mélisende and her Connétable Manessier d'Hierges. Baudouin had to subdue by the arms first the Connétable, and then his mother. Jerusalem was in turmoil of civil war for a few weeks, for Baudouin had to lay siege to Jerusalem, the gates of which had been closed to him by Mélisende. Baudouin and his faithful Barons got inside Jerusalem after a while, but they had to siege and to storm the walls of the city and then the citadel after having destroyed part of the defences with mangonels. Mélisende hid in the keep, in the Tower of David, and refused to surrender still. Mother and son eventually reached an agreement and Mélisende left Jerusalem for Samaria.

I lived in Jerusalem during those years. I bought a small house of my own in the north quarter of the town, on the Street of Jehoshaphat, near the Gate of the same name, not far from the Church of Saint Anne. Gormond lived with me when he was not in the citadel.

I visited the Holy Places of Jerusalem, thus accomplishing my own pilgrimage. I stood in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, a vast complex of several chapels and crypts. The main church was large, but not nearly as large as the Church of the Saints Peter and Paul of Cluny. Much work was still going on in this church, inside and outside, for it was being rebuilt. The building was crowded with priests, monks, and innumerable pilgrims. Masses were going on continuously. The smoke of candles, incense and torches burned the eyes. I was much impressed by the mosaics and the paintings, especially by the ones of the Last Judgement. There were many representations of Jesus and of the Prophets, of Abraham and Isaac, of Jacob and even of Ishmael. I admired the Byzantine tapestries, the coloured marble, the finely turned columns, the sculptures, and finally the domes.

I visited the Crypt of Saint Helena. I thus saw the place where the True Cross had been discovered by Saint Helena, at the Chapel of the Discovery of the Cross. I saw Christ's Tomb in the Rotund of marble columns under its dome. Yet, the golden lamps that hung above Christ's Tomb revealed nothing to me. In the same complex I visited the site of Christ's Calvary at Golgotha, with its other dome. I went up the stairs of Golgotha but however much I imagined Christ walking that same way, no special elation brought me closer to God.

I was shocked by the most miserable among the pilgrims, many in a very dire state, who seemed to relish this particular ascent. They climbed up the steps by all means, some on their knees, step by step. Some crawled on all fours until they reached the top, and some had to be carried because they were unable to walk or crawl. I witnessed no miracle.

The new main church was practically finished, situated between the Rotund and Saint Helena's Church. I saw the Omphalus Mundi there, the rock that would be our Christian centre of the world.

I also visited the other many main churches of Jerusalem, more than ten of them. I was in the Church of the Temple, which was of course the Qubbat al-Sakhrah, the former mosque, and I saw the Rock. This was for Christians and Muslims the place of the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham on Mount Moriah, and also for the Muslims the sacred place where the Prophet of Islam left his imprint when he ascended to the heavens. For the Jews it was the place where David had prepared the altar for Yahweh. The former mosque was as wonderful inside as outside, and about the same length and width as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, and equally domed. However much I admired these buildings and let the atmosphere of the places overwhelm me, God was not revealed to me.

I walked to the outskirts of the city by the Gate of Jehoshaphat. I took the Road of Jericho and descended into the steep valley of the Cedron. I wanted to reach Gethsemane and the Garden of Olives, the place where Jesus became fully aware of his Passion and suffered his agony. I visited there the Church of the Tomb of Jesus' Mother, the Tomb of the Virgin Mary.

I found all those places overbuilt, churches covering the Holy Places, enshrining them but thus in a way de-sacralising them, the churches filled with too many people and too much noise of prayers and chanting, of shouting and disputing! The fumes and perfumes loaded the air to suffocation. I could not imagine how these places might have been in Jesus' time. I could not find the peace of mind, the serenity and dignity necessary for the mystic empathy with God that I sought. I was disappointed.

I returned to these places many times and it was only at certain moments of the year, when I was practically alone, facing the holiest remains, very early, when the crowd had not yet found the way to the Places, that I felt some kind of union with the spirits of the times of Christ.

Still, something retained me in Jerusalem. Was it the peculiar light of the skies here, the light that pervaded the mountain flank with the churches and houses so brightly when I looked at them from Gethsemane? Nature's grandeur then enveloped me and as the wind tore at my robes in front of the gorge of the Cedron, it seemed to me that God's breath indeed blew over the town. So many centuries of work had changed the site, yet in the mosaic of the rocks and boulders and gardens and orchards that deployed before me I sensed the presence of God. Still, my soul did not hover upon the breeze. I understood then that I would not see God at any moment of my own choosing. God would choose the moment, or never, in Jerusalem or elsewhere, to reveal his creation. A glum resignation took possession of me then. I would live, expect nothing more. I stayed at Jerusalem, waiting for something that might never come – but I stayed.

In the late spring of 1149 I went to see a Baron of Baudouin III, a courtier and knight of whom Jacob had told me that he was an affable man, a man loyal to the future King. Onfroi III was the Lord of Toron or Tibnin, a place south-east of the town of Tyre. He was a knight of honour and a close advisor of the King. We conversed quite a long time together, in the palace. Onfroi recognised me, for he had equally been on the campaign to the Hauran. He called out immediately, 'ah ah, the white knight!' I told Onfroi who I was and proposed to serve him. He was quite pleased. He was in need of knights who spoke Arabic and Hebrew and who might help his administration, his contacts with Damascus and with the Jewish communities. He was interested in Usama ibn Munqidh and he got really excited when I told him I had been at Aleppo and knew well the regions along the Orontes River, as well as Antioch.

I became a friend of Onfroi de Toron and he called me in often for advice or talks with Arabian and Turcoman leaders. Soon thereafter, I met also King Baudouin III. We made no allusions to the campaign in the Hauran and I still wonder whether he remembered me. I was not in his army during the civil war against his mother in 1152, for I was inside the town. Later, when Onfroi was appointed as the new Connétable of Jerusalem, I was practically always at the side of Onfroi and hence of Baudouin, now fully King of Jerusalem.

I was unhappy about having lost Aliénor in those times, but not sad. I had my friends Gormond and Jacob with me. Onfroi de Toron kept me busy. I felt needed and useful. I dwelled about the Court of the King of Jerusalem and learned much about the Barons of Outremer. I travelled in the lands of Jerusalem, Tripoli and even Antioch for Onfroi. Onfroi wanted to scan the territories wide. When he could not travel by himself, he sent me, as his eyes. Often, Gormond rode with me and we had fine times as comrades in arms. We saw little action of battles or skirmishes in that period.

Matters changed. The Kings and Barons of the Franks are knights and warriors. They were raised and trained to one duty only, which was securing their lands and enlarging their territories. It would have been impossible for them to grasp any other ideal. King Baudouin thought his northern and eastern borders were safe. He looked south, at Egypt.

The King's spies told him the Fatimid, Shi'ite Caliphate of Egypt was weakened by internal strives. I had been present with Onfroi de Toron and the King to translate for the Egyptian couriers that had been intercepted, and that provided us with information on the state of the Fatimid rule. Sea captains also told us who ruled in Egypt and how.

There was a void of power in Egypt. The Caliph al-Hafiz had died in October of 1149. His son al-Zafir was the new Caliph, but he had little support in the army. The Amir of Alexandria, al-'Adil ibn-Sallar had marched on the capital Cairo with enough armed men for the Caliph to fear for his life and to appoint Sallar as his Vizir. But Sallar had not the support of all the Empire, and neither had the Caliph. Powers in Egypt were divided, and the pray of intrigues.

The town of Ascalon, the first large town of the Fatimids in Syria had stuck as a thorn in the flesh of the Franks for long. Ascalon prided in a strong Egyptian garrison and that garrison sent regularly groups of warriors to harass the roads between Jaffa and Jerusalem, the roads the bulk of Christian pilgrims took to reach the Holy City. The Kings of Jerusalem before Baudouin III had built a series of strong castles to protect that road, but the danger subsisted. Baudouin thought it was time at the end of 1152 to capture Ascalon, and so did his Barons. The war on Ascalon would be a just war. For long enough the Egyptian garrisons there had acted as pirates, killing and pillaging the pilgrims to Jerusalem. The army of Jerusalem would march south.

I eagerly interrogated pilgrims that arrived at Jerusalem about what happened in France. I asked them what happened to the people I had known.

Abbot Suger, my benefactor and friend, died in the year 1151. In 1152 died the Sénéchal Raoul de Vermandois.

Not long after Suger's death, on the eighteenth of March of the year 1152, King Louis VII called together a Council of the Church Fathers at the town of Beaugency. The aim of the Council was to obtain the annulment of his marriage to Aliénor d'Aquitaine. He called up witnesses who testified to the consanguinity with his wife. The marriage was annulled. Aliénor rode from Beaugency to Poitiers a free woman.

Two months later exactly, on the eighteenth of May, very rapidly after her divorce to the King of France, Aliénor d'Aquitaine married Henri Plantagenêt. Her new husband was nine years younger than she. A year later already, she gave birth to a son, William, putting an end to the hopes of Louis VII to as yet control the vast lands of Aquitaine through his and Aliénor's daughters Marie and Alix. Henri Plantagenêt was the son of Geoffroy le Bel, Duke of Anjou and Maine. Henri's father had died also in 1151, leaving him his only heir. Henry had already been crowned as Duke of Normandy before. Henri claimed furthermore the crown of England, for his mother Mathilde was the daughter of the former King of England, Henry I Beauclerc. Mathilde had first married Emperor Henri V, then Geoffroy le Bel. Henry Beauclerc had no surviving sons. Henri Plantagenêt had a rival however, Etienne de Blois. Aliénor's husband sailed over the sea that separated England from France to make war on his rival. In a pact, concluded after humiliating defeats, Etienne de Blois, already a sick man, accepted that after his death the Norman Kingdom of England would pass to Henri.

The vengeance of Aliénor d'Aquitaine on France was soon to come. End October of 1154, Etienne de Blois died and Henri Plantagenêt was crowned Norman King of England. He was already Duke of Normandy, Duke of Anjou and Maine and by his wife Duke of Aquitaine. His lands in France and England were many times vaster than the territories of King Louis VII of France. The banners of England and Aquitaine would henceforth confront the banner of France, the Oriflamme.

Louis the Younger needed allies. In 1154, that same year, Louis of France offered his daughter Marie to be engaged to Henri de Champagne, son of his adversary of Vitry, Count Thibaud IV of Champagne. I felt redeemed then, and wondered just what role

Aliénor had played in this engagement. If she had not, fate worked in strange ways indeed. I wished my friend, young Henri de Champagne, all the luck in the world. He was a fine young man.

Chapter Three. Jerusalem, Ascalon and Baniyas 1153-1158

The Frankish army of Outremer marched on Ascalon a few days after the start of the new year 1153. I was about thirty-five years old then and in the strength of my life.

We advanced sluggishly south with a formidable army and we drew many siege-engines with us.

The Barons of the Kingdom joined us. We rode with several warrior-leaders of the Church: with Pierre de Barcelone the Archbishop of Tyre, with Baudouin the Archbishop of Caesarea, Robert the Archbishop of Nazareth, Ferry de La Roche the Bishop of Saint-Jean-d'Acre and Gerald the Bishop of Bethlehem. Foucher d'Angoulême, the Patriarch, was still with us and he carried the Holy Cross with his priests. The Bishops were accompanied by the Monk-Knights: by Bernard de Tremelay, the Grand-Master of the Templar Knights, and by Raymond du Puy, the Grand-Master of the Hospitaller Knights. Later, Hugue of Ibelin joined us and Philippe de Milly Lord of Nablus too, and the brothers Rohart and Balian of Jaffa. Also Eudes de Saint-Amand and Jean Guthman reached us, accompanied by many knights and footmen.

I rode in a group headed by King Baudouin and Onfroi de Toron, and with us were Sirs Guy of Beirut, Maurice of Montréal in the Trans-Jordan, Gautier de Fauquenberge the Prince of Tibériade and Simon of the same Tibériade. Gerard of Sidon rowed in with fifteen galleys to block the port of Ascalon.

When we arrived at Ascalon, we started to strip everything there was to eat from the luxurious gardens, orchards, vineyards and fruit trees around the town, so that we had enough provisions, and so that the garrison of the town would be denied that food. Then we surrounded the place and organised our siege.

Ascalon was a harbour town settled against the sea. The town spread along the shores in the form of a half-moon, a half circle of walls that faced inland, whereas the diameter of the half-circle faced the sea. A strongly defended gate in that long wall, called Bab al-Bahr, allowed the Ascalonians to bring in supplies from their port. If we wanted to starve the city of food and other supplies, we had to block the harbour. Gerard of Sidon assured that blockade with his fifteen galleys.

The defences of Ascalon looked impregnable. We stood in awe before well-repaired and well-kept, high walls of large stones, studded with mighty towers at regular distances. Although we had blocked the town by sea and by land, we knew that enough supplies had been stored inside, for the Egyptian troops to sustain a very long siege.

To storm the walls, the Frankish army had brought many siege engines. We put several mangonels and other catapults in the field. These could hurl heavy stones against the walls and into the city to demoralise the defenders. We doubted the mangonels could breach the thick walls, however. The King wasted no time. The mangonels began to launch their stones against the walls as soon as the army gathered

around the town, our tent camp arranged. The stones crashed with an ominous sound onto the walls. We saw the bulwarks shake and tremble, but the shocks were absorbed by the sheer massiveness of the earth and rubble no doubt used as filling between the layers of stones in the walls.

Knights and footmen in large numbers assaulted the walls four times in the first months, using scaling ladders. The efforts were useless. All the men before us who tried to scale the walls were killed or maimed. The wounded and the killed that fell down only made it more difficult for the next men to climb the ladders. The defenders of the city had all the archers and crossbowmen they needed. Even a child could fire a crossbow or an arrow-bow, so a hail of arrows and deadly bolts greeted us with deadly efficiency.

The Ascalonians did not even have to bend over the walls to shoot down, and in that fact be vulnerable to our own crossbow bolts. Every section of the wall was covered by round towers from which it was easy to send arrows along the walls while being protected.

The city apparently had plentiful of oil and pitch, so that whenever a ladder was full of Frankish assailers with any chance of reaching the top, boiling oil was poured down and then set to fire by the Saracens. We saw at times four or five of such cascades of fire droop along the walls, a frightening sight that scared us all off. Gormond and I ran never in the first waves of assault. The men who fought before us died terrible deaths, for the oil not only drenched cloth but passed in the chain mails and burned there. One could tear off cloth that was on fire in an instant. But trying to take away the chain mail from a howling and thrashing man burning like a torch was near to impossible. The cries of those men still fill my ears at nights. We failed to reach the top of the walls.

Night attacks also were of no use. The Ascalonians lighted hundreds of torches on the top of the walls and they patrolled the walls day and night. They would not be surprised.

The months passed and we continued to siege the town, but nobody really knew how to get beyond the defences. We heard some good news from Egypt. Vizir ibn-Sallar had married a woman called Ballara, a woman from the west of the Fatimids' Empire. She had a son from a first marriage called 'Abbas ibn-Abu'l Futuh. In April of the year 1153, while we were laying siege to Ascalon, this 'Abbas killed his father-in-law during the night. The murder was effectuated on the council of my old friend Usama ibn Munqidh. 'Abbas was the new Vizir of Egypt. He was strengthening his rule on Egypt, gathering support. He was too weak still to leave Cairo and wage an all-out war on the Franks. He needed his warriors to control Egypt. Egypt would not send strong reinforcements to Ascalon.

We were much encouraged when near Easter thousand of pilgrims arrived at Jaffa. Many of these men joined our army. With these newcomers, many of which were excellent artisans, we built an enormous tower of wood. The structure was higher than the walls of Ascalon, so that our archers and crossbowmen could shoot down at the defenders on the walls. That might allow us to set ladders against the walls in front of the tower and climb up under the protection of our own bowmen.

We also suffered setbacks. Despite the chaos in Cairo, an Egyptian war fleet of seventy ships showed up in front of Ascalon, bringing new troops, food and weapons to the town. Gerard of Sidon was no match for so many enemy ships. He had to retreat. The blockade of Ascalon by sea was broken. We could not reduce the city to famine and new defenders flowed in. That happened in the month of May, after five months of siege.

One day, I walked to King Baudouin's tents for a meeting with Onfroi de Toron. A knight stepped hurriedly out of the tents and, without glancing at me, pushed me aside. I was unbalanced and fell. I stood up and ran to hold on to the impolite bastard, even to challenge him, but Onfroi de Toron sprang in front of me and held me back. 'Stop,' he said, 'leave that man.'

'I will not be insulted,' I shouted.

'I know,' Onfroi replied. 'You are right, but that man is venomous. He is arrogant, brutal, cynical and he despises all who are born or have lived a long time in this country, Saracens and Franks alike. Moreover, he is untouchable now.'

'I have seen him before. I seem to know him, vaguely. Who is he?'

'He is Renaud de Châtillon,' Onfroi de Toron replied. 'He arrived only a very few months ago, at Antioch, but he lost no time. He seems to have promptly charmed Constance, the Princess of Antioch. The King has so much been subjected to complaints from the Barons about Antioch, that he allowed this Renaud to marry Constance. Châtillon will be Prince of Antioch soon. He has been in our camp for a few days to ask for that permission and the King has just granted him the wedding.' I smiled then. Once, many years ago, in France, in the town of Provins, I had fought as a youth with this Renaud and his friends. He had done well for himself. A scoundrel was to become Prince of Antioch!

The fighting for Ascalon intensified and turned into an obstinate showdown of hatred, for the townsmen suffered much from the stones that fell on their houses and in their streets, often also at night. Our wooden tower was the most serious threat to the Ascalonians. By that tower they suffered heavy casualties on the tops of their very walls. Twice already our men had almost reached the parapets in front of it.

One day, the gates of Ascalon nearest to the tower opened and a large number of Ascalonians sallied out of the city carrying bushels of wood. The bushels consisted mainly of vine trunks, wrought together, wood that burned long and intensely, and the trunks were imbued with oil and heavy black pitch. The men ran in columns; each man threw a bushel against our tower. Before we had the time to arrange a counter-attack, large amounts of the bushels piled against the assault structure.

I happened to be close to that site with Gormond and with the son of Onfroi de Toron, who was also called Onfroi, a brave young man. Onfroi liked to fight with a lance; Gormond and I were swordsmen. Together with a group of footmen, we ran towards the walls and attacked. A line of enemy defenders wearing shields and swords barred our way. We clashed into them with our shields and fought them, but behind the line the Ascalonians continued to bring on bushels. I hit with my sword on shields, arms and legs. The Ascalonian warriors fought bravely. I confronted two men and killed both of them. I thrashed my shield so powerfully against the first man that he was flung backwards from the shock and in that moment I cut at his legs. The wounded man slackened and the next moment I pushed my sword

beyond his small shield in his armpit. He wore mail, but my sword went past the chain rings. His sword fell from his limp arm and the man stepped aside, lowering his shield a little and then he had my sword in his throat. I broke the kneecap of my second opponent with a vicious kick of my iron shoe. He forgot that not only a sword could be a weapon. While the man hesitated and dropped back, I thrust my sword at his neck.

We advanced, the three of us, and the combination of two swordsmen with a man between brandishing a spear, was lethal. The third Saracen that came at me was a tall, slender but very energetic man. He swung his curved sword so rapidly and with such dexterity that I wavered and had to step back. When I did that, the man followed. He walked directly onto Onfroi's spear, which entered deep in his side, past his mail, in his guts. Gormond then almost cleaved the man's helmet and the dazed, wounded warrior had his neck sliced by my curved sword.

More Frankish sergeants and footmen joined us, even a few knights, and we pushed back the Ascalonians, leaving dead and wounded in our wake. Yet, the bushels continued to be thrown against the tower. The first flames licked at the wood. By that time we had succeeded in forming a wedge in the enemy troops. No more wood and no more oil was poured against the tower and we shoved the enemy back, with very great difficulty, shield against shield, but steadily, so that we were stopping the Ascalonians from adding fuel to the fire.

We apprehended of course the danger of the fire to our tower, so some of us ran to the structure. I shouted at Gormond and Onfroi to turn while I continued to fend off the Ascalonians. Gormond and Onfroi and many other Franks kicked the bushels away from the tower and against the walls of the city. Onfroi's spear came in handy, for it was impossible to draw the burning bushels by hand. Other crusaders saw what he did and imitated him. We did not have to fear too much the arrows of the defenders, for the men high up on the tower loosened one crossbow quarrel after the other onto the walls above us. More and more men ran to us from the Frankish camp. There were not so many armed Ascalonians facing us after all, and the men that heaved the bushels were apparently slaves, forced to carry the wood. These men were unarmed. They rapidly threw down what they were carrying and ran back to the gates.

I looked back and saw Gormond and Onfroi and many other men pushing wood and more wood to the stone walls of Ascalon, away from our tower. There were enough Frankish warriors now around me to defeat the Ascalonians. So I turned to help Gormond and Onfroi.

Something massive and dark fell down suddenly from above, to my friends. I shouted a warning, but was too late. A heavy earthen pot fell on the ground and crashed to pieces near Gormond, splashing oil and pitch all over him. Gormond stood near the flames of the bushel branches. In a nick of time the oil caught fire and Gormond was a torch, enveloped in flames. He cried, threw himself on the ground and turned there to try to quench the fire, but the oil was thick and mixed with sticking pitch. Gormond burned. I ran to him and while running took off my surcoat. Wrapping the cloth on my hands and lower arms, I slapped on Gormond's flaming body to stop the fire. I did not succeed well. Onfroi and other Franks did like me, but it took us a horribly long time to stop the flames from devouring Gormond. I dew him away over the ground, to behind the tower, for more oil was coming down.

Gormond's face was burned black. The stench of burnt flesh was in our nostrils. Onfroi turned against the tower and vomited. The oil continued to burn with little flames between Gormond's mails. Onfroi came back quickly, and together we drew off Gormond's coats and chain mail. With every movement on Gormond's arms he howled, for he was still conscious, and burnt flesh stayed on our hands and our hands also got burnt in the effort. Then, Gormond did not move anymore. He was unconscious.

On the other side of the tower the fighting finished, for the Saracens disappeared inside their town gates and the gates closed immediately.

The smoke of the burning wood along the walls filled our lungs, so we took Gormond at shoulder and legs and brought him thus to our tent. Onfroi was completely exhausted when we dropped Gormond on his cot, but he had not complained once. I ran out of the tent, called out desperately for a doctor, but it lasted quite a while before a Hospitaller monk ran to us. The doctor told us to leave the tent.

The physician worked inside. He left to shout an order to fetch water, entered the tent again. He came back out and ran off, saying he needed ointments. He returned a little later with a pot and white linen and with another man, and both disappeared again in the tent. Gormond gained conscience again, for we heard him yell from the pain, the howling of a wounded animal.

I rushed in. The doctor and his aid had torn away all the clothing from my friend. Creasy substances covered his wounds, but he flayed with his arms to ease the pains and fend off imaginary enemies. The doctor told us the ointments would sooth the pain with time. We held each arm of Gormond down, so that he could not tear at this chest and face. Large black patches covered his body. I asked the doctor whether Gormond would live. The man shook his head of no. He did not think Gormond could survive from his burnings.

The rest of the day and during the night, I remained at Gormond's side. He gained consciousness several times, only to cry out in pain, and faint again. I knew of course that a man could die slowly, tortured by excruciating pain and often I had prayed to be killed swiftly. I did not fear death. I feared the way of dying. Gormond held on to life for a very long time.

Blisters raised on his chest, arms and face. Blood filled the wounds and flowed down. When we touched his wounds to dry away the blood with cloth, he regained consciousness only to cry out. His wounds pestered rapidly. Pus formed on the blackness of his flesh. I prayed to God not to let my friend suffer thus, but Gormond died in ever-lasting agony.

I should have killed my old companion by a thrust of a dagger in his heart, but I could not. To the last I kept to the illusionary hope that Gormond would heal and survive. The young Onfroi was formidable. He stayed with me to the end and together we held Gormond down.

At the last, Gormond entered a state of delirium, fever and trembling. He had it difficult to breathe. I suspect his lungs were also burned from the hot fumes and heat that had enveloped him. He died three days later, in the last darkness of the night. I wept.

At the first light of dawn we buried Gormond in a wood, some distance from the camp, where many other little crosses testified of the Frankish victims of the siege of Ascalon.

The fire at the front defences of Ascalon burned through the previous days and the nights. In the late morning of the fourth day I stood again, facing the fortifications of the town with Onfroi de Toron and his son. Suddenly, we heard a loud rumble in front of us.

A miracle had happened! The fire had consumed and broken the stones of the wall of Ascalon. The wall had probably already been weakened by the projectiles of our mangonels there. With a large noise a whole section of the wall came down. From one defence tower to the other, the wall crumbled, so that there was a huge breach in Ascalon's defences. There was a shout of victory among our ranks then, for here was a chance to enter the city.

We had to exploit the surprise and be quick. My heart was filled with hatred, and I ran forward, brandishing my sword, accompanied by other knights.

When we arrived at the gap however, a tight line of Templar Knights withheld us. A group of fifty Templars or so was already climbing over the rubble, entering the city. A circle of Templars led by the Grand-Master Bernard de Tremelay forbade us to go further. We bounced against a wall of white shields with the large red crosses of the Templars. De Tremelay wanted all honour and riches for himself and his Order alone. We could shout as loudly as we wanted to let us in, we would have to fight the Templars to get past them. We insulted the Templars in our frustration, but finally turned back from such idiocy.

Meanwhile, the Ascalonian warriors had run to the gap in large numbers. They killed forty Templars without mercy, while the line of white knights in front of us held their backs to the killing inside. When the Templars that stood outside at the breach realised the disaster, they turned and wanted to let us in, but it was too late. The townsmen stood with hundreds of archers before us. They repaired the walls instantly by throwing in large wooden beams in the gap. By and by the Ascalonians repaired the breach and held us back. Some time later, it was totally impossible to storm that section of the walls.

Later in the day, the townsmen hung down from their walls the bodies of the dead and wounded Templars. We had never witnessed such horror. Forty corpses of Frankish knights, including the corpse of Grand-Master Bernard de Tremelay, hung along the walls, all around the city, to rot in the blazing sun. Vultures picked at their eyes and noses. Many a Crusader cried out and wept with hatred, frustration and abhorrence at such terrible fate. This happened in the month of August of that year 1153.

The corpses that hung from Ascalon's walls and that rotted to bones, their flesh torn by black vulture birds, discouraged us thoroughly. We lost energy and talked openly of abandoning the siege.

There was a meeting then in King Baudouin's tents. We discussed the situation. Onfroi de Toron was with us and he took me as his aid. There was much shouting and little rational arguments at that meeting. Most of the Barons wanted to abandon the siege and ride off. The Bishops however, refused to hear of defeat. The two men who absolutely wanted to continue the siege were the very old Patriarch and Archbishop of

Jerusalem, Foucher d'Angoulême, and also Raymond de Puy, the Grand-Master of the Hospital Knights of Saint John. Although I did not like Foucher after what he had done to us at Antioch, playing on King Louis of France's cowardice, I admired the bravery of the old man. I felt too much hatred against the Ascalonians to want to walk off, and Onfroi de Toron also sided with Foucher. Too many Barons however were wary of the siege and eager to stop the battles, so at the end of the meeting King Baudouin decided to put an end to the siege. The silence after that decision was terrible. The knights left the King's tent without saying a word and with bowed head.

The next morning however, while we prepared to break up camp, we heard from a few Ascalonians that had tried to escape from the city along the beaches, that there had been a fight also inside the town, among the defenders. Part of the townsmen wanted to surrender, another party not, and the garrison and the townsmen had come to arms. This discord decided the King and the Barons to not give up so rashly. They took courage and planned yet one more massive assault on the town.

The army of Jerusalem doggedly prepared for one last attack with grim determination. We all understood the importance of that attack, so we prepared in silence, whereas at other times shouts and laughter from harsh jokes filled the air. Meanwhile, our mangonels continued to throw large stones into the town.

The next morning we stood in ranks behind the woods around the town, so that the men of Ascalon could not see we were readying.

To our surprise, the gates of Ascalon opened and a large force of Egyptian warriors, probably the complete garrison and a large part of the town's militia, sallied out, heavily armed, against our camp. The Ascalonians must have hoped to surprise us and fall on us unprepared, but they had the bad luck to face an army in battle order, well organised and fully armed.

There was hatred in our eyes and hatred in the eyes of the men we clashed into. I was on horse in that battle, and so were Onfroi father and son. We crashed into the Ascalonian cavalry and unsaddled their riders with our lances. Then we were inside the enemy troops, threw away our lances and fought with shield and swords. I slashed around. I fought several duels with the Saracen riders. Brave men were facing me but I had been taught to kill on horseback by Gormond and I applied every trick I had learned from him. I parried, slung my sword and shield, wounded and stabbed, with desperation and force. No one showed mercy, no one asked for mercy. We fought almost until the evening. There were no middle ranks and no wings in that battle: two lines broke into each other and fought.

Finally, the Ascalonians broke and gave way. At least half of the enemy cavalry was slain. Wild horses ran over the plains without riders, many with terrible wounds in their flanks, from which blood oozed. The grounds beneath the walls were littered with dead and wounded men, friend and fiend. The battle was ours however. The Ascalonians fled back to the city. Our cavalry pursued them pitiless and killed their men until right in front of the gates. I killed two more men there, men that fled in full gallop but I slashed my sword at their necks. The Ascalonians fled to the protection of their barbicans and gates, from where a hail of arrows and crossbow

bolts stopped us from following them to the last. The Saracens disappeared into their town and the gates closed shut. Many wounded men lay below the walls of Ascalon, abandoned by the Egyptians.

We returned to our tents, exhausted, covered in sweat and blood. We had won a victory. But we were still standing at the wrong side of the walls of Ascalon.

In the morning of the next day, a delegation of Egyptian Amirs rode out of the city to meet King Baudouin. I waited with the King, a few Barons, and Onfroi de Toron. The people of Ascalon asked for a temporary truce to recuperate their dead and wounded. The King granted them that privilege until the afternoon. The mood was one of dignified respect for the brave adversary.

Afterwards, our mangonels continued to hurl stones and burning wood into the town. The Franks thus showed their determination to make the siege last, though Baudouin was on the point of leaving.

The next morning yet, a new delegation from Ascalon rode out of town. The Saracen leaders of the city proposed to surrender the town. They asked to leave the city unharmed, with all their possessions.

King Baudouin stayed unperturbed and did not accept the conditions immediately.

The delegation of Ascalon returned to the city without an answer.

Baudouin talked to his Barons and all agreed in happiness to grant the Egyptians safe passage. Many a rough warrior-Baron wept, embraced his neighbour from joy. This was the first great victory since a very long time for Christendom in Outremer. At last, the entire coast south of the Kingdom of Jerusalem would be completely in Frankish hands, till far below Gaza.

King Baudouin had trumpets sound later that day to call into his camp the delegation of Ambassadors of Ascalon. The King offered all the inhabitants safe passage to an ancient town in the desert, called al'Arish, from where the Egyptians could go where they wanted. He gave the men of Ascalon one day under guarantee of hostages to leave.

The Egyptians thus abandoned their town, some sailing off by boat, the others walking in a long column over land.

The Frankish army waited for another day, and then entered Ascalon in triumph.

Onfroi de Toron organised the joyous entry into Ascalon. Archbishop Foucher d'Angoulême rode first, proud as a peacock despite his years. He wore the True Cross of Jesus Christ. Then rode the Bishops, slowly and with dignity, fully attired in religious habits and wearing their mitres. They were followed by priests and monks, who sang hymns. King Baudouin and his younger brother, Amaury, the Count of Jaffa, who would be the new Lord of Ascalon, rode next. Behind the King rode the Barons, among which Onfroi de Toron and his son, and me behind them. We entered Ascalon with all knights in fine, new surcoats. Near the fortress the procession of Barons and knights stopped. The town was empty. The Egyptians had left. Only a few Christians who had lived to the end in the town, stood before their houses. The knights dispersed. The Barons called their knight-servants to them and sought out the wealthiest houses. The Egyptians had left without their possessions. Many riches remained to be found and won.

I let the knights ride out in frantic search for treasures. I rode alone to the seaside of the city. Almost outside Ascalon, close to the harbour, were fine houses too, and most knights sought close to the citadel, not at the harbour side. I suspected wealthy merchants had lived close to the harbour. I rode at ease to two of such houses, searched them without being disturbed by other knights. I sought in cellars and dark corners of the houses. I found a house with a large warehouse beneath. The warehouse was filled with precious silks, linen, bales of wool, and a large hoard of provisions of food and spices stored in deep, cool cellars. I settled in this house, barred the doors and nailed a cross on white linen on the doors, a sign that the house was occupied. In a third house nearby, I found another store in a cellar, and in corridors hewn out of the rocks behind a very low but very sturdy door, I found a large iron casket filled to the brim with jewels and coins.

Most of the Barons remained for a few months at Ascalon. The city gradually filled with people, with Christians that were poor and took possession of the houses, with Armenian merchants and Jews. I guarded my houses jealously.

I became a trader in those times! When the large merchant ships once more embarked at the port of Ascalon, I sold my goods. I was the owner of two large houses near the port of Ascalon, now. With the jewels and coins I had found I had a small fortune on me, not nearly as large as many of the Barons had found, but large enough to make of me one of the richer men of Jerusalem.

Finally, I stayed almost a year at Ascalon. I liked the sea and I walked for parts of the day alone along the beaches. I was terribly lonesome however, but I worked hard not to have to think. I traded. I bought and sold goods in the harbour at a frantic pace, each day. In the end, that work started to bore me. I was restless. I had found still no aim to my life.

Onfroi de Toron sought for me and burst into my house one morning. He embraced me, and cursed me for not having stayed with him. He told me it had taken him long to find me. He asked me to come with him to his fief of Baniyas. He wanted to organise his town-fortress better, and strengthen the defences. I was both happy and grateful. I thought everybody had forgotten about me. I promised Onfroi to ride to Baniyas, but I had to return to Jerusalem first. I was over-joyed to still have friends after all, and I remembered I still had Jacob at Jerusalem.

I sold everything I owned at Ascalon, my houses and all my goods. I bought precious stones and golden coins, and rode one day out of the city laden with a fortune. I arrived back at Jerusalem in the middle of the year 1154.

In Jerusalem I spent a few days walking around before going to Jacob's house to tell him about Ascalon and Gormond's death.

I pushed open Jacob's door and shouted, 'Jacob, Daniel here!'

Only the elderly woman, Jacob's servant, showed up and bade me to a larger room. A little later, the younger woman entered. As usual, both were veiled so that I could not discern their faces. I had hardly seen the women since my illness; I had never set eyes

on their faces and scarcely given them any attention when they ran past me sometimes when I entered Jacob's house. They always hid behind black veils.

I asked in Hebrew, 'is Jacob here?'

The younger woman answered, 'Jacob is not in the house. He has been sick.'

'Where is he then,' I asked impatiently. 'If he is ill, I would like to visit him. Where is he?' I feared for Jacob too, now. I was anxious to see him.

'He has been very sick,' the woman replied. 'I am afraid he has deceased.'

I suppose I was suddenly very pale in the face. I sat. I wavered. I grasped the table.

Fear gripped my heart.

'Are you well?' the woman asked, and I heard the concern in her voice. She stepped a little closer and peered at me. The elderly woman also stayed in the room, as if she had to be there to support me. She folded her hands and seemed to implore me of something.

'I am fine,' I answered after a while. I asked the question I feared most and the words came haltingly, 'how did he die?'

'He got suddenly very sick. He went to bed and we cared for him. We did not know what sickness he had. He was weak. He had no fevers. He was just not well. He died in his sleep the night after he felt bad. He died peacefully. I believe his heart simply stopped. He was quite old, you know. He did not suffer.'

I was very grateful for the answer and very much relieved. I was so happy I may have smiled even. I realised a smile could be misunderstood, so I explained, 'I am sad that my friend has passed away. But I am happy he did not die from a violent cause. I am grateful that you cared for him and stayed by him in his last moments. Jacob was like a father to me, probably the closest to a father as could be. I loved him much. I would have liked to tell him many things still.'

'Yes,' the woman said. 'He left letters for you. You must read what he wrote.'

The elder woman went to a cupboard, opened a door and took out a rather thick parcel, which she handed to me.

I asked her, 'do you know what is in here?'

The elderly woman shook her head and looked at the other. The younger answered, 'yes. I know what is in the parcel. My father wrote to you what to do in the event he died.'

I was startled. I had not known that Jacob had a daughter. He had mentioned of course he had family in Toulouse, but we had never discussed that matter. I addressed the elderly woman, 'were you then Jacob's wife?'

The younger woman answered again, 'no! My mother died many years ago in France. Sarah has served us and she was my wet-nurse, too. She is like a mother to me.'

I tore open the parcel. There were many types of vellum written in Hebrew, notes with figures, written by different hands. The top document was a letter, addressed to me. I read it while the two women waited. Jacob wrote his last will to me. He wrote there were documents in the parcel which had to be given to the Jewish Rabbi of Jerusalem so that what Jacob wanted me to do would be legalised to the Jewish community. Many of the documents were debentures and proofs of money Jacob had invested with other Jewish merchants. Jacob left me all his possessions, all his money, all his goods. He only asked me to always care for his daughter and her servant and to make sure by my own will that they would never lack protection or the means to live safely, peacefully and comfortably. He left me his house in Jerusalem. His daughter

would show me where his money was. She knew who the merchants were that owed him more money. He asked me to care for his daughter as if she were my sister. He wrote he had loved me. He said I was a hard bastard and a difficult student, but he thanked me for the many fine days we had spent together. The letter was short, hardly longer than a single page. I was moved.

I looked at the two women. I said to the younger one, 'show me.'

She knew what I meant. We went to another room, walked past that to still another room, then still to another one and I lost all sense of orientation. I asked, 'wait. We are not anymore in Jacob's house! We are in the house next to his!'

'Jacob bought the two houses next to the one you know,' the woman said. 'Then he cut down part of the walls between the houses so that one could walk through. They are one dwelling, now. Few people know we have the three houses. My father lived in one of the houses with Sarah. I live in the second house. The third, he used as library and store. We are in that part, now. I have to take you to the cellar under the buildings.'

So, Jacob had actually a very large place, maybe one of the largest in town, much larger than the usual Jewish houses in Jerusalem. And he had dug cellars and corridors in the rock beneath, like the merchants of Provins had done. We went deep into the cellars. The woman advanced before me with a torch in her hand. We came to one of the deepest, farthest cellars. Jacob's daughter had to open several heavy, wooden doors with large keys. Then she showed me four chests and opened them. There lay a fortune in gold, silver and stones in the chests. Jacob was probably the richest man in town and added to my own, I realised suddenly I was one of the wealthiest men of the Kingdom. I did not run my fingers through the gold. I just looked briefly at it. I glanced at the woman, and then told her to close the chests again. We went back to the upper room.

There I asked, 'what is your name?'

She answered, 'Miriam!'

I said, 'thank you, Miriam, for showing me all this. The inheritance of your father should be yours by right, not mine.'

Miriam replied without hesitation, 'I knew what my father was doing. I agreed with what he wrote. We discussed the letter and his decision. A man should guard my father's legacy. A man should trade or use it. I cannot do that. Sarah and I would not be able to live alone in the house. The Jewish community would come and provide us with a tutor. The money would soon be gone and we would be left wanting. I would be forced to marry somebody. I was and am not ready to marry. My father trusted you and I trust you. I have enough money to live. We will not be a burden.'

'Fine,' I said. 'I will do as Jacob wrote then, as he wanted. Suppose we changed nothing to the houses. Suppose you continued to live here with Sarah. Would you be offended if I lived in Jacob's quarters when I am in Jerusalem?'

'I was hoping you would do that. Sarah will be very happy. My father told me that if he died we would have to bring the documents to the Rabbi, who was a friend of his, here. We were to tell the Rabbi that I am now under your protection. The Jews would be angry, my father said, but the Rabbi would support his will and the Jews would comply. Under your protection we would be safe.'

And so we did. I sold my house in Jehoshaphat Street, and brought all I owned to the houses in David's Street. In that street lived Jews as well as Christians. I made sure

the people around knew that a Frankish Crusader knight now lived in Jacob's house. No one would dare to enter and harass Miriam and Sarah. Sarah served also me, now. I seldom saw Miriam in the beginning. She came and went through her own doors. I was too busy with myself to want anyone else's attention.

I had nightmares. Terrible nightmares. Marie was burning in fire and Gormond was enveloped in flames. I wanted to help them, but arrived always too late, and then the images started all over again. I thrashed at the fires but they would not be extinguished and gnawed at me, too. I was so helpless. I wept and shouted and hit the flames with my hands, with my feet. I cried and I woke from the sound I made myself. I was soaked in sweat. The sheets of the bed were all wet. It was pitch black in my bedroom, but a woman was holding me.

It was Miriam, for she spoke to me, 'it was only a nightmare, Daniel. Nothing but a nightmare. It is all over now. You are well. You are safe. Hush, nothing is wrong here.'

She held my head in her arms and caressed my face. She held me and stroked me until I was normal again and I said, 'it is all right. I am well now. Yes, I had a nightmare.' Then Miriam went. This happened several nights in the new house.

One morning, I knocked on Miriam's door. She opened and was heavily veiled as ever. I asked, 'can I come in?'

She said nothing but bade me in with a gesture of her hand. Her house was frugal and very clean. I saw several large books on a table and that surprised me. I wanted to thank her for the nights and explain her. Her veils suddenly irritated me.

I said in a grim tone, 'there are enough ghosts in Jerusalem and in this house, Miriam. Please take off your veil and let me see you.'

She hesitated, but then took away her veils. She dropped them on a chair near her.

Jacob had been an ugly little man, shrunken with the years. His last years he had also lost all the hair on his head: he was bald. He was crooked, always wore an unkempt, dark beard that covered most of his face. He had a large pouch, and looked as if he would be cheating on you constantly.

What I had now before me was someone who the poet called tulip-cheeked, ruby-lipped, amethyst-eyed, a shining face lined with luxurious, long, pitch-black hair knotted in musk-scented tresses. She held her face a little slighted and watched me almond-eyed, twitching her lips a little with shyness and expectation. Miriam was such a beauty that I forgot to breathe and I snorted so loudly that she looked both alarmed and amused at me. She smiled, then. She noticed I found her very lovely. Yet, she was more than lovely.

She was not a young girl anymore, a woman slightly less than my age. I looked her up and down then, open-mouthed, and I stared. Despite the black dress I also noticed her heavy, high breasts, her tiny waist, broad hips, and her legs were as long as mine. She was of my height, even just a little taller, whereas Jacob had shrunk to two heads lower than me.

I was very shy after that. Miriam was a woman. Marie had been a girl, lovely, lively, but not yet a woman. Aliénor was a Queen, always haughty and always unapproachable but for the few who knew her intimately, hard even when we kissed. Miriam was a woman that any man would fight for to have and cherish. She was the most splendid jewel of the house. No wonder Jacob had hidden her.

I said, still grasping for air and feeling very silly, ‘please stop wearing veils when I am in the house. Black does not suit you. Do as you like, but I prefer vivid colours. Do not be afraid. I will not touch you. I will not harm you. I would like to talk to you. There is much to say. I am sorry about the previous nights. I have nightmares. I have fought in battles and I suppose that in my dreams I want to undo things that happened.’

Her lips moved to a smile. The smile brought lines in her lips that asked to be caressed. The lips became the most striking, well-delineated, swollen feature on her face now, whereas before one was caught in her watery-blue eyes. Her lips were to be discovered. Her laugh was bewildering, enchanting.

She said, ‘I understand. If you want, we can talk about it. Talking often helps.’

I answered yes and then we stood awkwardly before each other. I continued to stare and to study her and I suppose I stared for too long. I was embarrassed. I broke the silence by saying I had to go. I stupidly ran to the door.

We talked a lot in the days thereafter. We talked in the house, evenings long, and we also talked while we took walks. We walked together to Gethsemane, on the other side of the gorge of Cedron, and we talked there and on the way. When we were outside the house, however, she insisted on keeping her veils on, even though I protested and hated those dark veils which hid her face.

Miriam had been trained as a doctor. She had learned to heal in Toulouse with Jewish physicians, friends of her father. The Jews of Jerusalem called her to sick women and sick children, never to heal men. She was very busy with the women. She was also a lying-in woman. She helped the sick but kept to her veils. The Jews appreciated humility. She was known as Jacob’s black woman. The Jews knew she was Jacob’s daughter. She laughed when she told that the Jews thought her father so ugly they preferred not to lay eyes on his daughter.

I recalled what I had done in France, and explained some of it to Miriam, but she knew already most of it. Her father had talked only of me. He had taught me the same things as her, had admired me, had loved me as his son – like the son he had never had.

After several such walks Miriam probed deeper and deeper into my fears. Then, after much hesitation and much dodging her questions, I dared to talk about what I had refused to let come to my mind, about what I had pushed back to the darkest corners of my brain. I talked about my greatest fear and my worse nightmare since Gormond died.

I said, ‘I think something – God or devil – kills the people I love, kills them by fire. My love Marie died burning alive in the church of Vitry and Gormond died before my eyes, consumed by flames. Maybe that is why when I have visions I always see a flaming sky. I am scared from flames but the flames accompany my dreams, my worse nightmares. I do not want the people I love to be hurt, not to burn in fire. Why am I punished in the people I love?’

‘I fought in several battles,’ I said to Miriam, ‘but I was never seriously hurt and when I was hurt somebody cared well for me so that I survived. I live, but the people that love me are hurt, are killed or have bad and sad lives. Why is somebody doing that to me? I am torn with suffering, with remorse and doubt about what happens to the people I love. Does that mean I should not love anymore? I do not understand why this is happening to me.’

Miriam listened and she did not answer at first, as if she expected me to say more. So I told her all. When nothing more came, she talked to me for a long, long time, repeating always the same arguments. She said she thought it was all a coincidence. There was only one death after Marie, Gormond, and Gormond died in a battle at a siege where many warriors died in flames. I was a strange man to believe there was an order, an aim, a reason for all things, whereas many things happened by pure chance. She said, laughing, 'wake up, Daniel! You are dreaming reasons that are not.' She said I was a damn egocentric creature, like so many men. 'Do you really believe,' she said, 'that you are so special that the universe turns around you only and makes things happen to you, one after the other? My father said we were free men and women. Either we are free or we are not. If we are not free, and the heavens intervene to modify what we do, or change what happens to us, then we would notice things, signs, events that are contrary to chance. We would perceive subtle deviations from chance and we would perceive the signs. Father told that despite thousands of learned Rabbis and scholars, no such deviation from chance had been noticed. Nobody had experienced it, nobody had written about it. So, he concluded, we must be free people. We make our own decisions, and what is laid before our feet, for us to decide upon, is chance. Hunches, portents lead to nothing, and surely to nothing that would determine or predict events. Pure coincidence, chance, accidents, fortuity was all that happened. You may have premonition of what will happen to you in the future, but it is not because you have visions, even heaven-sent visions, that Yahweh intervenes in your life!' She soothed me, called me a fool, and said I was prone to delusions. She mocked me so much that in the end I indeed felt silly. I had to admit to her, and she did not let off me until she heard it, that I had been a crazy, self-centred bastard and as stupid as a barrel of wine. She applied Reason to me and Reason said the universe had no specific aim for people.

However, I thought, why then do so many people pray that their fate would be changed? Why do things sometimes indeed change after one has prayed, for the better? And, I asked myself, without daring to tell her aloud: why then is your name Miriam, which is Marie? Were the events truly not signs?

I said, 'I have often been puzzled by the dominance in learning of logic. Philosophers tell us we are rational people. We apply reason to investigate on matters of God and the creation. The rules of how we reason have been discovered and described in the art of logic. Logic is taught in the cathedral schools of France. Yet, is that the only way by which men decide and choose? I think not! There exists a second ability of mankind. This, I would call the ability of intuition. We decide and choose often by sudden inspiration, sometimes even against the rules of logic. Logic works on assertions we are sure of, on truths, on certainties. Logic could work also on things we are not so certain of, but then it rapidly becomes inadequate. Intuition works on things we are not certain of. We chose despite the fact that our knowledge is incomplete. We have not enough information to apply logic, yet we do not hesitate to decide.

Let me give you an example. Suppose you have to choose between putting on a red dress or a blue dress. There is no real reason why you should prefer one over the other. Yet you decide for the red one. Asked why you picked that one, you would be hard-pressed to explain why you preferred the red. Likewise, in the middle of a battle, I know to which side of the fight to move, for no apparent reason. I know usually

when a fight is lost or won. I know when there is still hope to gain the day. Don't ask me why. I would not be able to cite the rational reasons for that fact. We have thus hunches, by which we decide. Now, suppose a world in which we would only be able to decide by using rational thinking, by logic. Why, I am fairly certain that the human race would have been extinguished thousands of years ago! If you think well about it, most of our daily decisions and choices are made by intuition, based on too little information to decide by logic. I am not saying we decide only based on intuition! Many of our choices are still made by applying logic, by tight reasoning, but many more are based on intuition!

Merchants and managers often work by intuition and hunches. A merchant sells cloth today and jewels tomorrow. He knows all about cloth-selling but nothing of jewel-selling; yet he sells jewels and makes a fortune by it. A good merchant is not the man who calculates and weighs in his head all the alternatives, all the time. The better merchant is the man that has the right hunches to trade there, at that place, at that time in that product and at that price. Don't ask him why: he will not tell you, not because it is a secret but because he doesn't know why, because he cannot explain exactly why in words. He just knows. I remarked that time and time again with the traders of Ascalon.

There is a lot more going on in our head than we are conscious of! Farmers work also by intuition all the time, sowing and ploughing according to their intuition.

The strange thing is that whereas we have known the rules of logic since fifteen hundred years, we know absolutely nothing about how intuition works. We know nothing about the processes, nothing about the rules. Are our brains so palsied that we cannot find out how intuition works? Did God make intuition so difficult to understand, so different from our nature, so that we might not understand the universe or have it very hard to do so? Does He prefer to keep us in the dark? Might that be a proof of the existence of God?

My intuition tells me there are so many coincidences in my life that go in a certain direction. What direction that is, I don't know. Maybe it is the search itself that is important to God. Maybe I am only directed to search and not to find.'

Miriam interrupted me. 'What about rhetoric?' she asked.

'Yes, there is an art in philosophy called rhetoric. Rhetoric is about learning to persuade others of our opinion. Rhetoric has nothing to do with intuition, save that it confirms brilliantly that intuition exists! Indeed, why would we need rhetoric if all our decisions were based on rational logic? Our arguments should not need to be defended, for they would be absolutely right, and nobody would be able to attack our stands! The sheer existence of rhetoric proves that we often proceed by formulating opinions, opinions that are the product of our intuition and opinions which are not sure truths of Reason and hence may be challenged.'

Miriam listened and did not look at me. I continued, 'Why is it that philosophers of all those past centuries have not studied intuition? Why is it that intuition is regarded with such disdain in comparison to logic? Intuition is most often considered to be not reliable, yet would it not be worth its while to study this ability, on which our survival depends so much? Is it not far more by intuition that we long for God? Is it not most by intuition that we comprehend something of God? Why despise and refuse to study an ability that leads us to believe in God? Are people afraid of what they might find or are they too stupid to discover the slightest ways and rules of how intuition works? Might intuition be connected to visions, to the experiences of the prophets?'

Miriam walked beside me. She remained silent for awhile, kicked with her feet at stones, and then said, ‘I have been very angry with my father. He abandoned me, leaving me alone at Toulouse with just my milk-nurse. He abandoned me for you. I have been jealous and irritated. I had a tough, loveless youth. My father may not have told you, but he was a Rabbi at first, then a merchant. He said he had learned too much and had his mind in confusion. Therefore he became a merchant. He left me alone because you were such a peculiar boy, the most brilliant my father had met and he wanted very much to teach you. I suppose you were the son he never had, and I was only a girl. I am beginning to understand my father, however. You are a very strange man, Daniel du Pallet. It is difficult not to be captivated by you, by your charm and by your knowledge. What are you? Are you a knight or a scholar? Are you a simple man or a prophet? By what do you live? Do you live by reason or by sentiment? You remind me of my father. He was much a man like you. Yet, Jews are not like you. Jews worship Yahweh, but they have their feet firmly on the ground and they try to judge in their lives by what is certain alone. They mock themselves for their faith in Yahweh and they sometimes irreverently say Yahweh is a rare joker, for everything he does to the Jews is contrary to their interests. Yet, they die gladly for their God. Yahweh makes life tough for Jews. Our lands, where our people have lived for thousands of years, are not ours. We have been oppressed for ages! Still, Jews don’t gamble! They don’t gamble even though, as you said, sometimes they have to. When they gamble, they know that either outcome can happen and they don’t regret whatever comes. The Frankish knights I met do not think at all on what you reflect on. Forgive me for being more pragmatic than you and not to reflect so much on our human gifts! Live and be happy!’

I smiled at her answer, but I was sad for what she said about Jacob. So I objected, ‘Jacob loved you more than he loved me. He was a man of justice. He would not suffer an injustice on you.’

Miriam took my hand and squeezed it but she was close to tears. We left the hard subjects at that and started to talk about the delicate hues of the splendid hollyhogs we discovered in a garden at Gethsemane.

We got along fine after that conversation, Miriam and I. She began to wear brightly coloured robes in the house and would dance around to show how prim she was, and she prided in her fine clothes. I never touched her and there was no talk of love between us then. We entered each other’s part of Jacob’s houses regularly, freely, without fear or shame. I found some form of happiness with Miriam and Sarah. Miriam was my only friend in those times. Yet we never embraced. We lived like brother and sister and grew closer. We never kissed.

Then, it was time for me to ride to Baniyas, as I had promised to Onfroi de Toron. I left Jerusalem at the end of 1155, at ease and satisfied.

I had heard in Jerusalem what had happened to the Kingdom and the lands around it. After we had captured Ascalon, matters worsened in Syria, at Damascus.

The Vizir Mujir al-Din Abaq of Damascus supported the Franks too openly. The Franks were too much present and visible at Damascus. The Vizir was too cruel with the population of the town and too vicious with his Amirs. The people of Damascus revolted and Mujir al-Din had to flee to his citadel. The Amirs called on Nur al-Din who must have made a jolt of pleasure, for in April of 1154 he stood before the city with his entire army, triumphant and leering.

Abaq had not been able to warn the Franks in time. When Jerusalem had assembled its army, Nur al-Din had already captured the city and Mujir al-Din Abaq was isolated in the citadel, which he defended with a few loyal warriors. He soon capitulated in return for a fief at Homs. Damascus thus fell in the hands of a Zengid, of Zengi's son Nur al-Din, almost without bloodshed. Saracen Syria was one, finally ready to confront Jerusalem. Yet, there still was a tacit peace, an absence of open war between Nur al-Din and King Baudouin III. And life was good in Syria and Outremer.

Baniyas! There existed no lovelier place on the face of the earth! Baniyas was a small fortified town in a landscape imagined by dreams. The Hermon Mountain peaks, vast, ominous, and covered with snow, shone in the distance. The hills of its base surrounded Baniyas. Only a little way farther were steeper hills and deep gorges. The Hermon peaks provided the melting water that formed the River Jordan, the sacred river of the Bible tales. Four rivers flowed near Baniyas, which converged to form the Jordan. North of the town lay the wide Forest of Baniyas. The Forest was at the Wadi al-'Asal, a gorge in which water always ran, and where high poplar trees grew, but also sycamore trees, willow trees, zaqqum trees, and fig trees. To the east were the valleys of the Wadi Kashabe and the Wadi al-Sa'ar, long and broad, low-sloping valleys covered with fine grass. Here were the enormous open pastures where cattle, sheep and goats, ate at will. To the west and further to the north were more fields. To the south lay gardens and orchards, the gardens of Baniyas, and to the south-east flew the rivers that formed the Jordan further south, and nourished the Lake of Huleh. Baniyas' rivers created a lush land of laurel-roses, of papyrus and reeds. The land was fertile, watered, rich in pastures and forests. Its landscapes were ever-changing when one travelled there and steep river valleys, torrents and rivers, waterfalls, broader valleys, low hills, and steep rocks and boulders alternated, all dominated by Mount Hermon in the far north. The hills might be bare like in deserts, but the valleys were all green.

Life was good at Baniyas for all. The Frankish garrison held the town and the castles, and thus protected the region from bandits, so that the shepherds could let their animals graze peacefully. It was a land of milk and honey and of flowers, the closest image to the Garden of Eden. The herdsmen were the descendants of Cain, nomads that came and went with thousands of animals. The King of Jerusalem had given the Syrian and Turcoman owner of herds permission to bring their flocks beneath Mount Hermon. The herds and the people thrived in freedom.

I loved to ride among the proud Bedu and the various tribes that travelled long distances and dwelled in this country. I was always a volunteer to lead a group of men to patrol outside the town. The herdsmen looked at us from the far when we passed, on their guard for foreigners, but they continued their work unhindered as soon as they distinguished our surcoats with the crosses.

Why had such a fine site to be the lock to the Frankish Kingdom of Jerusalem?

Baniyas was a town of northern Galilee, halfway between Mount Hermon and the Lake of Huleh, from which the Jordan slung its bed southwards to the Lake of Tibériade. The regions around Baniyas were a natural throughway between the high mountains and the wide rivers into the coastal areas of Galilee.

On the coast of Galilee lay the wealthy harbours of Saint-Jean-d’Acre in the south, Scandelion and Tyre in the centre and Sidon to the north. In these ports, Genoese, Venetian, Pisan, Sicilian Norman and Byzantine Greek traders, each established in their own quarters, vied for the trade in the Mediterranean Sea.

When one travelled perpendicular to the coast, eastwards, inland, from Tyre to Baniyas, one passed about halfway the town and fortress of Tibnin, called le Toron by the Franks. Baniyas was called Panéas by the Franks and both strongholds were the fief of Onfroi de Toron.

Baniyas was the easternmost fortress of the Kingdom of Jerusalem in Galilee. Further inland, deeper into Syria, to the northeast, due east of Mount Hermon, lay wonderful Damascus. If the Saracens of Damascus wanted to invade the Kingdom of Jerusalem, their easiest and fastest way was past Baniyas. Then they could launch a chevauchée of Saracen cavalry down south into Galilee, Samaria and Judaea, along the lands between the Sea and the Jordan to Nazareth, Nablus, Jericho and Jerusalem. Onfroi de Toron ruled over an Eden, but his Eden was one of the most coveted places of Outremer. When Baniyas was captured, the Kingdom of Jerusalem lay open. The contrary was also true: from out of Baniyas any Crusader army could reach Damascus in a few days.

Baniyas was therefore heavily fortified with strong, high walls and big round towers to guard every stretch of the walls. There was a citadel inside the town, but a more formidable fortress sat on a high promontory some distance from the town. This was called the Qal’at al-Subeiba, but the Franks called it Subeibe. This castle had been built at the extremity of a narrow, enormous rock formation, very steep, in the first hills of the mountains of the Hermon. Behind the fortress, to its north, was the Wadi Khashaba, a very deep gorge. Subeibe was near impregnable and Onfroi tried to hold ever a strong garrison of warriors there.

I served Onfroi de Toron and his sons from out of both citadels, but I lived most of the time in the wilderness – which was a paradise - with my men, sleeping in the free and happy to have the freedom that exhilarates the mind and the senses.

I quickly came to know the nomads better. They spoke many languages, but also Arabic and among Toron’s knights I was one of the very few to speak that language. I exchanged polite phrases with the nomad chiefs, anecdotes, then drank with them their sherbets and hot drinks. I learned about the links in their families, among the tribes. The nomads, as all people, were always eager and proud to talk of their families and to cite how rich they were in sheep, goats, camels and horses. I took the habit of riding in Arab clothes again.

The nomad chiefs had magnificent Arabian horses. They were masters in rearing the animals. They admired Awaj and recognised an Arabian but Turkish horse as soon as they saw one. When their first suspicions passed, I was invited to their tents. They said my horse had come from beyond Aleppo and one particularly proud chief said I

had an Aiyub horse. Stating that fact amounted to a question: how had I gotten such an animal? Had I won it in battle? I said to the truth I had received it from a friend. They did not believe me at first, but I gave the name of my friend: Salah al-Din Yusuf ibn Aiyub. They were quick to ask: the Salah al-Din who is the son of Najm al-Din Aiyub and whose uncle was Nur al-Din's warrior-lord Asad al-Din Shirkuh? I said yes. Their eyes rolled in their heads then, they all spoke at the same time, for they had heard of the terrible Shirkuh. I could hear them think: this man cannot be entirely Frankish if he has friends like Salah al-Din. He is a strange man, this one. But they believed me and saw no cunning or mischief in my claim. If I said I knew Salah al-Din, then I knew Salah al-Din indeed.

I lived at Baniyas, happy to do something useful and noble. I helped Onfroi de Toron keep the peace in Eden and I helped the nomad tribes to continue to live in pride and dignity. I stayed months in a row at Baniyas but returned regularly to Jerusalem. I remained never for long in Jacob's house. Each time however, Miriam hurried in and welcomed me. It dawned on me that I was very much in love. Those moments were happy ones too, and our house filled with laughter. After I had come and left thus several times, one morning I awoke after a night of much tossing and turning, but not alone in the bed. Less than a year later my first son was born. We called him Jacob the Younger.

I worried much about how the Jews of Jerusalem would regard Miriam after it became clear she lived in intimacy with a Frank. Miriam told me some Jews spoke scandal, but the most continued to call her in, as before. Miriam wanted a ceremony but the Rabbi, though her friend, refused to marry us. Miriam harassed him until he accepted to hold some kind of ceremony in private, with only the three of us, and, more importantly, he promised to write our names in his books as husband and wife for Jewish law. Miriam checked.

As for the Franks, my apprehensions over Miriam and me eased when one day I passed Raymond du Puy, the Grand-Master of the Hospitaller Knights in the Square of the Temple. He looked inquisitively at me. I saw him staring at me, and hesitating. I nodded a greeting. He stopped and halted me too with a word. He said, 'you are Daniel du Pallet, aren't you? You were with us at Ascalon?' 'Yes,' I replied, intrigued. 'You live with a woman called Miriam, in a house of David's Street.' 'Indeed, I do,' I replied, and my hand went instinctively to the hilt of my sword, as if I would not easily let him criticise the relations between Miriam and me - though one didn't threaten a Grand-Master of the Hospitallers and particularly not this one. Raymond was over seventy years old but still a strong, straight-backed knight, who wielded extraordinary powers in the Kingdom. Nothing of the sort was on Raymond du Puy's mind. 'She is as fine healer I hear,' he continued. 'And a surgeon even. Would you mind if she came to help in the Hospital once in a while when we have a very sick child or woman or even a grave case for a man? My physicians claim she is a better healer than they. Some of them would like to learn more. They insisted to ask her in but I resisted them until now, for she is a Jewish woman. Nevertheless, my doctors press me and the matter has been brought to me several times. May we call her?' I answered, 'I believe she will agree. But she is her own woman. I will ask her, but she may prefer not to heal Christians. Would she be protected?'

‘Of course she would be safe,’ Raymond said. ‘I would not have asked without guaranteeing her protection personally. Please let me know her decision.’ He hesitated, ‘I also heard that you are now at the garrison of Baniyas?’

‘Indeed I am,’ I replied.

‘The Hospitallers may send a garrison in the future to Subeibe. The King of Jerusalem asked us to do so. Would you consider leading some of our troops there?’

I was astonished. ‘I live with a Jewish woman,’ I said, ‘and Hospitaller Knights are monks. Are you sure you want me to lead Hospitallers?’

The Grand-Master smiled, ‘more Hospitallers than you could imagine have wife and children in other religions, children from Jacobite and Nestorian and Armenian and Syrian women. You are not married in our faith, I believe, but loyal and discreet. I normally demand chastity, obedience and the forsaking of Property. I will send you the rules, of course, but I will make an exception for you. I know how you live. I would be pleased to accept you in our Order.’

I continued, ‘that would mean a period of training and trials, and I am in the service of Onfroi de Toron. I cannot leave him.’

‘Oh yes,’ he replied pensively. ‘As to the period of spiritual training and the trials and the ceremony, we can do away with that in your case. It honours you that you want to stay loyal to Onfroi. Suppose we let you stay with Sire Onfroi de Toron but sometimes – let us say – ‘borrowed’ you from him until you are freed of your promises. Would you agree to that?’

I did not hesitate for long then, ‘that would be fine, of course. I would be honoured,’ I agreed.

‘Good, good,’ Raymond concluded. ‘I have to have this accepted formally by our Council of course, but we already discussed much of this. I will let you know.’

A few days later, Miriam was called to the Hospital of the Knights of Saint John near the Holy Sepulchre. She examined her first sick child discreetly. I had been at King Baudouin’s Court that day. When I returned in the evening, there lay on the table a black surcoat with the pointed, silver cross of the Hospitaller Knights, as well as a large black silk cloak with the same star-like cross stitched on it. It was a rich cloak and a present of Raymond du Puy. Sarah told me a Hospitaller servant had brought the coats. There was a parchment scroll to them, which stated that from that day on Sir Daniel du Pallet would be listed as a Knight of the Order of Saint John. The document was signed Raymond du Puy, Grand-Master. Henceforth I was a Hospitaller knight, free to declare myself so when I wanted and where I wanted.

Miriam and I settled in a cosy routine. Sarah cared for young Jacob when Miriam healed the sick. I served at Baniyas and returned every odd month for a time to Jerusalem. We were content with the moments we had to our own. We liked to live together and our love was tender, permanent and stronger with the day. We heard of battles, nothing more than skirmishes, going on all around the Frankish lands of Outremer, but those strives did not threaten Jerusalem. We lived in peace and quiet.

In this world of humans however, ambitions, lust for power, envy, conceit and greed never grant peace a long reign. It was greed that broke our peace, a greed that ultimately would condemn the Kingdom, and the greed reached out first to Baniyas.

In the winter months of the beginning of 1157, a large group of Jerusalem knights and armed men on horseback suddenly appeared at Baniyas. Onfroi de Toron knew not of their coming until the last moment. I was patrolling at the time almost up Mount Hermon. When I returned to Baniyas at the end of my mission, I failed to find the Forest as lively as usual. The herds grazed no more in the fields. Of the Bedu we found only burned tent camps and corpses lying in the pastures. The camps of the three most prominent nomad chiefs were destroyed. These men had welcomed me, been kind to me and I had sat and talked with them. Their herdsmen and women had danced in the evening to honour a guest. I looked for Saracen shields and arrows and dead Saracen warriors, but I found none. I did find discarded Crusader shields, broken Frankish swords and a Frankish crossbow. All the way to Baniyas the sheep and the goats, the bulls and the cows and the horses had disappeared. Only corpses of the nomads, men, women and children, lay around. I was utterly horrified. There was great silence in the town when I rode through the gates and many a hostile eye flared in my view before I reached the citadel.

‘I know,’ Onfroi de Toron shouted. ‘I know! Don’t tell me and don’t blame me! The killing and pillaging started even before I was notified. None of my knights did this! King Baudouin rode to here himself! He and his Barons stole all the cattle and the fine horses and they killed the herdsmen. I rode up to the King to protest, but the Barons rebuked me and threatened me! Me, the Lord of these regions! They took hundreds of horses, the camels and all the herds down the Jordan. Shameful! That was fools’ work!’

Onfroi added many hard words and curses, and swore until he calmed down. I said, ‘you realise of course that the nomad chiefs brought their cattle and horses here on explicit permission of King Baudouin? There is nothing as sacred to a Muslim Bedu, an Arabian or a Syrian or a Turk as hospitality. He who breaks the rules of hospitality performs a crime against the Qur’an! He will be called the worst criminal in the land. The people around here will henceforth attack any Frank in the region by stealth, from high ground or valley, in the night and in the day, along the wadi’s and in the hills. The nomads will not bring their herds here anymore. There will be no trading of goods anymore at Baniyas. Caravans will turn around the region. And of course, the tribes will all call on Nur al-Din to claim rightful vengeance in the name of Allah, and Nur al-Din will find all the nomads more than willing now to grow his ranks of warriors. Why?’

‘Do you want to know why all this?’ Onfroi cried. ‘I’ll tell you why! Baudouin needed gold - that is why! He is covered in debts. He likes gambling too much and he likes the wives of his knights too much. And all that costs gold to please his mistresses and his creditors. He is constantly harassed by his creditors, every day. So he stole! Of course, it was a lot easier to attack and steal from innocent, unarmed herdsmen than to attack a well-defended Saracen town. I am afraid he caused us an immense harm. I told the King we would not be able to hold the city against the Turkish army. So he proposed – what he had already decided before, I learned – that I should hand over half of what I owe here to the Hospitaller Knights. The Hospitallers will come with a strong contingent of Knights and troops to take over Baniyas from us, as well as the fortress of Subeibe. We stay in our citadel. I told the King I would hold Toron in the first place, then. This is crazy! Shameful! I agree with the coming of the Hospitallers, of course, for only with a very strong force of knights can we stand a chance to the army of Damascus and Aleppo. But taking away from me half of my

fief is an insult! How in God's name does Baudouin think he will uphold the Kingdom with any moral argument after this senseless bloodbath? He killed, murdered innocent children, Daniel. His men raped the women before they slaughtered them. I hid two Turcoman tribes and their chiefs and people in the city, under the nose of Jerusalem, but that was all I could do. So now, we guard day and night far out inland and watch for the Saracen army that will surely come! Rest a day, not longer. You patrol with double the usual men to the south and west. Guy de Scandelion will patrol east and north. I want to know of every movement of Saracens in the neighbourhood, if only of one man! Damn Baudouin!'

Onfroi roared like a caged-in lion. He kicked everybody around so that many of us cursed the Barons of Jerusalem. We were certain we would soon have to give battle. Many men would die over the greed of a King. Our warriors were bitter. They refused to understand why Baudouin had come and we, the knights, were ashamed to tell them the truth. We waited in fear, nervous and irritated. I patrolled and covered large distances. We took only cavalry. Whenever we met Syrians, they fled from us and the ones that could not flee were armed now, and defied us with hatred in their eyes. I did not even try to talk to them anymore. What could I have said?

After Easter of 1157 I saw in the far a long plume of dust rise in the air along a narrow valley that we scouted. A column of what could only have been Franks was advancing south to north, to Baniyas. When we rode nearer, we saw that the approaching army were several hundreds of black-cloaked Hospitaller Knights with their men-at-arms, driving with them cattle and wagons loaded with provisions and weapons. The Hospitallers had arrived to re-enforce and to occupy Baniyas and Subeibe. Moreover, a detachment of knights of Baniyas with their men was arriving from the north to join the column that marched from the south.

The column was a long one. It advanced in a valley parallel to the Jordan, to the west of the river, towards Baniyas. They were not so far from the town anymore, maybe a day's riding, but they progressed very slowly indeed, for the convoy of provisions they had with them slowed them down considerably. The Hospitallers Knights amounted to more than five hundred, I counted, and about a thousand footmen accompanied them. They drew along cattle, sheep, goats and donkeys and even formidable destriers, reserve horses. The cattle were driven by about a hundred Arabian peasants from the lands of Galilee. The advancing group had no vanguard and no rearguard and I had seen no scouting groups on any ridge. That was a mistake in territories so close to Damascus, for a band of eager Saracen warriors could split the Frankish convoy in two right behind the knights, defend their position to deny the knights access to the rear part of the column, kill the unarmed peasants and walk happily off with the rich cattle.

This was about to happen, for we sighted a little further a group of Saracen archers and warriors on foot posted behind a hill. A few Saracens were on the lookout, lying on the ridge of the hill. These spied on the movements of the Hospitallers, judging the right moment to attack. The Saracen cavalry had to lie in ambush somewhere near. Soon now, the unsuspecting column of Franks would be assaulted by surprise, and be split.

Where was the enemy cavalry? The Saracen archers could not hold their attack without cavalry, so there had to be Saracen horsemen nearby. Where were they? From our vantage point I could not spot the cavalry and we could not ride further, in danger of being seen by the archers. The Saracen cavalry was not on this, left side of the advancing column. They had to be somewhere on the right, covered by the hills that bordered the valley. I told my men we had to ride hard to warn the Franks of an imminent assault. We did not have to hide any longer now, so we rode hard, but we had still quite a stretch of grassy land to cover when pandemonium broke loose below.

The Frankish knights of Baniyas met with the Hospitallers. There was a temporary chaos of mingling men, exchange of greetings and discussions among the knights, before the two groups would be organised for further advance. Right at that moment the Saracens staged a double attack. It was well-planned and executed in two phases. We saw it all happen while we rode at a gallop to the armies, cursing for having been too late.

The Saracen cavalry, not a large force, charged on the Hospitallers at the front right side. The horse riders sent arrows to the Franks and a few men rode even with brandished swords into the column. This attack lasted only a few moments, for the Saracens seemed to have misjudged the force of their opponents, so they quickly turned and rode back, fleeing from the Hospitallers.

I cursed and smiled. The attempt of the Saracens was so obvious. I had seen such movements several times in the Hauran and also Usama had told me a little of the favourite ways of the Saracens to fight opponents. They would assault with a small force first, then flee, drawing the reckless enemy to them at the gallop, stretch their lines and then fall onto the thinner groups with the bulk of their men, massing their horse riders in the centre and cause disarray in their opponents' order. The Hospitallers and the knights of Baniyas fell enthusiastically in the trap. Each Frankish knight wanted to show the other how one pursued and killed Saracens. They thought that the Saracens had been surprised by the double contingent of troops. So they would teach the reckless enemy a lesson. But they were not yet well attuned as groups, so the Frankish cavalcade in the valley was a chaotic affair of charging knights without real leadership.

I was still riding towards the valley when what I feared happened. The column of Frankish knights stretched; the knights' destriers charged at full gallop in a contest of being the first to reach the fleeing enemy, which was an illusion, for the more heavily loaded Frankish horses could in normal circumstances never ride as fast as the lighter Saracens. Then from behind the hills on the right, a very large mass of many hundreds of armoured Saracen cavalry rode straight into the flank of the Franks.

A fierce battle ensued and more Saracen horse riders emerged. The Franks stopped their horses to confront the new peril, but the Saracens hit the thin Frankish line of knights like as many darts in one body. Many knights were unsaddled during the first shock. For every Frank in the centre were several Saracens, screaming revenge and victory. The Saracen warriors would finish off the centre rapidly, fend off the knights on their flanks and then attack at their ease the front and rear rests of the Hospitallers and knights of Baniyas.

While this was happening, the Frankish footmen ran to help the knights, but they had to run quite a distance. They would come too late and without the support of cavalry, they too would be easily annihilated by the swift Syrian horsemen. If that was not enough, the Saracen archers and footmen that had lain in ambush to the left of the column now charged down on the innocent and unarmed cattle drivers. A real massacre thus happened in the back of the charging Frankish men-at-arms. Some of them looked back and confused shouts were heard, but their leaders at the front saw not what happened in the rear, had only eyes for their masters and so they rode and ran on, desperately trying to reach the knights. The Arabian peasants and their few guards were instantly killed by arrows and sword cuts. The animals that were needed for the provisions of Subeibe would soon be lost entirely. The Saracen footmen were already stopping the beasts and driving them in the other direction, southwards.

When I arrived with my few men at the head of the Frankish knights, the battle was lost. The Saracen cavalry had killed or wounded the main part, the centre of the Frankish troops. We only saw mayhem of dust and entangled, fighting horse riders there, but there could be no doubt as to the outcome. The knights were outnumbered. I saw black-cloaked knights on the ground and others fall, black-cloaked warriors trying to disengage from the battle, but being shot down by arrows in horse and men. The foremost Franks, mostly knights of Baniyas, had plied onto the enemy and had attacked them. The fight was hard on the right flank of the Saracens too, but the knights there had never been able to do what they did best: ride in a dense mass of levelled lances against a horde of lighter-armed Saracen cavalry. The fight was a stationary one here, one man to one man, sword to sword, horse to horse, and the Saracens were no less brave and skilled fighters as the Franks.

My men and I could make a difference here. We held our lances straight and charged. We were a compact mass of fifteen Frankish warriors, trained to kill at the gallop. We drove hard into the point where the Saracen centre met its own right flank. We cut a wedge through the enemy by the sheer impact of our galloping horses. We pushed through, clashed our lances in bodies, drawing awful wounds, and then we were absorbed in the mass of Saracens. We had given temporary relief to the front Franks, but we had too few horse riders to make a decisive difference. Once our shock spent, though the Saracens had suddenly lost as many men as my group counted, we too had to engage by sword, horse to horse. The fighting was tough and obstinate, nobody yielding to his enemy.

We fought two by two, each man holding his right side and never allowing a Saracen between us. The Saracens were surprised by my curved sword but not much impressed. They welcomed a duel that resembled their training. I wounded several men by the energy of my sword-swerving, but as I grew tired in my arm the duels lasted longer and were more evenly matched. The sword-hacks, thrusts and parries slowed for me, as for my companions.

We had arrived deep into the group of Saracen warriors and the enemy were being packed and eliminated between our wedge and the Franks at the extremity. But was that making a crucial difference in the battle? More and more Saracens faced me.

While I parried I stood in my stirrups to look at what was happening to my right. Almost all of the Frankish knights had disappeared in the centre. The left flank of Saracen riders had almost finished the rear Hospitaller knights. Frankish knights were

surrendering there. Saracen cavalry had intercepted the Frankish footmen and they were killing the Jerusalem warriors by the dozens, swirling around them on horse, dancing around them, and killing them with pleasure and ease. Without cavalry the hundreds of men on foot had not the slightest chance at survival. The convoy of cattle had already been carried off. The ground in the valley there was littered with the corpses of the Arabian peasants.

We might destroy the right flank of the Saracens where I fought, but the enormous mass of hundreds of Saracen riders would in a few moments all fall on us, encircle us and slaughter us too. There was nothing so few of us could do to a main battle lost, in the face of this overwhelming enemy. So I pushed my prancing horse to the left and shouted to my men to advance to that side while fighting, to force us a way out of the mass of warriors. This took a while, and I saw the Saracens regroup to my right, watch us, and prepare for an organised counter-charge. I hit the stirrups of Awaj so that the animal shook and pranced on.

The Frankish knights looked at me. While I had their attention, I pointed left with my sword, to the open land behind the knights of Baniyas. Then I forced Awaj to pass through the Saracens. My group of knights followed and we connected with the group of knights of Baniyas and the few swiftest Hospitaller knights that had reached the front. They formed the most northern line of the fight. I passed that line, shouting to the men to follow me.

I still don't understand why men follow me in battle. Maybe fighters follow anybody who shouts what sounds like commands and who looks as if he knows what to do. Maybe I was among the few knights that always think while fighting, always assess their situation, while other merely fight on, and maybe other warriors feel that. I only know that what I do in battle works. The men around me therefore followed me and then more followed.

We were about forty knights, and we broke off the engagement at the right flank of the Saracens. We could escape. The enemy stood for a while, unsure about what to do next. I turned my horse and waited. I considered for a moment slamming with our forty knights head-on into the main Saracen troops, but there were too few of us and hundreds of Saracen riders waiting. Practically no fight anymore was going on in the midst of the Saracens. We would have to attack all the enemy warriors, just the forty of us. We had no lances anymore. It would have been folly to charge and die, surrounded by the enemy. I wanted no suicide. This battle was lost and we all knew it. Many of us were wounded, all blood-splattered. We should leave and save what was left.

I turned my horse north and forced it into a gallop to Baniyas. Our knights followed. Of course we were angry, and of course we were frustrated, but there was nothing we could have done except being killed. A large Saracen troop followed us for a while, but orders shouted the men back. We were allowed to escape.

I rode to a nearby hill and there, in the setting sun, we looked into the valley. The Saracen army circled on horse around a leader party of green banners. There would be the Amir that had devised and led the battle. The Saracens thus feasted their triumph in roars of shouts and in frantic circles of galloping horse riders. The battle had finished. The valley grounds were sowed with corpses, Christians and Muslims alike,

but there were many times more Christian bodies lying in the dust and grass. Prisoners were being assembled and driven together, knights and footmen were disarmed, knocked down and then bound. Farther along, to the south, all the Arabian peasants had been murdered. They had been the poorer peasants of the Frankish territories. They had hoped for a new life in another land. They had paid for their collaboration with their lives. None had been saved.

I did not wait long on the hill, for I abhorred the spectacle. The Hospitallers had lost over five hundred knights, maybe a thousand warriors and peasants and all of their provisions. Few Hospitallers rode with me, unscathed. It had not been a glorious day, the losses due to carelessness. The Hospitallers had thought they advanced in pacified territory. But this was scorpion land. They should have known that after King Baudouin's campaign they were in highly hostile land. The lowering sun sent its orange rays deep in the valleys and the shadows rapidly lengthened over the horror below. The wounded Franks were being slaughtered. I turned my horse and we rode to Baniyas.

Later, we heard that the leader of the Saracens had been Nasir al-Din, the younger brother of Nur al-Din, the Amir-Miran, the Amir of Amirs. Nasir al-Din cut off the heads of all the Franks fallen on the battlefield. He brought the heads and the prisoners to Damascus and showed them in triumph to the people. He executed publicly most of the prisoners, in vengeance of the massacre of the nomads by the King of Jerusalem. The rest of the prisoners, the wealthy knights, he sent to Ba'albek, to his brother and lord Nur al-Din. The Atabeg of Aleppo had them all decapitated. Nur al-Din was the hero now of the Syrian nomads too, and his number of warriors grew with their support. Nevermore would we be able to ride in peace around Baniyas. Henceforth we would have to expect an arrow in our back at any moment.

The Hospitallers of Jerusalem sent no new reinforcements to Baniyas. Their Grand-master had been disgusted by the loss of men. The protection of Baniyas was too costly for him. I wondered whether the Hospitaller Knights were still able to send more knights after so many of their men had been eliminated. Onfroi de Toron and I realised we were on our own in a suddenly very hostile country.

Life at Baniyas resumed. Onfroi de Toron was depressed. The town was unusually calm. Merchants and artisans abandoned the town in little groups. Trade came to a standstill. Baniyas had the smell of a doomed place.

Two weeks after the massacre of the Hospitallers, we heard that a large group of Saracens advanced from the west against our town. Onfroi de Toron sent a hundred knights to challenge the enemy force. He could not tolerate Saracens between Baniyas and his other fief, Tibnin. Our reconnaissance teams had returned too quickly with the news, however. The Saracens were not an isolated small group, but the vanguard of a formidable army led by Asad al-Din Shirkuh, a mass of several thousands of men, the vanguard of the great army of Nur al-Din coming to lay siege to Baniyas, led by his most dangerous war leader.

When nothing was heard of our knights I was sent to find out what had happened to them, or where they were. I found first Shirkuh's army marching from the west, from Tibnin. This was an unusual direction for the Saracens to come from, but Shirkuh was a man who knew all the tricks of all the Saracen army leaders together plus a few of his own.

I circled Shirkuh's detachments and found behind the marching men the corpses of the hundred knights of Baniyas. Well, there were no hundred corpses, a few less, but I supposed the other had been taken alive to be brought to Damascus and maybe killed there. The corpses lacked heads. It was a desperate war we were waging here.

I rode as fast as I could back to Baniyas and then rode two days further east. I found an enormous number of Saracen warriors arrive by those routes, even more men than were with Shirkuh. I was abhorred also to notice the mangonels, trebuchets, onagers and even old ballistas drawn by oxen moving slowly forward. Nur al-Din had come to capture Baniyas with a siege army. He wanted no one to escape from the city, westwards, so Shirkuh had ridden in an encircling move to a position between Baniyas and Tibnin.

Onfroi de Toron was despondently calm when I announced him we would be besieged in a few days' time. He sighed, and then reasoned again with that sense of superiority of all Franks in regard to Saracens. He called the prominent knights of his fief together and told them to prepare. He thought Baniyas and his citadels were strong enough to withhold a siege, his garrison strong enough even to defeat Nur al-Din's entire Syrian army under its walls. He waved away my remarks that two or three thousand men could hardly resist, let alone defeat an army of twenty thousand Saracens. He was still blinded by his matchless record.

So we repaired and strengthened the walls and towers and the gatehouses of Baniyas. We flattened the road to the upper castle of Qal'at al-Subaiba, to be able to ride and run rapidly from the town to this last resort. We drew our own meagre mangonels from the storehouses, assembled as much oil as we could find and filled the reservoirs on the top of the walls. We took in all the provisions around the town and we armed the people of Baniyas.

Nur al-Din and Shirkuh placed their tents respectively to the west and south of Baniyas. Their mangonels immediately started to throw heavy stones into the town and to the walls. A few burning projectiles were also sent through the air, pots filled with naphtha, enveloped in pieces of cloth on fire. Not so many of these were thrown however, probably because they were also of a nuisance to the Saracens. A real issue were the heavy iron arrows the ballistas shot into town. They killed many a man and woman. People hid in their cellars, if they had any, and they fortified the interior of their houses with anything they could find: wood, furniture, bales of cloth, sacks of grains.

The siege lasted. The Saracens tried to assault the city twice with scaling ladders. We threw them back fairly easily. Arrows, crossbow bolts and oil sufficed to keep the enemy at bay. The few Saracens that arrived near to the top of the walls we stabbed at with long lances.

Onfroi and his sons were heartened by these relative victories. They decided to sally and attack the Saracen camp. I warned them against such a move, for the Saracens

always let their enemies feel they had won a skirmish to draw them out of their position of strength, but the knights of Onfroi would not listen and Onfroi felt comforted by their advice. I was a bad Christian, they said, a doubter. God would be with us! So they sallied and ordered me, as a sort of punishment, to guard the paths from Baniyas to Subeibe, to the high citadel.

Well, they sallied indeed and made a fine show of their power. Unluckily, the Saracens proved to be no worse warriors than the knights, and the opponent of Onfroi de Toron was Shirkuh!

Onfroi de Toron charged from the gates of Baniyas and thundered with his destrier in the open plains before the town. It was a very coloured, impressive lot, for the Frankish knights wore all the flags and banners of Christendom. Onfroi had enough flat space before him to form his garrison into a mass of chain-mailed riders that would have run over any army. The spiral-coloured lances were levelled to horizontal thrusts. But Shirkuh had archers ready in a ditch facing the main gates of Baniyas. The Saracens were not unprepared for such a sally. They had expected it to happen. When Onfroi and his men rolled on, a rain of arrows pelted on the charging horsemen. Onfroi's knights wore mail, heavy mail, helmets, and they had shields. Their horses wore less armour. Many of the Crusader knights flew high in the air as their horses faltered. The falling horses drew other horses down, and in the chaos some of the energy of the charge was lost. The knights ploughed on however, and transpierced many an enemy archer. They made their destriers jump over the ditches and rode on. Shirkuh had amassed his most heavily armed cavalry right there. These men also were on horseback, and they also had spears, and they did not wait still for the impact. They rode into the Franks at full gallop.

I stood on the walls of Baniyas then and saw it all happen. The Frankish knights disappeared into a throng of Saracen cavalry. A very hard battle ensued there, when the Frankish assault came to a halt. There were so many fine, strong, experienced Turkish warriors right at the point where Onfroi had thought to create a surprise, that a mass had smashed into an equally tough mass. The fight lasted for some time and from the walls we could not see much, but for a tumult of dust and fighting men. It was certain that hundreds of knights had run onto thousands of Saracen riders and many hundreds of footmen now ran to the havoc, armed with spears. One by one, wounded knights left the fight and rode back to town. Then, more knights followed, and a little later the retreat became a rout, as packets of knights rode quickly back. Shirkuh did not wait to cheer on his triumph. He ordered his cavalry forward, so a mixed wave of both Frankish and Saracen cavalry all mingled together in one chevauchée, headed for the gates.

I needed not to see more. I ran down the walls, jumped on Awaj and rode to the other side of the town to secure the Qal'at al-Subaiba.

The townsmen that guarded the gatehouse of Baniyas did not close the wooden doors for the oncoming knights. The largest part of them could thus ride into town indeed, but the Saracen cavalry rode with them. Then, the doors could not be closed anymore, for the mass of horses and men pressed too much; again among the riders were as many Saracens as Franks. Saracens were inside Baniyas! When there were quite enough of them, some of them overwhelmed the sentries at the gates and then the gatehouse was held by the enemy, and the rest of Shirkuh's army rolled into town.

The knights could do nothing else but ride on towards the high citadel. The paths to Subeibe were guarded, and the Saracens halted in the low town. As many knights as had survived the sally rode into the citadel of Subeibe. I entered the place as last. We drew up the drawbridge behind us and closed the gates. There was a chaos of horsemen in the courtyard.

I saw Onfroi de Toron covered with blood, wounded but alive, accompanied by his sons, cursing and howling in the courtyard. He looked at me and he cursed some more. He should have taken my advice. I had the tact not to remind him, but he knew.

The next few weeks of April 1157 were remarkable ones. We were caught like rats in our nest. We could hold out for months, but ultimately we would have to surrender. Onfroi de Toron called on me and sent me out with two knights to propose to surrender the citadel on condition that all Christians could leave unharmed. I rode into the city and was escorted to the tent camp. Nur al-Din did not receive me. Shirkuh did. I approached the old, tough warrior with my best, polite Arabic phrases. The greetings exchanged, he invited me to drink a sherbet in front of his tent. I asked Shirkuh how his family was, especially his nephew Salah al-Din. Yusuf was being trained to be Shirkuh's assistant and yes, he was a fine fellow. Shirkuh remembered my name, for Salah al-Din had told about me. He remarked I still had the Aiyub horse. We came to no more than polite chat. I handed the proposal of surrender to Shirkuh, but no answer was given there and then. Nur al-Din would have to consider the offer. We rode back to Subeibe.

Nur al-Din never provided an answer. Why should he? He had his mightiest army ever against a tiny garrison. He could wait a few weeks more at the Subeibe and see how our situation would get better for him by the day. He could clear all the surrounding areas up to Tibnin from Franks and allied Syrians.

Something else astonishing happened however. Nur al-Din did not bring his mangonels on to our defences. He did not start to sap our walls. He withdrew troop after troop from Baniyas and drew his heavy machines after him. We saw how the Saracens systematically destroyed the fortifications of the town. The works hastened even, and then we saw the entire enemy camp break off. The Saracens plied their tents. The massive army left in one block.

Finally, the remains of the city of Baniyas were set to fire and a dense black column of smoke rose from the houses, and then blew our way.

When the Saracen army had abandoned the site to the last man, we left Subeibe and rode through desolation. The once so fine and wealthy town of Baniyas was totally in ruins, its entire population massacred, its houses destroyed and burning, its walls partially torn down, its defence towers demolished. The stench of burned thatch, wooden beams, rotting corpses and burnt oil and pitch disgusted us as we rode past the town. Onfroi de Toron ordered his knights to camp beneath the crumbled gates.

I rode on with a small detachment of knights to find out what was going on. Nur al-Din's army might well have captured and garrisoned Baniyas and Subeibe, and stayed there. But his army marched north, towards Mount Hermon. So I rode into the other direction, south, for half a day, and found nothing there. I then rode west for half a day. There, I met the vanguard of the Army of Jerusalem.

King Baudouin had Baniyas and his Connétable Onfroi de Toron on his conscience. He had gathered an army to relieve Baniyas. The enormous army of all the Frankish counties together neared the town.

I rode back to Onfroi de Toron to bring him the good news.

A day later, King Baudouin rode up to the town. All the Barons of Outremer rode with him, royal banners flying high in the wind. Baudouin noted the destruction of the place. He rode into ruins and he could not but realise that what had happened here was his fault. He did not smile.

Baudouin recalled the importance of a fortified Frankish settlement at Baniyas, so he ordered Baniyas to be reconstructed. I was again out of the town by then, following still Shirkuh's cavalry, to watch where they would ride to.

My men and I wore white robes over our Crusader surcoats and haubergeons. We had no lances and no banners. We followed Shirkuh for about a week. He moved north, to Damascus, but he moved with his horse riders not more rapidly than his oxen could draw his mangonels.

We got tired of following him. It was July now, and very hot and depressing in the sultry heat of the day. We were on the point of returning, when the army of Saracens split and changed direction. Shirkuh's footmen and his mangonels continued to move north-east on the roads to Damascus. His entire cavalry however turned and rode south. This time, Shirkuh might have had no idea he was observed by Franks. It was a good thing the Saracen cavalry rode in the valleys, for if they had followed the ridges of the hills they would have smashed right into us. Our attention had slackened also the last days, and we were rather surprised to find cavalry suddenly very close to us. We rode west to avoid the scouting parties of the enemy, but kept an occasional watch on Shirkuh's advance.

Shirkuh led his army south, in a very wide, eastern circle around Baniyas, over the rivers, down the Jordan, until we realised he was almost at the Lake of Huleh. What was he doing there with thousands of only horse riders? Shirkuh did not stop at the lake. He moved still south. We saw him stop just south of the lake, at a point where we knew was a large ford over the River Jordan, between Lake Huleh and Lake Tibériade. He was west of the river, so he could pass the Jordan here at the ford and follow north the river banks to return to his own territory. But why was he here?

Shirkuh's army waited for a day south of Jacob's Ford, as the place was called, then it seemed at dawn to disperse its men among the bushes, trees, reeds and high grasses along the River Jordan. With the day it dawned on me that Shirkuh was waiting for a Frankish army to march south along the river.

So I rode with my men north, then east, and very soon we spotted a column of Frankish knights advance at leisure south, down the river, past Lake Huleh. We rode to warn the Franks of the trap laid before them. They had made the same mistake as the Hospitallers riding some time ago in the opposite direction. They advanced without scouting parties. They were returning to Jerusalem, believing they were completely safe, supposing Shirkuh's army far north.

We rode into the valley of the River Jordan, seeing that the Frankish army marching south was King Baudouin's, returning from Baniyas to Jerusalem. The King had far less knights however in this group than he had amassed before Baniyas. He had disbanded his army. The men of Antioch and Tripoli had left. The Barons of Antioch and Tripoli had returned to their lands, while Baudouin advanced peacefully with only the men of Jerusalem. Shirkuh had known all of this from his own scouting cavalry. He had waited to annihilate the King of Jerusalem!

We rode to the King. We were not so easily allowed in his presence. I had to explain three times to the Barons that halted me that a trap had been laid before them. Two of them thought I was mad. The Saracens were back at Damascus and Aleppo! The Saracens could not possibly be so far south. The third however allowed me to accompany him to the King. I spoke to Baudouin and his Bishops, told him of the ambush and the tricks Shirkuh was playing on them.

Baudouin said, 'I know you. You are called Daniel, aren't you? You saved my army once in the Hauran. I think I shall believe you.'

The king shouted to his men to mount, for many knights walked in groups, chatting, holding their animals at the reins. The King ordered to take the lances and to advance in battle formation.

That was the moment we saw Jacob's Ford, and the Saracens.

Shirkuh had ordered the attack when he had seen us ride down the hills, knowing his trap sprung.

King Baudouin had the time to form his knights in four squares. Two groups would smash into the centre of the Saracens; the other two groups would guard the right and left flanks and prevent the army from being surrounded.

I rode with the King and had received a lance. We walked our horses at first slowly, and then rode at a more rapid pace, and when the Saracens were near we galloped with levelled spears.

We thought the Saracen cavalry would meet us likewise but the enemy dismounted!

Just as Shirkuh had done at Baniyas, he made his men send hundreds of arrows on us to stop the sally of our mass. I saw numerous horses felled, and riders unsaddled. The impact of Baudouin's charge was not halted however, and we smashed into the dismounted Saracens. We trampled over the archers but rode into a wall of lances, which were pushed into our horses with neat precision, by the men who waited on foot. Many knights fell to the ground, but we knocked terrible holes in the Saracen army. I rode with the King in the fourth rank, so we got past the front lines of the Saracens unharmed, and we began to kill the enemy by swords deep in their centre. We had drawn a thick wedge very deep into the enemy, almost split their army in two.

The fighting was desperate and dogged. Our flank troops had charged too into the Saracen warriors. Our footmen arrived a little later and they ran into the chaos of fighting men and horses. We fought like lions.

We almost reached the end of the Saracen block when I saw a richly clad elder warrior, the man I had spoken with at Baniyas, Shirkuh. Shirkuh the war lord was loudly shouting orders to all sides, and he stood on horse in a circle of green banners. Next to him was a younger man, clad in even more wealthy clothes. The young man

rode a magnificent Arabian horse. I presumed then this was Nur al-Din and that was the only time in my life I was so close to the Atabeg of Aleppo.

I only saw Nur al-Din from so far, because from everywhere Saracen cavalry emerged, mainly from the left and from the rear. We had attacked only a part of Nur al-Din's army. The entire Saracen army now rallied to their Amirs. Soon, I thought, there would be too many enemy warriors to handle. We slew many Saracen horse riders and men-at-arms on foot. As many men as we slew were replaced by newly arrived enemy. Our forces began to diminish. The Saracens lost many more men than we, but their ranks were being replenished constantly. Our left flank was being overwhelmed, since on that side most of the Saracens amassed. Still more Saracens joined the killing. Yet, we fought on with renewed energy and courage.

It was almost noon now. I was wounded twice from cuts on my left leg and an arrow had stuck itself in my mail, pierced the rings and buried halfway the length of the point in my breast. These were only flesh wounds, but the blood oozed along my body and I could not stem its flow.

I had killed or wounded more than five Saracen horse riders. The dismounted Saracen warriors were pressing on me with spears. I remarked also the King's party was fighting against men on foot.

I realised this uneven battle lost, for we were too few. Our own footmen could bring but little relief. We were sadly outnumbered and the numbers began to count in this fight of man to man. Not only did our knights diminish because they were being wounded or killed, but I saw many being encircled and forced to surrender. I desperately drew Awaj forward past the danger of the spears. I had remarked that the Saracens spared the horse, recognising it as a rare Arabian animal of price. I cut with my sword to left and right, and rode up to the King. Neither Baudouin nor I stopped fighting.

I cried to the king, 'your Majesty, we are outnumbered. We cannot hold. We have to abandon. If you do not ride off now, you will be made a prisoner.'

There was desperation in Baudouin's eyes but he continued to fight. He did not seem to want to acknowledge what I had said. Riding closer to him, I parried a vicious spear thrust to the King. Several other knights protected the King thus.

I shouted again, 'your Majesty! We must flee as long as there is still time. Can't you see there is no hope here? We are being surrounded and our numbers go down in this fight! There is no place to manoeuvre here. Turn back! Order the retreat!'

The King looked at me with wild eyes, while I slashed at a Saracen sword that was reaching him. The King's Marshall Eudes de Saint-Amand pushed to us and he also urged the King to leave the battlefield. Eudes promised to shield the King's back while he turned. Baudouin looked around him. He saw Jean Guthman, one of his best warrior-knights surrender just a little to his right. He saw as clearly as I what was happening.

King Baudouin shouted then, 'retreat! Knights of Jerusalem, retreat! Follow me!' The King turned his horse and while still fighting, slashing left and right, he advanced with his destrier a few paces to the back, northwards, shouting, 'retreat! Retreat!' The King's banners followed him, so we all turned.

We protected the King until we were out of the chaos of fighting men. Eudes de Saint-Amand covered the retreat and stayed inside the throng of massed warriors. The King wanted us to regroup, but he saw how most of his small army had simply been

absorbed by the thousands of Saracens. Jerusalem's army was either being slaughtered or being made prisoner. Nur al-Din's war lord had successfully overwhelmed the forces of Christendom.

I shouted, 'we must ride away!'

The King saw that was the only thing to do. He turned his horse again and rode north. 'No,' I cried, 'not north! We ride west, to Safed!'

I doubted the Saracens would let us reach the little castle of Jacob's Ford and we would anyhow not be safe there. To the west lay Safed, a much better fortified place with a strong garrison. I had visited the place before. I knew the way. I did not wait for an answer and rode west. The puzzled King followed. We galloped as fast as our tired horses could support us and we rode into the hills. The Saracens followed.

We were maybe fifty knights left. Among us were not the brave knight Jean Guthman, not Rohart of Jaffa and his brother Balian, not even Bertrand de Blancafort the Grand-master of the Templar Knights, and no Hugue of Ibelin. All those Barons of Jerusalem were caught alive and surrendered at the Ford of Jacob.

We rode on at full speed. At times, when our horses were tired, we paused. The Saracens had to do so too. They could not come nearer. In the beginning of the night we reached Safed. We entered the town and ordered the gates closed. We were the only knights that reached safety.

King Baudouin waited at Safed until his scouting parties, among which I rode too, announced him that the Saracens had passed the River Jordan at Jacob's Ford and had ridden inland and northwards.

When our scouting group rode past Jacob's Ford, past the battlefield, we saw hundreds of corpses lying around, all beheaded, plundered, deprived of armour and clothes and arms.

We followed the Saracen army for several days until they had almost reached Damascus. This time they headed for home. We watched impotently from the heights how Nur al-Din treated his prisoners with disdain. Hugue, Rohart, Balian, Jean, Bertrand and Eudes were tied and had to walk all the way. Hundreds of footmen were tied together and driven forwards like cattle. I saw heads dangling from saddles. Nur al-Din had once more let his men decapitate the dead and wounded Franks. When we were only one day's ride from Damascus we turned back to Safed to report.

King Baudouin rode from Safed to Saint-Jean-d'Acre, which was the closest and strongest harbour near to Safed. He commanded me to stay with him. Then we rode back to Jerusalem. We heard at Jerusalem that Nur al-Din had arrived at Baniyas once more, for the third time in a row that same year.

The King immediately ordered a new army to be readied, and not a week later we marched out of Jerusalem, back north. We rode the road along the banks of the River Jordan. We reached the castle of Noire-Garde, near Chateau-Neuf in the valley of Bahr-Huleh. From there, in the hills, we could see Baniyas. Ever more knights joined our army there, for Outremer was at stake. The knights of Antioch arrived and I stood eye to eye once more with Renaud de Châtillon, now Prince of Antioch. Count Raymond III of Tripoli also joined us with his complete army.

Onfroi de Toron arrived from Tibnin. We thought he was still inside Baniyas, but he said he had left the town after King Baudouin had returned south. The site was now held by Guy de Scandelion, and well held. Scandelion had done nothing foolish. He

had stayed inside his walls and fended off Nur al-Din's attacks. He remembered relief had come the last time; he hoped on relief this time too. And right he was. The town had not been captured.

At the arrival of the Army of Jerusalem, Nur al-Din once more broke off the siege of Baniyas. He retreated to Damascus. We could breathe again. Until when? A fierce war had broken out since King Baudouin had stolen the nomads' cattle and horses and broken the rules of hospitality. Nur al-Din could wage a sacred war against Jerusalem now. When would this war end?

We returned slowly to Jerusalem. The army advanced like a herd of tired cattle south of Jenin, near Nablus. Suddenly, we were startled by a rumbling sound in the air. We had a strange feeling in our guts. The air brought a force around us, though we had felt no wind before. Then the earth trembled. We were uneasy on our feet. Nobody spoke. We grabbed whatever there was to grab, even if that shook too. The impression lasted only a few moments, but left us standing, unable to move for a long time. We had experienced an earthquake, the strongest I had felt so far.

Later, back in Jerusalem, we heard that the earthquake had been worse in the north. It had destroyed several Syrian cities along the Orontes River, such as Hama, Kafartab and Apamea. Another such earthquake happened ten days later, but by then we were far south and did not really feel the shocks.

This happened in the beginning of July 1157.

In that same month of July, Thierry d'Alsace, Count of Flanders, arrived at Beirut accompanied by his wife Sibylle, the sister of Baudouin III. There was a great joy at the Court of Jerusalem because Thierry, though merely on pilgrimage, brought with him a large number of Flemish knights, and the Flemish were eager to fight. King Baudouin wanted to use those knights to retaliate against Nur al-Din. Baudouin could not digest having been beaten several times by the Syrian Turks. I still wonder where he got the energy from, to rebound so many times. We, the knights, were tired from the incessant fighting and marching. We had our belly full of battles. We longed for a period of peace. We had seen too many beheaded corpses of friends. Only Baudouin had the energy and the courage to think of nothing else but revenge.

I spent a few weeks in Miriam's arms. Miriam cared for my wounds, which had not very well healed. She was fussy about it, and she was angry with me for not having sought a proper doctor earlier. Yet, her embraces were tender and as passionate as before. I asked her whether it bothered her we were not properly married. 'Shut up,' she said, 'come to bed. Don't talk nonsense.' So I did; come to bed, I mean. There was now a complicity between us, which made me wonder how I could ever have loved another woman. Miriam fulfilled me. She made me want to be a better man, a man who cared for other people, for the people she was keenly aware of. I sought the finer and nicer things in life. Like a sunflower, I turned to the light. I bought her presents when she was not with me, to show her I had a real affection for her, and thought about her a lot. I suppose this was really what happiness was. She did not have to tell me she was pregnant again. I had remarked her belly was larger than before, her breasts heavier. I could feel she was with child. She was pretty certain we would have a daughter this time. She said the boy had lain in another position inside

her. We decided on 'Little Sarah' for a name. Miriam's nurse Sarah had died while I was at Baniyas and Miriam wanted to honour her memory. Then, Baudouin called again upon his knights for a campaign.

I had to leave once more. King Baudouin and his Barons rode to the plains of the al-Buqei'a near the Qal'at al-Hosn, the castle that the Franks call the Krak des Chevaliers, the Castle of the Knights, an enormous fortress of the Templar Knights. We marched so far north because Baudouin wanted to attack Nur al-Din in his heartland, the Syria near Aleppo. Here, at al-Buqei'a, the grand armies of Renaud de Châtillon and of Raymond III of Tripoli assembled with ours and with the knights of Thierry of Flanders. We decided for a campaign east of the Orontes River.

We first laid siege to the formerly Frankish castle, now held by the Saracens, called Chastel-Rouge, the Red Castle. My first assignment in the Principality of Antioch had been at this castle, so I knew the fortress and its environs well. Chastel-Rouge was a formidable citadel and we had not many mangonels with us to batter at the walls. Making more mangonels, siege-towers and sapping the walls of the citadel would have taken much time. Renaud de Châtillon therefore proposed to attack easier targets, ever more north, on the eastern border of Antioch.

While we advanced northwards in August of 1157, a new earthquake shook the army. We must have been in the middle of the quake, for we were shaken from our horses in a violent swaying of the ground. The trembling lasted longer than the previous ones, a month ago. Cracks appeared in the ground on our right side and for a moment we feared being engulfed by the earth.

Instead of moving east we decided to march to Antioch and to surge into Nur al-Din's territories from there. Antioch had been seriously shaken too, parts of its walls had crumbled and buildings had been destroyed. We heard at Antioch that the earthquake had destroyed anew many Syrian cities along the Orontes: Hama, Kafartab, Ma'arrat, Apamea, and Homs. The most afflicted of all cities was the Arab Munqidh town of the Shaizar. The entire family of the Sultan of the Shaizar, Taj al-Dawla Nasir al-Din Muhammed, had been killed in the ruins of the citadel. Usama ibn Munqidh had been saved however, for since 1154 Usama had been with Nur al-Din at Damascus.

We also heard that the Seljuk Turks threatened to attack Aleppo and that Nur al-Din was gravely ill. Nur al-Din was thought to lie dying in the citadel of Aleppo. He had already divided his lands among his brother Nasir al-Din, who would receive Aleppo, and Shirkuh, who would receive Damascus. The governor of the citadel of Aleppo closed the gates of the city to Nasir al-Din, but the population grabbed arms, broke the locks of the gates and let Nasir al-Din enter the city, as the righteous successor of Nur al-Din, his brother. The Amirs of the lands of Nur al-Din were divided in loyalties, with Nur al-Din himself being too weak to intervene. Saracen Syria lacked a strong leader. The time was propitious for an all-out attack on Syria.

In September of 1157 our army was still at Antioch, but King Baudouin sent an ambassador to Thoros II, the Armenian King of Cilicia, and soon Thoros joined us with a strong Christian army. All Christians of Outremer, except the Byzantines, thus assembled for a major coup against Nur al-Din's Aleppo. The proposal was to capture the Shaizar.

Few people in the Frankish army knew that the Shaizar did not really belong to the Turks of Aleppo. It was an ancient Arabian enclave, the land of the Munqidh family, which was independent from the Atabeg of Aleppo. This was true only in theory, for in practice, to preserve their town and enviroining lands, the Munqidhs had to declare themselves allies and vassals of Nur al-Din. The Munqidh family did not exist anymore since August, since the earthquakes. So it seemed possible to capture the rests of the town without suffering too much resistance.

It was in our interest to hold the Shaizar, for then the Franks would have a solid footing again east of the Orontes. The Shaizar lay halfway between Apamea and Hama, so that the communications between these two Syrian towns would be disrupted, as well as the communications between Aleppo and Damascus. There were no large fortresses further inland and all the main caravans from Damascus to Aleppo followed the Orontes River, past the Shaizar.

The Shaizar had been recuperated instantly, however, not by the Munqidhs or by the Syrian Turks, but by the Isma'ilis. The Isma'ilis had a castle in the mountains, Masyad, just a day's march south-west of the Shaizar, also not far from Hama. They had grasped the occasion to occupy the Shaizar, as they had bought and captured other strongholds and eagle's nests in that region the last twenty years.

The Isma'ilis were Shi'ite Muslims. They were not welcome with the Syrians and Arabs, who were Sunnites; they were even not very welcome with the other Shi'ites because they were of a particular branch of Shi'ism.

The sixth Shi'i Imam was called Ja'far as-Sadiq. When he died, Shi'ism broke in three fractions. One fraction estimated that Ja'far as-Sadiq was immortal and would return as the Mahdi, the Shi'i Messiah. This fraction had no real Imam anymore. A second group favoured Ja'far's brother, Musa al-Kazi, as his successor. The third fraction wanted to pass succession to Ja'far as-Sadiq's eldest son Isma'il. The other fractions did not want Isma'il. They said he was a drunkard and incapable of leadership. Yet, Isma'il's followers persisted in creating a group whose leadership claimed Isma'il as Imam. The Isma'ilis developed and established the Fatimid Caliphs in Egypt, as well as a sect in Syria that bought eagle-nest castles from Arab Amirs. A series of such castles were now established, both in Frankish territory and in Syrian Turkish lands.

After the earthquakes the Isma'ilis had taken over the Shaizar. I acknowledged that the Shaizar occupied a strategic position east of the Orontes River. I agreed that since it was partly destroyed and many of its people killed, its reigning family exterminated, it seemed easy to capture it for the Franks. Nevertheless, I did not like the campaign against the Shaizar.

We were not attacking Nur al-Din there, which had to be our real target. The Shaizar was Arabian, another group of people that suffered from Turkish dominance and that we might have used as allies. It was the property of the Munqidhs and of my friend Usama.

I did not like either fighting the Isma'ilis, for they had a reputation of daring to kill cold-bloodedly a Syrian Malik as well as a Frankish Prince in broad daylight in his own fief. An example of such daring had been the assassination of Raymond II of

Tripoli, murdered by Isma'ilis under the gates of his own town. I feared for the life of King Baudouin.

The Frankish Barons waved my objections aside, laughing, and so we attacked the town.

We arrived before the Shaizar in October of 1157 with a considerable army. King Baudouin III halted his horse in front of the walls, accompanied by Raymond III of Tripoli, Renaud de Châtillon of Antioch, with Thierry of Flanders and with King Thoros of Armenia. Behind him stood all his Barons. The siege of Shaizar began.

The army had brought mangonels and siege- engines. The Franks began by throwing heavy stones against the walls and into the town. This lasted for a few days. Then a group of footmen was sent with scaling ladders to test the resistance of the warriors of Shaizar. I was not part of this group, but watched from far with King Baudouin. The attack did not succeed, and was not supposed to succeed. Our men reached the walls with few casualties. Arrows were loosened on our men, but hardly any deadlier crossbow bolts. When our men climbed up the ladders, no burning oil was poured down. The Isma'elite defenders pushed our men back but we saw few townspeople among the city's warriors. Our men were thrown back when already at the top of the walls. When they returned, they told us there were only enemy at the place where they attacked. The rest of the walls had been quasi empty of defenders.

King Baudouin and his Barons, among which also Onfroi de Toron, were much encouraged by this news. The King decided on a massive attack by the entire army at once, all men running with scaling-ladders, of which we had very many, and siege-engines. We first lulled the Isma'ilis into thinking for a few days they had defeated us at the first assault. Then on a fine morning, very early, our trumpets sounded the all-out attack. All knights fought on foot. Part of our men waited on horseback to counter a sally.

I ran with my men and our ladders to the walls of Shaizar. I disliked what I was doing, for I was bound to kill the people of a friend, but I pushed back such thoughts in the thrill of the assault. We ran and arrived exhausted under the walls of a central part of Shaizar, near the main gate. We threw our ladders straight and my first warriors climbed up. Two men immediately fell from the ladders above me, yet that was less than I had expected. Few arrows really hurt our men. The warriors that fell would be dead, their bodies crushed by their weight and by the weight of their armour. I was sixth on a ladder. I was surprised to just climb and reach the top. Two Franks were fighting with Isma'elite warriors there, but the Franks were standing on the walls. There were not many defenders at the top of our ladders, at most five or six men. I jumped to the fight, spotting no archers around, and threw my shield immediately in the shins of an Isma'ili. The man lost ground and retreated. I used that time to thrust my sword in his throat. While I did that I already kicked with my steel foot in the side of a second man and swayed my sword against his. It was high time, for the Saracen had intended to slice my side. We fought thus and I hit with such power that the Isma'ilis hesitated and retreated.

By that time our ladders were totally secured and many more men, also knights, poured over the walls. The Isma'ilis were overwhelmed at our part of the wall. We killed the men and gave no mercy. The Isma'ilis stood no chance against so many

Franks that attacked them simultaneously. They fought well but they were not enough to withstand us.

Everywhere on the walls the Franks swarmed over the defences. We fought near a tower, so we ran to that and faced resistance only from a few archers on the inside stairs, at the openings in the thick walls. We did not bother about the men higher up. We ran down, ducked when an arrow was loosened at us, then immediately struck down the archer. We did not care about their meagre sword thrusts. They were strong men, but they all made the mistake to think that an arrow would stop us. We took the arrow on our shields, then flung ourselves onto the man, pushed him aside and offered him for the killing to our companions.

We arrived rapidly at the lowest part of the tower and looked through the doors. Few men waited for us there; none had large spears and they wore no armour. They did not expect Frankish warriors to sally out of the tower so soon. They looked at the walls and guarded the stairs along them. We ran out, crying loudly to instil them with fear. The tower spewed Frankish men-at-arms after that. We engaged the enemy and fought with such sudden frenzy that the men surrendered. They threw down their weapons and disappeared in the narrow alleys. We ran towards the gates of the city. We fought against a few sentries, but resistance was also not great there. Some of us fought on and held the guards at bay; the others opened the gates. We were the first to open a gate of the city of Shaizar. The Franks poured into the city by the tens and the hundreds.

We had done our part of the task. The Frankish army rushed into the many streets of Shaizar. The Franks killed and plundered. I waited some time to secure the gates, and then I also walked into the town, amidst raging Frankish warriors. Many houses had been destroyed by the earthquake and stood unrepaired, with collapsed walls. Any structure that resembled a tower was in ruins. The town walls had held because they were so thick, but I was sure they had been weakened by the movement of the ground and we would have been able to throw a breach in them with our mangonels. Yet, our ladders had sufficed.

The Franks ran into one house after another. I heard the screams of the men they killed and of the women they raped. I walked on, blooded sword in my right hand, to the citadel. The Isma'ilis abandoned fighting everywhere. The ones that surrendered were slaughtered. The Isma'ilis poured into the citadel. The Franks preferred pillaging and killing the practically defenceless people rather than attacking the last defenders of the town. By the time I was near the citadel, the gates of the castle closed.

I waited there until the Barons and the King arrived. There was not much we could do for now. The castle, though much in ruins, was still an imposing stronghold. Its towers had collapsed, but the remains of the walls were very high. King Baudouin decided to wait for a few days before assaulting the citadel. He ordered mangonels to be brought to batter at the fortress. He thought the Isma'ilis would surrender soon. The Frankish army settled in the town.

The next morning, the King assembled the Barons in front of his tent, in the open air. He was unarmed but he wore chain mail. I admired how fine a man he was, how well he supported by his demeanour his royal dignity. I had walked to Onfroi de Toron. We arrived late. The Barons were arguing. A dispute was going on. The dispute was about the handsome Renaud de Châtillon.

‘Your Majesty,’ shouted Renaud indignantly, ‘you cannot possibly offer the Shaizar to Count Thierry of Flanders! I do not doubt the qualities of the Count, but the Shaizar belongs to the Principality of Antioch! The Shaizar must be mine by right!’

Raymond of Tripoli answered coolly, ‘Shaizar has always been Arabian. It never belonged to Antioch.’

‘The entire region east of the Orontes River belongs to Antioch,’ Renaud cried. ‘The Orontes flows through Antioch!’

King Thoros of Armenia watched the dispute with disgust.

The Patriarch of Jerusalem tried a compromise. ‘We can offer the Shaizar to Thierry d’Alsace under the condition that he be a vassal for Shaizar to the Prince of Antioch.’

‘I will not accept to be the vassal of that ambitious toad-shit who was made temporary Prince of Antioch because he seduced a woman. He is a nobody of doubtful nobility! He would have been a beggar in France! I am Count of Flanders! Never a Count of Flanders will be subordinated to a villager of France!’ shouted Thierry. ‘If you cannot offer me these lands in due respect, in being the vassal to the King of Outremer, then I will withdraw immediately with my men from these lands. The insult that is being done to me is unheard of!’

The dispute went on like this. Onfroi de Toron and I listened incredulously to the ever harsher insults and curses that the Barons of Christendom shouted to each other’s faces. The Barons could agree to no solution. They just quarrelled, haggling at times over the Shaizar like gamblers in a tavern. They haggled over other conquered lands and over lands and towns to be captured in the future. Onfroi and I and also King Thoros walked off, unable to bear this much longer.

We heard later that no agreement had been reached. The parties were readying to ride away with their armies in anger and discord, away from Shaizar. Renaud de Châtillon was the first to kick his men up and to order his tents packed. A little later, Thierry of Flanders rode also off.

The Frankish army was much diminished now. Renaud de Châtillon marched back to Antioch. King Baudouin was distressed. He was in favour of Thierry of Flanders but many of the Royal Barons, jealous of the wealth displayed by the Fleming, supported Renaud de Châtillon. Baudouin could not assert his authority. He decided to leave the citadel of Shaizar as it was and to ride behind Renaud de Châtillon, hoping to convince him yet. Thierry d’Alsace followed the King from a distance. King Thoros returned to Cilicia with his army.

I was scouting at that time in the vicinity of the Shaizar for the Frankish army, when I had an unusual encounter. I rode with three warriors in the wadis just west of the Orontes River to make sure we were not being attacked by a Saracen force, when I sensed the presence of a lion. I must have perceived the roar of its mighty throat in my head without actually hearing it, or I was upset by a subtle change in the nature of the wilderness, maybe by as the silence of the birds. I left my men in the wadi, told them to ride along the riverbed, and climbed a hill with my horse, a Frankish charger.

On the other side of the hill the ground sloped less steeply. I saw a man lying on the ground amidst asphodel bushes. The man was obviously hurt, for I saw much red on his leg and he did not move. He just lay there, staring intently in front of him and holding before him a stout quntariya spear, a spear of Byzantine model. He wore a

black turban, which was odd for these parts. He was in armour, dressed in a kazaghand, a padded, heavy shirt which held layers of mail, light armour, finely decorated with silver threads on smoothed leather. He was a Saracen, and the reason he kept his spear before him I could only see a little later. A bit further stooped a formidable lioness, watching him with the glee of an easy kill in her eyes.

I considered just for one moment leaving the man to his fate. Then I grinded my teeth at my own damn stupidity and spurred my horse down. When we arrived close to the man, my charger was too nervous and scared for me to do anything of use on it, so I stepped down from the stirrups and let the horse gallop off. I kept my eyes on the lion. The animal was not too sure about what it should do next: run after the horse, jump at the Saracen or put its claws in me. I stepped nearer to the Saracen and held my spear firmly before me. I was still a few paces from the man, when the animal suddenly sprang onto the Saracen with a speed I would have scarcely believed to be possible. The lion sprang with an enormous release of tension.

The Saracen's quntariya caught the lioness straight in its breast under its head. By that time I was on the animal too, and thrust my spear forcefully and deep in its side. I pushed the animal away from the Saracen, for in its last moments the lioness still clawed desperately around. At least one of our spears must have pierced the lion's heart, for it fell dead to the side of the Saracen, not without first having ripped with its last pangs at the man's breast and legs. More blood was torn from him, though his armour had saved his life.

The man almost fainted. He panted heavily and lay his head down, watching me with wild and dark eyes. I sat next to him in the heat of the day, shaking like a reed because it was the first time I had helped to kill a lion. I had never been so near such an animal. After a while I looked at the Saracen and we both grinned, exhausted. The man lay entirely on his back, groaning. I heard a neighing nearby and saw my horse had returned. I stood up, went to the horse, took my water and some clean, white cloth and daubed at the man's legs. He had three large, wide slashes of a lion's paw, three hands long, on his right leg. Those wounds must have hurt like hell, but the man would survive if the wounds did not pester. He had other wounds, one I suspected a sword wound. I cleaned the man's wounds, which he let me do, and I bound other pieces of clean cloth around the slashes, pushing his flesh together. All the time while I was doing that, the man watched me working without a word.

When I had finished the Saracen spoke in Arabic. He said, 'what are you going to do with me?'

I answered, 'you need help from a doctor. I'm going to take you to our army camp.' The man showed no surprise that I talked Arabic to him.

'You might as well have left me to the lion, or have me killed right now,' the wounded Saracen warrior replied. 'Leave me. I don't want to be imprisoned and tortured. I don't want to be killed by a spear in your army. Save me from that dishonour!'

I hesitated then. I would also not have liked to be caught, probably tortured, and then killed ignominiously by an enemy hand as a prisoner. I did not tell the Saracen however what I was planning to do. I pulled the man right. I held him on his good leg and drew the horse near. I told the man to get in the stirrups and I pushed him in the saddle. The high cantles of my saddle supported him well enough. Then I jumped

behind him on the horse. I took the reins and directed the horse not to my group in the wadi but to where I knew was the Frankish camp.

I rode around the camp to the north. I jumped off from the horse and said to the Saracen, 'I cannot help you further now. You will have to ride on your own to wherever you can find help. There will be no Franks to the north. Keep the horse!'

The man was feverish already. He slumped in the saddle. Yet, he might live.

He asked in a coarse voice, 'what is your name?'

I answered, 'I am called Daniel du Pallet!'

'My name is Abu Ahmad al-Din Saif ibn Muhammed,' the man replied. 'I am a commander with my people, an Amir of the Nisari Isma'ilis. Take this ring.' He took a ring from his finger and handed it to me but I refused it. I said, 'I am setting you free. I am not robbing you.'

'No,' the Isma'ili continued. 'Take the ring. If ever you need help send this ring and a note to Hisn Masyad, to Amir Abu Ahmad. Help will come. I owe you a life.'

'We are enemies,' I replied. 'I don't think I will ever need help from an Isma'ili. Keep the ring!'

'No,' Abu Ahmad insisted. 'There is a saying among my people that whenever men kill a lion together, their fates are locked. Allah is great and compassionate. Who knows what is written for us in his Book? Take the ring and remember what I have said. I thank you with my life.'

I accepted his ring and put it on my own finger. That seemed to satisfy Abu Ahmad, for he managed a grin. Then I slapped with my hand on the horse and he rode off. I kept that ring on my finger. It was a fine silver piece, intricately wrought with the words 'Allah the Great and the Compassionate'. I walked on foot to the Frankish army.

Later, I rode from the camp with a Frankish sergeant who knew how to skin animals. We took the lioness' skin. We took the spears. A butcher dried the skin and took all the rests of flesh from it. He tanned the skin for me. The lion skin lay always behind my saddle on my horse. This was the only lion I ever killed – or helped kill, for to this day I do not know whether I, Daniel, took the animal's life, or Abu Ahmad the Nisari.

We remained for two months in tents near Antioch. The Barons continued their fierce dispute there. They could never agree on the matter of who would rule Shaizar. Nur al-Din solved the issue for them. Slowly recovering from his sickness, the Atabeg send one of his Amirs to occupy the town with a very strong garrison of Turkish experienced warriors. These men had only to walk into the town, as if they had been on a sight-seeing tour. The Isma'ilis immediately surrendered the citadel.

Onfroi laughed and wept. The Franks had assembled their largest army in a hundred years to capture a territory for Nur al-Din, a territory that had never belonged before either to Zengi or to his sons, a territory that had never been taken by force by the Turks, only to offer it without the slightest resistance to the Atabeg of Aleppo! Shaizar had been presented to Nur al-Din on a platter, like the head of Saint John the Baptist. Henceforth, Shaizar would not be Arabian anymore but be incorporated in the lands of Nur al-Din! I suspected the Atabeg had also cheated on Usama, for Usama ibn Munqidh was logically the rightful ruler of Shaizar. Even though Usama was one

of his Counsellors, Nur al-Din gave the town a Turk of his court. No wonder the mood among the Franks soured visibly by the day.

King Baudouin's ability to sweeten his Barons was admirable. He was an obstinate man. He could not be withdrawn from his aims. In the late month of December 1157, the King and the Prince and Counts, including Thierry of Flanders, decided to forget about Shaizar and to attack Harim. I could agree with that, too. Harim was merely a village, but it had a very strong castle that lay on the roads between Antioch and Aleppo, not far from Antioch. Harim was a constant threat to Antioch. If the Franks captured Harim, on the east side of the River Orontes, Antioch would be much safer, and from there assaults could be launched against Aleppo.

The Frankish army arrived at Christmas of 1157 before Harim. The siege of the city began with much energy. We had used our waiting time at Antioch to build more mangonels and assault towers. The towers were half ready when the army marched, so we took with us the trunks necessary to finish the towers at Harim. When the towers were built, we nailed hides on top and rolled them to the walls of Harim's castle. We also slung one stone after the other day and night into the fortress. The stones clashed against the citadel and did much damage there.

King Baudouin decided to sap the walls. Hundreds of men were put to work. They started to dig far from the walls, far enough so that the defenders could not reach with their arrows the men that dug into the earth and rock, and the men that incessantly came out of the dark hole loaded with baskets of sand and stones. The tunnel advanced slowly but steadily. King Baudouin hoped that within a month or so we would be at the last part of the tunnel, under the very foundations of Harim. In the most dangerous phase of the works the earth under the walls would be strutted with timber so that the walls would not fall down too soon. More earth would be scraped away while the strutting intensified until the stones were found of the foundations of the city. Then bush wood would be accumulated in that part of the hole. Fire would be set to the wood, to burn the timber beams. The hole would collapse and with it the walls would fall. I was quite curious about such work. I had not yet seen an actual sapping. I was curious but not too keen to enter the black hole and see for myself. I was also not too sure this scheme would work.

I never saw the sapping come to an end. In the first days of February of 1158 the gates of the city opened and two Amirs rode out unarmed. I was with the King when they proposed to surrender the fortress in exchange for the lives of their men, the garrison of the castle and the Saracen inhabitants. Baudouin accepted immediately. Thus, Harim was abandoned by the enemy, no blood was shed, and the triumphant Frankish army took over the empty town. Renaud de Châtillon rode haughtily into the castle, for this time no one contested that this stronghold, so close to his capital, belonged to the Principality of Antioch.

I returned with the army of King Baudouin to Jerusalem. I was very happy to see Miriam. She jumped in my arms and I held her a long time. We could be happy once more. Miriam was very pregnant. A few weeks later, Young Sarah was born. She was a doll, fine and beautiful like her mother. She was also a quiet baby, very content with the milk of her mother. She thrived well and grew quickly. She would be a tall girl like Miriam.

Miriam and I talked about the coins and precious stones in our cellar. We bought a house and store in the city of Tyre and one in Sidon. We hired a few Jews of the environs of Jerusalem to dig deep in the rock under the houses, so that we had corridors that turned several times under the walls. When the work was finished we brought the Jews back. We hid parts of our treasure in each of the houses. Two very heavy wooden doors strengthened with steel bands closed the entries to the underground corridors. Then I had the doors masoned up with stones, as if the walls continued without interruption. Miriam found local Jewish men to occupy the houses. These men did not know they sat on a treasure. We gave them other coins however and goods, and they traded for us. We thus let one third of our money bring us more gold. We gave the men funds to start their trade and promised them more when they did well, so that they considered themselves more like partners than men that worked exclusively for us.

I would have liked to obtain a castle now from King Baudouin. I wanted a place safe enough to hold my family. I sensed however that no place would really be safe, not a place in a city and not a castle. I had seen too many cities besieged and too many castles surrender. But I wanted to wash! There was not much water in our house at Jerusalem. I could only have a pail or two of water to wash in. Usama and Jadwa had taught me to wash regularly at Aleppo. I had been very reticent at first, but I was not given much choice. Then I began to relish being washed with much water and I continued the habit even when I was back with the Franks. Now, I looked forward to a bath.

In the first weeks we had met, Miriam had sniffed at me with her nose in the air and remarked I smelled nicely. When I rode from Aleppo I had a green block of olive soap in my saddlebag. Whenever I could I strolled in the market alleys of the cities, looking for the green soap blocks. The sellers, mostly Syrians, looked at me with suspicion, for no Frankish knight bought the green stuff of Aleppo from them. Muslims had to wash before each prayer, if only symbolically, and that was four times a day. I washed less but more thoroughly and I kept the habit after my captivity at Aleppo. I forced Miriam to do the same and she came to enjoy the baths. Castles had wells and plenty of water. I wanted a castle and a bathing room of my own.

I had little peace, however, for King Baudouin was as restless as a hyena. We had spent only a little time at Jerusalem when he decided to attack the Hauran. He did so, but I asked not to be involved in the skirmishes. When he planned a full-scale attack on Damascus, in March of 1158, I could not refuse.

The King and his army first pillaged parts of the Hauran, then he set up camp at Dareiya, a place only a little distance from Damascus. We arrived there at the beginning of April. We stayed only a few days at Dareiya because Nur al-Din, whose illness apparently was now entirely over, amassed a considerable army right in front of us, settling between us and Damascus. Our two armies could spit in each other's eye, so close stood the men.

King Baudouin retreated from Dareiya. A real game of chess ensued. Our main army was in the south. Shirkuh attacked Sidon in the north while we were near Damascus.

The Franks of Sidon sallied but in a now traditional scheme were led into a trap and massacred by Shirkuh. Sidon however, held.

In the summer our army returned to Jerusalem. Nur al-Din then attacked the territories of Baniyas, far from Jerusalem, drawing our attention away from Damascus. He laid siege to the Frankish castle of Habis Jaldak, south of Yarmuk. King Baudouin once again rode out of Jerusalem, still joined by the knights of his brother-in-law, Thierry of Flanders, who seemed to enjoy himself as much as Baudouin.

While the Frankish army of Jerusalem marched north I overheard the conversation of our men. They said they recognised every stone of the road, after having walked on these paths so many times in the last months. They said the King would do well to send a few hundred workers to flatten the countryside so that they could walk more easily. They also said the King should leave half of them in the north so that at least half of them would not have to walk so much.

I rode to the King. He walked on foot, holding his horse by the reins. He was talking to Pierre de Barcelone, the Archbishop of Tyre and former Prior of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, whose servant-knights wore the True Cross. Pierre was also called Pierre the Syrian, a fine name indeed. I did not interrupt their conversation, so I rode a little behind them until they finished. The King felt someone watching his back however, turned and nodded to me to come forward. I stepped down from my horse and walked equally beside the King and Pierre.

I said, ‘your Grace, I have a question that has been bothering me. May I ask you the question?’

‘Of course, please do, Sir Daniel,’ Baudouin answered gracefully.

I said, ‘I have a great respect for your majesty. With all respect, may I ask you why we attack the Syrians incessantly? This time we react on an aggression of the Atabeg of Aleppo, but that is his reaction on our assaults in the Hauran. We must defend ourselves against the Syrians, but please tell me why we attack even when the Saracens leave us at peace.’

The King looked at me with surprise and anger. I suppose he was considering to have me hanged at a nearby tree or something. My question could easily be interpreted as a scorn, criticism of his actions, and outright disapproval of what he was doing. I tried to look as innocently and naively as possible. The King was annoyed by the question. He was wondering of course how many of his knights had had the same idea, and which faction of knights had sent me. Yet, I was lucky, for he was in a good mood. He deigned to consider me an idiot.

He answered, ‘Sir Daniel, if I didn’t know you well I might have you thrashed for that question. Your heart is pure however, so I will tell you.’ The King paused, walked on, then said, ‘it is strange how many of a man’s actions are determined by the words of his father. I was thirteen years old when my father died. He was a very busy man and he did not talk much to me. Yet, when I was alone with him, at very rare moments, he told me each time the same thing. He told me about my duties and I listened to every word he said, for he was a mighty knight and a formidable King. He asked me to whom Outremer belonged. I said that Outremer belonged to him, obviously, to Foulque of Anjou, King of Jerusalem. He laughed and I thought I had given the right answer. But he said that was the wrong reply. The lands of Outremer did not belong to the King of Jerusalem. I asked him to whom it then really belonged. Did the land

belong to the Jews, to the Syrians, to the Arabians? My father said the land did not belong to the Jews. It did not belong to the Syrians that had lived here for hundreds of years. He said it also did not belong to the Arabs and certainly not to the Turks and not to the Persians. I was puzzled.

My father Foulque said that Outremer, like any land, belonged to whoever fought to conquer it and hold it. No land on the entire earth belonged to somebody, he said, unless that somebody fought to keep it, fought incessantly. Only as long as one fought for a land did it belong – temporarily – to whoever fought for it. He said, never forget that. I did not forget.

So, Sir Daniel, the Kingdom of Jerusalem only belongs to the King of Jerusalem, who is merely a symbol of the Franks, as long as he fights for it. Therefore, I have to fight constantly. The moment I stop to fight for it, our enemies – whoever they may be, Nur al-Din or someone else – will attack us and try to take the Kingdom away from us. Men are egoists, Sir Daniel, so they always want more. If they have a weak neighbour they will impinge on his territory. That is why we have knights and that is why Kings and knights fight and why knights are trained to fight. It is our role in society. If we don't fight, the Kingdom will be grasped by somebody else and I guess many people, my people, would be massacred.'

Baudouin paused. 'So I fight,' he continued, 'and I will fight my entire life until my opponents are more tired of it than I am. Please tell the other knights what to expect: fighting for a lifetime!'

'Sire,' I smiled, 'no one sent me and nobody asked that question but me. Forgive my impertinence. I came to you for something else.'

The King looked surprised at my face, wondering what other bizarre question would come. He was interested. 'And what would that be?' he asked.

I continued, 'I remarked that several times in the last months the Saracens have ambushed our armies always by using the same tricks and always because of the same mistakes we make. I would like to discuss these with you.'

'Fine,' he said, amazed, 'go ahead. I'm listening'.

'We rarely use scouting parties,' I said. 'We use scouting parties only when we expect an attack. The Saracens surprise us each time we do not expect them. I say to have scouting parties around us always, also when we do not expect attack, and even in territory we believe is as secure as the city of Jerusalem itself.'

Baudouin looked at me with renewed interest. 'You may be right,' he said. 'So we should send knights scouting in front of us, now.'

'Not only in front of us,' I replied. 'We should have lightly armed knights on swift horses in front, to the left, to the right and behind us. I don't believe we would be attacked from the rear, but one never knows. Shirkuh is devious enough to do just that and he is capable of doing it in lands we believe we are still safe in.'

'Fine. Seek out twenty knights and present them to me. Organise four parties of five knights and do as you proposed. Train them, ride out, ride away from the army and report back to me every two days. When you see something, send two men back and keep looking; send two men again when it is necessary. You see, you get what you asked for!'

I had not really wanted that task, but now I could not refuse it. I hesitated, and lingered.

'Anything more?' the King asked.

I said, 'each time we lost a battle the Saracens surprised us. They chose the site of the battle. They trapped us by drawing us out, stretching our lines and then dividing us and leading us into disarray. So, next time, we have to choose the terrains. And we let us not be distracted by shim attacks. We choose how to engage a battle and when to engage. We seek out the place and the moment when we can do what we do best: charge and run them over.'

'I know,' Baudouin remarked. 'I can do something about the discipline, but it is true we were lured into traps before. I will tell you what to do about that. There is more, I guess, you wanted to say?'

'The Saracens have no solution to a lance charge by heavily armed, massed knights,' I said. 'So they let us ride until we are no mass anymore and they send a volley of arrows at us and that creates havoc among us, often breaking the charge.'

'Right. I have seen them do that. So what do we do to that?'

'I don't really know,' I answered. 'One thing that might help is to charge in two waves. We charge with a first wave of men, not too many, and attract arrows by those knights. While the knights engage the archers, for many knights always pass, we launch our second attack. Our first knights will have some time to bring order in their chaos. The second attack, with many more knights, can break through our own first men and enter deep into the Saracen's cavalry, our knights unhurt till then and unbroken by arrows. We push their leaders back, and create panic in their command'

'We can do that. But that takes many men and may leave our flanks unprotected. We will have no reserve. Then we get surrounded and massacred. Your scheme doesn't work.'

'Our footmen just run behind the knights,' I argued. 'They usually arrive too late in the battle to be of any use. They arrive at the battle when our knights have already been defeated. Then, our footmen are just massacred without having done anything useful in the battle. Suppose we only charge at the very last moment, but then with much speed and energy, so that we keep our footmen closer to us. Suppose we give them more archers and more spearmen. We split them in two groups to form a left and right flank and have them march in tight order as one block to left and right. We have an open square then, with our heavy cavalry in the centre and two wings backwards at the left and right, open only at the rear. If ever the Saracens attack there, and our men stay well together, they can fend off any cavalry attack. But they must stay tightly together with archers and spearmen! If they disperse, they will be killed by the horsemen. We must also teach them to move obliquely. For if the Saracens attack, and the left and right part of our knights fail, then the Saracen cavalry will move to our rear. The footmen must close the open square then and post themselves along the line of our rear, still in one block, and halt a rear attack.'

King Baudouin was excited. His eyes shone with hope and expectation. 'Use our footmen as actual attack bodies with own movements,' he said. 'I wondered how to organise the army. This is a solution.' He paused. 'All right,' he said. 'You organise the scouting parties, as necessary. Do as you please and choose who you want. When an attack seems imminent, you come to me immediately and post yourself at my side. We talk about what we do, when and how. Meanwhile, I will order the man-at-arms to be trained according to your plan. I will separate the knights in a first, very heavy armoured group and a larger second group. The real trick will be to choose our own terrain. We will need discipline, for the first wave should not pursue Saracen cavalry until we see their main army; so I need you with me to tell me when we see their army

before us. We charge only a short distance and otherwise advance with our entire force, our footmen included. You must ride out before us and also at our sides, to find a long, wide valley. We will stall there until we get attacked, supposedly by surprise. If ever the Saracens assault us and flee, I will see to it that the entire army advances in one block, so that no trap closes on us. I will have to talk to a few of my Barons. Thierry of Flanders will lead the first wave. He will like that. I will lead the second one. Onfroi de Toron is too impetuous for such command. I will take him with me. Pierre de Barcelone cannot charge with the True Cross. He must stay behind. But he can lead the footmen. I will talk to him. He will understand what important task he will have in the timing. He will agree. He is a reliable man. I will explain to him what he has to do. I will make him understand this would be no humiliation.'

I thought the king had finished, but he said, 'I want not one word of this to anybody, Sir Daniel, not one word except to Pierre de Barcelone and Thierry of Flanders. If the other Barons hear of the scheme they will argue about it, and decide on another scheme. I am King, but I cannot act against the Council. I will talk to Thierry and Pierre separately.'

I nodded and turned my horse. I was mounting it, when the King said one last word. He said, 'thank you, Sir Daniel. Remarkable! Any knight married to a Jew I would have been very reluctant to listen to. Any knight who criticizes my acts I would have flogged. Why do I listen to you and enjoy myself?'

We both grinned and I rode to the centre of the column. I knew exactly which men I needed. Some of them would be Arabian auxiliary cavalry, only a few would be knights, men who enjoyed riding alone. I needed mavericks.

We did not march the army straight to the fortress of Habis Jaldak. The Saracens would have liked nothing better than to draw us into the ravines and dried-out narrow wadi's of the hills there. We stopped in the plains of Puthaha, north-east of Lake Tibériade, just east of the place where the Jordan entered the lake and where the river had eroded and assembled a large flat land for us. There, the Frankish army waited, ostentatiously because there was enough space to wait, water was nearby, and because it was tired of marching. In fact it was waiting to be attacked, for Baudouin had decided that was a good place for a battle. The Puthaha was quite far from Habis Jaldak still, far enough for the Saracens to believe the Franks were at ease, unaware that they could be attacked there. But I and my men had seen Nur al-Din's army move south from the siege. Shirkuh hoped to surprise the Franks as he had done at Jacob's Ford. This time, we were aware of all his moves. We saw him split his army in a large mass of cavalry and in a smaller group that would attack first. It was half July of 1158.

I rode on the hill crests and spotted Nur al-Din slowly moving to Lake Tibériade. It was a grand spectacle to watch the thousands of horsemen advance in a large, proud horde in the valleys. A tight cloud of dust accompanied the mass of men and above that cloud the flags and banners, embroidered with the gracious, fluent Arabic characters on green, yellow and red fields, flowed in the breeze. I could distinguish where Nur al-Din himself rode, for there the large green banners with the silver inscriptions abounded. Only few foot warriors enforced this army and these ran rather than walked behind the cavalry. Nur al-Din was in a hurry. The farther south he could reach, the more he would surprise his enemy. His army was constituted of several large groups of horse riders, which would be the contingents of Aleppo and

Damascus, of Homs and the Hauran, of Ba'albek and the many other cities of Syria. His was a proud army of free men, and he had an invincible army, too. Nur al-Din, or was it Shirkuh, was a cautious man. He too had scouts covering his sides. But his scouts did not expect Frankish riders, so they rode in front of the Syrians. We saw them before they saw us, and we rode around them, all the time watching what they did.

When Nur al-Din's army was almost in the Puthaha, his advance halted. We waited. It was there that he split his men in a larger and a smaller group, and that took some parleying. He split, just as I had expected. It was high time I rode to King Baudouin. I left my men, telling them to warn me of any change in the behaviour of the Saracens, and rode quickly to the King. He knew what was on the moment he saw me. He gave signs to Thierry d'Alsace and told Pierre de Barcelone to go to the rear with the True Cross. Our army readied, but waited.

It was just afternoon when we saw the Saracens arrive. Hundreds of horse riders with archers rode provokingly up towards the Franks. They galloped to us and loosened their arrows. The men shot from riding horses. The arrows did not do much harm. Thierry of Flanders led our first group of knights. He did not move. He endured the arrows on his men, but he forbade them to pursue the Saracens. He endured the punishing. Baudouin had given the right orders and Thierry had agreed with them. Thierry accepted the arrows like as many bee stings, but he stayed put doggedly in front of the screaming, wildly riding Saracens. After a while, the Saracens rode in the other direction, feigning retreat. They invited the Franks to pursue them. Any Frankish army would have complied, but not this one. We laughed actually, when the Saracens turned, astonished after a frantic but useless gallop across the plain, noticing that nobody followed them, turning again and re-enact the same mock attack. They had to repeat that three times. The last time they almost ran into the Flemish knights and a few lance duels ensued. Thierry d'Alsace still suffered the arrows. He had even shot a few back. He waited.

King Baudouin looked at me and said, 'are you afraid? Your hands tremble, Sir Daniel!'

My hands trembled from the stress and expectation more than from fear, but I grinned, 'your Majesty, I am afraid my bladder will burst, my teeth grind my tongue to pieces, and all my limbs tremble, not just my hands!'

The King laughed. 'What do you fear?' he asked.

I answered, 'we chose a scheme. What if the scheme doesn't work? What if we were wrong and Shirkuh yet uses other tricks? Is it really as simple as this to win a battle: decide on a scheme and then apply it and win? What if all schemes fail?'

The King did not laugh anymore. His mouth changed from a smile to a thin, hard line. He said, 'the scheme is the best we could have devised. Ultimately, every man must do what he should do: fight to the death. Your duty was to provide a scheme and by God, nobody else presented me with a better one. Whether our scheme works or not we will soon know. We did the best we could. The rest is up to each man. What do we do know about Nur al-Din's intentions? So far he acted according to our expectations!'

'I suppose his main army must have neared, now. We should advance slowly, march, not faster than our footmen can walk. We must not make them run and tire them. We walk, until we see Nur al-Din's entire army. His army must have entered into the

valley now, maybe wait behind that slope in front of us. I say we march to that slope. When we see his army beyond, we charge on him!’

King Baudouin ordered the army to march and we crept forward. Thierry’s knights in front were still being harassed by Saracen cavalry, but he held his men together. The Saracens did not like that. We did not disperse our forces. We rode up the slope and when we reached the top, we saw indeed the entire, glorious extent of Nur al-Din’s vast forces waiting in the plain. His army was almost double our size. Many a Frankish knight sighed at the might of spears and banners gleaming in the sun, deployed before us.

‘That is a frightening sight indeed,’ the King gasped beside me. ‘This is going to be not a little battle. I had hoped he might have brought only a part of his army, but the whole damn lot is here! Sir Daniel, please stay close to me. I am going to need advice. As well as protection.’

We advanced at a slow pace. We too showed our lines to Nur al-Din.

At the moment I would have let Thierry d’Alsace charge forward, the King looked at me and I nodded. We had the same idea at the same moment. Baudouin had his trumpets sound. Thierry d’Alsace looked over his shoulder to the King and Baudouin drew his sword from its scabbard and held it high, pointing in the direction of the Saracens. Count Thierry rode far from us, but I saw him smile, turn in his saddle, look at the Saracens, and shout the attack. The Battle of Puthaha had commenced.

I all happened very quickly.

The air was suddenly filled with a deafening sound. A thousand Frankish knights thundered with heavy destriers over the plain, shouting cries of war. The knights of Flanders charged, first slowly and then ever-quickening. When they were but a few moments away from Nur al-Din’s men they galloped at utmost speed. Thierry knew and we knew what he would have to pass: showers of arrows, but when they came, he rode ferociously on. To his left and right knights and horses fell. Thierry’s heart must have crunched to see so many fair knights of Flanders, friends, tumble with horse and armour in the dust. We heard the wounded scream, the horses neigh from pain, but had there been ten times more arrows, the pride of Flanders would not have stopped. Despite the chaos of falling men, Thierry d’Alsace reached the archers of the Saracens. The Saracen archers were mounted warriors. But they were warriors with only light armour; leather jerkins and light swords. The Flemish knights overran those who could not escape. They ran their lances through soft bodies and threw horses aside. Then they rode into Nur al-Din’s lines.

Nur al-Din had sacrificed his archers, as we might have sacrificed our first group, but the Flemish knights were less harmed than one would have expected. Thierry’s men disappeared in the Saracens’ mass and were absorbed. We did not see our knights anymore. We only saw a chaotic whirl of lances, banners and swords, a whirl of gesticulating men, witnessing to the arduous fight that was no doubt happening in the centre of the enemy.

It was time to provide the hammer blow to that same centre of the Saracens where Thierry d’Alsace fought. Baudouin accepted his spiralled lance from a page, closed

the visor of his helmet and ordered the attack. Four thousand destriers began to move forward at a lazy pace. Our footmen followed. When our first knights were at a distance of a mere three hundred feet, Baudouin ordered the gallop. The sharpened hooves of our horses droned towards the enemy lines. We levelled our coloured lances and a mass of steel dashed horizontally into the Saracens.

The knights of Flanders let us pass as we crushed Saracen warriors under our hooves, pierced through the enemy with our lances, smashed into smaller horses to push them aside and throw them in disarray, aside, squeezed between our destriers, throwing our adversaries from their saddle. We did not stop, for the ranks behind us forced us on, and so we drove as so many knives in Nur al-Din's heavier cavalry. Though these warriors had spears too, they could do nothing against the impact of our charge. Our lances were still horizontal though they ripped through mail and flesh or pierced shields to shreds, so hard that their masters were flung from their horses. The spears were a great danger, but our lances were longer. Still we continued to ride at the same speed. An enemy missed was the prey of the knights behind us. I rode next to the King in the third line and we passed right through the Saracen army. There, our charge was spent. We turned our horses, for behind us the Frankish knights had come to a standstill.

Our warriors fought the enemy with swords now. Enough damage had already been done. Baudouin threw away his lance, too, and drew his sword. We cheered, for the fighting spirit that wins battles, the elation of victory, had been broken in the Saracens. We could see it and we could smell it. The Saracens fought for their lives, but their minds already knew they had lost. Their groups were in disarray, chaotic, order lost. Each Frankish knight fought three or four Saracens, and the enemy held ground, but he killed or wounded one man after another, receiving only slight hacks of swords on mail and shields.

The Saracens defended themselves in despair. The initiative was not with them, and not the energy to win, either. The Franks sensed that the struggle of the Saracens was lacking the added surge of might that is necessary to kill instead of be killed. When a Saracen slashed with his sword or thrust with his spear, two slashes returned, deadly, lethal. A shield was pushed in a Saracen belly, a foot kicked in his groin, a rein was cut, a horse's leg was broken and a helmet cleaved.

The left and right flanks of the Saracens had suffered less than the centre. The cavalry there tried to circle around us and attack us in the rear. But Pierre de Barcelone's footmen held a wall of spears and shields to them. The Saracen attack faltered. The cavalry bounced at the shields. Horses stumbled and in the chaos at the shields the enemy's warriors were transpierced by Frankish, long spears. After a while, Pierre de Barcelone ordered his men to move around the Saracen lines. He was in the attack now.

More and more Syrian warriors lay wounded on the ground. Riderless horses abounded on the battlefield. The Frankish knights heaved blood-bespattered shields. The enemy warriors were being massacred in their centre. The Flemish knights cleaved through Nur al-Din's lines. Here and there I saw Saracens throwing down shields and swords. Warriors were surrendering. Little mercy was given and I regretted that. A vengeance was being taken for so many a friend killed, maimed or captured, or decapitated at Nur al-Din's orders in previous battles.

While fighting, I looked at where the Saracen orders came from. Somewhat to the left of where the most dogged struggle was being fought, was a low hill. Many green banners stood there in a small group of silver-clad men. The men were all fending off Frankish knights, but they did that with the haughtiness of the very best warriors. The hill, I knew, was called Tell-Hubaish and it was there that Nur al-Din fought, screaming orders around. His troops charged down the hill, to be pushed back upwards.

I cut with my sword and parried sword-hacks on my shield. A spear pierced the calf of my leg and entered a little into the flesh of my horse. I sliced through the neck of a Saracen footman. An arrow flew in my mail, but the rings held, the arrow had not the force to penetrate them. I cut a helmet off a Saracen warrior and he let a long, bloodied line on my lower arm. But then I was right under Tell-Hubaish and I shouted to the Franks to rally to me. Then I called Nur al-Din's name. His eyes flickered at me and I pointed at him with my sword. Our attack on Nur al-Din's guards was savage. We forced back the guards and many a silver armour fell to the ground. I wanted to push onto the Atabeg so that he would hesitate and go backwards, retreat or flee, which would be the final sign of a defeated army.

Onfroi de Toron remarked what I was doing from the far. He had some space before him to charge. With five of his knights he rode up the Tell-Hubaish. Onfroi was a great warrior and he was the Connétable of Jerusalem, Jerusalem's Lord of War. Where he went, the army followed. No Saracen would have been able to hold his fury that day. He cut himself a bloody path into the Saracen guards and halted only two horses away from Nur al-Din. I attacked from the other side. More Frankish knights followed Onfroi's example and filled the gap he had slayed in Nur al-Din's last defence.

The Atabeg of Aleppo was a proud and courageous man however. He still yelled orders. He cried phrases of the Qur'an, incantations to Allah, to harden his men. Three Amirs tugged at his horse and spoke to him, surely entreating him to withdraw. He finally realised he would soon be encircled and threatened with death, his retreat cut off. He slowly turned his horse and rode with his loyal Amirs down the opposite side of the hill, away from the battle. His green, enormous banners followed him. Nur al-Din abandoned his army. We rode on the Tell-Hubaish.

A ripple of fright tore through the Saracen forces. Their leaders had left the battle. From left to right, Saracen horse riders galloped towards the mountains, out of the deadly plains of Puthaha. They fled from the battle. At first, single riders fled, but then entire groups disengaged. The flight became a rout.

Only in the large centre of the Saracen army was the battle still raging and doggedly fought. Pierre de Barcelone sent his footmen to infiltrate the struggling cavalry. The Saracens, caught in the mêlée, stood no chance. Few Saracen warriors surrendered. Most were killed fighting, and the more were killed the easier it was for the Franks to kill still more. When a knight threw a Saracen from the saddle, two spearmen found the heart of the fallen enemy. In a short time then, no adversaries were left to kill for the Frankish knights, and Nur al-Din's proud centre was no more. The Frankish knights drove their horses away from the battlefield. Spearmen on foot walked in the valley and slaughtered the last wounded enemy.

King Baudouin rode to the Tell-Hubaish and looked beyond. I was still standing there with my panting horse. The meagre rests of the Saracen cavalry fled in full gallop, as a totally disorganised mob, towards the north. Those forces were unable to launch a new attack. The day was us. Baudouin held his sword to the heavens, long enough for all knights to see and to cheer. Pierre de Barcelone brought the True Cross there. Baudouin had won the Battle of Puthaha.

I was so tired then, that I was unable to move my horse. Baudouin grinned at me. Thierry of Flanders rode up to us. His silver armour had the colour of red. The gold of the True Cross flashed in the last rays of the sun. Shouts filled the air; the King was hailed. All swords first went to the sky. Then, Baudouin dismounted from his horse and he knelt before the True Cross, bringing his mouth to the golden lining. All knights in the plains dismounted then, knelt and prayed with the King. Then the King rode with his Barons down the hill, through the knights and warriors. He had his triumph. I stood alone on Tell-Hubaish.

Later, much later, just before the sun disappeared completely behind the mountain ridges, I rode towards the place where the Frankish army had concentrated after the battle, away, south from the battlefield. I rode through the plain of Puthaha. I rode in a sea of corpses strewn all over the valley. I heard men groan and moan and stir but I rode on. My horse walked neighing amidst the men lying with large, ugly wounds, with hacked-off members, with smashed heads, with open, bloodied bellies from which hung entrails. The animal carefully avoided putting its hooves on the pitiful remains of the men. As we rode, vultures and other scavenging birds flew angrily up before us with croaking sounds, until they seemed used to our steps and moved aside just a little, pecking at the legs of the horse. Hyenas and jackals scuttled before my horse among the corpses. They were eager to have their pick at the open wounds of the dead men. They licked at the dried blood. When we passed, they looked savagely and angrily at my horse, but they moved only at the last moment. I would have sent arrows in them, for they horrified me. They watched me as if asking what a wandering, living man was doing in their dominion. A few Frankish footmen plundered the dead men on the ground, going expertly through hidden pockets and seams in which coins might be found. They also killed the few remaining wounded Saracens that moaned for mercy in the last heat of the day. I spurred my horse on. Its hooves were tainted red from the blood that muddied the soil. Was I the cause of this horror? From where came this ability of otherwise gentle, pitying men to plan a battle in cold blood? How was it possible for men in a battle to consider their opponents only as dehumanized enemies that only needed to be exterminated? Or saw most men but me all other people without any feelings, like butchers killed cows and pigs?

Gradually, the colours of the heavens shifted. I guessed at first that the sun had modified the colours, but the appearing hues were too eerie. It seemed to me that there were less Franks pillaging than before, and then I saw none anymore. I was alone on the battlefield, alone among the corpses. The wind had stopped, there were no vultures in the air. The moaning had ended. A strange silence hung over the Puthaha. I turned, for I had sensed a presence behind me. I saw a single man standing there. The long shadow of my horse reached him. He was dressed like a French monk. He wore a light grey robe and a black belt. He had a hood drawn over his head despite the heat, so that I could not see his face. The strangeness of the atmosphere suddenly gripped my heart. A voice spoke from under the cap, but I knew the voice was only in

my mind. It was a deep, rumbling voice that echoed the words. The voice said, ‘he who threatens you will be punished. Lead my people away. Lead my people away.’

My horse pranced and shook sideways. I looked around and noticed a few Franks once more scavenging among the dead. The wind, the noises, the birds returned. I looked back at the man, but he had gone. There was nobody anymore in front of me. My gripping fear receded then. I was not sure whether the man had truly been there or whether I had dreamed him in my tiredness and mood of horror. My heart thumped; fear tore at me once more. I rode around, but I could see nowhere a man in a dress that resembled the monk’s robes. I was angry then.

I had not experienced a vision for a long time. I thought that as I lived and fought intensely, the visions would disappear. I surmised I was so much involved in the everyday world, in the real world, that I would get rid of my tendency to see images and hear things that were from another realm. I had been wrong. The visions were part of my nature and a new one had visited me. I was also glad however, for this vision had been short and it had not been violent. I had seen no fire, no horrors, just heard a voice in my head that spoke of punishing who would harm me and urged me to lead people off. I had no idea which people I had to lead away, to where? The vision had only moderately frightened me. It had not made me sick. I rode up to the Franks, away from Puthaha, pushing back the memories of the vision, refusing the vision to haunt me any longer.

The Frankish army stayed for two days at the end of the Puthaha plains. We buried the dead below the Tell-Hubaish. We recuperated the weapons, armour and other riches abandoned by the Saracens. A delegation of Amirs of Nur al-Din came to our army and asked the privilege to bury the dead Saracens. King Baudouin granted the Saracens that duty. He complimented the Amirs with their courage at the battle. The envoys of Nur al-Din did not smile.

The Frank army, led by King Baudouin, marched then to the Sawad, to the fortress of Habis Jaldak. The knights repaired the fortress and strengthened the garrison. All Saracens were chased from the Sawad region.

While Baudouin thus lingered near Habis Jaldak, he received emissaries from Nur al-Din. I translated for the King. In finest diplomatic Arabic, Nur al-Din asked for the ceasing of hostilities between Jerusalem and himself. The Atabeg of Aleppo even proposed reconciliation between the great leader of Syria and the King. Baudouin had me write polite letters to agree to the proposals of peace. We thus secured Baniyas, Galilee and the Sawad. We could return peacefully with the army to Jerusalem, and march once more south on the road of which we recognised every hill and every stone.

Later, we heard from Syrian and Jewish merchants that Nur al-Din had relapsed in illness, but had recovered. While he laid ill in Aleppo’s citadel, his younger brother, the Amir-Miran Nasir al-Din had tried to draw all power of Aleppo to his person. But Shirkuh, on the council of his brother Najm al-Din Ibn Aiyub, hastened to Aleppo and had the sick Nur al-Din sit behind an open window of the citadel, so that the people of

the city could see that the Atabeg was not dead and could still order his Amirs. The population of Aleppo chased Nasir al-Din. He fled to the fortress and city of Harran, which he captured, but from which the cavalry of Shirkuh chased him a little later. Like his father Zengi, Nur al-Din would not forget the loyalty shown to him by the family of Aiyub in dire moments.

Chapter Four. Jerusalem and Constantinople 1159-1165

I delighted in Miriam and in our two children. The boy and girl were a source of wonder and surprises. Miriam had hired a wet-nurse and two new female servants, so that our house was uncomfortably filled with noise and movement. I did not dare to complain.

Miriam was still a doctor. She often helped in the Hospital of the Knights of Saint John. I tried to be discreet and did not ask about her patients. From snatches of conversations I deduced she was probably a friend of the Grand-Master of the Order of Saint John.

In the evenings we sat close in our hall, often entwined on a couch, and we told each other what had happened during the day and in the months we had not been together. I painted her with much verve the battle of Puthaha, but she expressed only horror. I told her about the vision I had experienced on the battlefield. She could not make more sense from the images than I.

I enjoyed merely a few days of leisure at Jerusalem. King Baudouin sent me on a new mission. He called me to the palace with Onfroi de Toron, his Connétable. We stood in the great hall and as always, Baudouin was as fidgety as a grasshopper. Onfroi and I leaned amused at a window, resting our elbows at a sill; Baudouin stepped from one place to the other, gesticulating and arguing to us. He said he wanted to secure Outremer. Onfroi and I looked at each other and said that if after Puthaha the Kingdom of Jerusalem had not been secured, we really wondered what more was needed. Baudouin's ideas darted about as much as his eyes. He needed to marry, he said. The Kingdom had to have a heir. He needed more power to support him. More Christian power than Outremer was only available at Constantinople. He needed the Byzantines. Baudouin wanted us to sail to Constantinople, to Emperor Manuel Comnenus and forge a new alliance between the Kingdom of Jerusalem and the Roman Empire. We had to travel on an embassy to the Emperor and ask for a Greek wife from the Emperor's family for Baudouin. Thus, the bonds between Outremer and Constantinople would be renewed.

'Jesus,' Onfroi de Toron remarked, 'this a bad moment to ask something of the Emperor! You know that Renaud de Châtillon, the Prince of Antioch, has attacked and pillaged Cyprus in a stupid raid, not so long ago. The Emperor was outraged at that act of piracy. Renaud has insulted Manuel Comnenus and defied him, claiming publicly that Antioch was his and nobody else's. The Byzantines believe Antioch is still a part of their Empire. That issue, whether Antioch belongs in vassalry to the Emperor or to the Kingdom of Jerusalem, is very actual and thorny. If we go to Constantinople, that issue will be the first on the table, once more. We will obtain nothing if we do not accept the supremacy of the Emperor's will on that matter, and on Cilicia as well, whereas King Thoros is our ally. Are you sure, your Majesty, that Manuel Comnenus will not throw us in jail and let us rot there till the end of times, rather than receive us with honours?'

'Who cares about Renaud de Châtillon?' King Baudouin cried. 'If the Emperor has been outraged, so have I! Renaud thinks he is Prince of Antioch and acts like that, but he is only temporary Regent for the child Bohemond, the rightful heir to the fief of

Antioch. If the Emperor wants to disembowel Renaud, let him proceed! We will not support Renaud de Châtillon! We will not cover his idiocies. Tell the Emperor we accept his claims over Antioch, even though it is part of Outremer. The Emperor must understand that Antioch is his territory by law, but that Jerusalem is much nearer to it and able to defend it. We will hold the land for the Emperor, provided he lets us continue the descendants of the family of Poitiers as rulers at Antioch. I am sending you two on a mission of diplomacy. So use diplomacy to explain all to the Emperor! You can do that, Sir Onfroi. You must do that! Sir Daniel knows Greek like a Byzantine. He can translate the subtleties of diplomatic Greek and advise you. He is good at that, at advice!’

There was not much arguing with Baudouin once he had something on his mind. There was one other thing on Onfroi’s mind, though, and I saw him hesitate to say it, turning around the point. Finally, he must have thought he was still the Connétable of the Kingdom, allowed to speak out frankly.

Onfroi said, ‘your Majesty, marrying into the Imperial family is not a little feat. You will have to honour being the relative of the Emperor. Marital fidelity will be a necessity. Can we ensure the Emperor that you will be loyal to your Queen? Can we ensure her subsistence despite possible issues between you and her?’

I was almost puffing with laughter at Onfroi’s candour, but I held a face as if I was attending a funeral. King Baudouin was a handsome man of twenty-seven years old. He was tall and slender, wore a small, sophisticated pointed beard, and he cared for his looks. His face had fine and regular traits. He appreciated fine women and the ladies of the Court were crazy about him, and he about them. The King could not resist the ladies and the ladies did not resist him. Any Baron or knight who showed his wife at Court might be cuckolded, at least if the wife was fair and witty. Onfroi was suggesting that Baudouin would have to be loyal to his wife in order to avoid the wrath of the Emperor, and provide guarantees to that loyalty. Baudouin was not offended by Onfroi’s words. He burst out in laughter and both of us joined in, relieved and unable to hold our faces serious any longer.

‘Of course,’ the King smiled. ‘I do know what you mean. The girl will receive a fief of her own in the Kingdom. I will be loyal to her! But you make sure she is pretty!’

And so the matter was settled. I had not had more than five evenings with Miriam and I had to ride out again. She was mad at me, but understood that a word of the King was a command.

Onfroi de Toron and I travelled immediately to the port of Saint-Jean-d’Acre. We embarked on a Genoese ship for Constantinople. The embassy sent by King Baudouin consisted of Onfroi de Toron, the Connétable of Jerusalem, of the Archbishop of Nazareth, Attard, and two other knights, Guillaume de Barres and Jocelin Piseau. We sailed in the summer, yet the sea was hard in July of that year of 1158. The ship tossed and writhed on the Sea. I found myself unable to be sea-sick, just as on my voyage to the Holy Land. Onfroi de Toron and Bishop Attard suffered, however. Attard must have been a sick man before he sailed. He was weak, had a very pale complexion, walked with difficulty on the planks that led from the quay of Saint-Jean-d’Acre to the ship, disappeared below decks never to emerge, and barely nourished himself on board. He succumbed after a horrible five days at sea. We buried him in the waters. The leader of the mission was now Onfroi de Toron. He considered turning back, but we saw the arduous Baudouin before our eyes and decided to continue on our journey.

We sailed north along the coast of the former lands of Ionia, but we did not stop at any of the ancient Greek cities that were now Byzantine. We sailed through the Hellespont, east. We sailed along the shores. These coasts were the loveliest I had ever seen. There were fine bays with deep blue water and many inlets, fertile shores and sometimes the horizon was lined with hazy-blue peaks of mountains. I still thank the Lord to have allowed me to admire his finest works of nature. My teacher, Jacob, positioned the Garden of Eden east of the coasts of Phrygia, inland of those regions, and he may well have been right. The shores of these lands were the most beautiful and most spectacular on earth.

Constantinople, the Imperial city! Founded by Spartans, at first called Byzantium and then re-baptised Constantinople by the greatest of the Roman Emperors, who preferred the opulent east over the corrupted west.

We sailed into the harbour of the Golden Horn. Hundreds of merchant ships and war galleys docked there. The ships unloaded their cargoes. The captains loaded other goods on board. One had not to wonder where the wealth of the Byzantine Emperor originated from.

Constantinople was the maritime centre of the world. The trade from the vast east into the Mediterranean Sea and vice versa passed here, through the Bosphorus, by obligation. There was no other sea or land road. The caravans and trade routes from north to south and from south to north converged here too. Constantinople was a vast exchange point. Western ships did not go much farther and eastern ships also stopped here. Goods were simply transferred from one ship to the other. The same happened with the northern merchants and the southern ones. The Emperor collected taxes on all transactions. Moreover, the city of Constantinople was built on an isthmus and could be easily defended. The harbour was the largest and the best protected of the region.

Constantinople dominated the Bosphorus and the Bosphorus was the key to the east and the west, the south and the north of our world. Bulk goods of grains, wood and hides and silks were brought into the port, sold and loaded onto the Venetian, Genoese and Pisan ships. There were Genoese, Venetian and Pisan quarters at Constantinople, but the Turks, the Arabs and the Persians traded here as much as the Franks.

We sailed along the enormous fortifications of the city, walls higher than any of France or Outremer, square and round defence towers by the dozens, all manned very ostentatiously with a multitude of Byzantine warriors. The Roman Emperor had created a thousand year state. Constantine the Great understood well that this town, more than Rome, was the centre of the world of trade, and hence a perpetual source of riches on which he could base his power. The stability of the reign of the Emperors was another factor in favour of trade here, for few changes disturbed the baits of the traders. The riches in gold paid for large armies and fleets, hence for the military power that remained unmatched in the whole region, from Constantinople to Egypt.

Immediately after our arrival, Onfroi de Toron asked to be led by the guards to the palace of the Emperor. We had to wait almost an entire day at the gates and in the evening we were not allowed in. We had to seek lodgings in town, in the dark, which we found in a tavern of the Venetians.

Every day Onfroi and I returned to the palace to repeat our plea. We explained our purpose to one after the other Byzantine Courtier. We never well understood the

functions of the many Greek that came to interrogate us on the same subject, time and time over. This was all so tedious! It took more than a week of patient parleying, repeating over and over again who we were and what we had come to negotiate. I tried the finest, slowest, most polite Greek terms, and the most awful Latin to accommodate the Latin that some Courtiers insisted to talk, so that the men would not be offended, before we were allowed to enter the palace.

We still did not meet the Emperor then. We were given quarters in an old side building of the Blachernae Palace. Lodgings and food were barely adequate. Our few rooms were squalid and musty. We had to support another week of parleying with haughty Greek emissaries. Gradually, very gradually, we were let to understand that the Imperial Court was very angry with the Prince of Antioch for having pillaged Cyprus. We had to apologise abjectly and ensure over and over again that the King of Jerusalem regretted the incident, disapproved of it, but had not been aware of the expedition until it had happened. Onfroi severely condemned Renaud de Châtillon for the ravages.

After many days, something changed in the attitude of the Byzantines. We were brought to finer quarters and given silk clothes in abundance. We received finely decorated rooms in the heart of the Blachernae. The wealth in that part of the palace was staggering. Gold and silver paints were used on the most expensive cypress and cedar wood as decoration. It seemed as if only silk was worn by the people that moved through the corridors. The servant maids were prettier than the prettiest. The nicest food was brought to us, ample fruit and legumes, roasted game and fowl were now served. We still had to wait for several days. New Courtiers announced themselves to talk to us.

In the Blachernae, the discussion centred again on Renaud de Châtillon and also on Armenia. After days of cautious probing, we understood that Manuel Comnenus wanted to chastise the Prince of Antioch and to re-conquer Cilicia from the Armenian King Thoros II. In equally covered language we agreed to future campaigns of the Byzantines in Cilicia and in Antioch.

At long last, the courtiers started to talk of a niece of the Emperor, who was a handsome girl and who might be proposed as wife to our King. We asked to see the Princess. That question had to be debated for a few days more. Finally, we were led to a gallery above a hall, from which we could see down into a room, where several women walked. One of the women was pointed out to us as the niece of the Emperor. She was a very young girl, but indeed a great beauty. She had a very pretty, finely chiselled face crowned with luxurious blonde hair. The silk moulded her fine body and suggested generous forms. We were assured of her excellent health and quick intelligence. She had large, blue eyes. Onfroi de Toron agreed with this child as a possible wife for the King of Jerusalem.

Suddenly, we were allowed to an audience with the Emperor, Manuel Comnenus, Emperor of the Roman Empire of the East.

The experience was unforgettable. I cannot explain in words the splendour and the magnificence of the rooms in which resided the Emperor. It seemed to me as if even the guards were dressed in gold and wore silver spears.

We were led into the audience hall. The hall was filled with Courtiers, women and men, all dressed in the richest fashions worthy of a King or Queen. All this had been staged for us, to impress us with the grandeur of the Imperial Court, as compared to the provinciality of Jerusalem. The Imperial Court of Constantinople had assembled to receive us with magnanimity and good pleasure.

Onfroi and I looked at each other, for we knew then our pleas had been accepted. The work was accomplished. We would not have to discuss any further with the Emperor himself. Manuel merely granted us a welcome and he would tell us his decision, but the decision was positive. We were suddenly optimistic. We would not have been received thus if the Emperor had been displeased still.

We advanced in the hall and had to kneel three times though, before we could stand before the Emperor's throne. Emperor Manuel Comnenus was seated there with his wife on a fabulous golden throne. He was dressed in purple silk. We did not have to say one word. The Emperor spoke excellent Latin. He had accepted the pleas of the King of Jerusalem. He was satisfied by the proposals of renewed alliance with Jerusalem and accepted the terms with pleasure. He granted King Baudouin a Byzantine wife of his family. He proposed Theodora, his niece, the daughter of his brother the Sebastocrator Isaac Comnenus, to be wedded in holy matrimony to King Baudouin. He assured us, the envoys of the King, that Theodora was handsome, well formed, and would be a loyal wife. Thus, he concluded, the families would be united and the ties between Jerusalem and Constantinople sealed. The Emperor was delighted that we had reconfirmed the greatness of the Empire and its claims over Antioch and Cilicia. He then mentioned politely that the Kingdom of Jerusalem was a natural extension of the Empire, to be ruled by the King and his Imperial wife.

After the audience we returned to our quarters. The Courtiers came to speak to us. There was still much to discuss. Onfroi de Toron was delighted however when the dowry of Theodora was mentioned. King Baudouin would receive a hundred thousand hyperpyres of gold, ten thousand hyperpyres for the wedding ceremony and thirty thousand hyperpyres would be added in special gifts. Such a fortune was enormous for Jerusalem. It would solve all Baudouin's possible debts forever. We guessed such a fortune was small, compared to the riches that lay in the Blachernae. Onfroi de Toron thanked the Imperial court, signed one parchment after the other. We promised the region of Saint-Jean-d'Acre to Theodora Comnenus, for her to retain also when King Baudouin might die before her, even when no children were born from the marriage.

We saw Manuel Comnenus several times more to discuss details in a more formal manner. The Emperor was much interested in the situation of war in our territory but we sensed there was very little he did not know yet about the Kingdom. Each time, several Barons and Court leaders were present. Our conversations were courteous, open and fair, devoid of irony or cynicism. The Emperor preferred to talk in Greek, which we did, and which Onfroi de Toron knew sufficiently to understand although he spoke it only haltingly. When better Greek was necessary, I answered for Onfroi.

The Emperor had us shown the city, especially its palaces, churches, ramparts and fortified walls. There was actually a double stretch of walls around the city and the walls ran for enormous lengths, from sea to sea. The Blachernae Palace was an enormous complex of several palaces, churches, courtyards, stables and garrison

buildings. Moreover it was not the only Imperial palace in Constantinople. We visited the Holy Sophia cathedral, the church of the Holy Spirit or Holy Wisdom, the largest building in the known world, with its grand, rounded dome. It was the highest building in the world.

Constantinople prided in many other large churches and monasteries inside the city. As a special privilege, we saw the famous Christian relics of the Emperor: the crown of thorns that Jesus had worn at his death, the nails by which Jesus had been crucified, parts of the wood of the True Cross, and the veil of Saint Veronica. We saw the shroud in which Jesus had been enveloped when he was laid in the tomb, which held the imprint of his body and his head, and which was folded so as to show only Jesus' face in icon. We beheld in the Theotokos Church of the Blachernae the cloak, the veil and the belt of the Virgin Mary, and many other relics of saints.

I was allowed to stay alone near the relics that showed the face of Jesus Christ. I thought it most remarkable that I seemed to know the face quite well. It was not very different from the many drawings, paintings on walls and mosaics that I had seen in churches of France and Outremer. I expected to see an entirely different portrait here in Constantinople. The face on the cloths however not only resembled each other, but they resembled much the images I had seen before. I suppose the painters had copied the same portrait over and over again for centuries, all originating from these very early ones, and from the Greek icons of Constantinople. I was moved by the intensity of the face. The eyes seemed closed, the traits of the head dignified, graceful even, long and serene despite the sufferings the Christ had endured. The face radiated immense pity and yet quietness. I could not but wonder whether I had been sent here by chance or by some divine design to stand before the face of God. It was an extraordinary privilege granted to me. I talked to God then, told Him about all I too had suffered and I thanked for the joys granted to me. I asked Him to protect Miriam and the children, who were Jews like him. I thanked Him for the special grace of prophecy God had bestowed on me. I asked Him to explain to me the sense of my life. I had not more answers however in the splendour of the church of the Blachernae than I had received at Jerusalem, at the Holy Tomb. My life would provide me with the answers.

Emperor Manuel Comnenus invited us to feasts in Constantinople. We could not refuse, even though we wanted to sail back rapidly to the Kingdom of Jerusalem and bring the King the good news.

The Emperor allowed us to sail a few days later on a ship bound for Tyre. Two imperial galleys accompanied us for protection. Once our ship out of Constantinople, Theodora walked freely on deck, shedding off the protocol her ladies were always trying to impose on her. Theodora conversed with us. We saw her face now and then, when her veils flowed in the sea-winds, and we could not but congratulate us with the happy conclusion of our mission, for she was truly a beauty.

Theodora was still a child really, a young girl of thirteen years old, but she was already formed like a woman. She had been educated at the Court of Constantinople, and that was a hard school of diplomacy. She was instructed in Latin and Greek, and we could exchange some views on elementary philosophy. She knew poetry and music and had a keen interest in the history of her family. When I expressed interest in history too, she handed me a little book of the deeds of her grandfather Emperor Alexis Comnenus, a book written by his daughter, Anna Comnena. This book made me understand much and better about the Emperors. Theodora had good notions of

where the coastal cities lay and she asked the captain always where the ship was, and compared that with a crude map she had brought from Constantinople. She had an exquisite mind. We were delighted to have with Theodora Comnena a wife worthy of a King, a Queen that would be a real addition to the stature of Baudouin and of Outremer.

We arrived at Tyre in the month of September of 1158. Onfroi de Toron and the two other knights travelled to Jerusalem with Theodora. I asked Toron for permission to remain a while at Tyre. I needed to check on my Jewish traders there. I also wanted to go to Sidon to learn how our merchants advanced in transactions with Syria. I believe Onfroi de Toron was secretly pleased to release me at Tyre: all the honours would be for him alone to receive. Onfroi asked for fifty knights from the Archbishop of Tyre and from the Templar Knights, and he rode out of the city with several ceremonial carts, in which rode Theodora and her ladies.

I lingered for more than a month at Tyre and as much at Sidon. I heard at Sidon that King Baudouin had married Theodora Comnena as soon as she had arrived at Jerusalem. The marriage was not consecrated by the Patriarch of Jerusalem, for Foucher d'Angoulême had died the year before, and the new Archbishop Amaury de Nesle had not yet been confirmed by Rome. The wedding was consecrated in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre by Aymeri de Limoges, the Patriarch of Antioch, who had fled from Renaud de Châtillon and lived in Jerusalem. King Baudouin was twenty-seven years old, Theodora Comnena was thirteen.

I arrived at Jerusalem at the end of November of 1158. I rode to the town, but left the stallion at the stables we owned outside the city. I strolled through David's Gate to my house. Nobody was at home, no Miriam, no children, no servants. I was disappointed, but I could hardly expect that all would be waiting for me after so many months of absence, and Miriam did not know when I would return. I supposed they would soon be back, so I turned to the citadel to seek for Onfroi de Toron. Then, I would go to the palace in the fort.

The sentries brought me immediately to the rooms of the Connétable, who was indeed at the castle. I had to wait quite a time before he could talk to me. Onfroi de Toron came out of his study with other knights and said goodbye to them. Then he welcomed me. He drew me into his personal room.

He said, 'I'm sorry to have let you waiting. I wanted to see you alone, though.

Welcome! How was your journey?'

'Fine,' I answered. I sensed a slight embarrassment in his voice and he avoided my eyes. 'How was the trip with Theodora to Jerusalem? How was the wedding? Was the King pleased?'

'Oh yes! Everything went fine. Who would not have been pleased with a beautiful young wife and a handsome dowry? Especially the dowry! Tell me, how long have you been in Jerusalem?'

'I just arrived, this very instance! You are the first man I talk to, Sir Onfroi.'

'That is good,' Onfroi replied. 'Sit down, Daniel. Much has happened while you were at Tyre and Sidon. I don't know where to start. You must take care!'

Onfroi never was a man to come to a subject from the easy, simple side.

I wondered, ‘take care for what? All is fine now, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, yes, all is fine,’ Onfroi continued, fidgeting with a dagger. There had to be more. There was something he dared not speak out immediately.

‘Come on, Onfroi,’ I said, ‘what is happening? You are worried! Are the Saracens once more attacking Jerusalem?’

‘No, no, the Saracens are quieter than expected these days. No, there is something with you! You live with a Jewish woman. We heard that some kind of a ceremony has been performed.’

‘Yes,’ I answered, piqued. ‘Everybody in Jerusalem knows that, and knows it since many months. The King knows it. He said so to me, even on the battlefield of Puthaha! Many knights are married to Syrian, Armenian and Jacobite or Nestorian women, not to speak of people married to women of the Greek Church. What is the issue?’

‘Well,’ Onfroi said, ‘times have changed perceptibly since our Patriarch Foucher d’Angoulême died and a new Patriarch was appointed. And there has lately been some talk about you, Daniel. You know how a Royal Court is. There are nice people at the court and then there are jealous and ambitious people. You drew quite some attention this year. You were the hero of Puthaha. No, no, don’t protest! You were! It became known that you advised the King with a plan that brought us victory. The King himself told the story times and times over again, and how you proposed all the measures. The King bypassed the Council of Barons with that, and that was not accepted gracefully. You were also my advisor and friend on our mission to Constantinople. We brought Queen Theodora with us. That too, was a very fine success thanks to you to no little extent. The King was inordinately pleased, as well with the Queen as with the money and it became known that Jocelin and Guillaume would have given up the negotiations at Constantinople if not for the tenacity of us two. All that made you a man close to the heart of the King. And that induced jealousy and envy, of course. No Courtier knight likes to admit a knight higher than himself in the favour of the King. And some of the Barons found that the aura of Baudouin glowed too much. The King’s successes also created envy. The King was growing too popular, too powerful! Now, such tensions always seek an outlet, a funnel through which to escape and hit something. I am the Connétable, practically untouchable, a normal husband, and a pious man gifted with not too many talents. So the intrigues sought to damage where they could. They found you. They heard somewhere you lived with a Jewish woman. They worked on the Jewish Rabbies and got the information that you were married to Miriam. Then they slandered you with the new Patriarch, and spread nasty rumours at court. They reproached King Baudouin of supporting you, so that they could criticise the King at least for something! They reproached Baudouin for allowing Christian-Jewish marriages and for taking advice from heathens. One rumour after the other was launched, until the most outrageous heathen ceremonies were invoked. As if you ever had indulged in those! You have been at Aleppo to worship the devil; you dress so that you could pass for a Turk; you had a splendid Arabian horse given to you by Nur al-Din to ultimately betray us. You were rich with Syrian and Persian gold. And so on, and so on. All of it were lies, of course, spread at the Court while we were at Constantinople and later. But King Baudouin was harassed constantly with new rumours about you.’

I asked, very tense, ‘who is “they”?’

‘Oh, difficult to say for sure,’ Onfroi replied with risen eyebrows. ‘The rumours originated from several places. They came from around the Queen Mother Mélisende, from the new Patriarch Amaury de Nesle, who we have found to be a tedious zealot, but who I believe not to be able to have devised the rumours because he does not know us so well. Some of the original stories we traced to Antioch, to Renaud de Châtillon. De Châtillon was particularly angry with us having accepted Byzantine dominance over Antioch, though that is an old affair. He could hardly blame the King or me, so he blamed you. There were of course people who spoke in your defence: King Baudouin himself, to start with. I too, of course. Aymeri de Limoges, the Patriarch of Antioch, who cannot smell Renaud from far, was with us, and so was Raoul, the Bishop of Bethlehem, who seemed to like you, and Raymond du Puy the Hospitaller. But the rumours spread and they became nastier with the day. There was even talk of arresting you for treason, of arresting and burning the Jewish woman you live with, bringing her to some sort of religious judgement!’

I think I became very pale then, and Onfroi de Toron’s eyes seemed suddenly filled with fear. I stood calmly up from my chair however, went round the table and towered above Onfroi.

I cried, ‘where is she? Where is Miriam?’

‘Calm down,’ Onfroi shouted back at me. He was not a man to fear a threat. ‘Nothing happened to her, I assure you! Nobody hurt her. The King refused to do anything about her or about you. I must tell you, however, that you cannot be welcome to the Court any longer. Baudouin is aggrieved, surely, but in view of the persistent rumours he cannot receive you anymore officially at the palace, not for the moment anyhow. The King asked me to intercept you before you called on him and explain. Baudouin does not like you less, but suddenly it seems that a knight mingling with a Jew is a problem anew for Jerusalem!’

I was utmost troubled by Onfroi’s words. I rather regarded the entire world as my enemy at that moment. Some of the knights had abused of my absence to slander me at Court. What should I do now? Leave Outremer with Miriam and the children? I said so to Onfroi.

‘God no, no, no,’ he said. ‘Do not blow up this outrageous affair too much either! I doubt your wife will be touched. You will certainly not be touched. But the King cannot for a while show you at his side. You must make yourself be forgotten for a while. If there is any danger, then come to the citadel. I will protect you, and so will the Châtelain here. I will protect you and hide you.’

‘Hide me? Since when do I have to hide? I did nothing but assisting the King! This is madness!’

We argued in the same tone for the rest of the afternoon. In the end I was more and more excited, and angry. I left the citadel promising Onfroi to do nothing rash, and certainly not to leap to the palace to see the King. I walked back home, anxious to see Miriam.

Two Hospitaller Knights stood at my door. When I wanted to enter, one of them held my arm and asked my name. I was rude. I told them I had not to give my name in front of my own door, and to keep their hands off me.

The guard said, ‘then you must be Sir Daniel du Pallet. This house is now under the protection of the Order of the Hospital. You may enter, of course. We have a message

for you from the Grand-Master of the Hospital. We are to tell you that Miriam, the daughter of the merchant Jacob, is well and in the Hospital with her children.‘
I did not thank the man, for my anger was out of any proportions. What was Miriam doing in the Hospital? Was she in custody, in prison? Had the Hospitaller knights taken over my house? They might have done such a thing, in execution of their rules. What said those damn rules?

I stepped into the house. I went straight to the room in which I kept an extra chain mail and weapons. I put on the long mail, took a belt with a heavy sword and a long dagger. I took a helmet and a shield. I found the Hospitallers’ surcoat in a chest. I wanted to throw that at the face of the Grand-Master, so I did not dress in it but kept it folded on my arm. I ran outside, past the surprised guards, and ran straight to the Hospital. I asked to see Raymond du Puy.

The Grand-Master of the Hospitallers was in his study. He looked at me with a smirk on his mouth when he saw I was dressed for battle.

I asked, ‘where is my wife?’

Raymond slowly laid down the notes he had been examining. He walked to behind his table and sat in a chair, apparently not in the least impressed by my show of belligerence.

‘Sir Daniel,’ the Grand-Master said. ‘A good evening to you too! I am so glad you could come to us. The doctor Miriam is here, at the Hospital, in quarters I assigned to her. She is under our protection. You see, I heard disgusting rumours slandering her, rumours that I was unable to stop. When the rumours got nastier, these last weeks, I proposed to the doctor to come and live with us. I put your house under the protection of the Hospital, too. Your Miriam is safe, and so are your children. Miriam is our guest, and free to go where she wants, free to go whenever she wants. I dare say she accepted our hospitality with gratitude. Your house is yours, of course. We posted sentries there so that nobody would get it in his head to break in or something.’

Raymond du Puy still looked inimically at my sword and dagger. I felt I had been silly.

I said, ‘Miriam is not in custody here, then?’

Raymond du Puy smiled, ‘she is very much in custody here! I will challenge anybody who would come darting in here, dressed in mail, to take her away! In custody she is! In good custody! You believe she is imprisoned? That she is not. Sir Daniel. Who would be so stupid as to throw his own doctor in jail? Miriam has been the only physician I trusted around me these last years. I have been so well served I rather prefer to keep her well and around me!’

I was rather flabbergasted. Raymond continued, ‘I will lead you to her rooms in a while. If you want, you can take her with you, to your house. But please, listen to me first!’

Since I hesitated, now indeed willing to listen, the Grand-Master spoke again.

‘Passions have soared over you, lately. I talked to Onfroi de Toron, who knows you well. We both found the affair disgusting and scandalous. No doubt the source lay somewhere by the Templar Knights, by over-religious zealots and by the stupid bastards of the Court that have nothing else to do all day than to slander people. But like Onfroi, I cannot stop the rumours. So I did what I promised. I promised to protect Miriam and the children, which I did. I protected you. Now, why did I protect you?’

You are Miriam's man, and that should be reason enough for me. I also like you. And what is more, before even you arrived at Jerusalem I knew who you were because I received two rather remarkable letters from France. France rarely bothers with me. One was from Bernard, the Abbot of Clairvaux. He wrote who you were and said your faith was pure and undeniable. He wrote you had the rare gift to be in the grace of God – whatever that meant! He asked me to look after you. Such a letter, from a man who had your father condemned as a heretic, was remarkable indeed. The other letter was from somebody who was not exactly a good friend of Bernard's. It was a letter of Suger, the Abbot of Saint Denis. He wrote about the same thing as Bernard, however, plus he asked me to keep you out of the hands of the Templar Knights.

So I propose that you do not throw that surcoat you wear on your arm in my face, but wear it! I appreciated you have not worn it until today. Now wear it! You are a Hospitaller knight, a distinguished member of the Holy Order of Saint John! You are married and you are rich, which is all against the rules I myself decided for the Order. But those rules are only to make sure our knights know how to behave. You lived well, honourably, piously, defending Christianity well, and that was enough for the Council of the Order! That was the true sense of our rules. So wear the surcoat! I am really anxious to meet the knight or Baron who dares to challenge our Order!

Raymond slammed his fist on the table and he looked really angry, a dangerous man. He paused, let his outburst of anger subside, and then resumed, 'nevertheless, since the access to King Baudouin is closed for you, I propose that you work for us, if you agree to do so. We hold the castle of Beit Jibrin, which is Gibelin as we Franks call it, half way between Hebron and Ascalon. We lack a commander there. There are other castles and fortresses and places where we could use you, but Gibelin is not too far from here, and I would like Miriam to stay at Jerusalem. I need my doctor! Please indulge an old man and let me have my doctor. Miriam can stay here, at the Hospital, or live in her house with you. While she stays in her house, the Hospitaller Knights will guard her and her house.'

Raymond du Puy must have seen the gleam in my eyes and the marvel and joy for having found a new friend. He continued, 'ah! I see this offer pleases you! Well then my son, put on that surcoat when you leave here! Show the envious ones that you can be envied a little more! I like some provocation once in a while! But now I want you to go to your Miriam and to little Jacob and Sarah. You have two wonderful children. They give me great delight in the evenings.'

So I went to Miriam. She was unharmed, and had a great joy at seeing me back at last. Everything Raymond du Puy had told me was true. We decided to go back to our own house with the children. I proudly endorsed the black surcoat with the white, silvery pointed cross of the Order of the Hospital. The two guards that still stood at my door were not a little surprised, but smiled benevolently. They pushed the door open for us. For two months, two Hospitaller guards walked close to my house from early in the morning until late in the evening.

I went to see Onfroi de Toron and Raymond du Puy regularly. The rumours slackened, and then stopped altogether. I did not leap to the palace of Jerusalem to speak to the King. Onfroi told me that Baudouin knew what had happened to me. He was grateful I did not push myself on him. I stayed away from Court.

By the spring of 1159, other events pushed the rumours about me slowly but surely into oblivion. By then I was Châtelain of Gibelin and walked in the black surcoat and cloak of the Hospitaller Knights.

Life was not hard at Beit Jibrin, the castle of southern Jerusalem. The garrison of Hospitallers mainly pursued groups of bandits there, little more, but the castle was necessary indeed to secure the area of the pilgrimage roads from Jaffa to Jerusalem.

I did a lot of hunting in the region. I paid an Arabian austringer to my service and I hunted with hawks, like Usama ibn Munqidh had taught me.

The Hospitaller Knights organised raids in the environs against Arabian and Egyptian merchants. I stopped those raids. I modified the patrolling customs. Instead of having twenty men in heavy armour riding through the desert and in the hills so that everybody could hear them coming with their thundering destriers from a half day's ride far, I forced the knights to ride in small groups of three or four men. They rode swifter horses. We bought more Arabian horses. My men wore less armour and more layers of light linen or even of silk. They rode on the crest of the hills. We set a wide screen of defence around the castle and a second circle within the first. Only when we spotted a group of bandits or a group of stray Egyptian warriors did we send out larger troops of knights, our scouts always tracking the enemy. I trained more knights into using crossbows and bows and arrows. We did not neglect the heavy massed attacks on horse however.

After the summer of 1158 the Byzantine Emperor Manuel Comnenus invaded Cilicia with a very large army. He chased King Thoros II from Lower Armenia and re-occupied the Armenian cities of Tarsus, Mamistra, Anazarbus and many more. King Thoros hid in the mountains.

Then, Manuel threatened to advance his armies on Antioch. Renaud de Châtillon, urged by his Archbishop, rode to the Imperial camp at Mamistra and submitted to the Emperor. Renaud abjectly knelt and knelt again before the Emperor, head uncovered, and he muttered barely audible excuses for his raid on Cyprus. He had to accept a Greek Patriarch at Antioch instead of a Latin one and he promised to hand over Antioch's citadel to the Byzantines whenever Manuel asked for it. Manuel Comnenus entered Antioch in triumph.

A little later, King Baudouin III also rode to Mamistra. He reconciled the Emperor with King Thoros of Armenia, in exchange for a vow of Thoros for being henceforth loyal vassal to Constantinople.

Afterwards, Baudouin III, Renaud de Châtillon and Emperor Manuel Comnenus marched out of Antioch with their armies on a punitive campaign against Nur al-Din. King Baudouin hoped to annihilate Nur al-Din's power and armies. When the Christian army set up camp before Aleppo however, Manuel Comnenus began to negotiate with Nur al-Din. The Emperor obtained that all the Christians held captive

at Aleppo, about ten thousand men, should be liberated. Then, the Emperor suddenly abandoned Aleppo. He marched back to Cilicia and Constantinople. Manuel's aim had only been to submit to his power Cilicia and Antioch. He cared for the lands of Qoniya a lot more and waged war against the Sultan of Qoniya, Qilij-Arslan. Nur al-Din was a pain in the back for the Seljuk Turks of Qoniya, so Manuel Comnenus had spared the Atabeg of Aleppo. Much later, in 1162, Qilij-Arslan swore in Constantinople to be the vassal of the Emperor of Rum.

Meanwhile, King Baudouin III was as restless as ever. He harassed the Hauran and the lands of Damascus in raids with a limited number of men. He did much harm though, ravaging towns and villages, stealing cattle and destroying caravans. The garrison of Beit Jibrin did not participate in all of this.

In November of 1160, Renaud de Châtillon's accomplices in theft told him that large herds of cattle, of camels and of well-bred horses had gathered in the hills between Mar'ash and Duluk. Many of the herdsmen were Syrian Christians and Armenian Christians, but Renaud hardly bothered about such details. He set out to capture the animals, which were worth a lot of Byzantine coins in the trade of overseas. He overran the herdsmen without much trouble, for the peasants were no match for his knights. The herdsmen ran to Aleppo for support. The Governor of Aleppo happened to be then the son of Nur al-Din's nursing mother, Majd al-Din Abu Bakr Ibn al-Daja. He listened patiently to the herdsmen, heard of the raid, and saw a chance to gain some notoriety with the tribes that appealed to him.

Majd al-Din pursued the Franks on their return to Antioch. Renaud refused to leave his rich booty behind and so he stuck to the slow-moving animals. He fought the Aleppian cavalry. Majd al-Din's horse riders harassed the Franks and finally defeated entirely and annihilated Renaud's force. Renaud saved his life by surrendering. He was taken a prisoner. The Saracens bound Renaud and forced him to walk behind camels, led in shame to Aleppo and they threw him in a prison. He would stay there for sixteen years.

I could not but feel with some satisfaction that part of my vision of Puthaha had become reality, for Renaud de Châtillon had done me wrong by threatening Miriam.

King Baudouin III solved the issue of the succession to the throne of Antioch by confirming the child Bohemond III as Prince of Antioch. After all, Renaud de Châtillon had not been more than a Regent in the name of Bohemond. The King assigned Aymeri de Limoges as Regent until Bohemond came to legal majority.

It was not sure whether Baudouin had truly the right to decide in the succession, for Antioch was vassal to the Emperor of Constantinople. Emperor Manuel Comnenus did not intervene however. Still, he reacted.

The Emperor at that time sought to marry one of the Frankish ladies. He decided to marry Marie d'Antioch, the sister of the boy Bohemond, instead of Mélisende of Tripoli, sister of Count Raymond of Tripoli. He so re-affirmed his aspirations on Antioch. Marie of Antioch was also one of the most beautiful women in the Orient. The marriage was celebrated in the Hagia Sophia of Constantinople on the 25th of December 1161.

Not long afterwards, in the beginning of February of 1162, King Baudouin III died at Beirut. He died no doubt because his physician of Tripoli, Barac, had administered him dangerous drugs. Since Baudouin III had no children with his wife Theodora, his younger brother Amaury, Count of Jaffa and Ascalon, was crowned King of Jerusalem at around half February.

Amaury was married to Agnès de Courtenay, daughter of the former Count of Edessa, Jocelin. They had two children, a son called Baudouin and a daughter Sibylle. Agnès was the cousin of Amaury. The Barons of Jerusalem argued that such close parentage was by law not allowed for a King. The Barons wanted Amaury to divorce his wife. Amaury was forced to comply. Later, in 1164, Agnès de Courtenay married Hugue I of Ibelin. Hugue was lord of Ibelin or Yebna and Ramla, both south of Jaffa, and also Lord of the castle of Mirabel, equally called Mejdél-Yaba.

King Amaury was only twenty-seven years old when he received the crown of Jerusalem. He was a tall man, and given to fatness in the belly, although his shoulders were narrow. He had fine eyes in an otherwise puffy face, blond hair and a darker beard. He lisped when he spoke, which he did not often and only with as few words as a Spartan. He was very intelligent, though not as brilliant as his brother Baudouin III had been. He was a learned man, more a lawyer and a scholar than a warrior. Still, he was brave and audacious, and when in battle he was as courageous as any of his army. I liked the man, because we had been together at Ascalon and he had been an agreeable companion of war. He had not hesitated to run with us to the walls of Ascalon. He had dressed as a sergeant, leaving other Barons on horse standing next to Baudouin, his brother, watching the battle from the far. He fought with us and though we had more to defend him than he us, we appreciated his courage. He was not a man given to vice. He was no gambler. He laughed a lot and when he did that, he laughed much and very loud, which sometimes embarrassed us. Yet, he was not very loyal to his wife. Despite a certain heaviness of body and language, he flaunted a charm many women found irresistible, and which may have originated in his wonderful, thick, wavy hair.

Like his brother, King Amaury I was a restless monarch. He knew how dangerous Nur al-Din of Aleppo was, so he cherished the calm on that side, his eastern border, the peace that had been kept since Puthaha. He directed his eyes southwards, to Egypt.

To understand the events that marked the situation of the Fatimid rulers of Egypt, I have to go back to the year 1154.

In Egypt, the Caliph al-Zafir had been assassinated by his favourite, Nasr, the son of his Vizir ‘Abbas. Usama ibn Munqidh played a part in that plot, as he later told me, and had inspired the assassination.

The governor of Upper Egypt, an Armenian called Tala’i ibn Ruzzik, however, gathered an army and marched on Cairo with revengeful intentions. ‘Abbas and Nasr fled to Syria, trying to take with them hundreds of camels laden with the treasure of Egypt. Most of that caravan was pillaged already near Cairo. ‘Abbas and Usama, Nasr, as well as a few servants and a nice number of treasure-camels, escaped into the

Desert of Tih. They travelled north to Damascus. On the way, ‘Abbas was killed by a group of Templar Frankish knights. Nasr was made a prisoner and the treasure captured to the extreme delight of the Frankish warriors. Usama ibn Munqidh, slick and lucky as always, managed to flee and reached Damascus unharmed. The Templars delivered Nasr into the hands of Ibn Ruzzik for a large ransom, thus enlarging their fortune captured. In June of that year 1154, Nasr was crucified and hung to dry on the gates of Zawila, south of Cairo.

Until 1161, Ibn Ruzzik ruled as Vizir of Egypt. He ruled in the name of the child Caliph al-Fa’iz, who died in July of 1160 at the age of eleven years. Ibn Ruzzik was rapid to bring to the Caliphate another child aged nine, al-‘Adid, a cousin of al-Fa’iz. Later still, Ibn Ruzzik made this youth marry his daughter.

All that was too much for the Amirs of Egypt. They assassinated the Vizir. Hurt by many daggers, Ibn Ruzzik lived long enough however to hand over the function of Vizir to his son al-‘Adil ibn Ruzzik. Al-‘Adil became Vizir in September of 1161. At the end of 1162, this al-‘Adil was put to death by the Governor of Upper Egypt, Shawar, so that Shawar became the new Vizir of Egypt.

We lived happily in those years. I had some fright when in 1160 Raymond du Puy died, our protector. Fra Auger de Balben succeeded on him and that was a relief, for Auger had often conversed with us, knew Miriam and supported her as well. Auger died two years later, to be followed by Fra Arnaud de Comps. By that time everybody in Jerusalem had forgotten about Miriam, although she continued to serve also in the Hospital. She returned to our house and nobody harmed her. Arnaud de Comps was Grand-Master of the Hospital for less than a year. His successor was Gilbert d’Assailly and Gilbert was another kind of man.

In Egypt during that time, an Arabian Amir and Great-Chamberlain of the Caliph, supported by the Caliph, revolted against the Vizir Shawar in 1163 and chased him. This Amir, called Dirgham, remembered quite diligently how his predecessor Vizirs had all been killed by his fellow Amirs. So he began to execute all the Amirs of Egypt that might be suspected of some power and some reticence to his position, which were about all the Amirs of Egypt. Hundreds of Egyptian Amirs were thus eliminated, dangerously weakening the Fatimid Caliphate of intelligent and experienced warrior-leaders.

Amaury of Jaffa and Ascalon had been following the events in Egypt from out of nearby Ascalon with interest. This Amaury was now King. In September of 1163 King Amaury of Jerusalem entered the Egyptian territory with a Frankish army of knights. He did not have much success though, for the Vizir Dirgham promptly destroyed the dikes of the Nile, inundating the land before Amaury’s troops. Amaury returned surreptitiously to Jerusalem.

Nur al-Din of course tried to profit from the absence of the King. He attacked the castle of the Krak des Chevaliers, the Qal’at al-Hosn, and set up camp in the nearby plains. He thought Tripoli weak. But just in that year, two French Barons, Hugue VIII de Lusignan, called Hugue le Brun, Count de la Marche, and Geoffroi Martel, brother of the Count of Angoulême, had come in pilgrimage to Jerusalem. They were on their return to the Port of Antioch where they hoped to catch a ship bound for Italy. Also at Antioch happened to be the Byzantine Duke Constantin Coloman with a large unit of

Byzantine warriors. These knights assembled all the forces of Tripoli and attacked nastily a very surprised Nur al-Din. Nur al-Din and his men were actually caught napping in their tents in the middle of the day, hiding from the heat of noon. The knights of Tripoli celebrated a great victory, but a cursing and seething Nur al-Din could escape.

Nur al-Din changed strategy. He had at his Court the former Vizir of Egypt, Shawar. Since he had arrived, Shawar had been ceaselessly bickering to Nur al-Din to obtain an army to chase Dirgham the usurper from Egypt. Who could Nur al-Din better send to Egypt than his best leader, the war-genius Asad al-Din Shirkuh, the man who could win any war?

In April of 1164, the army of Aleppo marched for Egypt. Dirgham shook like a reed when he heard who led Nur al-Din's men. He sought for help and he had only one man to appeal to: King Amaury of Jerusalem. Amaury gathered an army. The old Kurdish leader Shirkuh of course beat Amaury to the march.

Shirkuh and Shawar arrived at Cairo already in May of 1164. They rapidly deposed Dirgham, who was much hated in Egypt by that time. Shawar tried to say a nice 'thank you' to Shirkuh and hoped to see the old warrior return docilely to Syria. Shirkuh laughed in his face and wanted to be paid first for the campaign. Shawar refused. Shirkuh put his warriors to work and occupied half of Egypt. Shawar then appealed to the Frankish King Amaury. Amaury marched into Egypt for the second time.

The armies of King Amaury and of Shawar joined and laid siege to the town of Bilbeis, a town that was more or less the key to Egypt, and in which Shirkuh had taken refuge. Battles were fought at Bilbeis for three months, tough and expensive in men, which exhausted all parties.

Finally, Amaury proposed to Shirkuh to both leave Egypt. Shirkuh accepted and the Franks returned in October of 1164 to Jerusalem, the Saracen Syrians marched back to Damascus.

It was high time King Amaury returned to Jerusalem. He returned to a disaster in his Kingdom.

In August of that same year 1164, Nur al-Din had assembled an enormous army from his own troops, from the troops of his brother the Atabeg of Mosul and from several Ortoqid Amirs of his neighbours. Nur al-Din appeared suddenly before Harim. The Franks there surrendered immediately. The Franks of the County of Tripoli rode out to meet Nur al-Din's army and prepared to give battle to check his advance. Nur al-Din applied the old battle strategy, attacking with part of his cavalry, feigning to be defeated and retreating with his fast riders, drawing the Franks with him, separating them from their footmen. Nur al-Din's allied troops calmly destroyed all of the Frankish warriors on foot and then they surrounded the Frankish cavalry.

The Franks of Tripoli left more than ten thousand men killed and numerous prisoners at Harim. Raymond III, count of Tripoli was made prisoner there, and so was Jocelin III de Courtenay, Hugue VIII de Lusignan, Bohemond III Prince of Antioch, as well as the Byzantine Duke Constantin Coloman. A little later, Nur al-Din also captured the citadel of Harim. He could have conquered Antioch and Tripoli then, but he was a

very cautious man. He feared the Byzantine army. So he withdrew. But he attacked Baniyas on his way back.

The Connétable Onfroi de Toron was in Egypt, with King Amaury. Baniyas was guarded by one of Onfroi's knights, Gautier de Quesnay and Gautier was not only scared out of his wits, but also a greedy man. No doubt, Nur al-Din bought Gautier. Before Amaury could intervene, Baniyas surrendered to Nur al-Din in October of 1164.

I tell this light-heartedly, off-handedly, but can you imagine the horror of the dead and the imprisoned of all these places? The irony of what happened, and the stupidity of the Frankish Barons is staggering. Lovely and powerful Baniyas, for which I had fought so hard, which Baudouin had defended so bravely, for which Onfroi had worked so courageously, was captured by Nur al-Din in the flash of a moment. My heart bled.

Nur al-Din released Prince Bohemond of Antioch for an enormous ransom in the summer of the next year, 1165. Bohemond travelled to Constantinople then, married a niece of Emperor Manuel Comnenus, equally called Theodora, and accepted at the same time the Greek Athanasius II as Patriarch of Antioch. The Latin Patriarch, Bishop Aymeri de Limoges, immediately left the town on protest, to sulk in the Castle of Qusair, half a day on foot south of Antioch.

It was then that Bohemond offered several castles and monasteries to the Hospitaller Knights. Some he gave to the Order, some he sold to them.

Gilbert d'Assailly, the Grand-Master of the Order, was ambitious. He was power-hungry. He wanted to equal the Templar knights in importance at the Court of Jerusalem. The Order of the Hospitallers grew in might. It dangerously shrank in means.

As a result, Beit Jibrin was depleted of its knights and best sergeants, and money was scarce with the Order. I had to train youths that had seen their first sword in our fortress and that were under-paid. Luckily, our region remained peaceful. There were no major incursions of armed troops in the lands of at Beit Jibrin during that time, though the Franks fought constantly on the eastern frontier between Tripoli and Jerusalem against Shirkuh's troops. These skirmishes could last forever, keeping the Barons of Jerusalem moderately happy, giving them something on their hands and something to boast about at their evening hearths.

Chapter Five. The David Citadel of Jerusalem 1166

I remained more at the fortress of Gibelin than most other commanders were in their fortresses. They regularly participated in the raids and campaigns of the army of Jerusalem. I refused to take part in such campaigns, however, and provided a decent excuse. Beit Jibrin lay at the southern border of the Kingdom, had few knights capable to garrison such a castle, and the threat of bandits, as well as of incursions of the Egyptian and Syrian forces was high and permanent.

Other commanders might have told similar subterfuges, for no castle of the Hospitaller Knights was in peaceful territory and no castle had enough knights, but the other commanders were more eager, more ambitious and greedier than I. Few of them had families – at least not that I knew of – for most of them were true monks, called Fra or Brother.

I laid low about Miriam and the children. I did not bring them to the castle, though I would have liked to. Only a handful men at Beit Jibrin knew that when I was absent from the castle I was actually with Miriam. All of the men knew I was at Jerusalem, but most thought I was at the Court or at the citadel of the town. I was intimate with no other knight at Beit Jibrin but for Benoit d'Entraygues, a courageous knight, who had been in Outremer for about as long as I, who had come like I to Jerusalem with the second Crusade, and who I appointed to replace me as commander when I was absent. The Knights of the Hospital at Beit Jibrin were used to my absence from the fortress, but I never remained away for weeks in a row.

I was intimate with several of the sergeants of Gibelin. I trusted more in my sergeants to hold the castle than in the knights. The sergeants had all been much longer in Outremer. They were still young; a few had been born in the Kingdom. Some could even converse in Arabic, if only with few words. They knew well the merchants and herdsmen and the caravan leaders, for they patrolled more and deeper in the land, whereas the knights preferred to stay inside the fortress. The sergeants were generally respected by the Bedu, Jews and Syrians.

I visited Miriam often. In 1166 we were approaching fifty years of age. Miriam took on weight but she remained a splendid woman. She was much woman. She became more radical in her ideas and decisions, more certain of her opinions and she professed them easily and openly.

The Jewish community of Jerusalem was discreet and all male-led, but the Rabbi and the elders often met in our house, and then Miriam was not excluded from the discussions. The Rabbi sought her advice. Many a Jew of Jerusalem knocked on our door to plead for the intervention of Miriam. The Rabbi's aides felt at home with us, simply pushed open the door and shouted they had arrived, and then sat in our room. There was always a drink for them, a gossip, olives and figs and bread to eat. They got used to the black-coated Hospitaller Knight at Miriam's side who spoke Jewish with them and knew their families.

We had no guards of the Hospital at our doors anymore since a long time. Nobody bothered Miriam. She continued to work at the Hospital occasionally. She was called

in for severe cases of illness. She was not present there at regular times. She told me how much she had liked Raymond du Puy, and also his successors as Grand-Master, Auger de Balben and Arnaud de Comps, had been friendly to her. She had been the physician of Raymond du Puy and the secret doctor also of Arnaud de Comps. This last Grand-Master had, despite his apparent strength, already been a sick man, inside his body, when he took office.

Miriam had little contact with Gilbert d'Assailly, the current Grand-Master of the Order. Gilbert bothered little with the Hospital itself. She was not certain he even knew she existed and worked for the Franks.

Miriam was very evasive to me about the people she treated for sicknesses and about her remedies. I probed, but she answered my questions reluctantly, in bits and pieces of information, haltingly. I learned not to ask more.

I was each time anew over-joyed to see Miriam, to hold her in my arms, to squeeze her and to hug the children. We were not allowed anymore to call Jacob 'Little Jacob'. He insisted we call him 'Young Jacob' and since Sarah was smarter and primmer than the boy, I had to say 'Young Sarah' to her too. Young Jacob was ten years old then and Sarah a year younger, but Sarah could do with Jacob whatever her little finger wanted to. That little finger could also twist me to whatever it wanted, and even Miriam found it hard to resist, or realised with astonishment that after many tortuous discussions she had accepted in the end all what Sarah had wanted in the beginning. Young Sarah was smart! Young Jacob and Young Sarah were Jews, of course, but I taught them much about the life and ideas of Jesus Christ and made them read not only the Torah but also Jesus' stories. Miriam and the Rabbi seemed not to mind. I was with my family thus every two or three months for two or three weeks in a row. There were periods when I stayed longer at Beit Jibrin, especially lately, when the Hospital had depleted our castle of knights, but I managed to see Miriam more often then, for shorter periods.

I was rather surprised therefore when one day a sentry of our main gate announced that a Rabbi Isaac Ben Asher wanted to see me with a message of a certain Miriam. The Jew had been left to wait outside the gate, so I ordered the guard to bring the man to me. Isaac was the youngest of the aides of the Rabbi of Jerusalem, and an admirer and a confidant of Miriam, almost a son of our house, but also one of the most hot-headed Jews in town. Isaac was trouble. He was tall, fair-faced, a lean young man. He spoke rapidly and excitedly, so that I had to slow him down.

Isaac said Miriam was imprisoned in the citadel of Jerusalem and would soon be judged.

Isaac did not know of what exactly Miriam was accused of, but the accusations were serious, for she had been dragged with violence out of our house, with little regard to her. She had been beaten in the street and had been dragged immediately to the citadel. I supposed it was the same old story of a Jew married to a Christian that had surfaced, with nobody daring to attack me directly and therefore taking to a helpless woman instead.

I had to sit down a while, for the blood left my mind and I was weak in the limbs. Once more I had been careless, lulled into believing there was no danger for the ones

I loved, too confident in the nature of the knights and the Court. What value was the formerly promised protection of the Hospital to a Grand-Master as Gilbert d'Assailly? I remained silent a long time before Isaac, because I was thinking of what I could do to get Miriam out of the citadel. I could run to the Barons I knew and plead with them. The courtiers I could appeal to were the knights that had the keys to the citadel, however. None of those men would have imprisoned Miriam, and certainly not without warning me first. The order must have come from very high up at court, from the new Bishops and Barons right in the vicinity of the King. I had to go to Jerusalem. Was I in danger of being imprisoned too? No, a delegation of knights would already have fetched me here, at Beit Jibrin. So why imprison only Miriam? I decided to be careful.

I only said, 'let's go!' to Isaac. I strode out with him, put on my mail, took my arms, ordered a horse for him too instead of the mule he had arrived on, and we rode to Jerusalem as fast as we could.

I did not ride immediately into the town. I did not go to my house. Isaac had told me the children were safe. They had not been harmed when Miriam had been taken. The sergeants had ignored the children. The children had remained in the house with our servants, and the family of Isaac now cared for them. So I remained at the farm and barns we owned outside the walls of Jerusalem. We went on foot inside Jerusalem. I told Isaac to go home. I went armed, wearing the surcoat of the Hospital, sword at my side, dagger at the other, to talk to the Barons of Jerusalem. I went straight for the citadel.

I stepped through the gates of the Castle of David and no sentry asked me anything. I was lucky, because I found Onfroi de Toron in the courtyard. He stopped me from bursting into the keep and told me as much as any other knight of the court would have been willing and able to tell me. He said reluctantly that yes, Miriam had been brought to the prison on orders of King Amaury. Even Onfroi de Toron did not know why exactly Miriam had been thrown in the cellars. The King had refused harshly to talk with him about the affair. Onfroi did not know what she was accused of. It was certain however that her crime must have been great, for she would be judged by a Court of Bishops presided by the Patriarch Amaury de Nesle himself, and she therefore might be judged for religious offences. No Baron of the citadel would release her, could release her. The judgement might be harsh and Miriam might be executed, maybe burnt at the stake or beheaded in prison.

Nobody had mentioned Miriam's marriage to a Frank. The Hospital had not been mentioned, though that might simply have been because of Gilbert d'Assailly's stature and diplomacy. Nobody had mentioned my name, probably for that same reason of my links with the Hospital.

In fact, said Onfroi, nobody talked of anything and nobody was allowed to see Miriam, not even the Châtelain, not even the Connétable. The whole affair was being hushed between Amaury and the Bishops, and why silence was held, nobody around him knew.

Also, the army of Jerusalem was being gathered anew, the Bishops would leave with the King, the judgement would not come soon.

I left the citadel and Onfroi de Toron. I was in a state of terrible anxiety, confusion and anger. Miriam was suffering in the fortress, so close, hurt, probably getting sick from the cold and hunger and bad treatment. Even Barons like the Connétable Onfroi

de Toron did not know why. There was nothing I could do to get her out, he had told. What would Amaury do if I went to him to protest? He could do one of several things: refuse to let me speak to him, let me speak to him but refuse to release Miriam, hear me and release Miriam, or throw me in prison too. So there was a four to one chance that speaking to Amaury would gain nothing for Miriam. And in one of those chances all hope would be forfeited for I would be in prison too.

It was Isaac who suggested a way out. I sat in the farm with my head buried in my hands when Isaac came to me with two of his companions.

He said, 'Miriam is in prison. I tried to find out why and learned nothing. We heard she will be judged but not soon. It will take time to bring the Bishops together. It is an enigma. Who would want to blame Miriam for anything whatsoever? Why?'

'That much I know too,' I answered. 'She was imprisoned on the orders of the King. I wonder whether appealing to the King might help. I feel not, but what else can I do?' Isaac hesitated, then whispered, 'we have a way to get in the citadel.'

'What do you mean?' I asked.

'We have a way to get in the citadel,' he repeated. 'We can sneak people into the fortress of David during the day, leave them there till night, and then open a door.'

'Are you suggesting we attack the citadel of Jerusalem?' I asked incredulously.

'No, not attack the citadel. We are no warriors, at least not enough warriors to handle the guards of the castle,' Isaac continued. 'I am just telling you that we can open a door to the citadel at night.'

Isaac hesitated but he looked expectantly at me. The three men watched me, expecting something of me. I was a knight. I could take on a guard. But not the fifty guards that were at all times in the castle, even with the best ones on campaign. Not on my own. Not with a few Jews inexperienced with sword and spear. Men of Beit Jibrin might help me, but what would they say when I proposed to enter the citadel of Jerusalem by night? Who could I trust, how many could I trust? The Jews would help. But how many men had they?

I asked, 'how many men could you bring inside the castle?'

'Three. The three of us. Only we know of the door.'

'Would you have men outside?'

'We can bring five, maybe a few more.'

'How many of them warriors?'

'None, but three or so would be able to handle a sword reasonably well. We have a few quntariya spears.'

'So you can provide eight men, maybe more. Why would they risk their lives for a woman?'

'Miriam is Miriam. She is more than a woman. She is one of the most respectable members of our community. We cannot just sit and let one of our leaders, even if a woman, be imprisoned like that. Miriam saved our children and parents.' He pointed to the two men that were with him. 'His father would have died, and his wife.'

I looked hard at the Jews and I sensed anger, pity and determination on their faces. How would they behave in the heat of a fight with the guards of the citadel?

'Have any of you killed before, strangled men, or struck them through with swords or daggers?'

Isaac was angry at that question, in which I challenged their abilities.

'No,' he answered, 'but if necessary we can kill. We have killed animals.'

There was no need to enter into a discussion on the difference between killing a goat and a man. I sighed and said, ‘suppose of your men is caught by the guards. How long will it be before the Franks found out who the man is, from what community he is? What would happen to the Jews of Jerusalem and to the Jews all around Jerusalem if it then became known Jews had attacked the citadel?’

Isaac had an answer to that too, ‘we will have to make sure then that no Jew gets caught in the citadel!’

It was as simple as that, and he made me laugh for the first time. Isaac was young, reckless, and a fool.

‘There are sentries on the walls of the fortress,’ I remarked dryly.

‘Yes,’ he answered. ‘The guards look to the outside. They do not care what happens inside the citadel. The guards of a castle make sure nobody gets over the walls. So they have torches at the parapets of the walls and they look to what happens there. They do not see far, and they have not to look far, for they should only be interested in the walkway before and behind them. By the torches they can see where they walk. The light blinds them to what happens down the walls. We will not be blinded! We will see them; they will not see us.’

My mouth went agape. Why do Jews always challenge what other people take for granted? Isaac was right, of course.

Still, I had an idea.

I said, ‘all right, Isaac ben Asher! All right! Suppose I can have men, real warriors. Can you prepare things? I have to go and get my warriors and killers. Suppose I will be back here in fifteen days. We will have to hope that nothing happens to Miriam till then, and I can talk to a few men in Jerusalem to delay the judgement. Meet me here in fifteen days. Make sure that you can be the day after inside the citadel and make sure that the following night you can open a door. See to it that you have more men ready. Those men will not have to enter the castle. I will need them for other things. Five to ten men will be needed. The men will have to keep a secret. Tell them that if they cannot hold a secret I will slice their throats personally. Only one man or two or three shall have to be in the castle, as many as it takes – the minimum – to open a door at night. Make sure I can enter that door with fifteen or twenty warriors, no Jews, my warriors, unseen. One of you should be able to lead us to the prison. Can you do that?’

‘No need to threaten,’ replied Isaac. ‘Yes, we can do that. We can open a door, a small door. There is a house near that door. We can hide twenty men inside the house so that at night they can enter by that door.’

I asked, ‘how will you get into the castle?’

Isaac hesitated, looked at his companions. Then he decided he might as well tell me. ‘It is forbidden for Jews to enter the citadel. It is also forbidden for Jews to deliver goods to the citadel. Yet we do! We have done so for years. We bring in goods unknown to the Barons. We bring vegetables, cheese, cloth, game and fowl, and fodder for the horses. You name it, we bring it, cheaper and better in quality. We deal with the sergeants. And we leave more behind than we are paid for, so we can deliver the next times. We can get in whenever we want. We found a way to smuggle one or two men in at a time, in two deliveries for instance, and hide the men at a certain place prepared by us in a storehouse. At night these men can come out of their hiding place and open the door in the defence walls. The door is not a gate. It is just a very

small opening that formerly probably led to water-reservoirs, maybe to an old spring. Most of the Franks of the citadel do not even know it exists. But it does. It is at the end of a low passage in the walls. We know of it. We threw dead branches in the passage, so that anybody who looks in there sees only an abandoned, blocked, dark, dirty hole. The door opens only from the inside, but we greased the bolts. We already opened it and closed it. It works and it can be done. Why do you need men outside?’

‘Good,’ I said. ‘So have one or two men to open the doors and one of them lead us to the cellars of the prison. I may need to get into the town non-Christian warriors, which is also forbidden. Can the Jews, the other men I talked of, help with that? That will be the only thing asked of them. Still, the risk will be great for them!’

‘Yes. We can do that. We will need money, though. We will need carts and we will have to pay to load the carts. We may have to pay other Jews, maybe even Frankish guards. We will smuggle them in by all the gates of the city.’

‘I have the money. Tomorrow morning you will have as much as you need. More than you need. The men that will be smuggled in will have to be brought to the house near the door of the citadel. One of your men should be with them each time. Five carts to bring in four or three men each time. Your men bring them to the house, and then they can go asleep. They should sleep and forget.’

‘We will do what is necessary,’ Isaac grinned.

‘I need Bedu clothing for tomorrow morning,’ I said.

‘That can be arranged,’ Isaac replied laconically.

We considered all details of the operation meticulously. The men left and I walked to my house in Jerusalem, entered the cellar and the secret corridors. I opened the strongbox and took the gold coins that were needed for the Jews, a small fortune for Jerusalem. Then I fetched large bags and I put most of the precious stones and golden coins in them. I counted how much the treasure was worth. I had more than fifty thousand dinars in the bags. With that, I could buy me a small army. The bags were very heavy, but I managed to get them out of the house, alone. I slung them on a small handcart, hid them below a few bales of cloth. I paid a beggar to push the cart out of Jerusalem, me in his wake. I buried the heavy bags outside the farm. Very early the next morning, I handed over the smaller bags of coins to Isaac.

Isaac had dirty Bedu clothes with him. I dressed in those.

The success of our operation depended on Isaac and I told him so. I told him what I thought of him, the flaw in his character that might cause our ruin. He grinned and said he knew; he would not disappoint me. Isaac could betray me any moment. But he was a Rabbi, a zealot, yet a good and intelligent man. His determination was unwavering. I had no option but to have confidence in the youth, to trust him, and to pray. I left him standing outside the farm, waving me off. I had taken two Arabian horses. They were no thoroughbreds, but they were fast, and they could gallop for long periods. I rode from Jerusalem, north, along the roads the armies had taken, the roads to Baniyas I knew all too well. I rode one horse, held the other to gallop behind me. I changed horses regularly.

I rode to Hisn Masyad. I rode to Abu Ahmad al-Din Saif ibn Muhammed, my lion-brother, Ahmad the Isma’ili.

I passed Nazareth and from Nazareth rode to Tibnin. I raced the whole day, slept only a few hours, and rode also those parts of the night that I could still see anything. From my times at Baniyas, I knew knights at Tibnin. I asked for other horses there, and exchanged them for mine. I entered the Beqa' region, west of Mount Hermon. I circled past the Krak des Chevaliers without stopping. I did the same with Montferrand Castle, until I reached the mountainous regions west of the Orontes River, between Homs and Hama. That was the region of the fortresses of the Nisari Isma'ilis, all forming a line between the castles of Qadmus and Masyad. I was close to Masyad in four days and nights. I had no idea how to reach Abu Ahmad al-Din. I did not even know whether he was indeed at Masyad. I desperately held to the ring he had given me and decided to ride straight to the fortress, whatever happened.

I had to ask for the way twice, to shepherds and merchants in the region. They looked me over very suspiciously, but they were not aggressive. I suppose that by then, by that strange miracle of these lands that I find inexplicable to this day, the whole region had been warned of the venue of a stranger, approaching the fortress of Masyad.

Isma'ili guards challenged me indeed, half a day farther, when I could distinguish vaguely, at the limits of my view, the towers of a fortress. I entered a wadi, in the open, making as much noise as possible, riding slower than I had till then, seemingly innocent and unworried. I had released my second horse in the hills. Suddenly, a group of five warriors rode down from behind steep cliffs, on to me. They were on me in a moment. I stopped my horse. The men surrounded me. They held their spears up, did not attack me, but they were obviously ready for any eventuality. The leader asked or rather summoned me to tell who I was and what I was doing in these regions. I said my name was al-Abbas Ibn Mahjub, announcing me as a friend of Abu Ahmad al-Din Saif ibn Muhammed. I had fought for Abu Ahmad al-Din against the Franks at the Shaizar, though I was a Bedu warrior. I wanted to visit my friend. Was he in the castle? Could they bring me to him?

The leader of the group asked me questions, trick questions, to check on whether I indeed knew Ahmad. I gave him the right colour of hair and of beard, the true colour of Ahmad's eyes. I told him bite wounds were not on his left leg but on his right one. Then the men relaxed. They wanted me to stay a while with them, but I refused and said I was eager to be with my friend. They laughed at that. One could be friend and friend in these parts.

Finally, they made one of their group ride with me to Masyad. While we rode I talked to the man and set him at ease with war-stories. He took me right into the fortress.

Masyad was an eagle's nest, an awe-inspiring castle of towers and turrets and high walls perched upon a sharp mountain peak, nudged against another imposing mountain top. A long path winded upwards and on both sides of that narrow path were the steep slopes of a gorge. We passed three checkpoints of heavily armed and very alert guards. They were all bearded men, dirty-looking, clad in black shirts over mail. They wore shields, swords and spears. There were two bridges to pass, each defended by stout, round towers. Despite my companion I was interrogated twice. The name of Abu Ahmad was regarded with respect. Once in the courtyard of the castle, my companion left me and an Isma'ilite guard brought me to Abu Ahmad, in a small room of a tower.

I had let my beard grow thick and wild since Jerusalem, and I had not washed every day, contrary to Allah's commands. I was covered with dust. Ahmad did not recognise me. We had only seen each other a short while at Shaizar. He stood before me with his sword drawn out of its scabbard.

He said, 'I know no Abbas Ibn Mahjub. Who are you? What do you want of me?'

I got his ring out of a pocket beneath my mail and showed it to him. He took the ring, looked at me, scrutinising, then his eyes widened.

'Al-Abbas Mahjub,' he cried, 'the lion concealed! What a name! My lion-brother!'

He hesitated, then continued, 'a Frankish knight at Masyad! Are you mad, Frank? Have you come to spy on our castle?'

'No,' I said. 'I only came to see you. When you gave me that ring you said I could call on you, at any time, for whatever cause.'

Ahmad put his sword back in its scabbard. He laughed. 'That is right,' he said with a grin. 'Now, which Frank would be so foolish as to believe me for one moment, and deliver himself into Isma'elite hands?'

My heart sank in my boots. I had actually never doubted the word of this man. I had entirely given him my confidence. If he had merely lied to me, then Miriam was doomed. And I with her. The Isma'ili smiled again, then laughed outright, hard, when he saw my face sadden and darken. 'I like to make jokes, brother. What is it you want from me?'

I answered, 'I don't want much. I need fifteen to twenty warriors, stealth assassins, men experienced with killing in the dark. I need them to get into a fortress, and liberate a few prisoners from its cellars for me. I will come with them, of course. I know how to get in and get out again. I will have men inside the castle to open a small door at night, but I will need silence and efficient killing after that.'

'Is that all?' Ahmad asked incredulously.

'Yes, that's it, more or less,' I answered.

'Why don't you use Franks?' he asked.

'Because the fortress I want to break in is Frankish.'

'What castle is it you want to break in?'

'The David citadel of Jerusalem.' I added impatiently, 'I need to be back in seven days in Jerusalem. There is no time to lose.'

Ahmad's eyes widened. 'The David citadel of Jerusalem! No less! Who is it you want to take out? King Amaury in person?'

I made things worse. 'No,' I replied, 'just a Jewish woman. My wife.'

'Oh Christian, Christian,' Ahmad exclaimed. 'You want me to attack the first citadel of Christendom to get a woman out? I have encountered many a madman in my life, but never one so mad! Let's make this simpler. I will provide you with ten nice houris, all fine and beautiful, and very artful in love. They will make you forget your Jewish wife in no time! What do you say to that?'

'No,' I grinned. 'I want no houris. I just want my wife. I am mad, of course. I know! But I am also the Commander of Beit Jibrin and even you must have heard of that fortress. I am also a Hospitaller knight and a Hospitaller Commander. I was advisor to King Baudouin and I rode beside him at Puthaha. And I thought Isma'elite honour was better than what I heard from you. I am mad but I am no fool. I have a way to get safely into the citadel of Jerusalem at night. I then can get to the prisons. You have three options. You let me go or kill me, in which both cases you will be a man without

honour, a liar and a cheat and an empty boaster. Or you can come with me and we get into that damn citadel. Choose, but choose quickly. I have no time to lose!’

A mixture of terrible anger and defiance appeared on Ahmad’s rude face. He drew out his sword by half. Then he pushed it back and his face relaxed. I saw him gain control of himself in one fleeting moment. He waited. He laughed suddenly, loud and long. ‘Nobody challenges my honour, Frank, nobody!’ Ahmad turned in the room, waited, thought, then continued, ‘and if Abu Ahmad al-Din says he is going to attack the citadel of Jerusalem, take it, capture it, then that is what Abu Ahmad al-Din is going to do.’

I laughed too now. I had well gauged this man, and I liked him. ‘Not capture the citadel,’ I said. ‘I could not allow that. And it would take more than twenty warriors to capture the citadel. We just get some people out, with the least casualties.’

‘Same thing,’ he grinned, ‘same thing!’

Then he said, looking at me expectantly, ‘suppose I come with you. I will come because you are my lion-brother. I have men, but I will have a hard time persuading them to follow me.’

I knew what he wanted. I said, ‘I can give them fifty thousand dinars.’

His eyes became big. ‘Fifty thousand dinars? Is your wife a queen? Where would a poor knight get that much of money?’

‘That should be no concern of yours. But I have them. Merchants at every port of the Kingdom work for me. I promise fifty thousand dinars, Miriam freed.’

‘Done,’ Abu Ahmad replied, but I was not sure he believed me.

Abu Ahmad asked for two days of preparations. It took three, actually. Later, he told me he had needed an entire day to convince the Isma’ilite leaders to let him go. In fact, he only had to persuade his father, the Sheikh al-Jebal, the Old Man on the Mountain, the leader of the Isma’ilis, Abu Muhammed, as well as the rising star among the sect, Rashid al-Din Sinan, an Isma’ilite leader sent from Persia to control the Syrian sect. Ahmad had to explain what he was going to do. The Isma’ilite Council feared a war with Jerusalem. Ahmad had to promise that nobody in Jerusalem would know that it were the Isma’ilis who had broken in. Finally, the men were so eager to learn whether and how such a citadel could be captured, that they accepted. They even took bets in the presence of Ahmad on whether he would succeed or not. They allowed fifteen men, to be chosen by him, no sign of Isma’ilite on them.

Three days later we rode from Masyad, southwards, to Jerusalem. The Isma’ilite warriors were cutthroats, some of the rudest, fiercest men I ever met. The stories they told around the campfire in the evenings were breath-taking and hair-raising, even for a battle-hardened knight as me. At first they were secretive, but gradually they opened and were curious about me. Until then I thought all Isma’ilis were brutal killers and not more than that, but after a while I saw they liked to chat, laugh, and make jokes. Yet, they were able to kill between two jokes.

How could a Shi’ite people be that lived in fortresses, in desert hills, surrounded by Franks and hostile Sunnite Syrians? How could they survive? Did they not need some form of happiness, periods of calm, devoid of tension? Laughter is a manifestation and an antidote to anxiety. The Isma’ilis laughed a lot. They were people that sought

companionship eagerly. One by one they came to ride with me and Ahmad. They asked stories from me, and they delighted in the war stories of Baniyas and Puthaha. They discussed heatedly. They had a touch of mysticism in their character and liked to talk about their religion.

Abu Ahmad was also a talker. After a couple of days he never stopped babbling, while riding and while sitting, asking me out all the time. I answered as best as I could, not daring to stop him even when I got bored with his questions, and trying not to tell them too much about the defences of our castles and towns. Still, the Isma'ilis must have learned much from me, about our habits of living, of fighting, and about how we considered our religion.

The Isma'ilis knew better and faster paths to the Jordan. After that, it was I who knew the better roads. We had to avoid the valleys however, and the Frankish patrols. We hid our swords. We rode without spears, without shields, clad in short mail under our dark robes. We rode in three groups and only gathered at night. We passed around the Krak, avoided Nazareth, and arrived in the morning of the fifteenth day in the hills around Jerusalem. I brought the men to my farm and hid them and their horses in the barns.

In the afternoon, Isaac came to us. I told him I had fifteen Isma'ilite warriors next doors. He almost choked. I needed the rest of the afternoon to persuade him, to ask him whether he wanted Miriam truly out or not. The Isma'ilis were the only means. Finally, he conceded.

Jerusalem was forbidden to Saracens. So we had to smuggle the men inside, in the Jewish carts. All that was ready. The chariots came and we hid the men in the fodder and in barrels, and a few had to be dressed as women, Jewish women. There were a few young men with the Isma'ilis with almost no beard. So we shaved those. Somebody suggested dressing Ahmad as a woman, and we had a nasty fight on our hands for a while. I sighed with pleasure when the last Isma'ili was on its way to Jerusalem. The Isma'ilis would pass the gates just before sunset, at the moment of heaviest traffic at the gates. They would be brought by one Jew each to the house near the citadel's door, no questions asked, no word spoken. I waited in that house with swords, daggers and spears.

One by one the Isma'ilis trickled in. The 'women' were welcomed with much hilarity, so I had to stop the shouting and laughing for fear of the neighbours and the street. The more experienced men, including Ahmad, were as nervous as rats in a trap. They hated to have to wait in a little house in a town, in a Frankish town, surrounded by enemy and infidels. We waited for a sign from the door to the fortress. Isaac Ben Asher had left in the late afternoon. He would be in the citadel now.

I sat at a small window of the house, looking into the street, wondering whether we had really succeeded in assembling in our house, unseen, fifteen Isma'ilite warriors of the worst kind. The people in the street walked by, unknowing of anything special that might be going on in our house. It was a strange feeling, but all was normal.

Abu Ahmad came to sit next to me. He made a nuisance of himself by asking awkward questions. He was as nervous as I.

'What if the door doesn't open this night?'

'Then we wait another day.'

‘What if it doesn’t open the night after this?’

‘We wait three nights, and then call the thing off.’

‘How do we get back out?’

‘We wait until night, cut a few throats at a gate and get to the horses.’

‘Do we have enough food to wait three days?’

‘Yes we do.’

‘How do we get out this night, after we capture the citadel?’

‘We don’t capture the citadel. We just make as little noise as possible, disturb as little as possible. We deliver the woman Miriam and a few others for diversion, then leave.’

‘Yes. We talked that over. We also leave nobody alive in the hands of the Franks. But how do we get out of the city?’

‘Like I said. We run to the Gate of David, nearby. There will be only a few sentries awake. We overpower the guards, with as little noise as possible, open the door in the gates a little, and then leave. Isaac Ben Asher will close the doors after us to confound the Franks a little more and delay them if the alarm is given in the castle. We run to the farm and ride off.’

‘There are guards on top of the walls and in the guardhouses.’

‘During the night, the sentries only watch what happens at the top of the walls. As long as nobody climbs over the walls, the city is safe. So the guards are not interested in what happens below. Moreover, they walk in torchlight. They cannot see far. Their eyes are not accustomed to darkness. Ours will be.’

‘One guard that yells is enough to sound the alarm.’

‘I thought you Isma’ilis were experts at taking out a man without a sound.’

Ahmad looked at me quizzically, but he did not object. He had a reputation to uphold.

‘You know, the Qur’an says one should not kill people of the Faith. I suppose your Jesus Christ has ordained something of the same sort for Christians. You realise, of course, we may have to kill a few of the Christian Franks in there.’

‘Of course.’

‘So how do you justify those dead men? Your God will not like that!’

For an Isma’ili, Abu Ahmad was a particularly religious man.

‘Miriam is my wife,’ I replied. ‘By putting my wife in prison, which was a bad act, for I am certain she has never done harm and is the best doctor of Jerusalem, something has been set in motion. I do not want to kill innocent men. But Miriam is my wife. It is my duty to get her out of that prison. The sergeants in the castle are warriors. They are bound to live or die in battle. They have chosen to be warriors. I do not hate them. I apologise to the men and to Allah for every person killed this night, and I deplore the killings. But it will have to be like that. The wrongdoing will come on the head of whoever hurt my wife and imprisoned her. I have to liberate someone unjustly held captive and bound to be executed soon. I will not leave someone I love alone; I am bound by duty and honour to get her out. If that is against Allah’s command, so be it. I pray for His forgiveness. I cannot act otherwise. I cannot believe that to do what I feel is right is a sin against Allah.’

‘True. Well spoken,’ Ahmad said. ‘But isn’t that your own rule? It may not be Allah’s rule!’

‘I have looked into my conscience,’ I replied. ‘I repeat: I cannot act any other way and I will not. I hope God will understand. In fact, He knows all of this already, of course. If He agrees, we will come out with Miriam and lose no men.’

‘I sure would like to know why your Miriam was thrown in prison. She must have done something horrible.’

‘No. She wouldn’t hurt a fly. I don’t know what happened. She will have to tell me that.’

‘Look,’ I added, ‘we are here, waiting to enter the citadel of Jerusalem and kill and get killed. Do you really think this is the time for small talk?’

Ahmad remained silent a while, but he couldn’t keep up with that for long. He truly was a babbler. ‘Do you believe your god is Allah?’ he asked suddenly.

‘Of course,’ I replied, surprised at that question. ‘There can be only one god, and that is God. You and I and Isaac, we only have other ways of thinking about what Allah is and what he does, and how he does things. But who are we? We are only humans! What we believe is most men’s inventions and men’s ideas.’

‘True, true,’ Ahmad replied. ‘You know, the Prophet said that the Torah of the Jews and the Evangels of Jesus were the good books, inspired by Allah, and so is the Qur’an. The Prophet gave a new interpretation of those earlier books. I read the three books. I found the Torah and the rest of it long and sometimes boring, still it is Allah’s word too. The Torah is true, as the Prophet told, so the Jews must still be one of Allah’s preferred people, for that is written in the Torah. That bothers me a bit. The other texts, all the rest that is said - except for what is in the Torah, the Evangels and the Qur’an -, the many Hadith for instance, the Prophet’s supposed sayings, I believe these to have been added by men, not really to be inspired by Allah directly. I doubt their truthfulness. All the ceremonies held in our three religions are invented by men. Except for a few practical things provided by the Qur’an, the books of the Jews, the Christians and the Muslims, contain the same fundamental messages. Why do we fight?’

I said, ‘we fight not because of our religion, for our books indeed teach us to respect one another and to let us seek Allah as we can. You know why we fight! We fight for this land, for domination over this land, for its wealth, for its produce, so that a few leaders – well actually hundreds of them, but still few considering all the people that live here – could become powerful and rich and indulge in the vanity – the illusion – that they have been great men. Jesus Christ condemned such behaviour, many times, but few people realise that what they do is contrary to Allah’s will.’

‘And so we fight,’ Ahmad agreed.

‘Yes,’ I continued. ‘And because we have friends and beloved ones we fight when they are hurt. The suffering here has no end. I wonder whether it will one day end. I believe not.’

‘Allah is great and compassionate,’ Ahmad could still utter, but I will never know whether he agreed or not and what he wanted to say next, for at the little door of the citadel a torch was lit. Then, Isaac Ben Asher came into our house, urging us to enter the citadel.

The door to the fortress of Jerusalem was open!

We ran in a queue, one warrior after the other, dressed in black robes, with black cloth turned around our faces so that only our eyes shone malignantly in the darkness. We wore no scabbards and had darkened our swords. We had no shields. Half of us wore spears, Jewish spears, and had no sword. We ran on soft boots.

Isaac Ben Asher showed us the way. He ran in front of us, straight over the street, and in a few steps we were inside the citadel. Two Jews, equally dressed in black, held the door open, one inside, one outside. They had no arms but for long daggers. We had to

duck, running under the low and narrow opening. We ran a few paces in the low corridor through the walls, which proved us how thick the walls of Jerusalem's citadel actually were, then engaged into a small courtyard. I knew where we were and I knew where the prisons were, but Isaac still advanced to lead and I let him. He too knew where the prisons of the David citadel began. He led us the right way.

We clung to the walls of the buildings, but ran fast. We kept to the shadows, avoided the few torches that burned in the yard, and some of which the Jews had extinguished. We had to pass under a building, through a corridor where a guard stood, half asleep. Isaac stopped and Abu Ahmad slid forward. A few moments later, the guard's shadow became two; then the man slumped against the wall. We ran on.

We emerged into another courtyard and I could make out the ominous mass of the keep, where I had been often. The keep would have the most guards, but we still moved in the dark, without waiting, along the walls; the muffled moving of our boots on the dry stones did not break the dark silence of the fortress. We arrived at a flight of stairs that led downwards, in front of the keep.

'The prisons are down there,' whispered Isaac, and I knew that to be true. We left Isaac ben Asher and three Isma'elite warriors there to cover our backs if necessary. We ran down the stairs. I and Abu Ahmad led.

Below the stairs was a large, arch-vaulted room. The room was lighted. I looked around the corner. Three men sat at a table, playing dice. I held up three fingers to Ahmad. He sent three of his men forward. They swiftly ran into the room with spears, making no noise, and we followed immediately. One Frankish guard died in an instant, for he grabbed a sword. The two others were knocked down. I swore, for I should have taken one hostage to tell me in which prison Miriam was held.

There were two doors in the room. I slowly opened one, only to find a smaller space, with a knight snoring on a bed. I knew it was a knight, for a full set of armour was tossed in a corner. Two Isma'ilis burst into the room and held the man. I thrust a dagger to his throat, my hand over his mouth.

'No noise,' I said in broken French, 'or you die. Where are the prisons? How many men are in there?' I took my hand away. The eyes of the man were wild, wide open from fear. His breath stank of wine.

'The other door,' he managed to say, 'five guards. The prisons are below.'

'Where are the keys to the cells?'

'The men below have them!'

I knocked the man unconscious with the heft of my dagger. The Isma'ili behind me slid the man's throat. I had no time to argue. I opened the other door cautiously. More stairs. More light. We went down.

A voice cried in French, 'Jean? Where is that wine you promised us?'

A shadow appeared at the end of the stairs, then a man, and we had to fight. Abu Ahmad pushed the man hard to the ground, but the guard cried out and when I ran into the cellars three more men faced me. They were surprised, but they had the time to reach their weapons. They grabbed their swords and we fought. I had a sword in one hand, a dagger in the other. I killed a man instantaneously by thrusting my blade deep in his breast. I parried a sword cut from another guard, and that man had at the same moment an Isma'elite spear in his belly. We fought in silence, but the guards yelled the alarm. I doubted those shouts would have been heard more than two flights higher, and we had closed a door behind us.

Four more guards burst into the room. The knight had lied to us. There were more guards in the prison house. The fight in the small underground cellar was vicious. Our daggers did better work than the clumsy swords in that confined space, and the Isma'ilis were masters at dagger work. There was no place to cut or thrust with a sword, for too many men erupted in the room. I received a nasty cut in my arm though, and bled profusely. We fought desperately, clung to bodies while looking the men we would kill straight in the eyes while we thrust our daggers at them. We felt their breath, we held their flesh in a deadly hug, and we felt them die. In a few moments we had succeeded to eliminate all the men. Two Franks were gravely hurt, but they lay still conscious on the floor, panting, blood gushing from their wounds. They held their breast and belly. I went to one of them, drew him aside so that the man groaned from pain and shouted in his face, 'the keys to the prisons. Where are they?'

'On the wall, bastard' the man replied. I looked to the wall behind me and saw a row of keys. 'There!' I shouted in Arabic to the Isma'ilis and we opened the other door that led still farther down, to the deeper cellars. I almost got killed had not Abu Ahmad been standing next to me and drawn me aside, for a spear was thrust at me as soon as the door opened. A half-naked man appeared in the door and another followed, but that was as far as they went, for Isma'ilite spears reached them immediately. We drew the men inside the room where we stood, which was now damp from the blood that was spilled, and we stepped through the door.

We were in the prisons. But for one torch over a table, the place was completely in the dark. There was a low corridor and along the corridor one wooden door lined after the other. The cells were numbered. I looked at the keys an Isma'ili showed me and found also numbers on the keys. I started to open the doors painstakingly.

In the first cell I found a naked Bedu, in the second a Frank – probably a murderer or a thief -, in the third and fourth two Syrians. I had to open eight cellars, time passing so slowly, before I saw the half-naked figure of a woman lying on the floor, looking at me, terribly frightened, but staring with the most beautiful eyes in the world.

I said, 'all is right, darling, it is me, Daniel. I have come for you, to take you out of here.'

The Isma'ilis liberated a dozen more prisoners, but some couldn't even stand, let alone walk. None of the prisoners were tied to the walls in chains. In one cell about five Saracens were found and released. The cells stank of excrement and urine, but I refused to take in any such detail. I wanted Miriam out of there as fast as I could. She was barefoot, but could walk. I saw her eyes hurt from the light of the torches. I dragged her on.

'What do we do with the other prisoners?' Abu Ahmad whispered.

'Release the Syrians and take them out with you, but make sure they do not delay you, and tell them to stay shut. Let the others care for themselves. I will tell the Franks that are out to make no noise. You do the same with the Saracens.'

We broke open all the cells, released all prisoners, about thirty of them, and told them to be quiet. Then we walked back to the stairs. Miriam faltered twice, crying out in pain. I told her rudely to suffer in silence. She reached the courtyard and the Jews. We ran the way back to the door. The Jews and the Isma'ilis ran. A long queue of prisoners followed.

I was sure we would be spotted, but such a long row would puzzle the guards. The Frank prisoners poured out of the stairs too, but they were noisy. I pushed Miriam forward. I doubt she saw where we stepped. We passed through the corridor that led into the second yard. At that moment, the alert was given in the citadel. A voice cried out commands in French.

I could feel my spine tremble for fear as guards ran out of the keep, behind us, into the fleeing prisoners. I heard shouts and men crying in death agony as the guards fought the prisoners. I pushed on.

We were almost at the little door in the walls of the citadel when guards ran out of two doors of the yard we were in. We were still in the darkness though, and we spared no time. We ran on and disappeared in the wall. I was the last of our group to pass; prisoners followed me. The Isma'ilis ran in front of me, for I had been delayed helping Miriam along. Then we stepped through the small door, into the street.

The Isma'ilis stood all with their backs against the wall of the citadel, in the street. Isaac and the Jews pushed a fully laden cart of bales against the door, so that the opening would be obstructed for a while. We had also blocked the escape of many prisoners, but Miriam was out.

Isaac ran to David's gate. Behind us, in the castle, pandemonium had broken loose. I doubted that at that moment the garrison had realised what had really happened. We ran on in the dark, after Isaac Ben Asher. We arrived at the gate. We expected a new fight with the sentries there, but a door at the gates was open! Three men held open that door, just wide enough for us to pass.

'A little surprise of my comrades,' Isaac grinned. 'I had a few more men for security. They opened the door for us.'

I asked no questions, though he had disregarded an outright order of me. We just ran, with me only walking and drawing a limping Miriam out. The Jews inside would block the gates behind us, then hide inside the city.

I was not strong enough – not anymore – to carry Miriam. So two Isma'ilis drew away the cloths from their faces and carried her, one at the shoulders, the other at the legs. They advanced more rapidly that way than I, dragging Miriam along. I led now, back to the farm, where our horses had been readied.

The city was in turmoil. More torches were lighted on the walls. We heard shouts of panic. The Isma'ilis jumped on their horses. There were not enough animals for all the Saracen prisoners, about a dozen of them, but the Isma'ilis sat two to a horse. They galloped from the farm, into the hills.

I stood with Abu Ahmad and Miriam. I went into the house, came out with heavy bags.

I said to Ahmad, 'you will have to go. We may never see each other again. I am in debt. Thank you. Take these bags.' I gave him another ring, one of mine. 'You know what such a ring means to me,' I said. 'Now go, brother! May Allah guide you always and save you!'

'Farewell, my brother,' Ahmad said, grabbing the bags. An Isma'ili never discarded a coin given. 'I enjoyed myself!' He rode.

I was alone with Miriam. She had sunk to the ground, beside a wall. She could no longer stand. She was half-naked. I sought a coat for her, and then led her to three horses in another barn. I had packed these horses before. I put her on one of them, but she could not sit straight, let alone hold reins and ride. So I jumped behind her in the saddle. We could rest further south. I would ride south-west at first, in the opposite direction of the group of Isma'ilis. I rode slowly, with Miriam lolling against me in the saddle. We made some distance. I doubted horse riders would be sent out to pursue us in the night, and if that would happen, the riders would push north, after the Isma'ilis.

The sun rose to dawn and I still rode, Miriam sleeping in my arms. In the late afternoon of that day, I found a series of large boulders on the crest of a hill from where I could see the entire valley below and where I could hide our horses. We passed the night there. I washed Miriam's wounds tenderly, cursing the bastards that had hurt her. She had been treated badly, tortured and cut, bruised, burnt in places, but she had no broken bones and I hoped no hurt inner organs. She let herself be washed with the little water I had in gourds. She bandaged some of her cuts herself. She spoke no word. She watched me work on her and her eyes never left me. Then she slept.

Around noon of the next day, she awoke and wept. She broke and cried. Tears welled in her eyes. I took her in my arms and she let me hug her. She wept and her whole body shook with the sobs. I had to ask her not to make too much noise, for there were men passing in the valley. I could not stop her crying. She calmed down but slowly in my arms.

We remained on the hill for two more days. Then Miriam could walk again, though with pain, and her eyes were calm. Her first words were, 'the children?'

'They are fine,' I said. 'Isaac Ben Asher, the Rabbi, cares for them. They should be out of Jerusalem by now.'

'Where too?'

'Tyre,' I replied. 'We have to travel north. I am bringing you to Tyre. We will be safe there. Nobody knows us there. I will spread the news that you are dead, killed, that you disappeared during the raid on the citadel. In Tyre, we will be with the children again. We have a house at Tyre. Our merchant lives at the port, but we can stay there a few days. We will buy another house later.'

'My home is in Jerusalem,' she said sadly.

'Yes. Of course. It may be our home again, later. But not for the moment. Maybe later. We can return. It may be dangerous to do so in the next years, however.'

'Yes,' she answered. 'It may be once again our home. We must ride. I will be fine. I want to see the children. I am reborn, you know. You brought me to life again.'

So we rode down the hill and rode like two ordinary travellers, pilgrims, to Tyre. I had the time to look at Miriam during that ride. She had aged ten years. I rode with a strong woman still, but she was an old woman now. Yet, she was my Miriam, and I would kill for her anytime.

I felt stronger than the universe then, for at last the spells that I had thought to hang over people I loved dearly seemed broken. Maybe it was because I, too, had aged so much. There were now bonds between Miriam and me that would never be broken.

Despite the horrors that had happened to Miriam and despite the dangers we had been in at the citadel of Jerusalem, we passed a very pleasing time at Tyre. We stayed only a few days in the house where our Jewish merchant lived. He opened his rooms and asked no questions. I bought another, a larger house for Miriam, in the harbour district, with a nice view overlooking the port and the sea. We took walks on the beaches with the children. A little sadness came when I began to realise that I had to return to Beit Jibrin soon, lest the garrison would start to think something odd had happened to me.

I had let the matter pass, but a few days before I would have to leave I asked Miriam why she had been imprisoned. I had not brought that item up earlier. I needed to persuade her to talk, for she stayed numb at first and refused to answer. She did not tell me she refused to answer; she simply went silent on that subject. I had to recall to her how many men had risked their lives to get her out of the dungeons before she answered. Her words horrified me beyond belief.

Miriam had been called to the palace of Jerusalem. Guillaume of Tyre, the Archbishop of the town we were in, had appealed to the Hospital. Guillaume lived almost all of the time in Jerusalem then, because he was the teacher of the young Prince Baudouin, the son that King Amaury had had with his former wife Agnès de Courtenay. Baudouin was the Prince that would one day become King. Guillaume of Tyre had asked Miriam to examine Prince Baudouin and find out whether the boy was sick. Miriam had examined the boy twice but found him apparently in good health. Baudouin was a lively child, handsome, charming, cultivated, and intelligent. Miriam had been delighted meeting him, and she conversed easily with the boy, who seemed not to mind her being a Jew. Miriam told the Archbishop there seemed to be nothing wrong with the boy.

Yet, Guillaume of Tyre had insisted. Miriam had become puzzled and suspicious. She examined Baudouin further. She probed and felt his limbs. She then found what Guillaume of Tyre had already remarked.

The boy felt nothing, no pain whatsoever, in one arm and hand.

‘I realised then,’ said Miriam, and she clung to me when she told the horrible truth, ‘that Prince Baudouin had a terrible illness. He had the early signs of a leper. I pricked him with a needle in his arm and the boy was very proud to say he felt nothing in certain places. There were no lesions on his arm, but in a few years the lesions would come. His arm would fester in open wounds that would rot slowly. There is no cure for leprosy! It destroys not only flesh but also the nerves! A leper does not feel when he is wounded; his wounds do not heal well if at all. I could hope to stop the disease taking over his body with some of the medicines I had, but I would not be able in the long end to halt it. Prince Baudouin is a leper, Daniel! At the end of his life, the disease may be in his head. I don’t know how fast it could advance. He will not live long!’

I was shocked, of course, but I had seen too many killed and dismembered men, disfigured people and children, to be as horrified as Miriam. We live with disease and ugly wounds every day in Outremer.

I could only think, ‘good God, thank you my children are no lepers!’

I asked, ‘how soon will he die from that disease?’

‘I truly don’t know,’ Miriam answered. ‘Guillaume asked that question too. Baudouin may live long, long enough to be a leper King! I have seen leper children grow to adulthood, with the disease gradually taking over their faculties. They weaken, rot away, until the sickness reaches their mind and makes them go mad. When I realised that fate, I was thrown against the wall of the palace as if hit by a devil! I also did all I could so as not to contaminate Young Jacob and Young Sarah!’

‘So what happened next?’ I asked.

‘I told to Guillaume what I had found. I explained the symptoms. He merely nodded. He had already suspected the same. He asked me what I could do to stop the sickness. I said to him, truthfully, that not much could be done. Still, I administered potions to the child, very weak potions, and I applied balms on his arm. The remedies helped just a little, not much. I went back every week and I saw the sickness advance. After a while, Guillaume told the King. The King called on other physicians to treat Baudouin. Guillaume of Tyre returned to his town, here. The other doctors gave outrageous potions, useless potions, some even poisonous for the child. The potions made him weaker, whereas he should have stayed healthy and strong. Some of the balms opened rashes on his arms, and the wounds did not close. That was the worst they could have done to him!

Priests and Monks prayed day and night near Baudouin. They kept the boy inside, whereas he should have basked in the healing power of the sun. They held interminable sessions of prayers and exorcism. All that was kept secret. The treatments exhausted the boy. He should have been fortified in the sun, but he was buried inside the palace.

I said the Frankish doctors were not doing the right thing. I said the priests helped not. The doctors resented that, and the priests were horrified. One of them complained to Amaury de Nesle, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem. The physicians found no remedy, the prayers of the priests did no good, so the least these men could do was to find a cause for the sickness. They first thought of the consanguinity between Amaury and Agnès de Courtenay. That reason would have been too great a scandal, so it was not mentioned publicly.

They knew I was Jewish. They accused me of having brought the sickness to the child. Suddenly, all attention shifted from the inability of the doctors and priests to cure the child, to me, to the cause of the illness. I am sure that Guillaume of Tyre told that all of that was nonsense, but the argument that I had polluted the child with leprosy seemed too strong to be discarded. I only rarely came to the palace, and then not at all anymore, but I was thrown in prison, to be judged and no doubt to be executed.’

Miriam continued, ‘the guards tortured me in the dungeons, wanted to know what I had done to bring leprosy on the child. They hurt me, Daniel. They wanted me to confess that I had polluted Baudouin. I told them over and over again that I only saw Baudouin when he had already contracted the illness, but what I said was all in vain. I heard protests of Guillaume of Tyre. He once even came into the cellars and cursed the guards for treating me badly. The last weeks I was left more or less alone. I guess they did not really know anymore what to do with me. They could not accuse me, for Guillaume would say the truth. Yet they could not just let me go into the world with my knowledge. Bishops and priests came to see me. They just looked at me. They did not speak to me. I heard one of them say he was still convinced of my guilt and that I should be quietly killed one of these days, without a public judgement. I despaired.’

Miriam shuddered and grasped me. ‘And then you came, Daniel! You cannot imagine the loneliness I felt in that prison, in that horrible dark place! I saw no light for days on! How I longed for you, for the children! I begged the men, but they just kicked at me, and called me a dirty Jewish whore. Why did I have to suffer so much? I did no harm! I merely tried to help and I always told the truth. Why were they, the King, the Bishops, the priests, the guards, so nasty to me? Why did nobody – well, except for Guillaume of Tyre -, nobody, speak out in my favour?’

I ventured an answer, ‘few knew you were in prison, dear, and but fewer people knew exactly why. The King and his Counsellor-Bishops want the secret to be held quiet for a while.’

I could not provide other reasons for Miriam’s suffering. I could only hold her in my arms, hug her and tell her she would never again be in a dark cellar, tortured in a prison. But I knew that in order to protect her I would have to leave soon. I tried to calm her, but Miriam would have nightmares for the rest of her life, as I had. I talked much to her, told her time after time she was safe now, at Tyre, among the Genoese and Pisan merchants in whose quarter we lived.

The last day before my leaving for Beit Jibrin, while we walked, and at the moment I thought Miriam had put her imprisonment behind her, she spoke to me, showing she had still been thinking about the matter.

She said, ‘you did a very ugly thing for me, Daniel. When you drew me out of the cellar I noted the blood in the rooms. I saw many slaughtered men. You had no compassion. So many men killed or maimed for me! Maybe you should not have done it. Is my life worth so many horrors? Those dead haunt me at night.’

‘Yes,’ I replied, ‘they haunt me too. But they had to be put out of our way, and we could not do that gently. How could I have persuaded the men that were with me to not kill the guards? I could only lead the Isma’ilis by being stronger and more determined than they. We also dared not risk some guard to call the alarm. So we had to be quick and thorough. We took no chances. It was their lives or ours. I could not start to argue there about why we were in the prison and hope for understanding of the guards! Who bears the guilt of the dead? I believe the guilt is with the men that set in motion the whole affair, with the men who imprisoned you. Anyway, although I regret the dead, I would start anew today. I could not act otherwise.’

‘Still, I cannot but think often that it would have been better you left me there. Only one person would have died.’

‘That is what you should think,’ I said. ‘But it is not what I should think. I have a duty to my family and to myself. I will get you out of any prison, at any time, at any place.’ Then, Miriam remained silent, but she remained pensive, shaken by remorse, and when later we walked or sat together, I could see her in thoughts and I knew what she was thinking of. I loved her more then, for she was a righteous woman.

I hired five strong men to watch our house day and night, without Miriam knowing she was thus protected. Then I had to say goodbye to her and the children, and leave Tyre. I was sure Miriam had reasoned on what had happened and could cope with my absence. She had always been a rational and practical woman. I told her not to practise as a doctor, at least not outside the Jewish community, for a few years.

I returned to Beit Jibrin. I heard many rumours, one wilder than the other, about the raid on the citadel of Jerusalem. The citadel had been attacked in the night in an attempt to conquer the city. The prisons had been emptied. It seemed Saracen Syrians had attacked the town but failed. Many a prisoner, Miriam among them, had disappeared. Some prisoners had been caught and been killed. They did not know who the attackers were.

Henceforth I told everybody who wanted to hear that Miriam, the Jewish woman I lived with, must have been killed in the attack. That rumour stuck, and I spread it on. In the months after these events I only seldom visited Jerusalem. I was absent as much as before from Beit Jibrin, but now I was often at Tyre. Nobody asked me questions as to where I was.

Isaac Ben Asher was a common visitor at Tyre. He announced us it was now generally accepted that Miriam had perished in the attack on the citadel. He said with a laugh that even the Jews believed that story. Only four people knew the entire truth: I and Miriam, Isaac Ben Asher and that strange Isma'ili, my lion-brother, Abu Ahmad al-Din.

Chapter Six. The Ascent of Saladin. Jerusalem, Tyre, Gibelin, Ascalon and the Sinai 1167- 1177

Meanwhile, in that year of 1166, the war-leader Shirkuh was not pleased. Shirkuh had returned from Egypt in frustration. He had seen how wealthy Egypt was, how lush its gardens, how great its treasures of agriculture, and how thriving its trade with Constantinople, Christendom and Greece and the other lands around the Sea. He begrudged Shawar his treasures. He loathed the Vizir. Shawar was a coward and a bad leader. The Egyptian troops were weak. Shirkuh was convinced he could defeat them with enough men. Were the Egyptian Muslims not Shi'ites? Was it not the duty of every true Sunnite to bring true Islam to Egypt? Shirkuh worked on Nur al-Din's conscience. He reminded Nur al-Din of his duties.

In January of 1167, Nur al-Din gave two thousand cavalymen to his war-leader and Shirkuh rode through the desert to Egypt. His second in command was his young nephew Salah al-Din Yusuf.

Once more, Vizir Shawar appealed to the Franks. End January of 1167, the Frankish army of Jerusalem marched into Egypt for the third time. They advanced along the coast, from Gaza to al-Arish.

At the town of Bilbeis, the Egyptian army of Shawar met King Amaury. Shawar promised an enormous amount of money to the Franks if only they could rid him of Shirkuh. The Caliph of Cairo signed the pact of alliance. The armies of Amaury and Shawar and the enemy forces of Shirkuh moved on opposite sides of the Nile, around Cairo and al-Fustat, old Cairo. Skirmishes were fought, but Shirkuh avoided a battle because he had far more important forces before him than Nur al-Din had given him. He moved and moved until in March, close to Babain, he was out-moved. Shirkuh was badly outnumbered at Babain, even though the Franks had marched so quickly that they had left most of their footmen behind. Amaury had also had to leave many of his knights behind, for the cities on the way had to be defended with garrisons and the Egyptians had no fine leaders.

Once more, Shirkuh had more cunning than warriors. He used the same good old tactics that the Franks would never learn, the one I knew by heart. He made part of his valiant cavalry centre attack frontally. He made them loose some men, then the centre retreated. King Amaury and his Barons excitedly charged on Shirkuh's forces, believing to have the old fox in front of them. While Amaury caught up with the Saracen cavalry and defeated them, killing many enemy riders, destroying them – or so he thought -, Shirkuh was actually on his right. Amaury and Shawar's sons had placed mostly the Egyptian army and some Frankish footmen there, on their right flank.

Shirkuh destroyed the right flank of the Franks in their back without them being aware of what happened. Then he turned around and did the same with the Frankish and Egyptian left flank.

When the Syrian centre cavalry had absorbed the shock of the Franks, the rest of Shirkuh's hidden centre joined, a larger force, and when Amaury looked to his flanks for assistance, he saw only Shirkuh! Amaury had to flee. He used the power of his Norman destriers to force a passage through Shirkuh's first troops, but Shirkuh barred his way in a narrow valley.

King Amaury was brave. He assembled enough knights to force this passage. He reached al-Fustat, where other Franks joined him. He was very lucky to have lost only about a hundred knights in the battle. He did not count the lost footmen and the lost Egyptian army.

While Amaury and Shawar licked their wounds at Cairo and al-Fustat, Shirkuh entered triumphantly the large harbour city of Alexandria. The Egyptians now welcomed Shirkuh as the liberator of Egypt, especially the Sunnite merchants of Alexandria. The Alexandrian party of Shi'ites also hated the alliance between the Vizir Shawar and the Franks. The Alexandrians opened their gates and feasted Shirkuh.

I heard of all of these events from various sources. I heard Arabian and Egyptian merchants at the caravanserais. I spoke with wounded Frankish knights that returned to Jerusalem. I spoke with Bedu shepherds travelling from Bilbeis. It was about that time, from these men, that I heard for the first time talk of the youth that had led Shirkuh's centre and that had taken so well the grunt of the Frankish knights at Babain. This same youth, the confident of Shirkuh, had been appointed governor of Alexandria. The young Amir was thirty years old and the nephew of Shirkuh. The Frankish merchants and knights called him Saladin. His real name, the Bedu told me, was Salah al-Din Yusuf ibn Aiyub. Saladin was my young friend Yusuf.

Saladin had not much luck with his first assignment. King Amaury and Vizir Shawar laid siege to Alexandria. Shirkuh's main army was laying siege to the town of Qus, more to the south, near ancient Thebes, so Saladin had to defend the city on his own. Alexandria was blocked by land and by sea, for Ferry the Archbishop of Tyre had brought a fleet with arms and provisions for the Franks, and with this fleet he blockaded the port of Alexandria. The Franks built mangonels and hurled heavy stones into the town. The siege horrified the rich merchants of Alexandria. Their houses were being destroyed, their trade routes were blocked. They started to lose ships, money, wives, lovers and warehouses. King Amaury needed wood for the mangonels. So he destroyed the trees in the gardens of Alexandria. The inhabitants' hearts bled. They all began to blame Saladin, so Yusuf had all the trouble in the world at this head. How could he inspire the Alexandrians to hold the town, when all blamed him and threatened to jump his meagre troops to open the gates?

At the beginning of the summer of 1167, Shirkuh advanced against the Franks before Alexandria. He sent however Arnoul de Turbessel, a friend of King Amaury that he had held prisoner since Babain, to the King of the Franks and proposed again that both armies of Franks and Saracen Syrians would return home. Alexandria would then be delivered to the Egyptians, which meant also to Amaury. King Amaury accepted the truce.

Saladin's troops left Alexandria. Shirkuh released all Frankish and Egyptian prisoners of Babain. Amaury did the same with the Saracen prisoners of previous skirmishes. Then, both armies returned home, though not before King Amaury could enter Alexandria. At the beginning of September, Shirkuh was back at Damascus. Nur al-Din consoled him with the fief of Homs.

After that third expedition of Amaury in Egypt, the King of Jerusalem could consider Egypt as his protectorate. Vizir Shawar had to pay a large yearly tribute to retain Egypt. He had to accept a Frankish garrison in Cairo, as well as a Frankish overseer, a Shihna.

That same year of 1167, a delegation of Erneys, Archbishop of Caesarea and Eude de Saint-Amand, the King's Échanson, his Cup-bearer, returned from Constantinople with Marie Comnenus, daughter of Emperor Manuel Comnenus' nephew, the Protosebastus John Comnenus. Marie Comnenus married King Amaury at the end of August. The Byzantine alliance that was thus forged was not the true reason for the wedding. Few men at court knew the real reason why Amaury desired eagerly to marry again. He needed to secure his succession to the throne of Jerusalem. Baudouin, his elder son, might not live long.

Two Byzantine ambassadors accompanied Erneys and Eude: Georges Paleologos and the Sebastus Manuel Comnenus, cousin of Emperor Manuel. The aim of these ambassadors, and of King Amaury, was to talk over details of a joint expedition of the Byzantine and Jerusalem armies to conquer Egypt. Before the negotiations came to a decisive point however, the Barons of Jerusalem urged King Amaury to enter Egypt once more. Such an incursion was of course contrary to the pacts signed by the King, concluded with Shawar, Egypt's Vizir, but the Barons decided to ignore that pact.

King Amaury hesitated. He remembered his oath to Shawar. The Barons told him rumours about possible alliances between Egypt and Saracen Syria. It was said a marriage had been arranged between a daughter of Shawar and Saladin, Shirkuh's nephew and apparent heir to Shirkuh, as well as a marriage planned between a son of Shawar, al-Kamil Shuja' and a daughter of Nur al-Din. This, the Barons said, was enough proof that Shawar had broken his oaths, so king Amaury was not bound to his own oaths anymore. One of the men who drove King Amaury the most to act was the Grand-Master of the Hospital, Gilbert d'Assailly. The Hospital held many castles now, and the upholding of those castles with garrisons cost more money than the Hospital's income. Gilbert d'Assailly wanted to occupy the wealthy region of Bilbeis, the entry point of the caravans from the Orient into Egypt.

In October of 1168, King Amaury assembled his army and marched on Bilbeis. The Franks expected Bilbeis to open the town-gates immediately, like the previous times. But times had changed. Dirgham was not Vizir, but Shawar, and Shawar had been indulgent. The population of Bilbeis did not greet King Amaury as a liberator, but as a conqueror. They closed the gates, armed their men, and prepared for a siege. The Franks indeed laid siege to the town. They captured it after four days of heavy fighting, which left the Franks bitter and revengeful. The Frankish troops therefore ravaged and pillaged the town.

That was about the worst thing they could have done, for all of Egypt now knew what to expect from the Franks. King Amaury advanced with his army from Bilbeis to Cairo. He marched on the capital of the Fatimid Caliph and his Vizir. A horrible sight blocked their advance. Shawar, in a panic, had ordered the old town of Cairo, al-Fustat, to be set to fire. The ancient city burned down in front of Amaury's horrified eyes. Shawar sent a message to the King telling him he would not hesitate to burn down also Cairo itself. The people of al-Fustat fled to Cairo and Cairo prepared for a siege.

Amaury feared Cairo would equally be given prey to the flames. He feared the siege. He recognised his error. He could either destroy Egypt in blood and flames or demand a large sum of money from Shawar and retreat. Shawar complied, but Amaury had to return with one-tenth of the sum he wanted and with mere promises on the rest.

Amaury returned also because a large army of Syrian Saracens was on its way to Egypt.

Nur al-Din had given a new army to Shirkuh, an army of two thousand Syrian elite cavalry and six thousand additional Turcoman cavalry, four times the men Shirkuh had brought on his last expedition. Shirkuh had also received a large amount of coins for his expenditures. He did not have to draw a slow caravan of pack-horses behind him. He could live from the land and pay.

By attacking Egypt without being invited to, Amaury and his Barons had driven Shawar and the Egyptian Amirs into the arms of Nur al-Din. Shirkuh advanced so rapidly that he arrived at Cairo before the Franks could block his way. The King of Jerusalem could not confront the joint Egyptian and Syrian armies. He withdrew. He even abandoned Bilbeis.

In January of 1169, it was Shirkuh that was welcomed in Egypt like a liberator. Cairo was at his feet. Shawar went in audience to Shirkuh in great pomp. It was only Saladin who received him, accompanied by his war-leaders. Saladin seized Shawar and imprisoned him. The Caliph of Egypt, al-'Adid delivered a death sentence for Shawar. At the middle of the month, Shirkuh expedited the Vizir's head to the Caliph. Al-'Adid appointed Shirkuh to be the new Vizir of Egypt. But Shirkuh died from old age two months later, at the end of March in 1169. He left the Vizirate of Egypt to his nephew Salah al-Din, to Saladin. Saladin was master of Egypt.

Saladin had to force his power on Egypt. In the beginning, revolts fomented against him. He gave battle to an army of fifty thousand Nubian guards, huge black men, who formed an independent force in Egypt, dedicated to the Vizirs that wanted to pay them. Saladin nearly lost that battle, until he set fire to the camp of the Nubians. The Nubians were thrown in disarray when they saw their tents and goods in flames and their wives and children threatened. Saladin thus defeated the black Nubian guard.

Caliph al-'Adid had at first more or less openly attacked Saladin's troops at Cairo, the troops led by Saladin's brother Fakhru al-Din Turanshah. When Turanshah threatened to burn down the Caliph's palace, al-'Adid declared himself in support of Saladin as Vizir, and al-'Adid pronounced himself against the black guards. Saladin replaced quietly all the officials around al-'Adid with men loyal to his cause. He was the

undisputed master of Egypt at the end of the summer of 1169. Saladin was thirty years old.

The Frankish Barons had put in place by their disastrous last incursion in Egypt the Syrian domination over the land, and since Saladin ruled for Nur al-Din, Frankish Outremer was surrounded on all sides by lands controlled by the Zengid dynasty, by forces of Zengi's son Nur al-Din. The possibility for the Franks to play on alliances and counter-alliances to balance power and armies had ceased to exist.

At the end of September of 1169, I was at Tyre with Miriam and the children. The town was in turmoil. An enormous Byzantine fleet of galleys and sailing ships had arrived at Tyre. The view of so many warships excited the townsmen and drew all the children of the town to the harbour. The multitude of Greek ships with flying banners was a grand sight indeed. Luckily, the fleet was friendly. More than sixty Byzantine ships anchored before the port of Tyre. The power of Constantinople was thus magnificently deployed. The Basileus Manuel Comnenus had sent a large fleet to the Kingdom of Jerusalem under the command of the Megaducas Andronic Kontostephanos. The ships did not stay long, enough only to take in more provisions, which made me a little richer. Then its galleys and sailing boats departed for Acre. The fleet sailed for a new, joint expedition with King Amaury against Egypt.

I had not to refuse participating in that campaign. The Hospitaller Knights were almost bankrupt by then. They could not depart with Amaury. I had to intervene at Beit Jibrin with my own funds to avoid famine in the fortress. And yet, the Grand-Master of the Order continued to accept to take charge of castles, such as the newly captured fortresses of 'Akkar and 'Arqa in the County of Tripoli. With the castle of al-Hosn, the Hospitallers now guarded virtually alone the frontiers of Tripoli.

The Frankish and Byzantine armies got as far as Damietta and laid siege to the town. Saladin used the watercourses between Cairo and Damietta to transport experienced warriors and provisions into the town. The Byzantine and the army of Jerusalem remained for about two months at Damietta, but then not the townsmen were starving, but the Byzantines. They had only taken provisions for three months and lost much time at Acre. At the end of 1169, the expedition to Egypt was called off. The proud Byzantine fleet returned demoralised to Constantinople, and was almost entirely destroyed by storms in the Sea. Saladin had won his first major victory as Governor of Egypt, and he had done it on his own, without assistance from Nur al-Din.

In June of 1170 a terrible earthquake shook the region of the Orontes River once more. Many towns were destroyed. Saracens and Franks crept from under their ruins and held a truce to rebuild.

In the autumn of that year, Nur al-Din's brother, the Atabeg of Mosul, died. The two sons of Qutb al-Din Mawdud fought for the succession. Nur al-Din intervened and gave the land to his brother's son called Saif al-Din, but under his own benevolent

domination. Nur al-Din now held all the lands east and south of Outremer, from Mosul to Egypt.

End December 1170, Saladin invaded the Frankish territory along his north-eastern frontier, around Gaza, close to Beit Jibrin. He attacked the fortress of Daron. King Amaury arrived with his army and Saladin abandoned the siege. He attacked Gaza. The Lord of the town, Milon de Plancy, soon drew his knights away from the low town and hid in the fortress. The Egyptians massacred the townspeople, but could not take the citadel. Saladin returned to Cairo.

In the following year of 1171, King Amaury travelled in ten galleys to Constantinople to forge a new alliance against Nur al-Din with the Byzantines. The alliance was in the interest of both parties, so Amaury was well received in the Imperial city. After many festivities, he returned in June of 1171 hoping to soon lead another campaign in Egypt with the help of the Basileus.

The years of 1171 and 1172 were calm years for me. Nothing much happened at Beit Jibrin.

Saladin strengthened his hold on Egypt but he did not raid the Frankish lands of Gaza and Ascalon. Many skirmishes were fought on the northern border of Outremer, and in the east, but I only heard of those from far and did not participate in them. King Amaury fought the new Armenian King Mleh who had usurped the throne of Cilicia with the assistance of troops of Nur al-Din.

In 1173, Nur al-Din attacked the Krak of Moab, the castle of Peter of the Desert, in the Frankish lands over the Jordan River. The Lord there was now the same Milon de Plancy who had held Daron. He had married Etiennette de Milly, widow of Onfroi III of Toron, who was the heiress of those parts of Outremer. King Amaury had only to set his considerable army in movement to scare away the hordes of Nur al-Din.

In Egypt, Saladin consolidated his control. In September of 1171 the Fatimid Caliph al-‘Adid died. He was not replaced. In the public prayers the name of al-‘Adid had already been replaced by the name of the ‘Abbasid Sunnite Caliph of Baghdad, al-Mustadi. Egypt had become Sunnite.

In that same month Saladin attacked the Krak of Shawbak, or Montréal, in the Wadi al-‘Araba, over the Jordan. King Amaury reacted and arrived with an army in the region. Nur al-Din marched south with a Syrian army. Amaury would have been crushed if the two Saracen armies attacked at the same time, but Saladin saved the Franks by turning around and riding back to Cairo. To his astonishment, Amaury understood he had some new hope to manoeuvre between two Saracen powers, for Saladin had obviously departed not to have to join Nur al-Din and submit openly to him. Nur al-Din, understandably, was angry, and wanted to march on Egypt to teach his Amir a lesson. Saladin hastened to declare his total submission in a letter to Nur al-Din. He sought more power however. In 1172 he conquered Nubia, which delivered good warriors, and he also gained parts of Yemen.

In June of the following year, 1173, Nur al-Din attacked once more the Frankish lands over the Jordan. Saladin set his own army on the march to these regions; he changed his mind and returned before the armies joined. Saladin was playing his own game. And once more Nur al-Din was so angered that in May of 1174 he prepared seriously

for an attack on Egypt, on Saladin. Saladin had troubles in Egypt, too. He had to suppress a revolt of the Shi'ite leaders. He acted swiftly, eliminated the last Fatimid Amirs and stamped out the revolt in its roots. King Amaury had been ready to support that revolt, as had the Norman king of Sicily, Guillaume II, with a fleet that had already appeared before Alexandria. When the revolt was quenched before it had started, both these armies returned home.

I had an unexpected guest at Beit Jibrin in 1173. A very excited guard ran into my room telling me a Saracen Amir stood at the gates with an escort of Frankish knights of Jerusalem, desiring to talk to me. I stepped with the man into the courtyard, and remarked that the fortress was on alert. Men ran on the top of the walls, took their positions, readied their crossbows, and most of my sergeants ran all through the yards and buildings to ready for an attack. I smiled, because there was no reason for an alarm, but I did not call them off. It was fine for my men to be on tiptoes; I had a nice exercise here, and watched who was ready and who was not. I had the gates opened though, and let the horse riders clatter into the courtyard.

A flamboyant black rider galloped in my yard, led and advanced between two ranks of my warriors, and followed by a detachment of Frankish knights of Jerusalem. I recognised the mountain warrior that rode up to me. It was Abu Ahmad! I kept my mouth shut, but I truly wondered what an Isma'elite Prince was doing so far south, at my castle.

Ahmad jumped elegantly from his horse and fearing nothing, haughtily, advanced among so many enemies to salute me. We embraced, laughed, hugged and tugged, in front of the astonished Franks of Jerusalem and of Beit Jibrin. My guards could hardly miss the word 'lion-brother'. We walked, almost arm in arm, to my rooms.

Abu Ahmad soon solved the mystery of his presence. He had been sent as an ambassador of the Old Man of the Mountain, now Rashid al-Din Sinan for his own father and leader had died four years ago, to the Franks of Jerusalem to negotiate an alliance between the Franks and the Isma'ilis.

'Sinan said I knew the Franks,' Ahmad told, 'so he sent me.' King Amaury was very pleased with the embassy and would sign a treaty. He had promised the Isma'elite embassy already that they did not have to pay any longer the tribute they were due each year to the Templar Knights. That tribute amounted to two thousand bezants yearly. The King would pay the amount from his own treasury to the Templars.

We laughed, drank and told each other our war stories for two days. Abu Ahmad explained me more about how the Isma'ilis worked under Sinan, how strong their discipline was and how much Sinan diverted from accepted, Sunnite, Islam. After those two days however, Abu Ahmad and his escort had to return to Jerusalem.

Later, I heard that the Isma'elite ambassadors had been ambushed on their return to Hisn Masyad, somewhere beyond Tripoli. The Templar Knights, led by Gauthier du Mesnil, had laid a trap for the Isma'ilis and killed them all. That was the end of my friend, Abu Ahmad. I was sad at that news. Ahmad had not been the merciless Isma'elite killer that the Franks thought he was. He had been a passionate man, of course, a great warrior and hunter, a man ferociously dedicated to his cause and to his

companions, but also a man who truly sought to understand more of his religion, and who was open to ideas from others. Why did I lose all my friends in violence? King Amaury had rightly been extremely angry about the ambush. He sent Séhier de Maimendon and Godechaux de Turout to demand of the Grand-Master of the Templars, Eude de Saint-Amand, to deliver the culprit to his justice. The Grand-Master blatantly refused, answering to the Barons that the affair would be brought before the Pope, for the Order of the Templars, an Order of Warrior-Monks, had not to justify its acts to the King of Jerusalem.

Amaury did not hesitate one moment. He rode with his Barons to Sidon, where the Templars held a Council presided by their Grand-Master. He arrived in the middle of one of these sessions and without much ado arrested Gauthier du Mesnil from among the knights present and led him away before the eyes of the protesting Grand-Master. Amaury took Gauthier du Mesnil in chains to Tyre and threw him in a prison. Then, Amaury sent a message to Sinan, the Isma'ili, to tell him justice had been done.

In 1174 the constellation of power in Outremer changed dramatically. The Fates reshuffled the cards. At half May of that year, Nur al-Din died in the citadel of Damascus. His successor, his son al-Malik al-Salih Isma'il was only eleven years old. Saif al-Din, the Atabeg of Mosul, rapidly captured several places of the Jazira that had belonged to the Atabeg of Aleppo. A war was on inside Saracen Syria. The Amirs of Nur al-Din fought for the Regency. From out of Egypt, Saladin equally claimed the Regency. At that time, Amir Ibn al-Muqaddam protected Malik al-Salih and seemed to have the upper hand.

King Amaury took the opportunity to attack Banyas, hoping to regain the fortress, but its defence was too well organised. Amaury only gained a pact with Ibn al-Muqaddam, as well as the release of many Frankish prisoners.

But then, in July of 1174, King Amaury too died from an illness caught at the infructuous siege of Baniyas. He was only thirty-eight years old. He had two daughters: Sibylle, a child of Agnès de Courtenay, his first wife, and Isabella, his daughter by Maria Comnenus. He had one son, Baudouin, from his first wife. Young Baudouin was crowned immediately as King Baudouin IV of Jerusalem.

The regency over young Baudouin was at first exercised by Milon de Plancy, the Sénéchal of Jerusalem. Count Raymond III of Tripoli however, released from a Saracen prison for a hefty ransom in 1172, demanded the regency for himself. Was he not the grandson of King Baudouin II? Raymond III knew that Baudouin was a leper and would not live long. Raymond was doing more now than claiming the regency: he was claiming the succession to Baudouin IV! Milon de Plancy saw not so far in the future. He made Raymond return empty-handed to Tripoli. But Milon de Plancy was assassinated at Acre end 1174. Many suspected Raymond III of Tripoli, but nothing could be proven and the Count was too powerful. So, Count Raymond III became the new Regent.

At Aleppo, the Amir Ibn al-Muqaddam had to cope with severe resistance from the other Amirs for the regency of Nur al-Din's lands. He called Saladin to his aid. Saladin arrived from Egypt in Damascus at the end of November 1174 with seven

hundred elite warriors. Before the passing of the year he had captured Homs, Hama, and his troops paraded before the walls of Aleppo.

But Aleppo declared in favour of old times, in favour of the child al-Salih, and the boy asked the townsmen to defend the city against Saladin. Aleppo even called in the support of Count Raymond III of Tripoli.

Raymond, using the army of Jerusalem, assaulted Homs to create a diversion and draw Saladin away from Aleppo. Raymond could not take the town, for Saladin rapidly advanced his armies against him and Raymond had no stomach for a dangerous direct confrontation. Since he had only promised to save Aleppo, he retreated satisfied into Frankish territory, his promise accomplished, for Saladin had moved south enough for Aleppo to feel relieved. Raymond thus also had ensured that Syria was split in rival Saracen fractions once more.

Saif al-Din Ghazi II, the Atabeg of Mosul, then sent an army of Turcomans to teach Saladin a lesson. Saladin destroyed that army effectively in 1175 near Hama. He declared himself then the sovereign leader of Syria, the Sultan of the land. He laid siege to Aleppo anew. In May of that year 1175, the young al-Salih sued for peace. Saladin sent an embassy to Count Raymond III, begging or warning him not to intervene. As a sign of goodwill, Saladin even released all the Frankish prisoners that were in his hands. Count Raymond and the Connétable Onfroi de Toron accepted Saladin's terms. In the summer of 1175 however, the Franks ravaged the lands around Damascus. Saladin sought to hold the truce, and he renewed the pact with Jerusalem in August despite the insult.

In April of the next year 1176, Saladin defeated a large army of the Turks of Aleppo and Mosul. He set siege again to Aleppo in June. After a month of dogged, heavy fighting over the town, Saladin accepted at the end of July a peace treaty with the Zengids. Malik al-Salih Isma'il kept Aleppo, but only Aleppo. Saladin drew his troops back to the south, but he set up residence at Damascus. He was master of three fourths of Syria and of Egypt. But the warriors of his opposers continued to harass his positions.

In August of 1176, two Frankish armies, one led by the fifteen year old King Baudouin and the other led by Count Raymond of Tripoli, raided the Beqa valley. Saladin's brother Shams al-Dawla Turanshah led his troops to them. The impact of the joined Frankish cavalry was too powerful. Turanshah lost the battle of 'Ain Anjarr and fled. The Franks brought their men back to Tyre and Jerusalem.

Baudouin IV could have no children because of his leprosy. In 1177, the King had his sister Sibylle marry Guillaume Longue-Épée, Longsword, son on the Marquis de Montferrat in France, a cousin of King Louis VII and of Emperor Frederick Barbarossa of Germany. After three months of marriage, Guillaume fell ill at his fief of Ascalon. He died in June.

In September of 1177, Philippe d'Alsace, Count of Flanders, the son of Thierry d'Alsace, arrived on pilgrimage to Jerusalem with a large group of Flemish knights. He was the cousin of Baudouin IV and like with his father, the Barons of Jerusalem hoped to put the Flemish knights to good use. Baudouin offered the regency to

Philippe, but the Flemish Count haughtily refused the honour. He was only on pilgrimage. He also refused to support an expedition to Egypt, despite the arrival at Acre of a fleet of seventy Byzantine war ships with about as many transport ships. He refused as his aide the recently released Renaud de Châtillon. Renaud was beneath his dignity, he claimed.

What he truly wanted was to have the two sons of Robert V de Béthune, one of his vassals, marry the two sisters of Baudouin IV. This was not to increase his influence over Jerusalem. Philippe d'Alsace would receive in return for the double marriage the lands of Béthune to be added to Flanders.

King Baudouin refused that plea. Also Baudouin of Ramla, Lord of Ibelin, secretly desired to make of Sibylle his wife, so he opposed the Marriage of the sisters with the Béthunes in the Council of the Barons of Jerusalem. As to the expedition into Egypt, Philippe refused, then accepted, then refused again to support it, and King Baudouin did not envisage a campaign without the support of more knights than he had. The Byzantine fleet returned to Constantinople, convinced that the Franks had made fools of them.

Philippe d'Alsace did ride in a campaign with Count Raymond III of Tripoli against Hama in November, but after many skirmishes the Frankish knights had to abandon the siege. Prince Bohemond III of Antioch then took Philippe with him on a raid against Harim, east of the Orontes River. Bohemond and Philippe played more at dices, at checkers and at seducing the most women that accompanied the men, at feasting and at dining, than at war. The army of Aleppo intervened and also Saladin threatened to march against the Frankish knights. Bohemond and Philippe demanded a considerable sum of money from Harim. Once that sum paid, they left the siege.

King Baudouin IV had given Bohemond, Raymond and Philippe so many knights for their campaigns, that at Jerusalem remained only five hundred knights, including in that number the Knights of the Hospital and of the Temple. Saladin had always well-informed spies. End November, Saladin erupted into the region of Gaza with a large army from Egypt. He marched straight to Ascalon. A group of Templar knights was blocked inside the fortress of Gaza. Saladin went for the jugular of Jerusalem.

An exhausted messenger knight, covered in dust, arrived at my gates of Beit Jibrin to tell me all of these events. He summoned me to the King's army that was on its way to Ascalon. Every knight of the Kingdom had to rally to the King.

The messenger was one of Onfroi de Toron's men. The Connétable was very sick.

The man had two letters for me.

The first letter was from Onfroi, demanding of me to join the staff of the King. Onfroi wrote that the King knew who I was and Onfroi asked me insistently to assist the King in his place.

The other letter was written by the King himself, an honour that I wondered was due to what miracle. The King asked me to come to him. No doubt it was a standard letter, copied for every knight of Jerusalem, but it still puzzled me. I had no inclination to help the king of Jerusalem. Not after Miriam had been imprisoned in a King's goal! I was near sixty years of age. I had Beit Jibrin to defend. I hated the people that had

tortured Miriam. Was it not for the Leper King she had been hurt? I was not sure I wanted to fight Saladin.

But it was difficult to refuse an old friend such as Onfroi de Toron, especially when he was sick. My damn vanity did the rest. I did not want to be ungrateful to Onfroi. How would I be received at the Royal Court, would anybody recognise me and remember me for the battles won? I guessed I would be a non-entity.

So I put on my mail armour, took my shield and arms and rode out of Beit Jibrin with two of my ablest but youngest knights and half the garrison of the castle. If ever Saladin's troops decided to attack Beit Jibrin, they would have an easy job indeed.

I did not ride to Jerusalem. I rode to Ascalon, to watch the Egyptian army, and to wait for the King there. To my astonishment, the army of Jerusalem had already arrived. Baudouin might have been a Leper King; he sure knew how to force his men to march!

It was a small, pitifully small army that marched in the wide valley beneath me. There would have been scarcely five hundred knights down there, and not more than a thousand footmen. Saladin could destroy this group easily, and then the road to Jerusalem would be wide open for him. The Frankish troops marched sullenly to Ascalon. Its vanguard was already entering the gates of the city. The King and the Bishops rode near the True Cross. I rode slowly to Ascalon along the low hills, hesitating to join the army immediately.

In the far, behind me to the west, I remarked the dust clouds of another army on the move, the troops of Saladin. The Sultan's army had equally reached Ascalon! King Baudouin had some luck at least, for he had beaten Saladin to the town. I rode nearer to the Egyptian army, watching several parties of Turkish riders along the marching horde. Saladin had brought a considerable army, with many times more men than Baudouin had. I could not estimate from so far how many warriors Saladin actually threw against Jerusalem, and I also could not discern well how many parts of his army were Egyptian and how many elite Turkish. Whole groups of the warriors were hidden from my view. I guessed however that at least five thousand Saracen warriors advanced on Ascalon. The troops in the valley drew no mangonels with them, but those could arrive from the rear.

I sensed disaster then. What would happen if Saladin caught Baudouin and his small army inside Ascalon, blocking it with part of his army and sent the other part to ravage Jerusalem and the other cities of the Kingdom? What if another army, Saladin's army of Syria, of Damascus, marched too? I would have liked to see more of the Egyptian army, but to my regrets I had to hurry and enter the city with the rear-guard of Jerusalem, lest the gates would be closed and the terrain before the walls too dangerously filled with Saracen riders. I forced my horse behind the Franks and our small group was among the very last to enter Ascalon.

It was a strange sensation to be in this city again, not laying siege to it but being besieged. I was thinking ahead on what Saladin would do next. He could be patient and set a siege to the town. He had caught the King of Jerusalem; he could finish Baudouin off, here. He had to fear the return of a Frankish army of the north, however. Raymond of Tripoli, Bohemond of Antioch and Philippe d'Alsace might march southwards to relieve the King. Still, I thought, troops of Damascus could fend those off.

Saladin could stay at Ascalon and capture it, and make a prisoner of Baudouin. Then he could easily attack Jerusalem and the rest of the Kingdom. Saladin might also be impatient, leave a few warriors before Ascalon and ride north to ravage the valleys north of this region, east of Jaffa and west of Jerusalem, and then he could capture Jerusalem that was almost without defence. But a siege to Ascalon might take months and also Jerusalem would not be easy to take, for the townsmen would close the gates and defend the city. Maybe Saladin would only ravage the countryside, as Saracen leaders had raided so often, without forcing an issue.

Inside Ascalon, the knights sought houses to stay in. There was a chaos in the town. Footmen ran to the walls and manned the crescent of the defence walls, of the towers and of the guard-posts around the gates.

I rode slowly with my troops into the streets and sought the King. I supposed he was at the keep of the citadel, so I rode there. I left my horse to my companions and told them to find shelter in the town. I walked the last distance. The guards brought me to the King.

Baudouin was in the large hall of the main building of the citadel, not in the keep. Many Barons discussed at his side, some of which I recognised: Renaud and Baudouin and Balian of Ibelin were with the King, Renaud of Sidon, the Sénéchal Jocelin, Bishop Auberg of Bethlehem, Hugue of Tibériade and his brother Guillaume, Robert de Boves, and a few others I did not know. I was very ill at ease. How many of these men would suspect I had attacked the Citadel of David? In the first moments it seemed to me as if all knew. Of course, none had any clue as to who had led the assault, and on that day none cared less. Still, I was not eager to close on the men. They were arguing and shouting around the youth that was the King. They silenced one after the other when I entered. I was out of place. I was sixty and had already a white beard and white hair, but I was taller, leaner, more sinewy, much more the warrior-knight than most of them. They had had the time to change in finer clothes, Court dress, whereas I was in full mail, in sweat and dust. I saw the King ask who I was and someone whispered my name.

The King granted me a sign of greeting and another to wait, and I was grateful. I did not need to walk up to the men, among whom I felt uncomfortable. I receded back to the door and went out. I waited in the courtyard.

After a while the knights came out, alone or in groups of two and three. None stopped to talk to me. I really was a non-entity. I waited. Finally, the King also stepped out of the hall. He beckoned me and I went up to him, hand on the hilt of my sword.

Before I could utter a polite greeting, the Boy King said, 'come with me.'

We went into the keep, up a flight of wide stairs and into another, sparsely lit room. The King sat on a chair. He invited me to a chair next to a table. The King seemed tired. I looked at him to find traces of the leprosy, but noticed no apparent lesions. One arm was almost limb, though, and his right hand was gloved. The Boy King's face was fine, pale, youthful, devoid of face-hair, but energising eyes burned deep in its sockets under ample black hair and generous, delicate eyebrows. He was calm, fidgeted little, sat and watched, gauging me. Baudouin noticed me scrutinising him beyond his face, a gesture he must have been accustomed to. A rapid smile appeared and left his face, as if he had already guessed at what I thought. Baudouin stared at me too, maybe defying my curiosity. He must have seen only a dignified, old warrior, dressed in heavy, somewhat rusted mail, dressed also in the surcoat of a Hospitaller. I

had a wrinkled sunburnt face on which the many lines showed the years in as many deep scars, but I knew my eyes were young and active like his.

The Boy King said, 'Sir Daniel du Pallet, commander of Gibelin, isn't it? You are a friend of Onfroi de Toron, our protector. He is sick, very sick. He told me to trust you and to listen to you. He said you won battles for my uncle, the former King Baudouin. You know the Saracens well, Onfroi said, and how they fight. Onfroi told me to listen to you as if I were listening to him. He assured me that if one man could lead me to victory than that was you.'

'Onfroi de Toron is too kind,' I muttered, barely audibly.

Baudouin laughed, 'Onfroi is all but kind. He can be ferocious and I know of no better sword in the Kingdom. He is practically the only knight I trust to counsel well in war. He also tells me the truth, even if it doesn't please me. If Onfroi trusts you, and recommended you to me, you must be special. Yet you are not at Court. Why is that?'

'Has not Onfroi told you why, your Majesty?'

'He told me to ask you!'

'When you were a child, a woman physician of the Jews was sent to you, to find out what illness afflicted you. She found out you had the illness of leprosy.' I was blunt.

'The woman treated you and apparently did some good to you. Then, on orders of your father, she was accused of having polluted you, although you had leprosy before she touched you. She was arrested, tortured and thrown in prison. That woman was my wife. The Royal Court does not like Christians married to Jews.'

The King was not offended. 'I know that story,' Baudouin exclaimed. 'I remember the woman Miriam. She was nice. Yes, her name was Miriam. My father said he had been forced to take her away because his Bishops had accused her. He told me he would not allow harm to come to her. We did not know she was tortured. My father would not have allowed that to happen. If I am not mistaken, later, the citadel of Jerusalem was attacked and the woman disappeared together with many other prisoners.'

'Yes,' I answered. 'Miriam was my wife. I assumed I was not welcome at court anymore.' I grinned, 'and I had no particular liking anymore either, to parade at the Court.'

Baudouin was still not offended. 'But here you are,' he tried.

'Yes, here I am,' I repeated, 'and I do not like being imprisoned like an alley-rat in a town under siege.'

'Well,' the King remarked dryly, 'we are safe here, aren't we?'

'No,' I retorted angrily, 'we are not safe here. I have fought at several sieges of towns and castles. If a large army, a very large army, sets its mind to capturing a town, however many men defend it, the castle or town will fall. Sultan Saladin has the resources and he may have the patience to capture this town, as we had many years ago when we took Ascalon from the Egyptians. Pray to God the Sultan does not have the patience, for if he has, then Ascalon will fall, with us trapped inside. I have known not one town and not one fortress that can hold out against a large army such as the Saracens have here. If that army has the resources, provisions and arms, and the patience, and the determination to stay, then Ascalon will fall.'

'My Barons do not agree,' Baudouin said. 'Saladin is a Saracen. He does not have such patience.'

‘Saladin is extremely patient and extremely intelligent,’ I answered. ‘Maybe his Amirs do not have the patience and then he will have to act instead of sitting before these walls. But if he really wants to crush Ascalon, he will and he can.’

‘The Saracens are fickle,’ Baudouin protested. ‘Guillaume of Tyre told me how many times Nur al-Din and his leaders, also Shirkuh and Saladin, turned away from our armies although they might have won victories.’

‘Saladin is not like that,’ I replied. ‘Saladin is a man who waits for the right moment, like his uncle Shirkuh. No Frank has ever won a battle against Shirkuh.’

‘Oh, I know of one man who won from Shirkuh,’ Baudouin said, looking me straight in the eyes. ‘Onfroi de Toron told me it was you who advised my uncle Baudouin at Puthaha. You won from Shirkuh!’

‘Shirkuh was at Puthaha,’ I agreed, ‘but Nur al-Din was in command there. Was it Shirkuh that led at Puthaha or was it his Malik, Nur al-Din?’

Baudouin let the subject go. ‘So, what would you do now, then?’ he asked me.

‘Well, since we are caught inside Ascalon and since your army cannot manoeuvre anymore, there is not much you can do but sit tight, isn’t there? Of course, you might call in the forces of Jerusalem, Tripoli and Antioch and of those of Flanders that are still out there. But it will take time for those troops to arrive and they may be held up by forces of Damascus. Saladin can take them on separately, destroy them, then come back here. You can call them anyway, however, and spot movements of Saladin’s army. When part of his army moves, we could sally and hope Saladin does not play a trick to destroy you instead of the arriving armies of Tripoli and Antioch. Riding off and then come back was one of the favourite tricks of Shirkuh, and Shirkuh was his teacher.’

Baudouin stayed silent a while. He still scrutinised me. Then he said, ‘you draw a gloomy picture, Sir Daniel du Pallet. Are you always so gloomy? Is there no hope, then? Why do you believe Saladin would be so intelligent?’

I hesitated. Then I sighed and replied, ‘I know Saladin. I have eaten with him and I drank with him. He was my friend once, long ago, when he was a mere boy. He was the cleverest youth I met in those days. He could outwit grown men. He does not have that abstract intelligence one remarks in scholars. He has considerable knowledge of all things of the world, of all practical things. He calculates. He thinks. And he has the intuition of a great leader. He does the right things at the right moment. He is sly, believe me, and he has patience if he needs to.’

Baudouin was surprised and interested. ‘Where did you know Saladin?’

‘I knew him at Aleppo when I was held captive there by an Arabian nobleman. The Arabian Amir saved me, had someone care for my wounds, and eventually Saladin and the Amir released me. They let me go because we had become friends. The Amir was a sly politician and ambassador, who knew Franks as well as Arabs, Egyptians and Syrians.’

‘Would that have been Usama ibn Munqidh?’

‘It was,’ I said, astonished that Baudouin knew about Usama. I asked him how he had guessed.

Baudouin explained, ‘I read the chronicles of my family, Sir Daniel. Usama visited us with Mu’in al-Din Unur when Jerusalem was allied to Damascus.’

‘Yes,’ I replied. ‘Usama told me that story. But that was before my time. I arrived just before the Crusade of King Louis.’

Baudouin returned to his original subject. 'I already have sent messengers to Raymond of Tripoli and to Bohemond of Antioch. No doubt they will move south soon, to here.' Baudouin sighed, 'I also sent for more help from Jerusalem. I regret that, for many townsmen of Jerusalem already set on their way to come to our assistance. We have had news of them. They have been intercepted by Saladin's cavalry and cut to pieces.'

'That is what he will try to do also with the armies and Antioch and Tripoli,' I acknowledged.

'Saladin can do something else, though,' speculated Baudouin. 'He can be forced to impatience by his Amirs and try to attack Jerusalem.'

'Yes,' I said. 'He can do that, too. And that prospect is even worse than your army being caught in here!'

'Was it really you who told my uncle what to do at Puthaha?'

'No. I told him how Shirkuh fought and how to react to it. I suggested ways of proceeding. Your uncle held command. The victory was his. That is how we won.'

'Right,' Baudouin replied. 'From now on, please consider yourself to be my Counsellor. I want you with me at all times. Tell me how Saladin fights and what he might do. I will hold command.'

That was a strange thing to hear from a seventeen-year old.

Baudouin continued. 'I have not been able much to learn to manipulate arms. My father wouldn't let me. So I read books. I read many books of all kinds. It is amazing how much one can learn from books. My Barons have hardly read a single book, except maybe parts of the Bible or the Evangelists. I know things. I know how to react in situations that are entirely new to my Barons and knights, because I read of them in books. I read books of wars, of battles and sieges. A siege in Roman or Greek ancient times is not so different from a siege today. I talked a lot with Onfroi de Toron about that. He said I was like you; only you had read more because you were older. Onfroi said however that you had been in real situations of wars, battles and sieges too, so you had more experience than I, and you knew the Saracens and their tactics. You are offensive, disrespectful – but I understand why now -, yet honest and straight. I think I am going to trust you. There are two issues to work at: how to defend Ascalon if Saladin orders the assault, and how to stop him in the event he marches north, to Jerusalem, while we are trapped in here.'

Baudouin stood up abruptly, not waiting for an answer or arguments, and said, 'I have to rest. You must leave.'

I went down the stairs and walked out of the keep to find my men.

During the following days the siege of Ascalon went its course. Only, this time I was inside instead of outside. No mangonels and trebuchets were drawn to the walls, no siege tower advanced. I supposed Saladin's army was building those some distance from the town. We had to have patience to find out what was cooking with the Saracens. Warriors surrounded our walls, but all remained quiet.

I often walked on the top of the walls to watch the Egyptian army and spot some development. The enemy just sat in the pastures, hundreds of tents testifying to the presence of a large number of warriors. Thousands of horses, palfreys and Arabic thoroughbreds and packhorses and even donkeys were confined within makeshift pens. I noticed a pack of camels. Groups of cavalry patrolled all around the town.

Once, King Baudouin walked up to me. He also sometimes mounted the stairs to the top of the walls. He usually remained close to the main gates, however. He had walked quite a distance from the gates, this time, and found me.

Baudouin asked, 'what are they waiting for?'

'Something funny is going on,' I replied. 'They should throw stones at us and arrows. Trebuchets are not that difficult to make. It has now been a week and they just sit there. They could be digging under the walls. There is nothing of that! Saladin must be making up his mind about something. Or they expect us to do something.'

'If this continues, we might sally,' Baudouin proposed. 'My Barons want to sally'.

'No,' I answered. 'That could exactly be what they are waiting for. They so much outnumber us, that they can destroy us easily if we sally. I have known them stay put until a garrison sallies and then destroy it. Hold the Barons back.'

'Are you giving me orders?' Baudouin grinned.

I was relieved to notice the grin. 'I wouldn't dare,' I replied. 'I was just giving an advice.'

'Right,' he said and looked a while at the enemy camp. There was not much to see that day – nor had there been the previous days –, but for the tents, the smoke plumes from the innumerable little cooking fires, smoke that ascended almost vertically to the sky for there was little wind, and an occasional Saracen rider speeding to and fro, insulting the Ascalonians. We leaned on the parapets and looked.

'I have been thinking about that raid on the citadel of Jerusalem,' Baudouin suddenly continued. 'A strange raid that was! My father told me no prisoner of importance had been released because there was nobody of significance in the prisons. Nothing was damaged in the castle; no gate was broken open and nothing stolen. Only fools were around my father, he said, for some told to him and to Onfroi de Toron that the attackers spoke Hebrew, whereas others had heard French and still others had heard shouts in something like Arabic. My father believed none of the reports. He refused to have the Jews of the town interrogated. Isn't that odd?'

My throat dried out. 'Yes,' I said, 'that seems odd indeed!'

Baudouin stayed silent a while, as if he wanted me to absorb what he had said. I wondered why he lingered here, on the top of the walls.

'We had an Isma'ilite embassy once at my father's Court,' the King continued. 'One of the Isma'ilis asked where Gibelin was and we gave him an escort to visit your castle. That was odd too.'

I did not answer.

'You are a strange man, Sir Daniel,' the King said. He remained looking out into the far. He did not look at me. 'You have a Jewish wife, a strange enough thing in itself, for no religion I know of accepts marriages of people of other faiths. You know the Jews intimately. You had friends called Usama and Saladin, who are Saracens. The son of an Isma'ilite leader, the son of an Old Man on the Mountain, comes to visit you. From what I heard half the garrison of Gibelin would walk through fire for you and the other half would rather drown at a ford than refuse a command you give. You are also one of the very richest men in the Kingdom.'

I wondered where he had that information from. From Onfroi de Toron? Onfroi was not at Ascalon and the Connétable could not know I had coins.

'And,' Baudouin continued, 'the David citadel gets attacked by Jews, Franks and either Saracens or Isma'ilite fidaïs or by both together. A few prisoners escape, a woman disappears, who happens to be your wife.'

I was definitely nervous now, but I kept looking straight ahead. I guess I reddened beyond my white beard. He was so much like Saladin, this young King. He was wiser and knew more than his Court. From a corner of my right eye I saw Baudouin watching me, waiting for a reaction. I still did not move.

Baudouin pushed the dagger in. 'She must be living in one of the port towns. Acre maybe, Sidon, not Jaffa. Too close to Jerusalem, Jaffa. Tyre maybe. Nice town, Tyre. Fine air of the Sea. Guillaume showed me. The richest man of Tyre was seldom in town, it went.'

I looked at the youth. There may have been a pleading in my look.

'You can bring her back to Jerusalem, Sir Daniel. I never wanted her to be harmed. My father never wanted her harm. She will not be imprisoned again. Never. This country needs to live on, Sir Daniel. Not only Franks live here. I will not live long, but my Kingdom can only survive if we learn to live together with Jews and Sunnites and Isma'ilis and Armenians and Jacobites and Nestorians and Turks, Bedu, Arabs and Greek and with many more.

If we start thinking these people can pollute us, then all together will destroy us and the Kingdom will cease to exist. Mary, Miriam, can come home, to Jerusalem. I will receive her and I would like her to look at my wounds. I am sure the danger that I pollute her is far greater than the risk that she pollutes me! Bring her back, Daniel.'

'Your Barons and Bishops might not agree with you,' I remarked. 'That was what happened with your father.'

Baudouin sent me a look filled with flaring anger, even hatred. 'Then I will silence them,' he said. 'Do not think you are the only one who suffered. I have not forgotten that these same Barons forced my father to divorce my mother. Do you know, Daniel, what life is without a mother near?'

'Yes,' I answered. 'By God, yes, I do! My mother, Héloïse, was never at my side. Neither was my father, Abélard.'

'The Héloïse and the Abélard, the philosophers?' Baudouin asked, stunned.

'Yes,' I said. 'The Héloïse. Héloïse the nun. The woman who rather preferred to become a nun than to care for a son. And the Abélard, the philosopher, who preferred to forfeit his fief to be able to teach and study.'

'I don't believe it,' Baudouin exclaimed. 'I read books of Abélard! Guillaume of Tyre wouldn't let me, but I sent letters to Cluny to ask for books! Then I found out that Guillaume had a copy in his library too. You are the son of Pierre Abélard?'

'Yes, I am. My real name is Astralabius. Daniel is the name my aunt gave me, not my parents. I was raised in Brittany, at Le Pallet, but it is no longer my fief – if it ever was.'

Baudouin said, 'I repeat. If your Miriam wants to return home, to Jerusalem, let her. Send her to me. No, better: let me know when she is in town and I will send her an escort of Royal Guards to the palace!'

Before I had thought of an appropriate answer, Baudouin walked on along the parapets. I did not dare to remark that as long as we sat in Ascalon with five thousand Saracens watching our gates, talking about Jerusalem seemed a little out of time. Such is youth. Young men dream and old men have nightmares. Young men hope and old men despair.

The next day I definitely noticed a change in the Egyptian camp. Early in the morning, tents had disappeared. More tents were being packed on horses and on camels. A part of the camp was effervescent with men and animals. Men were running around, riders galloped off. A part of the tents remained standing, however, still very many. I guessed about a thousand warriors, maybe less, still guarded Ascalon. The rest had departed. If this was a trap and the main troops had simply moved a little behind the hills, why had they taken their tents with them? To make the trap look even more alluring? I wondered.

Baudouin and a few Barons stood on the walls, as astonished as I, discussing the event. They shouted victory and wanted to sally from the gates. Baudouin came to me.

‘No sally,’ I said. ‘With the little army you have here you cannot win from Saladin’s main force and that force can be hidden behind the hills, waiting for us.’

‘Our men have seen Saladin’s army march north! The Kingdom is open! My guess is Saladin is forcing a thrust for Jerusalem!’

‘That may well be so. But we have to make sure. The only way to win of Saladin with our meagre forces is to surprise him; not the other way round. Knowledge about what he is doing is key to victory! If Saladin hears we are sallying, he will turn and destroy us by surprise. Enough eyes are still watching Ascalon. Even if we can return rapidly into Ascalon, what would we have gained? Never give battle without being sure you can have a gain!’

‘So you advise me to do nothing?’ Baudouin cried. He was very nervous. I did not blame him. He sat here, with five hundred knights, doing nothing but turn his fingers, while the Saracens could capture and destroy practically anything they wanted in the Kingdom of Jerusalem, including Jerusalem itself, for without defence.

I said, ‘no indeed. We have to act. But we do not sally! We have to think! We should leave the town and yet have the Saracens believe we are still inside. Perhaps we can get out by the beaches, or have ships bring us a little further and drop us on the shores north of Ascalon. It will take time, but the hills hide the view along the beach.

A hundred men or so, townsmen, can sally and when they are attacked, quickly return to Ascalon. That may lull the Amirs that have stayed into believing we are scared and not as many as they thought. While such a diversion is on, to mask the noise of a marching army, and to draw their attention away, our main army marches north along the shore!

Again, the key is to know what Saladin is doing. It must be Saladin that has marched off; he would not remain sitting here, at Ascalon, with a mere thousand warriors. If Saladin simply hides a little farther and waits for a sally, laid a trap, we will know it quickly. He will assault on our sallying party in force. So we have to send out everybody we can get, women and children disguised as warriors, too. If Saladin hides and attacks, our sallying men return quickly and also our main army on the beaches.

If Saladin doesn’t come, that means he is marching north. Then we withdraw the townsmen slowly and we continue to advance north with our knights. On our march, we must not be surprised, but surprise. So we need scouting parties. Many scouting parties. I want small groups of fast riders on good horses in a circle around the army, all the time. These men must seek out Saladin without his own troops seeing us. He must not be aware we are at his back. Then we can surprise him!’

‘We must not be in his back,’ Baudouin added. He was smarter even than I thought. ‘We must be in front of him! He does not expect us in front of him. He expects us here, at Ascalon, or at his back. I outmarched him to Ascalon. How can I be in his back when he moves to Jerusalem? No, I have to be in front of him!’

‘Fine,’ I replied. ‘So we still need to know where he is, at any instant of the day, day after day. Give me twenty young, eager knights. Tell them to obey me in all circumstances. I will teach them how to look out for troops, how to send messengers back. I will find Saladin for you – if Saladin had not remained here, that is. Then we surprise him!’

‘What would a surprise do us any good?’ Baudouin asked bitterly. ‘We have far too few knights to harm him. He will destroy us anyhow, surprise or no surprise.’

‘While he marches north he will be weakened because he will be divided,’ I told. ‘He has packhorses with him, his treasury of war, camels, donkeys, and so on. His army is large, but it is on the move, and on the move it may not remain concentrated; it may be drawn out in a long line, unorganised. He will be ravaging the region. He will have to disperse his troops to plunder. Why shouldn’t he? So we let him plunder and ravage for a while and when he believes he can do anything that pleases him in the Kingdom, when he is divided, then we attack him in a valley not too wide so that he cannot manoeuvre too much, all knights tightly riding together, and we smash his centre.’

I laughed dryly, ‘anyway, we will only have a centre! We have not enough men to have wings. Saladin doesn’t know that, however. If he thinks us still behind him, then he may believe he is attacked by the armies of Tripoli and Antioch. That may cause a panic! Not a panic in Saladin, for I am certain he is beyond panic, but his leaders may panic. The panic may paralyse Saladin’s army.’

‘I am not going to let him ravage my country!’

‘Oh yes, you are,’ I answered and hissed through my teeth. ‘If you attack him now, soon, you will lose everything you have. You will be defeated, and your men will flee. If you fall, Jerusalem falls, and Jaffa, Acre, Tyre, and more. Understand me well, for I am only going to say this once. Either you keep your head and let Saladin do whatever pleases him, even if that is cutting off a thousand heads and burning a hundred villages, but surprise him in the end and defeat him decisively, or you will lose everything that is of value to you. You choose!’

That calmed him. For a few moments he had the looks of a scared child. Then his head grew higher on his shoulders. ‘All right,’ he replied. ‘How the hell am I going to keep the Barons down? They will all want to attack rapidly.’

I laughed, ‘that is why you are King for. How are you going to keep your Barons from tearing Miriam to pieces if you cannot hold them here? Work on the Bishops first, and then have the Bishops excommunicate anybody that does not want to obey you. You are King! No one else!’

‘So true,’ Baudouin grinned, and we started to prepare like two sinful conspirators.

We discovered a small gate in the walls along the beaches of Ascalon. The door was just wide enough to let a horse pass. One by one our knights and footmen passed through that gate, making as little noise as possible. Even the True Cross passed, though the Bishops had to carry it horizontally. The King rode with that group.

At the same time a few of our knights and the Christian townsmen of Ascalon of any age, and even a few of the stoutest women, rode and ran out of the gates at the front of the town. I stood watching at the top of the tower nearest the Saracen camp. The Frankish cavalry that sallied rode slowly. The footmen ran and the youngest men and the women walked behind. Our sally was a long column; the Saracens could not know how long the column would be.

An alarm sounded very soon in the Saracen camp, and then a skirmish between our horse riders and the Saracen cavalry. I had told the knights to resist for quite a while, and to fight as if they were truly challenging the enemy forces. A few hundred Saracens were in the field, not more, and no other warriors darted from out of the hills. Yet, our men were outnumbered.

I had trumpet signs sounded to the townsmen – or should I say townswomen – to return immediately. A little later I called back the militia of Ascalon, and then our knights, but in such a fashion that the retreat more or less looked like a rout.

You have to say one thing about knights: once you give them an order and tell them they will be crucified if they don't follow the orders, they execute to perfection.

I was sure now that Saladin's main army was not in ambush near Ascalon. They would have crushed our sally and attacked the gates while people flowed back in. Baudouin's army, however small, could leave town.

I was among the last to pass the door at the beaches. The troop of knights and footmen marched north slowly at first, in the sand and over the rocks, so as not to throw up too much dust. I found Baudouin in the centre and told him I would ride out with my lookouts. Like before, with Baudouin's uncle, we circled around the army. I had twenty-four men in six groups of four: one group in front and back, two groups on either side. I had told the knights how to scout and what to look for, see but not be seen. Many of them didn't like this kind of making war, but I showed them the crucifix that hung around my neck.

We were now King Baudouin's eyes. My groups rode fast. We found out that the Saracen army of Egypt had left behind their convoy of pack-horses, camels and a small rear guard at al-'Arish. The enemy front guard had reached Ramla and burnt it down. We saw groups of Saracens and Egyptians led by Turks as far as Lydda. Saladin's main army marched to Jerusalem. That army would soon be at the fortress of Blanche-Garde, at Tell al-Safiya, more to the east of Ascalon than to its north. Jerusalem was east, so that was where Saladin was heading.

One of my groups that had scouted far to the south, found the corpses of the men sent by Jerusalem to succour the King at Ascalon. Saladin had intercepted them, killed most, made the others prisoners, then beheaded them all. I doubted Saladin had ordered that massacre, but it had been done. I surmised the Egyptian army was at Ibelin now.

King Baudouin's troops advanced more rapidly than Saladin's forces, still along the coast, only a little inside the lands. We knew at every moment where Saladin was and where Baudouin. My lookouts directed Baudouin's army away from Saladin's men, yet moving Baudouin in front. Saladin let large groups roam the countryside and ravage the land. We were able to move between them, unseen – or so I hoped.

I saw Saladin stop to pass the night that first day. I sent a knight back to Baudouin to tell him to march on to Ibelin, then to march east, and then also to stop and rest. The King would be somewhat to the north of Saladin, where the Franks would not be

expected, and where Saladin had no raiding parties. Saladin let his troops now mostly raid east and south of him.

I watched from the hills until the next morning and saw Saladin continue his journey east. Baudouin must be near, so I stopped but held two of my men to warn me if Saladin changed directions. I rode to Baudouin, told him what Saladin was doing, and we sped on in a forced march. The footmen suffered, but it was necessary. Near the Wadi al-Dahr, close to Tell al-Safiya, our army spotted the first troops of Saladin. Saladin's centre had to be a little further. The dried-out valley was narrow here, not wide enough for Saladin to deploy wings. I explained the situation to the Bishops that were close to the King and the True Cross. Baudouin decided to ride in a thundering chevauchée through the valley and swipe Saladin's men before him. The Barons knew from my lookouts that Ramla had been burnt. Baudouin of Ibelin, Lord of Ramla, asked the king for permission to lead the attack.

Baudouin of Ibelin and his brother Balian placed themselves at the head of the army. We had no front guard and no rear guard. We had a mere three hundred knights, but we had the True Cross in our midst, worn proudly by the courageous Bishop Auberg of Bethlehem. The gleaming gems of the Cross increased our determination. In the wadi we had the weight of three hundred heavily armoured destriers and the points of three hundred levelled lances before us, and we had the benefit of surprise.

We rode at savage speed through the valley, and crushed into Saladin's long column of riders. We flattened his first troops and were in no time at his centre. I rode with other Barons around the King. We exchanged worried looks, for we saw clearly how tired he was. He had tiny wounds of leprosy appearing on his neck. Yet, he rode as fast as we. He was the only to hold no spear.

Was it the speed with which we rolled on through the wadi that drew a cloud of sand with us, or did the True Cross perform a miracle? A sand storm followed us and overtook us as we smashed in the throng of our enemy's warriors. The storm threw sand in the eyes of the Saracens, so that they could not see us well until we were passing them and piercing them. Then we were lost in the sea of warriors of Saladin.

The Egyptian army of Saracens was completely surprised. They tried to regroup and also form a mass to match ours. A group of enemy riders, far on our left, Saladin's right flank, moved into the centre and positioned itself against a hill, but Baudouin and Balian of Ibelin had by then drilled through Saladin's core. Our knights pierced bodies with their lances, and then hacked with their heavy swords. Our armoured destriers crashed into Saracen Arabian palfreys, throwing enemy horses and riders to the red ground.

King Baudouin and his Barons struck into the battle with all their might. Baudouin also heaved his sword and held his reins with his stiff hand. He fought, but the Barons protected him and kept Saracen warriors at bay, away from him, as much as possible. Thus we cut into the Saracen army. We let death and destruction in our wake. The men of the enemy that were in our midst or behind us were entirely separated from their leaders, disoriented and unaware of how small the group was that had smashed them.

I parried a sword blow, slashed at right and at left, pushed my horse into a Saracen bowman, ducked under a quntariya spear and thrust my sword into a collarbone. This

was end November, but there was still much heat in the air inside the wadi. We sweated profusely but fought on. Two Egyptians, brandishing their swords high crashed into me but my horse held steady and I escaped one, then parried a cut from the other. Guillaume of Tibériade killed one of the men by putting his spear all through the man's mail.

I saw the fear in the eyes of the enemy that confronted me, and I regretted the killing, but I could give no pardon. We fought sword to sword, until the man broke off the engagement and tried to flee. He should not have fled for I wielded my sword for a cut through the rear of his neck. Blood sprouted over his horse and he slowly slumped in the saddle, and then fell from the animal. I rode on to challenge another enemy.

The battle was ferocious. We forced all our pent-up energy in those first moments, cutting down the entire front and centre of Saladin's army. The Saracens lacked that energy and the determination to stand. There should not have been a battle there and then. This was not of their choosing. I saw to left and right Saracen riders flee backwards. The impact of our assault had been devastating. Our tight ranks had engulfed the enemy. We rode on and left the Saracens behind us to our footmen. We fought on. Tiredness set in, but we fought on. Then we reached a field in which less riders and few footmen fought. Beyond that open space waited a few hundred splendid riders, heavily armed men, all dressed in yellow robes. These were the Mamluks of Saladin, Saladin's elite slave warriors, his personal guard of experienced, Turkish warriors. We saw a wall of gold before us and we stopped.

Many Frankish knights had broken through the mêlée behind us and joined us in the open space. We shouted victory then in our war cries, drunken from the blood, intoxicated with the excitement of the battle won, invincible in the exhilaration of the massive blow by which we had scattered into oblivion Saladin's main army. More and more knights emerged from the throng of fighting men behind. Baudouin of Ibelin made his horse prance once and then gave the order to charge on.

A dense rank of steel knights formed a broad hammer that clattered onto the anvil of gold, of Saladin's last guards. The fighting was worse then, for the Mamluks knew well how to resist such a blow. They stood and many a knight flew from his destrier, transpierced by a spear. These guards were trained as the best Frankish knights. The fight was even. We had almost as many men with us as the Sultan's guard had, however. Our eyes were wild with hatred and revenge. I fought many duels. I got wounded twice. My horse had an arrow point in its side, but it carried me on.

I saw Saladin. The visor of his silver helmet was open. He had no need to fear arrows, for our knights had no bows and our footmen were still behind, battling with his vanguard and core troops. I recognised his face, his regular, fine traits that were now only darkened by a neatly cut black, sophisticated beard. He wore a golden, embroidered surcoat of silk. Several Amirs, splendidly dressed like himself, probably all family, were with him.

With each hew of our swords the Frankish knights advanced and cut through Saladin's men. Saladin's horse strode backwards, slowly, proudly, dancing without turning, its head still directed at our knights. It clearly retreated however from the shock of the Frank knights. I fought somewhat to his left and might soon arrive at his back.

Suddenly, three Frankish knights charged on him with levelled lances. There were only two yellow-clad Saracen footmen wielding curved swords between Saladin and them. These would have been swept away by the heavy destriers of the knights. Saladin faced death. I could not let that happen.

I hit my spurs hard in the sides of my heavy horse, threw it sideways and, crushing over fighting warriors, I smashed into the storming Frankish knights, deviating their horses and lances to Saladin's right, into another throng of battling warriors. The knights cursed me, but they had no time to argue, for Saladin's guards assaulted them on that side. I stood for a few moments close, in front of Saladin. I lowered my bloodied sword, opened my visor and shouted in Arabic, 'Yusuf, Sultan Salah al-Din, save yourself! You have lost the ground!'

Saladin shouted in anger. There was surprise on his face when he saw who had jumped in the way of the knights. I saw his lips make 'Daniel? Daniel?', but in the clashing of steel and the shouts of the men around me I could not hear his words. His horse pranced and then two of his guards hacked at me and a spear struck my leg. I drew my horse aside, avoiding certain death. The spear cut open my leg. I turned my horse entirely, came at the footmen from the other side and cut at them in lethal slashes. I hit a man at the neck, opened a throat and then looked back at Saladin.

Saladin rode off, slowly. He retreated. I was engaged by more Saracen fighters. The sun was setting and it would very soon be dark. Saladin had to flee when he still could. He must have called off the battle, for I saw him turn and turn a little further, then ride away, in front of us, his yellow-dressed guards still protecting him from single Frankish knights that had come so far. He disappeared at the end of the wadi, around a curb in the river bed.

I held my horse then, all my force spent. Around me, the Egyptians threw down their weapons in submission. Many groups of enemy riders fled.

My leg hurt like hell. Blood oozed on the ground along my foot. I thought I was definitely getting too old for battles like these. I tore a piece of cloth from my surcoat and stopped the blood by tying the cloth around my leg. I pushed cloth into the wound. I cursed and hoped my wound would not fester. The last thing I needed here was a putrefying leg.

I rode back to the King, who had stayed way behind. I found him in the middle of the first group of Saladin's centre, destroying the last resistance of the enemy.

Baudouin waved his sword. 'We won,' he yelled, shouting and laughing at the same time. Balian of Ibelin, Robert de Boves and also Bishop Auberg rode to us, crying victory.

'We can stop the fighting,' Baudouin said. 'We won a victory. Tell the men to stop killing and regroup.'

The Barons rode away. I said to Baudouin, 'now is not the time to stop. It is good to regroup and give new orders. But you must not let the Saracens regroup! Otherwise Saladin will be in front of us tomorrow with as many men as we have seen today. Have the footmen finish off all of the enemy that remains in the wadi! They do not have to kill; they can make prisoners. The knights must continue to ride in large groups as long as they can see anything. They must eliminate the fleeing groups of Saracens. This is not the time to stop and shout victory before the work is done. You

must finish off this army and pursue all the fleeing men to wherever they ride! Do not allow Saladin to regroup. Destroy his army now!’

Baudouin looked at me somewhat puzzled, for I had again commanded a King what to do, but when his Barons returned he issued the order to continue the fight relentlessly and to pursue all fleeing enemy. Though close to exhaustion, he rode on, shouting orders everywhere to fight and to pursue. The battle raged on in the wadi throughout the night, as long as there was a shimmer of light to see in. The knights chased after isolated Saracen cavalry.

The King, some of his Barons and I, found an abandoned small farm below a hill beyond the wadi. We did not step from our horses; we fell from them. We slept a while in the open, leaning against the walls.

At the first light of dawn we stood and decided to pursue the remnants of Saladin’s army. The King remained with a large troop of footmen, a few knights, with Bishop Auberg and the True Cross. The farm became a rallying point, as more and men gathered. Baudouin sent all riders out again immediately, after the enemy.

I asked prisoners whereto Sultan Saladin had fled. The exhausted men pointed south. Hundreds of isolated Egyptian warriors were now caught by the Frankish knights. Warriors of both armies swarmed alone or in small groups over very long distances around the battlefield. Everywhere, the Franks took the Saracens and made prisoners of them.

Then the winter rains came. In the swamps of the Wadi al-Hasi, swelled by the water, Saladin’s warriors abandoned most of their armour and weapons. Our footmen picked them out and assembled them. They recovered enough panoplies to arm hundreds of men.

The torrential rains of the day soaked the wadis and new torrents flowed that had not existed the days before. Paths disappeared, as well as the traces of previous groups that wandered home. The Egyptian Saracens, left without guides, marching in isolated groups, lost their way in the hills of Judaea. We only had to wait for them at the exits of the valleys and make prisoners of them. Few resisted. Most relinquished further fighting, and docilely let us lead them off. Stray knights found Saladin’s baggage camp, pillaged by Bedu warriors.

Saladin drove his remaining men south relentlessly, and then west, but the roads to Egypt were blocked. He ventured into the Desert of Tih. We forced Saracen Syrians and Bedu to act as guides for us. We fought small troops of Egyptians that tried to reach their lands and we eliminated them. We never caught Sultan Saladin and his guards however, and I have to admit I found some satisfaction in that fact.

I pursued the Egyptians and Turks with a group of twenty riders, no knights among them. I had left my wounded Frankish destrier with the army, but one of my men brought me an Arabian thoroughbred captured on the battle field. We rode south. We encountered several groups of enemy runaways. We made no prisoners. When we had to fight, we killed. The haggard Saracens surrendered docilely, relieved even of the

end; we took their hauberks, helmets and other armour and large weapons such as spears and swords, and set them on the right way to Egypt, out of the desert. When they asked for it, we gave them water, took them to a village and gave them food, then menaced them and made them promise never to come back – for what such promises were worth. We indicated to them the direction of the coast, to the west and not due south, for the road into the desert would lead to death.

I followed the traces of a rather large troop of Egyptian cavalry. They did not bring us west, to Egypt and Cairo, to Bilbeis, but due south, deep into the Desert of Tih. We rode slowly in the intense heat, in a difficult terrain of sharp hills, deep gorges, rocky paths, and wadis of sinuous dried-out rivers that led to nowhere. The troop of Egyptians was easy to follow at first, for once every while we found gear that the warriors had thrown away: a helmet, a shield, a spear, a piece of plate armour. We also found a yellow surcoat, which made me believe we were on Saladin's heels. We encountered three groups of about five men each, dying of thirst and lost in the unforgiving land. These were Mamluk Turks indeed, men of the personal guard of the Sultan. We had two Bedu guides with us. I did not trust these men, but they led us in quest of some meagre treasure to be recuperated on dead and abandoned Egyptians. They were not of much use in the skirmishes, for their horses clattered with the hauberks and plates of silver they had taken from the dead men along the trails. But they knew the way in the desert. Two times I sent some of my men and the guides back north, out of Tih, with Egyptian prisoners. I refused to let men die in the desert and I refused to kill those that surrendered. Some of my men were angry at that, and relieved when I sent most of the ones that began to question my orders back with the guides. I learned nothing from the prisoners about the men we were chasing. In the end, I had only three sergeants with me, and still we advanced into the desert. My leg hurt much and I suspected the wound had started to fester. I nevertheless insisted to pursue the rests of the Saracen riders, as had all knights of Jerusalem, despite wounds. I wondered why I showed such zeal, why I stubbornly continued to ride south. After a few days also, I did not know anymore whether we still pursued our original group of Saracen warriors, or whether we followed the tracks of other riders who crossed this desert.

I was happy to ride into the desert, for it was winter season further north. At least here the desert sand and the dry air cauterised my wound to some extent, whereas the rains and humidity of Ascalon and Bethlehem would have made my pain sting worse. I could not hold out much longer however. After several days of riding south, riding along rocky and sandy hill after rocky and sandy hill, I decided to return. Sand storms had erased every trace of the Saracens I was pursuing. We found no new tracks after another day of riding.

At that point the fevers started. My leg wound throbbed and I feared my leg would putrefy, and that gangrene would set in soon, and then probably propagate to my entire leg. Despite the heat of the sun I experienced intense cold in my limbs at moments. I shook and trembled, barely able to hold the reins. I passed two nights in agony. I had no idea anymore to where I was leading my escort to, towards north or again southwards. I saw the sergeants watching me with worried eyes. They were concerned for me, but they could ride a lot more rapidly out of the desert without me, back north or west, not due south, ever deeper into the hell of the desert. I did not

know anymore where I was riding to, but refused to stop, and could not speak to the men.

Then, I began to distinguish the paths and the hills only in a haze. I could not make out anymore the pebbles and sharp little rocks that might hurt my horse. The animal advanced on its own will; I merely slumped on its back. I had lost all sense of direction. I closed my eyes every once and a while, leaving the animal to find a way by itself. I was too tired, too weak to think of death. I just rolled to and fro on my horse, my back supported by the high cantle of my saddle. Without that cantle I would have fallen in the sand.

I found myself on my own. My horse had strayed away from my companions. They had let me ride on, then turned somewhere and disappeared. The men had abandoned me to the desert before I became a burden to them or ordered them into oblivion. I rode alone for almost an entire day. I drank sparingly, despite my fever. I did not know where I was. I was too weak to look regularly at the sun and find out whether I was riding south or north or west or east. My horse took me somewhere, but I couldn't care less whereto.

I felt light-headed, uncaring, wonderfully at peace with myself and the land. Was that the effect of the fevers or of the desert? I was in a state I had heard Bedu shepherds in the region of Beit Jibrin talk of in front of their tents and campfires when they prepared me a hot drink. Bedus always had tales about the desert, as if the sea of sand and rocks fascinated them more than their fears. All Bedus had a tale or other about when they lost their way in the desert hills and wandered around, losing not only all sense of direction but also of all matters so dear to ordinary people of the fertile plains.

I delighted in this state, for since my very early youth I felt so at peace, so united with the azure heavens and the yellow-brown rocky hills that seemed to guide my horse through the wadis.

I looked up to the skies, which were of the deepest blue, not the slightest trace of a cloud forming in them.

There were vultures circling above my head. The black prey birds glided majestically in the air over the valley and the hills. The birds gradually changed colours and became larger. Some of them displayed now red wings and they were not vultures anymore but resembled red dragons, fiery monsters from which orange flames sprang at various places of their bodies. They did not descend to devour me however. They just hovered above me, flew straight above my head, sometimes very close so that I could hear the swoosh of their bodies as they glided past my ears with large, outspread wings that formed ample shadows on the sand. They flew like blazing coals, like torches in the skies. They had six wings, not two. Two wings covered their face, two wings covered their feet, and they flew with two wings emerging from their breasts.

Then the fiery creatures gave way to blue birds, equally large and terrible to watch. These seemed to be cold beasts. Despite the heat of the desert they brought a column of glacial draught over me that chilled me to the bones. My horse did not seem afraid. I drove the animal on to escape from the freezing air, but the poor beast could hardly step more rapidly than before. The blue dragons, blue flames erupting from their

feathered bodies, flew above me for a while with almost immobile wings. Then their wings flapped with a sound like of a whip, and they left me again in the frying heat.

The tiny black vultures returned. Had God sent me his Seraphim and Cherubim to punish me or to lead me on? Whereto was I led? The fiery birds had flown to the left and upwards, so I tugged on the reins to force my horse to advance in that vague direction, into a deep gorge, and up a low hill. The animal reluctantly agreed to step on.

My horse neighed loudly so that I tried to open my sun-burnt eyes painstakingly and look through the haze that was now permanently in my sight. I rubbed my eyes with my hand, which only brought more sand in them, irritating them and drawing out the last drops of salty water I had in my body. I stood with my horse on the top of a hill. High peaks surrounded a valley in front of me.

I had a mirage. The valley was a large bowl of a landscape, a place surrounded by sharp mountain hills, not extremely high, but forming narrow gorges. No wadi led in the bowl. In that place, quite below, stood a series of buildings surrounded by high, thick walls on all sides. Had I found a fortified desert village? The structure of the mud-smoothened walls was almost a perfect square. There was a church tower and bells hung in the tower, so I had arrived at a Christian place. Was it a real place or was I dreaming?

The sun was setting, so with the last power of my left leg I spurred my horse and the animal brought me down the hill. A bell sounded but I only remembered pushing my horse to the walls to touch them, and make sure they were real. I fell from my horse at the wall, when the animal stumbled and fell sideways.

I awoke on a bed in a small, white-painted room. Except for the bed there was no furniture in the room but for a small, rickety table on which stood a jug of water, a beaker, a piece of bread and a pungent cheese. I could reach the jug and drank eagerly from it, spilling the cold water over me. I tasted the cheese, goat-cheese, and found it delicious. I felt ravenous, so I stuffed the bread with my two hands in my mouth.

Then I remembered, and looked at my right leg. It was still there. The leg was bandaged, clean, no blood sipping through the white cloth. Some kind of greasy balm soothed the pain, but the balm also stung a little. I was grateful for the stinging however, for it reminded me that there was still life in my leg. I more sat than I was lying on the bed. I drew myself up more. My right leg did not hurt much, but it was stiff. I was not nude, but my mail and surcoat and everything else had disappeared. I had white robes on, two robes, one above the other. My head ached but I had to stand, to know whether I could.

I was trying to get up, with my naked feet on the ground, sitting on the border of the bed, when a door opened next to me, to the side I had not yet looked at. A man in black entered. He had a black beard that hid most of the flesh of his face, dark eyes, a strong, warty, sun-burnt nose, and he wore long black robes held at the waist by a piece of rope.

He hushed at me and made me lie down again. He spoke Greek. He said, 'I am glad you are better. The fevers have subsided. You will heal.'

I answered in Greek. I asked, ‘where am I?’

The man was only slightly surprised that I had replied in Greek. He said, ‘you are at the Monastery-of-the-Mount-Sinai-on-which-God-walked. Or, if you prefer, at the Monastery of Saint Catherine in the Desert. We found you one evening, lying at our walls, holding the reins of an Arabian price horse. The animal served you well; it did not draw you along on the rocks. It is at our stables, eating its belly full from our hay. I am afraid we will take some of your coins to pay for that hay! I brought you fruit. Try the grapes! They are sweet and will make you strong. I grow them myself. I am Brother John. I am the physician and the vine-grower of the monastery. Now eat, later we talk! And don’t move from that bed until I tell you!’

I ate and drank. I cried for more bread and the door opened and another man entered, then left, then came with more bread. I felt better.

Later, Brother John came to see me and he did so often the following days. He told me I had slept for four days, had talked in several languages during my sleep; I had had bouts of fever. He knew I came from Jerusalem and was a Frankish knight. I had only awakened when the fevers had left my body.

Brother John had treated my wound with herbs. He had cauterised my wound with a white-hot iron. I would live, he said, but I would have a nasty, very long scar on my leg. Miriam would not like that.

After two more days, he allowed me to walk around with a stick. A day later I could wander freely in the monastery and also in the garden.

Earlier on I had told Brother John he was crazy with his vine-growing tale. I had told no vines and no herbs grew in the desert. He had laughed then heartily, and told me he would show me his Garden of Eden. The garden indeed existed, fed by underground sources. It was a wondrous place, for although in the middle of the desert, it was a paradise of green plants of all sorts. Brother John proudly showed me his vines. I could tell him that at the place I was born we had grapes that tasted as musky as his, Muscat grapes. Brother John confirmed his grapes were Muscat too. He knew the name.

If the garden was a miracle, the entire abbey was a miracle. It was a Christian monastery that had survived in the middle of the desert and in the middle of Saracen Lands. When I met the Abbot, he told me the monastery had been built on orders of Saint Helena, the mother of the first Christian Roman Emperor Constantine the Great, the Helena that discovered the remains of the True Cross. It had been a Byzantine monastery, but few Byzantines came on pilgrimage to the site. The Abbot was an Archbishop, rather stubbornly independent of other Archbishops or Patriarchs.

The place had been preserved from bandits more by its isolation than by its high walls, which looked as if they had existed since always, so ancient were their stones and mud bricks. Maintaining those walls took much of the time of the monks. There were only very small doors in the walls, and one had to stoop through long, narrow corridors that could be easily defended, to enter in the abbey.

The Muslims had preserved the monastery because of the respect all peoples had for holy places. Not only held this monastery the relics of Saint Catherine, which drew pilgrims occasionally, but it was also the site where grew the Holy Burning Bush into which Moses had seen God. There was a chapel now around that spot, and the monks

showed me the altar and the stones of the rock on which God had spoken to Moses and given him the Ten Commandments. Moses was also a Prophet venerated by the Muslims, so the site was also more or less sacred to Islam. Inside a courtyard, against a wall, the monks still tended a small bush, a little tree that was still taller than I but not by much, that grew against the stones and that the monks told was the only bush of that kind that existed in the entire world, and that was the remnant of the very bush that God had made to glow.

I healed rapidly in the peace and calm of the desert monastery. I regained my strength. I realise now I was in the euphoric state of a sick man who had escaped death by miracle and looked at the world with new-born, astonished eyes and spirit. I was happy at that monastery. I felt close to nature, to the elements and to God. The monks showed me very ancient pictures of the Saints, of Saint Catherine, of the Virgin Mary, and of Christ. Some of the icons were set in golden frames and so darkened from the candle smoke of centuries that the colours could hardly be discerned. I attended masses, which were held in a ritual that was entirely different from our Latin ceremonies. The chants were mystic, elevated the soul. I was allowed to enter the library and discovered there more books than at Cluny and Saint Denis together. I also left the monastery to walk around its walls. I walked a little off, to look at the incredible landscape of hills and rocky grounds.

I wondered by what miracle I had come to this place. God had brought me to this place to teach me, show me what the happiness of mind could be at a place that was closer to Him than any other on earth, and give me the occasion to reflect on my life. I laughed at those thoughts, for my reason told me that I had merely travelled through the desert, strayed off and arrived at the place by sheer chance or by the instinct of my horse to search for water.

Another side of me said that no, I had not happened to arrive here by chance. Angels had guided me. I remembered the fiery red and blue angels that had guided me in my fevers, and my vision of Puthaha in which a voice had said to lead his people out. Moses had passed here on his Exodus from Egypt and talked to God. Moses had not been a warrior. He had been a priest, a leader of men, a man who showed the way. Was I not more a leader than a warrior-knight?

God had finally showed me the futility of my world, the futility of battles and pursuits, of skirmishes, wars and sieges, in view of the eternity of the peace and of the nature of places like this. For what meagre earnings were men fighting to the north? To gain what? To suffer misery, blood, wounds, and win treasures that would be captured by somebody else the day after. All a man needed was here, in this monastery: a little food, warmth, protection, the laughter of friends, the vicinity of God and the intimacy with His grand nature that was elevating. The monastery was a place of spirituality in its purest form. Was this in fact what I had been looking for in my life?

I could stay here and talk to God each day. I was sure I could nowhere better find Him, try to understand Him here, accompanied by the many authors of the books that had been gathered in the library. I remained for many days at the monastery, thinking about my life and about God's Creation, reading ancient books.

The thoughts came clear to me in the desert. I spoke to the Abbot and to Brother John. The first helped with his erudition, the other with his wisdom. I thought about God, about Christ, about the prophet Mohammed, about the wars of Jerusalem. I thought

much about Jerusalem. I thought about the evil in the battles, the horrors of defeat and the hypocrisy, yet elations, of victory. I began to understand who I was and why the world was as it was.

I remained many weeks at the monastery, but I knew I would have to go. I was no monk. I was a knight. I had a wife and children and the longer I stayed there, despite the peace, the more I longed to see their faces and feel the skin of Miriam against mine. Miriam might despair and believe me dead.

I talked to the Abbot of the monastery. I told him of my intention to leave. He offered me a guide to where I would find a path that would lead me first to the coast westwards, and then when I travelled north and west I would reach the region of Gaza. I accepted the guide gladly. My horse had been well cared for. I said thanks and farewell.

My guide rode a small donkey, so we advanced slowly. We travelled from the monastery through many deep gorges, mountains and hills of sand. We rode for two days. Then the man said he had to return to the abbey, but he showed me a path I had to follow and that would bring me out of the desert. I rode west, then north, with enough water and bread in a pack on my horse. I travelled for six days. I avoided stray troops of Saracen warriors that scouted along the frontier with Egypt. Then, I was at the coast of the Sea and I rode north to Gaza and Ascalon.

Chapter Seven. Jerusalem 1178-1187

The mass of the Frankish army had returned to Ascalon. It had defeated totally the rest of the Saracen army that waited before the town, at the siege, the troops that were not aware yet of Saladin's defeat in the north.

Then the King marched back to Jerusalem.

A real triumph waited at Jerusalem for the young Leper King. The town feasted. Flower petals were thrown under the hooves of King Baudouin's horse. Never had the Franks won a finer victory than before the Tell al-Safiya in the Wadi al-Dahr, at the place the Franks call Montgisard. And yet, there were so few of us at that battle! We had not the full Army of Jerusalem, and not the army of Antioch and Tripoli with us. Baudouin, seventeen years old, had defeated the best warrior of Egypt and Syria, the great Sultan Saladin, at the end of that month of November and the beginning of December of 1177.

I was still in the Desert of Tih when the King entered Jerusalem. I often saw young Baudouin in the spring of 1178 however.

Day after day his illness advanced and claimed more of his body. At the end of the year it started to eat at his face. He was weaker then, tired rapidly. All who knew him well saw he would not live long.

I did not return to Beit Jibrin, to the fortress of Gibelin. At the express wish of King Baudouin IV, the Hospitaller Knights dispensed me from duty. I hardly ever put on the surcoat of the Hospitallers after that time, for I was at the Court of the King. Baudouin talked almost daily with me, but I did not accompany him on his campaigns. I was past sixty years of age and I limped. I could still ride a horse, but fighting on foot would have been difficult. I envied the men of over seventy who still rode off with the army.

Why did I not return to France then? Why did I stay at Jerusalem? The land was of course the home of Miriam and of our children, but if I had insisted, they would have followed me. Life in Provins for instance could have been as agreeable to them as at Jerusalem. Outremer continued to fascinate me, however. There was much that would not let me depart from these lands. I was still expecting to learn a truth, to solve the enigma of my life, the puzzle of the universe, and Jerusalem seemed the only place to find out about all that. Nowhere than at Jerusalem were the passions so open, the ambitions so great, the developments in the struggling peoples so rapid and so intense. One lived life at speed in Jerusalem.

Since Puthaha I had no premonitions, no visions anymore. I guessed with old age reason overtook the intuition and instincts, and blunted our abilities to make contact with the other world. Reason took possession of my mind with old age. I expected some kind of an ending, unknowing what the nature of that end could be. Would I find something before my death? I despaired, starting to wonder whether life and the universe had a sense after all. Yet, I also thought of the answers I had discovered at the monastery in the desert.

I despaired of, but was fascinated by the incessant minor battles, raids, campaigns, expeditions, which the Franks and the Saracen Syrians continued to organise against each other. The raids seemed pretty useless to me, mere pinpricks, by which each party gauged the weakness or strength of the other, but in which no party ever won much decisive advantage. It seemed as if a gigantic game of chess was being played on the board of Outremer and Syria, and at one place of the board sat Baudouin and I, on the other Saladin. The chess game left misery and pain in its wake, misery to peasants and merchants. Many warriors on both sides were wounded, maimed, made unable to work or trade. Beggars and prostitutes filled the streets of the towns of the Kingdom. For a wounded warrior it was better to be killed outright than to be saved, but a remarkably high number of wounded men survived the ordeals. The knights had some means. The Orders protected their members and provided for them to some extent. The poorer foot-warriors were left to their fate. Armed gangs of former army men terrorised the country and sometimes even entered towns to raid quarters.

The misery in the Kingdom was widespread and deeply rooted. Few knights from our homelands, France and Germany and Italy, replenished the men that were killed. The number of knights in the Kingdom declined, but it took an old man like I to remark the change. I was sure by then that the Franks would slowly disappear out of Outremer. We needed another Crusade of Christian people that wanted to settle in Outremer, but Outremer was dangerous, and every pilgrim that returned home told of course how hard life was in our lands and how risky. Yet, now as before, the King and Counts did not seem to notice. There was more. The community of Franks in Outremer and even more so in Jerusalem, began to resemble the putrefying wounds that I knew on Baudouin's body.

I could convince Miriam that if she wanted to return to Jerusalem, she could do so. She was hard to convince, but Jerusalem was her home. As she heard how many times I had spoken to the King, and how the King had proposed for her to care for him, she relented. In the middle of that year, we took the children and came back to our house in the town.

I say children, but our Jacob and Sarah were grown-up by then. They were both just over twenty years. Rabbi Isaac Ben Asher drew strange looks from Sarah. Isaac made cow eyes at Sarah. He jumped up and stumbled over chairs and tables each time Sarah entered the room. He had not married until then, but Miriam and I supposed he would not stay single for much longer. Young Jacob, Young no longer, had become a keen merchant. He worked at Tyre and knew how to trade with the Genoese, Pisan and Venetian merchants. He took over my work with our agents in the port towns of the Kingdom and I admit gladly that he did much better at what I should have done but had never had a real mind to. He had inherited the talents of his namesake grandfather. From that time on, Jacob was not often at Jerusalem anymore. He travelled between Tyre, Sidon, Acre, Beirut and Saint-Siméon, and seemed to like it. We also worked with merchants of Damascus, mostly with Nasr ibn Qawam, a very rich Saracen, who sent caravans from Damascus to Acre to sell his goods there. I ensured the protection of his caravans. I also bought his spices and cloth and silk and jewels and many other items, and transported them to Christendom in Genoese ships. Jacob organised the buying and selling and we grew richer by the month. My money chests in Jerusalem filled up again. I regularly brought more money and stones to Tyr.

In April of 1178 I told Baudouin that Miriam was back at Jerusalem. The King sent her an escort of four guards who wore surcoats of his colours and his badges. My now sweet, old woman walked proudly between the huge guards to the palace. The whole street of David came to look at what happened.

Miriam met the King. From then on, Miriam would be at least once a week privately with the King. She dressed his wounds and helped him bear the illness. But she told me there was no hope for Baudouin. The illness continued to usurp of his body. She spoke much to the King and he seemed to find some comfort in her care.

I could not but recall then the vision I had had many years ago, in which I had seen rotting pestilence in Jerusalem, and seen Jerusalem destroyed by that pest. When would that arrive, for Jerusalem was at peace after the battle of Tell al-Safiya. What did my vision mean? I fretted about what I could do, how to protect my family from a disaster that might strike Jerusalem, and I wondered more and more whether coming back to the town had not been a mistake.

As it was, the Kingdom did not rot only with young King Baudouin IV. It rotted more after he had died, but that was still in the future.

There were still skirmishes going on at every frontier of Outremer. King Baudouin continued to lead campaigns himself. He made almost the same mistake as so many years ago Renaud de Châtillon had made. He stole cattle in the forests of Baniyas, dispersed his men, and he was caught off-guard by a group of the vanguard of Saladin's troops, men led by Farrukhshah, the nephew of Saladin. Baudouin rode with Onfroi de Toron and with only a few men when the Saracens ambushed him. The old Connétable saved the King, but he received an arrow in his face that cut through his nose and entered his mouth, came out at his chin. Another arrow pierced his foot, a third broke his knee. Other Barons got wounded as badly. Onfroi de Toron, my true friend, died a little later, at the end of April of 1179.

In May of 1179 Sultan Saladin attacked the newly erected Frank fortress at the Ford of Jacob. The fortress held well and Saladin had to droop off. But he remained with his forces near Baniyas afterwards, and launched raids into the coastal lands of Galilee. Saladin's Amirs were fine warriors. Thus, Bohemond III of Antioch came to face Saladin's nephew Taqi al-Din Omar, while Saladin's cousin Nasir al-Din Muhammed ibn Shirkuh fought around Homs against Count Raymond III of Tripoli. Saladin's campaigns into Galilee were led by Farrukhshah, another of his nephews. The Aiyubids were fierce warriors. Saladin's brother al-'Adil was governor of Egypt and regularly supported the Sultan with troops.

King Baudouin had to make a move on the chessboard, and we discussed how and where to prick. He assembled his army and marched rapidly, straight for Saladin. I had told him that speed and surprise were adamant if he wanted to accomplish something. Baudouin had also organised his scouting parties well. He surprised Farrukhshah at Marj 'Ayuir, defeated him and pursued the rest of his troops to Baniyas.

But then he made a mistake he could have avoided. His troops were dispersed. I had told him never to disperse. What happened, though, was more the fault of his Barons

than of him. He was gathering the men of Raymond III and the knights of the Templars when Saladin spotted these first. Saladin had learned to be well prepared for surprises. The Sultan attacked Raymond and the Templars and blew them to cinders. The fleeing Franks got lost in the mountains and in the wadis. The Saracen cavalry pursued them relentlessly, just like we had done after Montgisard, and killed large numbers, making prisoners of many others. Eude de Saint-Amand, the Grand-Master of the Templars was made a prisoner, and so were Baudouin of Ibelin and Hugue de Tibériade, valiant men with whom I had fought at Tell al-Safiya, at Montgisard. Then, Saladin turned against the King. Baudouin received help, however.

That year, Count Henri II of the Champagne came on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Several French Barons accompanied him: Count Pierre de Courtenay, Count Henri de Grandpré, Bishop Philippe de Beauvais, and others. These men arrived at the time of Baudouin's raid in Galilee and they sped to help Baudouin, but before they could join the King's group, Saladin attacked the castle of the Ford of Jacob and captured it. Many hundreds of Franks died in that siege, killed by sword or spear, burnt in the fire that consumed the place, shot by arrows, or decapitated by Saladin's revenge. There were so many rotting bodies in the ruins of the fortress that a pestilence broke out in Saladin's army, which cost him many men. Saladin destroyed the fortress entirely. An Egyptian fleet attacked Acre also at that time, burning many Christian ships and throwing a cloud of arrows on the city, which killed many townsmen.

King Baudouin IV sued for peace to Saladin, and Saladin accepted that peace in 1180. The peace was however only agreed for the Kingdom of Jerusalem. Saladin continued to harass the County of Tripoli, as well as the Principality of Antioch, in many incursions of cavalry.

Raymond III of Tripoli sued for peace. By then, Saladin had his hands full with quarrels with the Seljûqid Sultan of Qoniya, 'Izz al-Din Qilij Arslan II, and with the succession of the lands of Aleppo and Mosul, whose two rulers had come to die. Until the end of 1181, Saladin had to hold his armies at his far northern frontiers and was otherwise engaged than to launch expeditions against the Franks.

Miriam tried to heal Baudouin of his leprosy. She could still do not much more than relieve somewhat the results of his lesions. She washed his wounds, applied soothing balms and bandaged him where she could. Baudouin did not suffer, for in all the places reached by the illness, he did not feel much. The potions his doctors administered him made him sicklier than he should have been, so Miriam's efforts were often directed at countering these ails. Baudouin sent many of the doctors away and preferred the simpler methods of Miriam. Miriam saw Baudouin's leprosy advance to his entire body, lately also to his face. Baudouin showed himself in public only hidden by dark veils and he appeared less and less to other people.

It was a sad moment when he told me he would have no children. Until then he had not worried about that eventuality; now he accepted that as a fact, and it worried him much. He had to marry his sister to a suitable heir. There had been rumours about a possible marriage between Baudouin of Ibelin and Sibylle, but Sibylle was bored with the rough-cut warrior, and Baudouin had been absent for several months as a captive to Saladin, so had not been able to charm her. Baudouin of Ibelin later told me Sibylle had promised to marry him, however. But when Baudouin of Ibelin returned from

captivity, having promised an outrageous ransom to Saladin, Sibylle had fallen in love with someone else. The danger for Baudouin of Ibelin had come from his own family. There was a knight at Jerusalem, one Amaury de Lusignan, who had married Échive of Ibelin and who was thus the brother-in-law of Baudouin of Ibelin. Amaury was at the Court while Baudouin of Ibelin was in captivity. Amaury told Sibylle many fine stories in the most lauding phrases of a brother he had in France. Sibylle fell in love with Amaury's brother before she had even laid eyes on the man. The man was Guy de Lusignan and when he arrived at Jaffa, a consuming passion enflamed Sibylle. King Baudouin was pleased that his sister had found a fine suitor, and he was glad to have a new French knight among his Barons. Baudouin married his sister Sibylle to Guy de Lusignan, and he gave him the Counties of Jaffa and Ascalon in dowry.

I met Guy de Lusignan at court. There was an immediate enmity between us, for he envied my presence near the King. Sir Guy was the youngest son of his family, so he had no money and no claim on lands. He was a fine young man however, charming and witty, pleasing to women, liking feasts, frivolities and enchanting compliments. There was nothing to arouse my antipathy for him at first sight, but I didn't like him. When we talked with the King I found him weak and indecisive, and yet impulsive, naïve, vain and ambitious for the wrong reasons. He displayed no authority, no natural leadership, no charisma with men, and the nobility of Outremer took an instant disliking of him, considering him an undesirable outlander.

The Barons of Outremer had fought many times together, with me and with Baudouin of Ibelin. They were dedicated by comradeship to Baudouin. They knew Baudouin's courage, honesty and stature. Guy de Lusignan came from France, not from Outremer, had abused of his good looks to seduce a woman and thus arrive to prominence. Being able to charm a light-headed and fickle woman like Sibylle was not a fine enough quality to lead a kingdom.

Baudouin IV's other sister, Isabella, fell in love with Onfroi IV de Toron, the grandson of my friend Onfroi II. The mother of Onfroi IV was Etienne de Milly, who had remarried in 1177 Renaud de Châtillon. Onfroi IV was not made of the steel of Onfroi II. He was vain, and weak, not unlike Guy de Lusignan. Onfroi IV was a plaything in the hands of Renaud de Châtillon.

The power behind Onfroi IV was Renaud de Châtillon, now through Etienne the master of the region of the Trans-Jordan, and Lord of the Castle of Kérak. The lands of the Trans-Jordan were crucial for the trade between Egypt and Damascus. Renaud's supremacy there would mean trouble sooner or later.

These two marriages were bad signs for the succession of the Leper King.

There was worse. It was thus with knights. When they could not make war to a common enemy, they made war amongst each other. And when they could not make war they wallowed in debauchery. There was not just a pestilence in that small dimmed room of the palace of Jerusalem where the Leper King lay. The pestilence emanated from that room like a dark cloud over the Kingdom and reached the farthest corners of the land. The tragedy was that indeed the rot began in that room and that the man from whom it originated, though a noble and wise man, could not control its progression. It was as if the room and the palace were not inside the walls of Jerusalem but stood at the Hill of Evil Counsel – but the evil counsel in these affairs

was not mine. The rot was not only with King Baudouin, with Guy de Lusignan, Onfroi IV and Renaud de Châtillon, and it consumed other Frankish knights from within.

Prince Bohemond III of Antioch abandoned his wife Theodora Comnena, and even repudiated her after the death of Emperor Manuel Comnenus in September of 1180. He lived with a harlot then, also called Sibylle, the sister-in-law of the Lord of Burzey, a fief to the east of Laodicée, north of Apamea on the eastern side of the Orontes River.

Patriarch Aymeri de Limoges, Archbishop of Antioch, disagreed with Bohemond's dissolute private life and I couldn't blame him. Aymeri expressed his disgust, then hid in his castle of Qusair, just south of Antioch. Bohemond even set siege to his castle! Aymeri fled to Marqab, where one of the principal Barons of Antioch, Renaud II of Marqab, gave him shelter and protected him. Aymeri brought the Principality of Antioch under the Interdict of the Church. Antioch was divided within. Bohemond was also in open revolt to Jerusalem because of this affair. Moreover, he quarrelled with Roupen III, the Armenian Prince of Cilicia and warred against him.

The rot was also in the Latin Church of Jerusalem. Heraclius, the Patriarch of Jerusalem, had been a simple clerk of the Géraudan. He was a very handsome and charming man, who had much success with women. He was elected as new Patriarch in October of 1180 by the influence at Court of Agnes de Courtenay, the mother of the King, whom he had charmed with his polite manners and good looks. He knew more of women than of ecclesiastic matters.

Heraclius had a lover, the wife of a mercer of Nablus. She was called Paque de Riveri and she even had a child by the Patriarch.

Guillaume, the Archbishop of Tyre, protested against this election. Heraclius excommunicated Guillaume in April of 1181. Guillaume travelled to Rome to appeal against the appointment. Heraclius had the Archbishop followed until Rome however, and Guillaume, the once loyal teacher of King Baudouin, was poisoned in the Papal City.

The Patriarch was a scandal in Jerusalem, the incessant subject of obscene jokes, but the jokes sounded bitter in my ears.

King Baudouin was so much subdued by his sickness that he was most of the time unable to govern the Kingdom and unable to govern his Barons. The Court of Jerusalem was more or less taken over by his mother, Agnes de Courtenay, and by her brother Jocelin III de Courtenay, the Sénéchal, and Count of the now extinct Frankish County of Edessa. Around them fluttered a group of ambitious and unscrupulous Barons, devoted to their cause.

The only decent power in Outremer was Count Raymond III of Tripoli. So, of course, all the malicious forces in the Kingdom turned against Raymond. The Courtenay clan feared that Raymond would be appointed Regent. They even refused him to pass the frontiers of Jerusalem and come to the Royal Court. Baudouin's health declined constantly.

I prepared to draw Miriam out of Jerusalem, for once more I feared for her life the instant Baudouin died. She might well be accused of witchcraft anew. Miriam refused to leave the town now, for she felt Baudouin needed her.

And still the truce with Saladin held. The man who set the wars in motion again was of course Renaud de Châtillon.

By his marriage, de Châtillon was Lord of the Trans-Jordan lands, of the fortress of the Krak of Moab, of Montréal or Shawbak, of Petrea and of a series of smaller fortified places. These castles controlled the roads between Egypt and Damascus and also the roads from Damascus to Mecca, the Hajj routes. In the summer of 1181, Renaud de Châtillon set his own small army on the march for a raid against the Oasis of Taima, halfway between the Trans-Jordan and Medina, very near the Hajj route. Sultan Saladin reacted immediately by having his nephew Farrukhshah invade the Trans-Jordan. Nevertheless, Renaud de Châtillon had the time to pillage a very rich caravan that travelled peacefully from Damascus to Mecca.

King Baudouin, who came rarely out of his bed those days, sent me with a delegation of Templars and Hospitallers to accuse Renaud of having broken the truce with Saladin. Renaud laughed in our face. There was no question to provide for restitution of the stolen goods to Saladin. He practically chased us from his lands, mocking the legal feudal power that the King nevertheless had over him.

King Baudouin could only write to the Sultan stating that he had tried to discipline Renaud de Châtillon but had failed in the effort. He should have assembled his armies and chastised Renaud, but he was too sick and too surrounded by Barons favourable to Renaud to take such action. At Jerusalem, the older knights knew what that answer meant: the end of the truce with Sultan Saladin.

In May of 1182, Saladin was in Egypt. He returned to Damascus by travelling along the Desert of Tih, to Aila, at the end of the Gulf of 'Aqaba. Baudouin IV heard of the march, felt threatened, and invited a meeting of his Barons to be held at his palace. This time, Count Raymond of Tripoli was present.

The Council of Barons decided to block the way to Damascus for Saladin's troops. Raymond did not agree with that decision, and neither did I. But the fractions of the Courtenay family, led by Renaud de Châtillon, controlled the votes.

Saladin escaped the roaming Frankish troops by riding further to the east, along the road of the Hajj, and he even ravaged briefly the region of Shawbak.

The King sent the entire army of Jerusalem to the Trans-Jordan. Farrukhshah therefore invaded Galilee, where no Frank troops were left to defend it. He pillaged the land and then attacked the region east of the Lake of Tibériade and he captured the fortress of Habis Jaldak. He returned to Damascus with a thousand prisoners and twenty thousand heads of cattle.

When Saladin finally arrived at Damascus, in June of 1182, he moved a considerable army to a place south of Semakh, north of Lake Tibériade. Saladin was well entrenched in a triangle formed by the Lake of Tibériade, the Jordan River and the Yarmuk River. He sent Farrukhshah to ravage the lands south of him, to attract the Frank army. He also threatened the castle of Belvoir. Saladin had assembled more than ten thousand men. The army of Jerusalem could bring less than a thousand knights in the field. Nevertheless, the Franks attacked and fought hard. The battle ended indecisively. The Franks withdrew and Saladin returned his troops to Damascus.

In August of 1182 Saladin assembled his army once more, south of the Beqa, and he attacked Beirut. His brother, the governor of Egypt, sent thirty galleys to assault Beirut by sea. Al-‘Adil also attacked the coastal lands of Daron, Gaza and Ascalon, to create a diversion. Beirut was besieged by land and by sea. In capturing Beirut, Saladin could cut Outremer in two. Saladin launched attack after attack against the town. The army of King Baudouin approached rapidly however, having let the garrisons of Gaza and Ascalon defend themselves alone. The King remembered the first rule of the chess board: not to disperse your forces. When Baudouin’s army arrived from Tyre, Saladin once more avoided a direct confrontation with the True Cross in a battle. He withdrew to Damascus.

From the autumn of 1182 on, Saladin was occupied again at his northern frontier. He fought skirmishes against Aleppo and Mosul, still ruled by Nur al-Din’s offspring, the Atabegs of the Zengid dynasty. Saladin laid siege to Mosul.

King Baudouin IV, knowing Saladin’s army at Mosul, raided the Hauran as well as the region south of Damascus. I was not aware of pacts between the Zengids and Jerusalem, but these raids of Baudouin IV could only have meant that the Atabegs of Aleppo and Mosul had asked Baudouin to attack Saladin’s lands to relieve their own. The diversion worked, for Saladin stopped the siege of Mosul and moved south. Saladin marched no further than Aleppo however, to which he laid siege in May of 1183. ‘Imad al-Din ibn Zengi II of Aleppo lost his mind. He proposed to keep a few places and a considerable fortune to surrender his town to Saladin. In June of 1183, Saladin could call the wealthy city of Aleppo his. End June, Harim fell to him. The Principality of Aleppo was now entirely of Saladin. In August of 1183, he was back at Damascus.

King Baudouin IV was certain Saladin would attack with all his forces from out of Damascus. He assembled all the knights of Outremer in Galilee, including Bohemond III of Antioch and Raymond III of Tripoli. Baudouin accompanied the army of Jerusalem to Nazareth. He could not walk or stand anymore, but he wanted to be with the army. He was almost completely blind. His limbs, arms and legs, putrefied so that he could not use them anymore. He was brought in a litter. And yet, he was with the army. That was a good thing, for since Montgisard Saladin feared him.

At Nazareth, Baudouin was at the end of his forces. He abandoned the Regency over the Kingdom to Guy de Lusignan, keeping for himself only the town of Jerusalem and a personal income of ten thousand Bezants. He returned to the palace.

In the autumn of 1183, Saladin indeed raided Galilee. Guy de Lusignan advanced to him with the army of Jerusalem. The two armies remained for several days gauging each other. The Franks did not dare to give battle to the Saracens because they felt their army was too small for Saladin’s mass of men. The Saracens encircled the Franks at their ease. The Franks did not suffer from thirst, for they were at the Sources of ‘Ain Jalud and ‘Ain Taba’un, but they had nothing to eat.

The Franks found out that the lakes of the Sources were full of fish. They ate the fish and survived. The Franks were too well entrenched for Saladin. He could not manoeuvre with his numerous men and he could not starve the Franks out of their positions. He marched off, hoping the Franks would follow him, but the Franks fled to Nazareth, refusing all engagement of arms. The knights of Jerusalem were saved.

The decision of avoiding a major battle that could have meant the destruction of the army of Jerusalem was inspired by Count Raymond III of Tripoli. The other Barons of Outremer had followed his advice.

The knights of Outremer had such a disgust of the fact that King Baudouin had relented power to Guy de Lusignan that they had refused to attack Saladin's army. Of course, Guy de Lusignan, Renaud de Châtillon, Jocelin de Courtenay, Onfroi de Toron and their client knights called Raymond a coward afterwards. But every knight of the Kingdom blamed Guy de Lusignan for having brought the army in a situation that could have been the end of Frankish power in Outremer.

At that time, King Baudouin IV was at Tyre. The air was purer at Tyre, refreshing from the sea winds, as Miriam had told him.

The King deposed Guy de Lusignan from the Regency. Bohemond of Antioch, Raymond of Tripoli, Renaud of Sidon, Baudouin and Balian of Ibelin and me, advised the King to that drastic decision that was so dishonourable to his brother-in-law. We made sure then that the son that Princess Sibylle had had with her first husband, Guillaume de Montferrat, would be proclaimed King. This happened in November of 1183. That son was only a boy of five years old, but he was declared King as Baudouin V, together with Baudouin IV, and heir to the throne. We had thus barred the route to Guy de Lusignan to ever become King. We hoped now that Raymond III of Tripoli could hold the Regency of the Kingdom until the majority of Baudouin V.

Renaud de Châtillon drew once again the hatred of the Saracens to him. He built ships that same year, and transported them in detached pieces on camels close to Aila on the Gulf of 'Aqaba. He blockaded Aila and attacked caravans that travelled along the eastern coast of the Red Sea to Mecca and Medina. He threatened the Hajj routes. He even ravaged the coasts of the Red Sea, not far from Mecca.

Touching Mecca and Medina was the worst insult one could inflict on all Muslims, and it was a personal insult to Sultan Saladin. Saladin's brother, the Egyptian Malik al-'Adil rapidly brought a great fleet to the Red Sea and this fleet destroyed in February of 1183 the small pirate Frankish fleet of Renaud de Châtillon.

At the end of November of 1183 therefore, Saladin and al-'Adil wanted to teach a lesson to Renaud de Châtillon.

They laid siege to the Krak of Moab, the fortress the Franks called Pierre du Désert. Renaud de Châtillon refused to accept into the fortress the people of the small town so that they were massacred by the Saracens.

Saladin had chosen his time well, for Renaud de Châtillon was feasting the marriage of his son-in-law Onfroi IV de Toron. Etiennette de Milly, Renaud's wife, had been married before to Onfroi III de Toron and had this son Onfroi IV with him. Onfroi IV had married Isabella, the other sister of King Baudouin IV, and Renaud had wanted to feast the wedding in a grand way. Saladin installed his mangonels to add his gifts to the feast.

King Baudouin IV reacted with his last forces. He gave the order to assemble his army. He appointed Raymond III of Tripoli to lead that army, for he was unable to do so himself. Yet, he accompanied the troops. The arrival of the army of Jerusalem was enough for Saladin to return home, and Baudouin IV was brought in great triumph, lying on a litter, inside the Krak.

The Krak of Moab remained a thorn in Saladin's flesh however, and a danger for the Hajj routes and the caravans of Damascus. In the middle of August of the next year, 1184, Saladin brought his army again to the Krak of Moab. This time he had fourteen mangonels with him. Again the army of Jerusalem arrived. Saladin burned his mangonels and confronted the Franks. He desired a battle this time, but Raymond III refused him the honour. Raymond could lead his troops plus his provisions to the Krak. Saladin withdrew his army, not without having first ravaged the environs.

Meanwhile, Guy de Lusignan fetched his wife Sibylle at Jerusalem, where she could be in the influence sphere of her brother, and brought her to Ascalon. When King Baudouin returned to his town, he summoned Guy de Lusignan to justify himself for his actions at 'Ain Jalud. The former Regent refused. Baudouin had his knights bring him in his litter to Ascalon. De Lusignan refused to open his gates. Baudouin moved to Jaffa, which surrendered to him immediately. Baudouin withdrew Jaffa from Guy de Lusignan and placed it under the orders of a royal Bailiff. Guy de Lusignan was furious because he had only Ascalon left. He devastated the country around Ascalon and massacred the nomad Bedu tribes that used the region to pass through with their herds.

King Baudouin was even more outraged by those abominable acts, which threw the discredit on all Frankish rule. He reiterated his will to have Raymond III of Tripoli as new Regent of the Kingdom. A clique of Barons still opposed this, although they also asked Baudouin to appoint someone else than Guy de Lusignan.

Finally, an agreement was found by which Raymond III proposed that the guardianship of Baudouin V would be confided to Jocelin III de Courtenay, and by which the Royal castles would be handed over to the Templars and to the Hospitaller Knights. If Baudouin V would die before the next ten years, Raymond III would keep the Regency to allow the Pope, the German Emperor and the King of France to decide between the rights of Sibylle and Isabella to the throne. Baudouin V was then consecrated sole King. Jocelin brought the child Baudouin V to Saint-Jean-d'Acre, far from the intrigues of the court of Jerusalem.

King Baudouin IV, the Leper King, died in March of 1185 at the age of twenty-four years. He was buried at Jerusalem, on Golgotha, near the Chapel of the Holy Sepulchre.

That year of 1185 was a year of great draught. Outremer and Syria suffered. The ground dried out to a burst cake. Not enough rains fell in the winter months that led the year. Famine threatened.

Count Raymond III of Tripoli proposed a truce of four years to Saladin, and the Sultan, whose lands were equally afflicted with the dryness, accepted gladly.

During the years of 1185 and 1186 Saladin was occupied with his affairs in the north and in the east. He laid siege to Mosul. He had also to control the members of his own family, his cousins and nephews, who had become powerful thanks to him but who were ambitious and were not content with their role as second leaders.

In the autumn of 1186, young King Baudouin V died at Saint-Jean-d'Acre.

The battle for the Kingdom burst loose. Count Raymond III of Tripoli was certainly the ablest of the Barons and had been assigned as regent by King Baudouin IV. But Guy de Lusignan was married to Sibylle, the eldest sister of the former King. De Lusignan had powerful supporters: everybody who was weak, envious and ambitious, loving intrigues and debauchery was in his party. Among these were Renaud de Châtillon, the Patriarch of Jerusalem Heraclius, Jocelin II de Courtenay, the Grand-master of the Templars Gérard de Ridefort, and of course the Queen Mother Agnes de Courtenay, flattered by all.

Gérard de Ridefort in particular hated Raymond III, because the Count had refused the debt-ridden Grand-Master to marry the heiress to the Principality of Batrun, preferring a Pisan merchant who could give Raymond much more, direly needed money.

Jocelin de Courtenay played the perfect Judas role. He persuaded Count Raymond to ride to Tibériade and to wait there until the Barons had assembled to elect a new King. Meanwhile however, Sibylle travelled in haste to Jerusalem, buried her child, the late Baudouin V, and desired herself to be crowned as the legal heiress to the throne by Patriarch Heraclius. The Barons of Jerusalem reminded her that the testament of King Baudouin IV stated that the Parliament of the Kingdom, an assembly of Barons and Bishops, had to elect the King. The testament also forbade explicitly the Patriarch to crown Guy and Sibylle. Two Abbots of the Cistercian Order, Jean de Belesme and Guy le Queux, accompanied by two knights, addressed this refusal to Sibylle.

Yet, Sibylle and the Patriarch organised the coronation. The Barons of the Kingdom refused to attend to the ceremony. Also Roger des Moulins, the Grand-Master of the Hospitallers, refused to attend.

A real coup then took place at Jerusalem.

Heraclius, Renaud de Châtillon and the Grand-Master of the Templars had the gates of the city closed. Roger des Moulins had the keys of the treasury of the Kingdom, the crowns and the sceptres. He refused to hand them over to fetch the crowns. Renaud de Châtillon and Guy de Lusignan harassed and threatened so much the Grand-Master that finally, Roger threw the keys in anger and disgust on the ground, in the middle of the palace hall, in front of Sibylle and Guy. These stooped to eagerly pick up the keys.

Patriarch Heraclius crowned Sibylle Queen and Sibylle placed the second crown on the head of her husband. Guy de Lusignan was King of Jerusalem.

The Parliament of Barons then assembled with Count Raymond III at Nablus. The coronation of Sibylle was not legal until this Parliament had accepted it. Baudouin of Ibelin, Lord of Ramla and Bethsan, was so disgusted by what had happened that he said openly he would leave Outremer. Of course, he had hoped long ago to marry Sibylle himself, but Guy de Lusignan had beaten him to the Princess.

The Barons preferred to give the crown to Onfroi IV of Toron, the husband of Isabella. But Onfroi IV was a shy man, a weakling also, and a man who feared the responsibility of the Kingship. He fled from Nablus to Jerusalem, to his sister-in-law, to Sibylle. He paid homage to Guy de Lusignan. The Barons could do nothing else but to accept Guy de Lusignan as King. Only Baudouin of Ibelin and Raymond III still refused to recognise Guy as the righteous King.

Guy de Lusignan called together the Barons at Saint-Jean-d'Acre, to a meeting in the Cathedral of the Holy cross. There, he shouted that if Baudouin of Ibelin would leave the Kingdom in protest, the Ibelin family would lose all its fiefs of Outremer. Guy de Lusignan ordered Renaud de Châtillon to call Baudouin of Ibelin to pay homage to him. Renaud called three times, and three times Ibelin refused to come forward. Then Guy called for Ibelin himself.

Baudouin stepped forward then, but said, 'King Guy, I show you homage as someone who would hold lands from you never!'

Also Baudouin's brother, Balian II of Ibelin, and his son, paid homage this way. The Ibelins thereby renounced their fiefs in the most insulting way.

Guy de Lusignan was so furious he wanted to arrest them on the spot, but the Barons withheld him.

Baudouin of Ibelin left the cathedral, and rode to Antioch. Prince Bohemond III gave him there a fief as large as the one he had forfeited in Jerusalem.

Count Raymond III, filled with bitterness, and fearing for his life, sent messengers to Sultan Saladin asking for his support. Saladin promised to help whenever Raymond asked for it in real assistance. As a sign of goodwill he released all the knights of the County of Tripoli that he held prisoner.

If until then the weakening and corruption in the Kingdom had slowly unveiled, in 1187 the last act of the tragedy of the Frank Kingdom of Jerusalem began, and that act was once more introduced by Renaud de Châtillon.

Renaud de Châtillon owned in the Trans-Jordan fortresses such as the Krak of Moab, the Krak of Montréal or Shawbak, which stood straight in the way of the caravans that were vital to Syrian trade with Egypt and Africa. To the south of Montréal lay the Desert of Tih, a region to avoid, and the Gulf of 'Aqaba. More to the south even than Shawbak, in the Wadi Musa, was the fortress of Val Moyse or Wu'aira.

There was only a short stretch of land between Val Moyse and Aila, at the tip of the Gulf of 'Aqaba, through which caravans might travel unhindered, but those lands were inhospitable, dangerous, and far from any direct route to Damascus.

Renaud, strong in his knowledge of being a confidant of Guy de Lusignan, thought he could do what he wanted in the region with impunity.

In the winter from the year 1186 to 1187, Renaud de Châtillon pillaged once again an extremely rich Saracen caravan that travelled from Cairo to Damascus. Renaud received help from Bedu Arabs, men without religion and scruples, who lived from plunder and murder. The caravan had been escorted by Saracen warriors, but Renaud had ambushed them and massacred the merchants.

Sultan Saladin demanded in messages the restitution of the stolen goods, but Renaud refused. Saladin then demanded Guy de Lusignan as King of Jerusalem to return the rich booty, but Renaud bluntly refused to Guy, as he had refused years earlier to Baudouin IV. Guy de Lusignan wanted not and dared not to exert his Royal authority over Renaud de Châtillon. Saladin waited for an answer from the King, but no answer was given.

In March of 1187 therefore, Sultan Saladin called together the armies of Damascus, of Aleppo, of Egypt, and of all the lands that owed him tribute. He first rode with a small force to the Trans-Jordan to protect an important caravan that was arriving from Egypt. That caravan brought Saladin's sister. Renaud could not capture that caravan, which arrived untouched in May at Damascus.

Then, Saladin's army ravaged the countryside around the Krak of Moab and of the Krak of Montréal. His men cut down the crops, the trees, the vineyards, and they devastated the oasis. Renaud de Châtillon not only lost more in those destructions than he had gained by pillaging the caravans, but he also found himself surprised and caught in the Krak of Moab, surrounded by Saladin's troops.

In Jerusalem, Guy de Lusignan wrung his hands in despair. He had to war on Saladin, but he was alone. Count Raymond III of Tripoli would not support him, for Raymond was in a personal alliance with Saladin. Prince Bohemond III of Antioch was also in negotiations with the Sultan for a pact of peace, a pact had been concluded in June of that year.

Guy de Lusignan and Gérard de Ridefort decided in utter madness first to attack Raymond III at Tibériade. This was an act of extreme folly at a moment when all the forces of the Kingdom had to be summoned to stop the Saracen armies from overrunning the Trans-Jordan. Balian II of Ibelin, head of the Ibelin family after the voluntary exile of his brother, rode to the King to conjure him to make peace with Raymond. Guy accepted and let Balian plead to Raymond. Raymond reluctantly agreed, if only the King would offer him back the harbour and town of Beirut.

Guy de Lusignan then sent Gérard de Ridefort, Roger des Moulins, the Grand-Masters of the Temple and of the Hospital, with the new Archbishop of Tyre, Joce, with Balian of Ibelin, as well as Renaud of Sidon to Tibériade, to accept the exchange and to persuade Raymond.

On their way they encountered the entire army of Saladin. Saladin had marched to attack the coastal cities and especially the environs of Saint-Jean-d'Acre. For that, he had to pass in Galilee near Tibériade. He had asked first Raymond of Tripoli's permission to pass through Galilee, and Raymond had granted safe passage. Raymond closed the gates of Tibériade and saw the mighty Saracen army – only a part of the total Syrian army – march past Tibériade, below his walls, at the end of April.

When Gérard de Ridefort understood what was happening, he alerted his Templar Knights of a nearby fortress, got ninety Templars in all and added these to the forty knights of the Royal Escort that was at Nazareth. Believing he could win all, he attacked Saladin's vanguard at Saffuriya with a mere hundred and fifty men, only to be promptly defeated, his men massacred.

The Grand-master of the Hospital was beheaded, and so were all the Templars and Hospitallers, but for three knights that had escaped, among them Gérard de Ridefort. He ran away from the battle.

Before that battle Gérard had sent a messenger to Nazareth announcing he had defeated the Saracens. The townspeople came running to the site, only to be caught unawares by Saladin's army. Raymond III of Tripoli stood still on the walls of Tibériade and saw this time the Saracen cavalry pass in the other direction, holding on their lances the heads of the slaughtered knights, drawing behind them hundreds of miserable prisoners of Nazareth.

Balian of Ibelin and Renaud of Sidon had not been present when Gérard de Ridefort had given the stupid order to attack Saladin. They hastened with a few remaining knights of Nazareth to Raymond III at Tibériade. They persuaded Raymond to make peace with Guy de Lusignan, and Raymond, horrified by the sight of the defeated Franks, accepted. He met with the King at the Castle of Saint-Job, southwest of Jenin, a Hospitaller fortress. There, finally, Raymond reluctantly, and for the first time, paid homage to the man he despised, Guy de Lusignan.

The complete army of the Franks assembled painstakingly at the Sources of Saffuriya. Bohemond III of Antioch sent his eldest son Raymond with fifty knights, but did not come himself.

Gérard de Ridefort opened the expiatory treasure sent by Henry Plantagenêt, preserved by the Order of the Temple, and called all the mercenaries of the Kingdom to him.

Patriarch Heraclius sent the True Cross, but he was too cowardly to wear it himself in battle. He remained snugly in Jerusalem, in the arms of his mistress, and let the emblem of the Kingdom be worn by the Bishops of Acre and Lydda.

The King of Jerusalem thus assembled about twelve hundred knights and twenty to twenty-five thousand Frankish warriors and mercenary Turkish and Arabian auxiliaries.

Saladin marched with an army of almost a hundred thousand men to Tibériade. He had the largest Saracen army ever assembled and launched against the Frankish Kingdom, that was never so weakly led as in that year of 1187.

Sultan Saladin arrived at Tibériade at the beginning of July of 1187, at the beginning of a hot summer. He captured Tibériade immediately, but for the citadel, which was held by a meagre garrison of Franks led by Échive, the wife of Raymond III.

At a Council of Barons in the Royal Tent, Count Raymond told Guy de Lusignan not to march to Tibériade, to that region called the Hattin, for it was there a very arid land, where the Franks would not find water at this time of the year. The only source there was the Source of Croisson, and that source was far too small to provide water to an army of several tens of thousands of men. Raymond told in despair that he preferred the citadel of Tibériade to fall and his wife to be captured, rather than see the Frankish army defeated. He knew Hattin was a deadly trap.

Count Raymond argued that if the Frankish army did not move from Saffuriya, Saladin would have to leave the area too for lack of water. Gérard de Ridefort was the only belligerent Baron to counter Raymond III. All the others were in favour of Raymond's proposal. But when the Barons separated and left the King's tent, Gérard de Ridefort stayed with Guy de Lusignan, calling him a coward and a man without honour if he brought not the True Cross to the Saracens. Guy de Lusignan's reign would succumb in dishonour if he did not now confront Saladin in battles Jerusalem would surely win.

In the middle of the night, King Guy de Lusignan ordered the Frankish army to the march. Gérard de Ridefort and Renaud de Châtillon called Raymond III in public a traitor if he did not join the King. Raymond complied.

The army of Saladin moved in front of the Franks along the lake of Tibériade, so that they had access to a wealth of excellent water. The Franks stopped in front of the Saracens instead of marching south or north in search of water springs. It was Raymond III of Tripoli who proposed to spend a night at the hill of Qarn Hattin.

When day broke, the Franks were encircled by Saladin's massive army. There was no water on or around the hill where the Franks stood in the heat of the burning summer sun. Saladin commanded the dried grass to be set to fire and a wall of flames quickly propagated among the Frankish positions. The Frankish men-at-arms surrendered that same day.

The Frankish cavalry tried several times to charge the Saracens, but it could not break through the enemy lines. Only a few knights, among them Balian of Ibelin and Renaud of Sidon escaped.

Count Raymond III charged desperately with a small group of knights and the enemy warriors wisely opened that part of their ranks to let the charge pass. They then closed the trap again.

The entire Frankish army of the Kingdom of Jerusalem surrendered on the hill of Qarn Hattin. The True Cross was in the hands of Sultan Saladin.

Guy de Lusignan, King of Jerusalem, was Saladin's prisoner. Saladin killed Renaud de Châtillon with one single sword blow before his tent, personally. Then the Sultan ordered all the Templar and Hospitaller Knights to be slaughtered by the zealots of Islam, by the Sufis and the scholars, the mystics and the men of the Law.

To assemble an army of twelve hundred knights and twenty thousand footmen, the Kingdom had been depleted of men-at-arms and knights. After Hattin, these men were either killed or sold as slaves.

Saladin could almost unhindered now conquer all the places of the Kingdom. Only the militia of the towns could hold him off from capturing the cities one by one without a battle, but the townsmen could not oppose a Saracen army of a hundred thousand warriors for long. The Frankish Kingdom of Jerusalem was annihilated. The catastrophe was complete.

Chapter Eight. Jerusalem 1187

Balian II, Lord of Ibelin, rode as fast as he could from Qarn Hattin to Jerusalem and brought the terrible news of the total defeat of the armed forces of the Kingdom. Only a handful of old and maimed knights had remained in the town. Balian was married to Maria Comnena, the widow of King Amaury I, so we asked him to call himself Lord of Jerusalem, and to organise the defence of the town.

Queen Sibylle was still in Jerusalem, but our resentment against her and her husband was so strong and so openly hostile, that she hid inside the palace and did not appear among the people.

Balian made knights of all the sons of knights above fifteen years and he also made knights of the principal townsmen, the merchants and artisans. Patriarch Heraclius melted down the silver of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre to buy arms. We opened the gates to thousands of refugees from all parts of the Kingdom, people that thought safety could be found still at Jerusalem.

After the Battle of Hattin, Saladin besieged Saint-Jean-d'Acre and captured it promptly. Jocelin de Courtenay had escaped the ordeal of Hattin with Raymond III. He was inside Acre, and he arranged with Saladin for the submission of the town. Saladin allowed the people to stay or to leave unharmed. Most of the merchants preferred to leave. Then, the Saracens pillaged and took everything that was left behind.

Thus, all the towns of the kingdom fell: Nablus, Jaffa, Beirut, Tibnin or Toron, Sidon and Ascalon. When a town resisted, such as did Jaffa, its population was partly massacred, partly sold in slavery.

For the surrender of Ascalon, Saladin even used Guy de Lusignan, the former Lord of the town. He promised liberty to Guy if he could persuade the townsmen to surrender. But Ascalon refused. Nevertheless, Saladin held his promise to Guy de Lusignan, but the Sultan would not let the former King go before the capture of Jerusalem. Saladin invited Queen Sibylle to join her husband, which she did. We let her ride out of Jerusalem with an escort of Saracens. She rode to Nablus, where Guy de Lusignan waited for her.

Gérard de Ridefort received the same promise if he could work out the surrendering of the castles of the Templars, among which Gaza.

From mid-July to September, the army of Syria conquered practically all the cities and fortresses of the Kingdom, except Tyre and Jerusalem.

Then, Sultan Saladin turned to face Jerusalem.

We held our Councils of Siege in the palace of the King. Hardly a knight of any stature, except for Balian of Ibelin who presided, attended the meetings. A few minor knights, old and useless men, a few merchants and the heads of the artisans of the town, but also the Patriarch of Jerusalem, Heraclius, came to our daily talks.

Heraclius spoke loudly at the first meeting in favour of surrendering the town immediately. Balian had already sent a messenger to Saladin, however, to announce he refused to give up the town, so Balian refused to hear about surrender. He said he would not abandon to Islam the first town of Christendom, the site where Jesus Christ had suffered and the aim of the pilgrimages from the homelands. Balian was a brave and a proud man.

I rather agreed with Heraclius. It was fine to talk about putting up a fight to defend the symbol of Christianity, but Christianity had left us alone to do the job, so that there would soon be more than a hundred thousand enemy warriors at the gates to test our determination. Sultan Saladin had granted mercy to the cities that surrendered their pride to him immediately. He could not offer his magnanimity to cities that resisted him and killed his men. Even if Saladin would want to pardon violence, his Amirs would cry for vengeance. I proposed to send a second emissary to Saladin to offer him the town. We might try to obtain a few conditions in our favour, such as the preservation of the Holy Places and the continuation of the Christian pilgrimages, as well as the right for everyone who desired to leave the town with one's possessions in peace.

Most of the men present agreed with Balian however. One could not just like that, instantly, sacrifice a town like Jerusalem, the prime symbol of Christendom. The wealthy men of the city feared they could take only few coins with them on their voyage out. They would have to forfeit their rich furniture and their stockpiled goods in their cellars to plunder. They feared being robbed on the travel to Tyre or to Antioch, practically the only cities that were still in Frankish hands, and those harbour towns were far away. They felt more secure within the walls of the Royal City. Jerusalem had formidable defences. These could be strengthened. Saladin might assault the town, but droop off when he lost too many of his men. I told them no city could hold against an army of a hundred thousand men. I told them what it meant for a city to be besieged, when the mangonels started to do their gruesome work and when the sappers undermined the walls. I told them of the bloodshed at a breach of walls and how a city was plundered when warriors stormed inside the streets, raping and killing. There was an embarrassed silence after that. Then, one of the merchants cried that one could see the big stones of the mangonels coming, and duck. One could hide one's family in cellars, shouted another one. One could build a double wall at the place sappers worked on. The city was the only safe place to be when Saladin arrived. The Frank knights, also Balian, did not really believe Jerusalem could hold, but they were knights and they wanted not to tell that I was right, for they still wanted to fight for the honour of Christendom. I had experienced this kind of self-delusion before. It is remarkable how knights lack the imagination of the horror of a battle or a siege until a man with a sword stands above them and is on the brink of slicing their head off. The Council of Jerusalem voted for resistance.

Immediately, all the men of Jerusalem took up arms. There were not many weapons and armour sets in the citadel, but swords and spears showed up in the hands of every townsman as by miracle. Weak sections of walls were worked upon by masons, and strengthened. Oil was gathered and poured in pots. The few small mangonels we found were positioned in open places along the walls. Men dressed in rusted mail coats and armed with aged spears of all sorts patrolled on the walls. The blacksmiths worked day and night to forge more crossbows and quarrels. Carpenters assembled

sturdy beams and put them on carts ready to be hauled to walls that might be breached.

We knew Saladin's troops were advancing towards Jerusalem. Balian rode with a group of knights and warriors outside the walls, despite my warnings. Nevertheless, he surprised Saladin's vanguards and defeated them. He was proud to return into the town with his wounded after this feat, showing his prisoners. I told him to set the men free, for they were only so many more mouths to feed.

The next day, Balian was unable to ride out again, for at dawn tens of thousands of warriors on horse covered the hills around Jerusalem.

Sultan Saladin sent three Amirs to summon the town to surrender. Balian would not even let the men enter the town and talk at the palace. I stood at his side on the walls and translated when he refused haughtily to receive the men. Balian however asked for permission to let Maria Comnena, now Balian's wife, as well as the children of his brother Baudouin, to leave the town. The Amirs rode back to the tent camp and other riders returned in the afternoon shouting that Saladin accepted in his great magnanimity to let the woman and the children leave. Saladin even promised an escort of Saracens for them to Tripoli. The Sultan wanted no issue with Constantinople.

The Saracens positioned their mangonels in front of our walls, huge affairs that could hurl very heavy stones into the town. Yet, the mangonels did not start to throw. The Saracen army waited. We suspected the Saracen army hesitated to destroy the Holy Place of Islam, though their Sanctuaries were out of reach of the mangonels.

We did not expect an attack across the Vale of Jehoshaphat, for the Saracen warriors would have to run up against the steep slopes of the valley there. They could not really hope to place scaling ladders against the walls at that side. The mangonels of the Saracens were also not positioned on the Mount of Olives, for the distance to the walls was too large from there.

The first attack on Jerusalem was launched on the twentieth of September.

We expected attacks on our western and northern walls, and that was indeed from where the enemy came running. The Saracens assaulted our northwest corner, at the junction of our western and northern walls, at the place where Tancred's Tower stood, between the Gates of David and of Saint Stephen. The attack began by the mangonels. Stones banged against the walls, which shook under our feet from the incessant battering. No stones were thrown into the town at first.

When the stones hit the walls squarely, hardly much damage was done. The stones of the Saracens shattered against the walls and exploded to pieces in terrifying noise, but our ancient walls absorbed the shocks. Much worse was when a thrown stone grazed to the top of the walls, and hit the parapets. Men were killed then, smashed to pulp or hauled from the walls and flung to a bloody mess in the streets below. Parts of the corridors on which we ran along the walls were thus destroyed. Carpenters were called up the walls to repair the gaps with planks and beams, whenever we could not pass to reinforce the defenders on those stretches.

A little later the mangonels hurled their charges higher in the air, over the walls into the town, sometimes enveloped in cloth drenched in pitch and set to fire, so that it were fireballs that flew above our heads. We were surprised at that, for we hoped the city would be spared.

We knew then that the Saracens would come at us with scaling ladders.

So they did. Saladin launched a few thousand warriors wearing ladders, against the defences. He attacked at once the entire length of walls between David's gate and Saint Stephen's gate. A large wooden siege tower was drawn to the south of Tancred's tower and another one north of this point.

I defended the northern part of the walls; Balian of Ibelin defended the west part. The fighting was terrible instantly. We were lucky in that the Saracens' towers were not higher than the city fortifications. Our archers and crossbowmen had it rather easy to aim downwards. In that morning, we had the sun in our backs, whereas the Saracens were blinded by the light.

There was fighting all along the walls. While the Saracens climbed up the rungs of the ladders and filled the walls like ants that crawled upwards a mound, we threw stones at them, breaking their ladders, making the warriors fall to their death or to broken limbs. When Saracens reached the parapets of the walls, we used our longest spears to push them down. Few of our men died at the top of the walls that morning. Many a courageous Saracen fell to his death before even reaching the top of the walls. Our defence was efficient, steady, controlled at all places.

A battering ram approached Saint Stephen's Gate. I ordered pots of oil and pitch to be thrown down on the warriors that rolled the ram near. We set fire to the ram before it rolled against the gate. We also hurled stones onto the structure that covered the ram, through its roof and hides, and then we flew down a rain of arrows into the men below. We heard the burning Saracens scream of pain and not long afterwards they simply abandoned the engine to burn to cinders.

Meanwhile, one ladder after the other was still pushed against the walls. When a ladder fell, two more came up to the walls. Yet we held. What we did that day was real butchery, with few losses to our own men. Many a Frankish warrior grinded his teeth at the shouts of the Saracens that fell dead, but continued his hideous work unwaveringly. I was astonished at how easily men learned to kill.

I had taken with me five sturdy young knights, men still in their teens, to whom I had given a rudimentary and complimentary training of a few days in spear- and sword-fighting. With these I ran along the walls to places where the Saracens threatened to spill over. Then we pushed into the Saracens and slew the few men that had dared to set foot on the top of the walls. We thrust our spears in their bellies and threw them back into the whirling mass of enemy below, back to the outer side of the walls. When that section was clear of Saracens, we ran to the next problem point. Six times the Saracens succeeded to pass over the walls. Six times we pushed them back with sheer power of arms. We sprang on the Saracens, struggled with them and pushed them off. After two such attacks, my young men fought as experienced warriors. They fought as a group. One man would jump on a Saracen, pin him down with a shield, while the other would swing a lethal spear into a weaker part of mail. It became a routine, and my men did the butchering without wincing and without hesitation.

The greatest danger at our stretch came from the Saracen assault tower. Its highest point was lower than the top of the walls, however. I reckoned the Saracens had miscounted the heights of Jerusalem's fortifications. There was a small slope in front of our walls, a downward slope, and the tower dipped slightly into that, so that the tower's deck was quite lower than our parapets. The Saracens pushed planks onto the walls, but they had to run upwards and the planks were slippery from our oil and from the blood of the warriors that we killed. Our crossbowmen did a terrifying job there and killed many men. Still, at that point the fighting was stubborn, terrible for the townsmen, and horrible for the Saracens.

For almost half of the afternoon, Saracen warrior after Saracen warrior ran courageously out of the tower's deck onto the planks and we hit man after man. Five times we could push the planks away with enemy warriors still running on them, five times new planks were dropped on the walls. I heard one of my men actually apologising to a Saracen while he drew his spear out of the man's leather armour and softer belly. None of us killed for pleasure that day, but we killed.

At the end of the day, no Saracen had reached the inside of Jerusalem. All that day drums and trumpets signalled the Saracen troops to attack at other points. Then, when the sun nearly set, the Saracens drew their tower back. But drawing their tower back was hard for them, for they had to roll upwards a little, out of the slope to the walls. So far I had not dared to set the contraption to fire, for I feared the fires would weaken our walls. Now, I ordered pots of oil to be thrown against the wooden structure. When the towers rolled back, our arrows set fire to it. Our oil had soaked the planks and the hides. The pitch in the oil stuck at places, and continued to burn there for a long time. The Saracens were only drawing a blaze backwards, so after a short while they let the wooden siege engine burn and fled. The attack on our stretch of walls was thus called off, and the Saracens ran back to their camp.

I took one third of every man on our walls and ran towards Tancred's tower to assist Balian. I had seen no Saracen inside the tower so far, so I supposed Balian too had repulsed the enemy. I met Balian at Tancred's Tower. He had had the same idea as I, for the Saracen attack had stopped at his side too. We met, running into each other's arms, cheering victory. Yes, that first day, Jerusalem had bravely withstood the siege.

We licked our wounds. We repaired the parts of the walls that had suffered. We quenched the fires at our gates. We stopped the fires in the city. We brought our wounded men to the Hospital and bandaged their wounds. Then we returned to the walls. We slept on the walls or just beneath them, in the streets.

I have to admit that Balian of Ibelin knew well how to inspire the men of Jerusalem with the energy to fight, and he was a fine organiser.

Of course, any army that has won a victory is convinced it can win twice. The people hoped the Saracens would leave Jerusalem after that first fight, but we knew this first assault was only a skirmish, though a massive one, really set only to test our defences.

Five days later, the Saracen hordes ran once more to our walls. The beginning of their assault was impressive. When the thousands of warriors ran in a wave to the city, the townsmen on the walls silenced in nervous expectation and dismal dread. The attack

was directed this time on the north and the north-east, between the Gate of Saint Stephen and the Gate of Jehoshaphat. Balian brought many of his men from David's Gate to the Gate of Jehoshaphat and I defended the northern walls still, but the Gate of Saint Stephen was now to my left side.

Again, Saladin's assault was introduced by the mangonels hurling their heaviest boulders at the walls. The mangonels battered until noon, while the Saracens waited in thick rows at a little distance from the walls. The mangonels did not do much harm at this part of the fortifications either, like the previous days. Before noon the Saracens began to throw their stones higher, once more into the town, and the masses of the enemy ran the last stretch of open field up to our defences. We placed many men that had fought the first attack among the townsmen that defended the part of the walls that came under the new attack. We had experienced warriors now!

Three towers advanced immediately in front of us, towers that had been kept from view till now, and another tower was drawn towards the eastern walls. These siege towers were higher than the previous ones, so we might expect them to be much harder to defeat. The towers were drawn to either side of a small door into the town, the Postern of the Magdalene. The Gate of Saint Stephen was again attacked by a battering ram. The ram brought a few frightening beats against the gates, but we annihilated it by throwing heavy stones at it, and flaming oil. So many attacks happened simultaneously! We had to disperse our defenders.

The siege towers were the greatest danger. The structures were more massive than the ones brought five days earlier. There were more men in them at the top, and more men wore crossbows and bows. Our men died in front of the towers. We had built spiked boards, with which we could push back Saracens from the bridges that led to the wall-tops. It was hard work to use them, for the floor on which my men stood was not wide enough to hold many. We could not use enough might to push back the many Saracens, so for a while there was something of a standstill in front of the towers, with warriors pushing on the boards from both sides. I also could not run from one part of my walls to the other, for the Saracens had taken foot between my sections of defenders. I ordered all the crossbowmen I had on this stretch and we sent volley after volley into the Saracens on the walls. The men in front knelt so that the men behind could also loosen their bolts into the mass of Saracens from behind the first row.

We could not stem the coming of the enemy warriors. More Saracens came over the walls than we could kill. Brute force only could answer brute force here, and we were not enough. I ordered my young knights forward. With the energy of despair we threw ourselves forward, into the Saracens, while our crossbowmen shot their quarrels on the men that ran on the makeshift bridge. We fought only with spears and we had an advantage with that, for the Saracens that were on the walls had only shorter spears and swords. We pushed with board and spears and advanced in a pool of blood, over Saracen and Frankish bodies. My men were used to the horrors of the dead and the wounded by now. They had seen every imaginable wound on enemy and friend, and seemed not to care anymore. They killed, butchered, and walked step by step forward, driving back the Saracens. Young men barely over eighteen years killed tough, powerful, veteran point-helmeted warriors with an ease that was horrifying in itself. My heart bled to see youth thus drowned in the horrors of war, but there was nothing else we could do. We closed our minds to the horrors, and threw back the enemy, back into their three towers, one wave after the other.

The Saracens evacuated first their wounded men. Then they brought in new troops and prepared for yet another assault. At the second tower, the Saracens equally succeeded to the top of walls, but not at the third one. I could reach the second section and led my young guards to counter the assault there. Meanwhile, hundreds of warriors climbed up the scaling ladders. They had little success, for our defenders knew how best to stop the waves almost but not just at the top. When Saracens fell down ladders, it took the others more time to start from down under again. The fights raged all along my walls. What was in the nature of men that could turn decent, passive citizens suddenly in experienced warriors that killed without blinking an eye? I lost my last illusion of the nature of humans, but I could not but feel elated at the fact that we held the walls so long under this fierce attack.

I looked down at the small door of the Magdalene and remarked that the Saracens had discarded it entirely. That gave me a bold idea, one that I would have scorned in other men. Instead of attacking the Saracens of the second tower on the top of the walls, I called about fifty knights and townsmen to run with me down the stairs. I had to be quick, for the men on the walls could not hold long without us.

We took pots of oil and pitch with us and I forced the little door open. My men looked at me as if I had gone mad, but I told them to shut up and to fight. Desperate situations needed desperate moves. I ran out before them. I had little breath in my seventy years, but no young knight sprang before me. Slaying surprised Saracens to right and left, we reached the tower on our right, the tower that represented our largest threat. We threw our pots of oil on the tower, at the foot of the structure, and then fought the Saracens there with shields, spears and swords. In a nick of time all my men fought at the base of the siege tower. I left them there and directed a second group to the first tower. All was a matter of speed now.

We set the two towers on fire from beneath, and our men continued to fight the Saracens around like mad wolves. We could not hold there for long. To my dismay more and more men of Jerusalem ran out of the little door, eager to assist. Some of those men, obviously carpenters, hewed at the lower beams of the wooden towers. One of these tilted, then slowly slanted and fell down in a thundering noise. The second tower was on fire and the flames rose rapidly higher. I was happy to see so many men of Jerusalem helping us, but that was an issue, for how would so many men run back to the city when the bulk of Saracens counter-attacked us there? Hundreds of Saracens ran down the hill slopes towards us. It was high time to flee back into the city. So I shouted and shouted to run back. I pulled on the young men, knocked a few down until they understood. I appealed to the older ones, but I had a difficult time to push the battle-crazy men back through the small Magdalene gate. I waited until the door was safely closed, then ran up the stone stairs again to the stretch where the third tower stood.

We fought back the Saracens at the last assault tower. These men had seen what had happened to the other towers. They were a little less fierce than before. The fight was arduous. It took us until sunset to hold back the attack, but we slew the enemy also at that point.

The Saracens only stopped to come at us until after sunset. I wonder still where we had the energy to hold them off our parapets. There was no leader anymore on our side: anyone who saw a danger would scream and men would rally to that point.

When spears were needed, spears came. When axes needed to cut cords, axes came. To my astonishment I even saw a few women run into the Saracens and hack at them with knives. A woman defending her children can be a terrible sight. I saw Saracens hesitating to cut at a woman with a sword, only to have that same woman at their throat slicing arteries without mercy, swiftly and deadly.

The battle stopped after sunset.

Balian of Ibelin, drenched in blood, ran to us once more with a contingent of troops of the eastern walls, for the battle had halted altogether at that part. We fought off the last of the Saracens together. The third and last tower was drawn back.

I was exhausted. Even before sunset, my young knights had shoved me aside and fought in front of me. I had only been able to shout orders, to parry a sword, shown how to lead a spear attack, pushed a shield higher, encouraged a youngster to advance, demonstrated how to aim better with a crossbow, and called more men to me. I was too old. I slumped against a parapet now. I limped and that was not too bad; worse was that because of my stiff leg I had used muscles everywhere else on my body that I had never used before. Those muscles hurt like hell now. I was massaging my legs when Balian slumped besides me, panting like a horse that had run a track five times.

‘God, I have never been so tired in my life,’ Balian the Brave sighed.

‘Look who you are talking to,’ was all I could answer with a throat dryer than a Syrian haystack.

‘We pushed them back once more,’ Balian continued to say.

‘You did well,’ I praised.

‘What would I have done without you? None of the other knights would have been able to hold against those towers. You destroyed them too!’

I grinned, ‘today we burned two of them and repulsed the third, half-burnt. Five days ago they brought two towers, today four. Where do they keep getting them? Will they have six towers tomorrow?’

‘I have asked our blacksmiths to forge large hooks,’ Balian said. ‘The hooks should be ready by tomorrow. If we can’t burn their towers tomorrow, we will throw the hooks onto them and draw over their contraptions.’

‘One surprise a day to the Saracens, he?’ I asked.

‘Yeah. That’s how it must be. They will not get in tomorrow either. Our men fight better. Also, more men are joining in! The last reluctant ones join us. Even some women fought with us! We have inspired them to courage.’

‘The Saracens are losing many men,’ I said. ‘Too many to their taste. Saladin must find the capture of Jerusalem expensive. He launched his assault today with many more warriors than five days ago. Maybe we can negotiate still. His Amirs must begin to doubt their ability to take the walls.’

‘We lost more men today too,’ counted Balian. ‘Many more men than in the first attack. Our men were more stubborn, more bloodthirsty, heinous even, than at first. But one more battle like this and they will be wary of fighting. I say Saladin will conquer the city in two or three assaults more.’

‘I agree,’ I consented. ‘If Saladin keeps this force on, we will have to surrender the town – if he still wants to give mercy. We have to show him we are not battle-wary, still fresh and ready.’

‘Are you kidding?’ asked Balian, who could not yet stand up. ‘Yes,’ he continued after a while. ‘We will have to surrender.’

I was surprised. I had thought he had wanted to fight until the end. But Balian of Ibelin was wiser than that. The battles had matured him in two days, or was it the sight of the many killed men that had softened him?

Sultan Saladin the Great did not wait for five more days to launch his warriors in a new attack. He cast his entire army at us. But he did not come with six war towers. He had only three, and one of those was the half-burnt tower of the preceding day. He could not send up fifty thousand men onto the walls with ladders and towers though. I guessed hardly ten thousand men really participated in the attack. The rest stood at a little distance, showing the might of the Saracen army, and waiting for us to sally, as we had done the previous day. No sally to burn the towers for us that day! I told my men not to be too much impressed by that show of might, for hardly more men than the day before really participated in this onslaught.

The towers reached our walls once more. We had hooks now, large ugly, heavy pieces of steel with three pointed rods of metal welded to the bar, and with a crude ring at one end. We put long ropes through that ring. When the Saracens were all in their towers, part of their men already on our parapets, and bridges of wooden planks thrown between the decks of the towers and our walls, we swung the hooks onto the structures. We threw the hooks into the top beams. When the hooks held, we pulled with every man we had on the ropes. The first tower on our stretch of walls crashed down in no time, killing a great number of Saracen warriors.

We had more trouble with the second tower. We had to try three times to hook onto to the beams. Two times very courageous Saracens defied our crossbows, climbed on the roofs and undid the hooks. But the third time two hooks grasped the wooden beams of the siege tower and we pulled with more haste. The second tower tumbled aside. There were more women of Jerusalem with us. They came with oil pots, even only small ones, but with more oil than I had thought possible to find in the town. They threw the oil on the wooden, ruined contraptions below. Then we set fire to the wood.

We heard loud cheers from the eastern side of the town, because Balian too had succeeded in overturning the siege tower. That day we destroyed all three of the Saracen towers. None of the warriors who tried to reach the tops of our walls with scaling ladders succeeded in the act. We cried victory with might at the end of that day, long before the sun set.

But something unexpected happened, something that changed our mood altogether.

We had seen Saracen sappers disappear in a hole in the ground and pour out basket after basket of earth and stones. We had not given much attention to them, for we thought Jerusalem was built entirely on rock. We assumed the Saracen sappers would have to work for weeks on end to dig a decent tunnel under our walls. The sappers

must have had chance with them and found softer ground, however. We suddenly heard a rumbling noise and a large part of our walls to the left of Saint Stephen's Gates collapsed. I suspected rather that the tunnel had caved in on the working sappers, for I had seen no bushels going into the hole and no smoke of fire coming out. A large cloud of dust came from the hole now and men ran out in panic. The hole should have been collapsed on a morning, not at sunset. Our walls also only collapsed half-ways. They sank down, then stayed that way. They did not fall over.

We were at first completely surprised, looking in awe at the slide. Some of our men that had been on that part of the walls were killed when they fell into the town to their death; a few got buried in the rubble. But the walls were still high enough to hold at bay the Saracen army. After the collapse, trumpets sounded and all the enemy troops withdrew. Hundreds of bodies were strewn beneath our walls. The troops went and we cheered, but we cheered too soon.

The Saracens drew all their mangonels close to the weakened wall. The heaviest stones possible were thrown with great skill against the remaining line of wall in the last rays of sunlight. The stones struck from top first to bottom next. We looked at what happened then with fascination and awe. One by one, the large blocks of the ancient walls of Jerusalem were blown away. A long stretch of wall crumbled inside the town. The projectiles of the mangonels threw the rubble apart. Half of the mangonels threw stones higher, to just behind the growing breach, to prevent our defenders from constructing a new, second wall behind the fallen one. I was thinking of the night however. Soon the mangonels would have to stop for lack of light. Then we would have the respite to build a second wall of wooden beams inside. Our carpenters and masons would have to work all night. But we had a night!

Again, Balian ran to my side on the top of the walls. In the last rays of the dying sun we assessed the situation.

'By tomorrow that breach will be wide open,' Balian started to say.

'Yes, I replied,' but we can build a second wall just behind that stretch during the night. However, first thing tomorrow the mangonels will try to blow that second wall aside. The breach is in front of an alley that leads to the Holy Sepulchre. We can fill that street with stones and beams this night too, but the Saracens can run south to the Postern of Saint Ladre, where the terrain is open. We can close that gap too, but I doubt we can hold it. The Saracens may climb to the top of the houses, or break through the walls of the houses. Then they can reach Saint Stephen's Street in front of the gate. Then their entire army will pour into town.'

'So we build our new wall before the Postern of Saint Ladre,' Balian proposed, 'and we block Saint Stephen's Street. I can post our crossbowmen on top of the roofs. We can put the front houses on fire. That will stop the Saracens.'

'It will only slow them down,' I said. 'But it will not stop them in the end. They will assault not only the breach, but also the other walls, once more. We have not enough men to hold them back at so many points. Tomorrow afternoon, Jerusalem will fall.'

'We will throw every man we have in the breach,' replied Balian. 'There will be a great massacre on both sides. We know they can enter the city, but will they know it?' I saw the doubt in his eyes.

We held a meeting of the knights and townsmen that evening. The entire town was building the second walls by then already, at the light of torches. Balian of Ibelin proposed a bold sally at the next attack of the Saracen army. He proposed to provide for a new surprise to the enemy. When the Saracens would run to the breach, we would open Saint Stephen's Gate and sally to defend the breach, standing on the rubble and run into the sides of the Saracens. We would fight to the death, afflicting such heavy losses to the enemy that Sultan Saladin would sue for a truce or for the surrender of the town at good conditions for us. My opinion was that sallying was a suicidal move, but many of the knights, including Balian, were desperate. I did not have to object. Patriarch Heraclius objected for me.

We had not seen the face of Heraclius in any battle so far. Balian and I thought not much of the Bishop. He was obviously a coward, a lowly and despicable man, comparable in not one quality to his predecessors Amaury de Nesle or Foucher d'Angoulême, who would have fought without hesitation on our side, brandishing a new True Cross. Nevertheless, he had still some credit with the younger knights and he used an argument that appealed to the townsmen.

He said that for every man in the city there were fifty women and children in the town. He was right; all the farmers of the region had sent their women and children of the villages and smaller towns into Jerusalem. Our streets were filled with them. The terrace of the Temple Mount was filled with them, all crouching there during the day and sleeping at the same place under the stars during the night. Heraclius said that a sally was suicidal. The men would be killed and then the women and children would have a dreadful fate. The women would be raped and sent into slavery, the children would be massacred.

Heraclius also told he had been talking to the leaders of the other Christian faiths. He said some of those men had been bitter about the decision of the Latins to resist Saladin. They were angry at the damage done to their houses and their churches by the mangonels. Heraclius feared they might try a devious attack by their militia in our backs at an unexpected moment, opening a gate or even only a small door that we could not well defend while we were fighting off the Saracens' main attack. This argument too was a good one, for I could very well imagine such a surprise when we least expected it from fellow townsmen that did not care for who ruled the city, whether it be Muslims or Latin Christians, who were anyhow not really of their religion. Heraclius said he suspected the Armenians, the Jacobites or the Melkites. I imagined they fomented revenge for insults done in the past.

Patriarch Heraclius's grave words, echoed by the thundering sounds of the last stones thrown into the city by the mangonels, now also hurled at Saint Stephen's Gate, changed the mood in the Council to one of despair. In that mood, Balian of Ibelin asked for a vote for the defence of the breach by all means, or for the surrender of Jerusalem. The Council voted almost unanimously to surrender the town to the Saracens.

The Council asked Balian to seek access to Sultan Saladin in person at dawn the following day. Nevertheless, the building of the second wall would continue. 'Wait!' I objected in my turn now. 'Think! Sultan Saladin proposed less than ten days ago to Jerusalem to surrender. Later, you did not even let his Amirs inside the town. Since then hundreds, if not thousands, of his men died or were gravely wounded. There is an implacable logic in war: be lenient towards the humble that do not resist,

kill the haughty. Jerusalem has been haughty. The Sultan is not a bloodthirsty killer. He is a nobleman who weighs his decisions, but he will want to take no such decision of surrender that might endanger his leadership. He cannot possibly accept a surrender, favourable to us, of a town that has resisted so long, without pillage and beheadings and taking of slaves and without plunder to satisfy the hatred and thirst for revenge of his Amirs. Saladin will regret the plundering, but he will accept and encourage it as being unavoidable. He cannot accept a mere surrender and certainly not one on good terms for us.'

'So what then should we do?' Balian cried in despair.

'There is one thing we can do,' I said. 'We have to show our determination to fight to the last man for Jerusalem. We have to stand before him as determined men, not as humble weaklings asking for his clemency. Let us go to Sultan Saladin tomorrow morning indeed, but have every man of the town to be on the walls, all banners flapping in the wind and held high. Give every woman a helmet and put them too on the walls with a spear in their hands, as if they were men. If not a spear, then give them a pointed piece of wood that could resemble a spear at a distance. Give them a wooden panel for a shield. Have the older children stand there too. Then we say to the Sultan that if he refuses a surrender of the town on reasonable conditions, we will fight to the last man. We also tell him that at the same time, at the first attack at the breach, we destroy all the Muslim temples in town, especially the Mosque and the Dome of the Temple. Tell him we will destroy the Stone of Abraham, destroy the Qubbat al-Sakhrah and the al-Aqsa mosque. We will kill all our prisoners, of which we have many, and then we will kill, before the Saracens pour into town, all our women and children with our own swords. Tell him we will then set fire to the city. He will find Jerusalem in ashes and drenched with so much blood that it will forever ruin the worship of Islam at this Holy Place.'

Horror showed on all faces. Heraclius certainly had not wanted to kill himself. But Balian sighed, and told that we could decide on such drastic actions, for being overrun by the revengeful enemy would not be worse. He said the threat might not have to be executed if the Sultan relented. And so we agreed.

At dawn the following morning, before the Saracen mangonels started to do their work on the breach in the town's walls, before the enemy army assembled for the final thrust, we, five men, rode out of Jerusalem. Balian of Ibelin led, holding the large banner of the Holy City. Behind him we rode, four knights. Near the Saracen camp I rode next to Balian, for he spoke Arabic only with difficulty. A hundred horsemen surrounded us immediately. I shouted we wanted to speak to Sultan Saladin.

The men guided us to a complex of magnificent, large tents. The canopies of those tents were brocaded with Suras from the Qur'an and the guards posted around it were dressed in the yellow robes of the colour of Saladin. We were told to dismount. Our spears were taken from us, but we were allowed to keep our swords. Balian refused to hand over the banner of Jerusalem, so the flag was left in his hands. We waited for a long time. Behind us, the army of the Saracens did not assemble for an assault on the

city and the mangonels throw only stones at the walls near the breach, just to prevent our townsmen to rebuild the wall, nothing more.

The tent opened. Servants poured out. The front part of brocaded silk was tied up by cords and beams. Tapestries were laid down before the tent, under the new roof. Then cushions were brought, large and small, wooden tables were set and on the tables excellent food was displayed, bread and biscuits and fruit and pieces of the pale flesh of fowl.

Finally, three men stepped outside. I recognised only the man in the middle, a man dressed in a long, golden robe, wearing a curved sword with a gems-studded hilt in a finely decorated leather scabbard. He had aged much. He was now in his late forties. There were wrinkles in his sunburnt face, and the face had a much darker colour than I remembered from the times we were together at Aleppo, in his youth. He had suffered from time and from the worries of a busy life. He wore a black beard now, a fuller beard than I had seen on him at the Tell al-Safiya battle. His eyes however shone as young and dynamic and piercing, ever moving, as I remembered from the days he was a young boy. Saladin advanced to us, a formidable man of the Orient in grace and in power.

I remarked with some satisfaction the surprise on his face when he recognised me. I stood to the side of Balian of Ibelin. Saladin stopped a pace from us. He said nothing and studied our faces first. Then a smile opened his lips and he said in a grave voice, addressing me and not Balian of Ibelin, ‘Astralabius al-Din Daniel ibn Abelard du Pallet! I should have known it was you who was at Jerusalem. Who else could have defended those sacred walls and destroyed my towers? It has been a long time, Daniel!’

To everybody’s astonishment, Saladin stepped to me and embraced me most unceremoniously. The moment was solemn, but we both smiled.

‘It has been a long time, indeed, Sultan Salah al-Din Yusuf ibn Aiyub. Allah be with you! How are you?’ I said.

When we stopped to embrace, Saladin still held his two arms on my shoulders. He only stepped back after a while.

Balian of Ibelin’s mouth was still open in amazement. His eyes turned in their sockets and I was sure he was still absorbing and assessing what he had just witnessed, and maybe wondering whether I had been a traitor to his cause all along. He feared treachery.

So I told him in French, ‘I have known Sultan Saladin when he was a boy of ten years old. We have not seen each other since that time. We were friends then.’

Balian relaxed. I presented Balian of Ibelin, Protector of Jerusalem, to Saladin.

Saladin said he knew the illustrious family of the Ibelins and held them in high regard. He gave us a signal to sit down on the low chairs and cushions provided for us. Our two knights remained standing behind us and so did three golden guards behind Saladin and his two Amirs. Inside the tent also stood Saracen warriors, at each corner, in mail and armed with spears and swords.

Saladin said, ‘this is my brother al-‘Adil Saif al-Din, Atabeg of Aleppo’.

Saladin’s brother was a little younger, obviously a warrior, for he was dressed in mail and he was a broad man with powerful arms and legs. He had a stern face and we

sensed this man was not in favour of peace. The other man was quite older, dressed in white robes and wearing no mail.

‘This is our man of law, ‘Isa. He will write down what we discuss. He is my advisor,’ Saladin continued.

A servant brought us hot and cool drinks, the cool cups set in bowls filled with ice from the mountains. We drank first, like Saladin, assessing each other only with our eyes. Saladin let some time pass, looked at the sun growing on the horizon beyond Jerusalem, and then he asked why we had come to see him. Balian of Ibelin spoke and I translated in Arabic.

Balian was even more direct than I would have been, ‘Great Sultan, Your Highness, we have come to propose the surrender of Jerusalem. We might continue to defend our town, but we believe too many Franks and Saracens would die in the effort. We propose therefore to surrender the town to you, on condition that the population be spared, that the people that desire to leave with their possessions and arms would be allowed to do so, and the people that wish to remain inside the city not be harmed, the town not be ravaged and pillaged, and its people not be subjected to slavery.’

Balian had stated his conditions very soon in the conversation, too soon, as if he had come to impose his terms without negotiation. But he was a war-leader, not a polite ambassador, and Saladin seemed to approve.

Saladin answered, ‘I proposed a few days ago that you surrender the town. Do you think I can forget the loyal warriors, the men of the Faith who were killed at these walls? A long time ago the Franks captured Jerusalem from the faithful and spared nobody. The Franks desecrated our Holy Places and turned them into places of your own worship. The men, women and children of Islam were massacred then. No mercy was given. Should I have mercy then, now? I do not want your surrender. I will soon call my army to attack and if need be we will attack again and again until Jerusalem is ours. There is a wide breach in the walls of the city. My warriors will enter that breach and swarm over the wall, and you will hold on no longer. Then we will kill you all, as the Franks once did with my people, for to a city that is conquered by the arms and that did not open its gates to us immediately there can be no mercy.’

Balian swallowed the bile in his mouth and he should not have done that for it was a sign of weakness and it showed he was impressed by the Sultan’s words. Still, he replied calmly and firmly. ‘In that case we will continue to defend the town and push your warriors back as we did at previous attacks. Do not think we have not the power to do so. Have a look at our walls. See how many men we have still at arms, and beware! Our walls are full of armed men, determined to die rather than to be slaves. The breach in the walls is closed up entirely inside the town. New walls will stop your troops from entering. The breach is a death-trap for your army.’

‘Many men will die, indeed,’ Saladin sighed. ‘But my men will burst into town like a desert wind and nothing will be capable of holding them back. Tens of thousands will run to the breach and over the rubble you might have amassed behind, and they will break through your poor defences.’

Saladin made a wide sign of his arm showing the thousands of tents around and the Saracens before them, all clad in armour and holding their weapons. ‘Have a look, you, to the warriors waiting for a sign of me,’ he continued. ‘Then, when my men are inside, the killing will begin and it will last until no Frankish man, woman or child will be left alive. That is your fate, Jerusalem.’

Saladin also spoke these words calmly, as if merely stating a fact. I had not known him this way. He had changed much. He spoke like a warrior and like a conqueror. This was the language of the start of a hard negotiation. Saladin had not refused to speak further. He might simply have stood up and laughed in our faces. The wording here was tough, but talk would go on. He was showing his power, matching Balian's bluff.

Balian said, 'when your men and our men fight, we either may throw you back several times to your tents, or we may be defeated. We may be defeated in the end, yes. Know then, that we have given signs that while your warriors will roll into our city, we will put fire to the houses and to the churches and to the citadel and to the palace of Jerusalem. We are keenly aware that Christendom expects of us, knights, to defend our Holy Places to the very end. So when your men will pour into the city, we will have destroyed the Qubbat al-Sakhrah, as well as the Stone of Abraham. The Mesjid al-Aqsa will have been destroyed to the ground, and destroyed the terrace of Mount Moriah. We will have made rubble of it all and thrown the rubble back into the Vale of Jehoshaphat. When you enter the town, we will have killed our women and children to spare them from dishonour or rape and slavery. Christendom watches us, Sultan, not just the people of these lands. The Franks of our town will not be slaughtered by foreign hands, as have been the people of Edessa in the past! Remember how many thousands of knights were sent from Christendom to avenge Edessa! You have experienced how well we defended Jerusalem. You have experienced the determination in our men. Fear our determination still! When the slaughter happens, do you really think Christendom will not avenge the destruction of Christian Jerusalem?'

Saladin's mouth drew to a very thin line. His lips entered into his teeth. He grasped the beaker of his drink and I saw his fingers clench around the cup. For a while I thought he would throw the beaker at our faces. The tension had grown with every moment we had talked. We needed to ease the tension. But how? Saladin did not hide his anger anymore. The time for politeness was gone. He looked at me, then at Balian, then back at me. He shouted, 'you are madmen! You are madmen even to propose such a horror to me. You are monsters of nature! Allah will chastise you for such sin! And this idea came from you, Daniel?' I answered, 'Sultan Saladin, hear us out. The townsmen are desperate. Desperate men and desperate women do desperate things, things unthought-of so far. The men of the town together decided on such a course, for they have no hope anymore and prefer to die at their own hands than in dishonourable death.'

Saladin moved on his chair and re-arranged his cushions, seeking composure. He was still seething with anger, but he believed us. He saw a victory stolen from him and drenched in horror. I knew exactly how he felt. The way he reacted showed he wanted a victory, but a decent victory.

Saladin paused and he regained slowly his calm. He waited for a long time, drinking once every while, and watching us. We waited. Then he spoke again. 'I will grant the people to leave unharmed the town. They can leave with their possession but without weapons. For every man that leaves I will demand a ransom. I will make slaves of the people that do not pay for their life. No

Frank can stay inside the town. All Latin Christians will have to leave. The other Christians may stay unharmed in the countryside outside the walls. The people of other faiths that desire to stay can stay. We will not pillage the people that leave or that stay, but we will do with the houses and the buildings what we want. The old buildings of Islam will not be touched by you. If one stone of them is overturned, we will kill all.'

Balian gave me a quick look, for we had our surrender on the terms we had expected. 'There are many poor people in Jerusalem,' Balian of Ibelin said.

'For every person leaving Jerusalem, of whatever faith, I demand twenty Bezants,' Saladin replied dryly.

'We cannot pay so much. We have not so many coins,' Balian objected. He was appalled.

I proposed, 'we might find ten Bezants for a man, five Bezants for a woman, one Bezant for a child.'

'Agreed to that,' Saladin declared.

Balian continued, 'many very poor people have run to the town from the villages. The poor will not be able to pay. Can we provide one lump sum for all the poor?'

'Allah is compassionate and told us to give alms,' Saladin replied. 'One hundred thousand Bezants for all the poor will satisfy me.'

'We have not that much in coins,' Balian said. 'One hundred thousand bezants would probably be more than ten Bezants a man. We may have thirty thousand Bezants.'

'How many poor men do you have in your town, men who cannot pay the Bezants?'

Balian hesitated, 'about ten thousand men, five times as many women and children.'

'For thirty thousand Bezants,' Saladin said, 'I agree to free seven thousand men of whatever faith. One man can be replaced by two women and ten children. For more men you will have to find more money. Melt down your gold and silver, empty the churches, and give me your precious stones.'

Balian looked at me and I nodded. There was nothing else to do. Saladin of course remarked the look and a fine, malicious smile appeared on his lips. He did not wait for Balian to answer.

He said, 'the men, women and children that leave will walk or ride on horses. They can draw one cart a man but take with them whatever they can carry. The men will be allowed swords, no spears, no bows, and no crossbows. One armour per man, and one shield only.'

I translated and Balian sighed, 'agreed!'

Thus ended the negotiation over the surrender of Jerusalem. We did not leave Saladin's tent immediately. Saladin was not happy. He still fretted over the conditions. He spoke at length in a language I did not understand to his law man 'Isa. We exchanged some polite words, but there was no warmth between us.

Finally, Saladin said, 'I will have to let you go back to Jerusalem. In two days, at dawn, you will open the gates of the city. At every gate I will post a hundred of my men. My army will not advance into the town until later. You will make all the Franks leave during that day. You will hand over to me the Citadel of David and I will put three hundred men in that citadel. I will be there and so will be my brother al-'Adil. We will make last arrangements at the keep. Complaints will be handled there. The Franks must abandon all churches, but I allow four priests to stay at the Sanctuary of

the Holy Sepulchre. I will honour that building, but you must promise that no stone be taken from the Holy Sites of Islam. Of none. I will levy a tax on all people that stay inside the city, and on all non-Latin Christians. The tax will be reasonable. Now leave!’

We stood up and began to leave the tent, bowing to the Sultan, when Saladin held up a hand to have us wait still. He said, ‘Daniel al-Din, I would like to speak with you further. Not about the surrender of Jerusalem but about other matters. Can you come back right after noon?’

I wondered what Saladin wanted of me, but I nodded. Then we rode back to Jerusalem.

Balian rode into town first. He would present the conditions to the Council. I did not join him in that work. I left my horse at the citadel, and then walked to Miriam to tell her to prepare to leave. Miriam had a choice however. She could stay. Not I. I doubted she would stay without me, however. We would have to push a handcart with some of our possessions. There was not much we had to save for us. Our cave held still a large amount of coins and precious stones. Those would go to the Jews that preferred to leave town, especially to the poor Jews, for the Franks would not pay for those. Some additional money would go to Isaac Ben Asher.

Miriam refused to stay at Jerusalem. She would leave with me. I walked to Isaac Ben Asher’s house. I told him what I could do for him and for the Jews. There were not more than a hundred families left in Jerusalem, the others had fled before the Saracen army had arrived. Isaac thought most of the families would want to stay in Jerusalem. Many of the men that would leave could pay. Some would need my coins. Young Sarah would stay with him, in Jerusalem. I left them a letter for Jacob, Sarah’s brother, telling him to offer half our possessions to Isaac and Sarah. I wrote to my son that I blessed him and had no need of more money. He could use it the way he wanted; the money would be his. I told Isaac he would do well to leave the money with Jacob and have it fructify in Jacob’s businesses. He said he would do that; he was a Rabbi, no merchant. There was enough money at Tyre to care for his poor. I said farewell to Isaac and Sarah. I was glad a piece of me would remain at Jerusalem. I wished them many children. I did not believe I would ever return to the city.

After noon I rode back to the Saracen camp. I was taken by Mamluks dressed in yellow surcoats over their mail to the Sultan’s complex of tents. The Mamluks brought me to a tent on a hill, not to the tent in which we had discussed the surrender of Jerusalem. This was a private tent, not the official tent of the commanders of the army. There were no other tents on the hill, golden guards stood all around the foot of the mound, and I saw a detachment of yellow-dressed cavalymen on horses a little further. A guard invited me to go up: I had to leave my horse with the guards. I walked up the hill alone. I looked behind me and saw a fine view of Jerusalem, resplendent in the bright light of the sun. From here the town seemed peaceful. I stepped around the tent.

The tent was open to the south, to the direction of Mecca and Medina. Tapestries had been laid down in front, under a canopy of tent cloth that flapped in the wind. Two

men sat on the cushions, one of them Saladin. Saladin wore no mail, no armour but for a leather jerkin over his light yellow robe. A long, curved sword lay at this side, readily at hand. A shield stood against a post. There were no guards on the hill, none in the tent.

Next to the Sultan sat a very old man. Saladin and the man sat somewhat in the shadow of the sides of the tent and I was still blinded by the fierce light of the sun that day, so I could not well see their faces. While I advanced however, my eyes adapted to the change and I recognised with a shock the long, bearded face that stared at me from the recess of the tent. The face was wrinkled in all places and the beard covered most of his flesh, but the eyes flashed at me still youthful. It was Usama ibn Munqidh who sat there with Saladin, my erstwhile saviour and friend.

I went up to the two men and said my Salaam Aleichem to them, ‘good afternoon Sultan Salah al-Din the Great and noble Usama ibn Munqidh.’

They smiled and I was relieved to see no resentment anymore on Saladin’s face. They repeated their Aleichem Salaam and bade me to sit.

Saladin said, ‘there need to be no formality between us, Daniel and Usama. We are old friends, aren’t we? Usama has been with me since quite a while now, advising me in all matters of policy. He promised me to write what he remembers of his life, but what he has shown me so far are only his notes on hawking and lion-hunting!’

Usama protested, ‘I am working on the rest, Your Highness. Still, I believe of all the important things I have done in my life nothing has been as pleasant and as valuable in my humble life as hawking and lion-hunting.’

Usama’s voice crackled a little but it was still as deep and warm as I remembered. Despite his age – he must have been close to ninety years – his voice was still strong and steadfast.

‘Usama underestimates his acts,’ Saladin replied. ‘He has planned palace revolutions in Egypt, led troops in war, withstood sieges and he has concluded numerous treaties among the powerful of this region even before I came here. He has advised Caliphs, Atabegs, Maliks and Amirs, yet he says he has had the miserable life of a useless Courtier. He has cunning, this old desert fox, this humble man! Beware of him, Daniel!’

They both laughed and sipped from their hot drinks. Saladin offered me a cup. He served me the drinks, for there were no servants close. He also pushed honey biscuits to me and pieces of bread. Other small plates and bowls with dates and raisins and olives he showed me with a sign of his open hand.

‘It has been a long time since Aleppo,’ Saladin started.

‘Yes,’ I answered. ‘It has been a long time since we sat this way at Usama’s house or in the hills of those lands. You have come a long way, Sultan!’

‘Sultan I am,’ Saladin replied. ‘But I can tell you here, with no other ears around, that fate has driven me, not I fate.’

‘And a fine fate it has been so far,’ Usama remarked. ‘Now *you* are too humble, Sultan. Look at you! We remember you as a young boy, of course already an Amir and close to those who reigned, but merely the nephew of one of Nur al-Din’s commanders. Now you are the ruler of all the lands of Syr, a victor of many battles, the wealthiest man in Islam and the ruler of other vast territories from Alexandria to Aleppo. What have you not accomplished? You wiped out the Shi’ite power in Egypt,

as well as Frankish power in Galilee and Judaea and you have restored the true faith of Allah over our lands.'

'Yes, I did that, too,' Saladin replied, but there was no sign of haughtiness, not even of pride, in his face. 'Yet I repeat that I was driven by fate, by the design of Allah. You know, when my uncle Shirkuh took me to Egypt on his campaign to Egypt, I refused at first to accompany him. Later still, the first rule he gave me was to govern Alexandria, and I refused that too. Shirkuh forced it all on me, and at Alexandria I failed miserably. I had to call for the aid of his troops. I could not hold the town, for the people there were sly, fickle as a desert wind on a hot day, and false and dishonest. At the first downturn they attacked me, would have killed me. They almost ousted me out of their town and would have gladly handed me over to the Frankish knights that stood at their walls. The rest of my life had been a repetition of what happened at Alexandria. I defended myself and my family, a holy duty, and only by that struggle power came to me. I could only have acted the way I did, there was no alternative.'

'Oh no,' I interrupted him, shaking my head in disbelief. 'You could have acted otherwise. Most men in your place would have acted otherwise! They would have hesitated to act when there was a need to react instantly, or they would have taken the wrong decisions. If fate has brought you into situations which could lead you to this Sultanate, you have always applied the right decisions, worked with energy and determination, and you have prospered. It could have been otherwise, but your decisions were always the right ones, the wise ones, the correct ones to bring you forward. I agree that fate led you from one event to the other, but by your decisions at the events fate was also driven by you!'

'Maybe you are right,' Saladin reflected. 'Maybe indeed I too decided of fate. What else is fate but a series of crossroads in the desert of life? At each crossroad I had to take a decision. The decisions were mine, of course, fate did not make the decisions for me, and yes, someone else might have taken another road, but the next crossroad was always presented to me by Allah. I did not control that. The crossroads were not of my doing. The roads I took then, yes. Isn't life always so, for each man?'

'It is,' Usama agreed. 'We believe we arrange our lives according to our whim, but life's paths are presented to us. Allah is great and we are little. Few however are the men that choose the paths that bring them to glory in the end!'

'Look here,' I noted. 'Two of the most successful people of Islam, one a ruler of millions, lamenting over fate!'

'I do not lament my fate,' Saladin smiled. 'Yet fate reserves nasty things also for us all. I have an empire, but what will remain of that empire tomorrow? I have to fight every day, or the empire will be taken from me. The empire, the land, is only mine as long as I fight for it. When I die, will my heirs fight for supremacy and kill each other? Is that glory? How long will my family hold on to power? What is power but a feather whirling in the wind, thrown this side and that by the whim of Allah?'

'Allah decides,' I said. 'You won the Kingdom of Jerusalem by your decisions at the crossroads. Yet, I am also convinced God brought the leprosy that condemned Jerusalem because it was His time to do so. King Baudouin was a noble youth, yet he was a leper. What you do not know is that the leprosy was also in the mind of the Patriarch of Jerusalem, in the mind of King Guy de Lusignan and his Queen Sibylle

and in the mind of Renaud de Châtillon, and at the same time in the minds of many other Counts and Barons of the Kingdom. I saw the debauchery, the ignominy, the lies, the leprosy take over Jerusalem. You cut down a rotten tree, Sultan Saladin. God made the rot enter in the tree, and only Baudouin fought the rot till the end. The others wallowed in it. Yet, to cut down the tree, it took a man of extraordinary talents for politics and war, a man that would make the right decisions at every turning point. You truly have been the instrument of Allah, Yusuf!’

‘You won a great battle at Qarn Hattin,’ I remarked.

‘Yes,’ Saladin said, setting down his cup. ‘I can tell this to you, Daniel, and Usama should keep quiet about what I am going to say now: I was scared to death by the charges of the Frankish knights. I avoided every battle in which the Frankish knights could launch a massive charge of armoured horses and armoured warriors at my men. I was scared all these years of the Frankish knights! Each time the knights charged, I lost a battle. Even Shirkuh lost such battles! He lost at Puthaha, I lost at the Tell al-Safiya. We had nothing that could withstand such massed charges of your armoured horses and warriors, nothing! Even the young and sick Baudouin could defeat me with that weapon!

The only way I could defeat the Franks was by manoeuvring and trapping your army somewhere where the knights could not charge in one mass. I manoeuvred the King of Jerusalem into the Hattin so that I could starve the troops out on a bleak hill without water from where they could not charge all at once, and then pluck their defeat like an overripe fruit. I could do that with Guy de Lusignan and with Count Raymond. Once the army of Jerusalem was at the Hattin, the rest was easy. I would never have been able to do that with young Baudouin. And yes, Daniel, I found out who the adviser of young Baudouin was, and who the advisor was at Puthaha!’

I choose to ignore his last phrases. I came back to Hattin. ‘I suspected how you won at Hattin,’ I said. ‘You almost had a large Frankish army before in a similar trap. You decided well. You see, Guy de Lusignan and Raymond of Tripoli made the wrong choices at the crossroads of Hattin. You did not!’

‘I was lucky you were not with them, Daniel. Do you think I did not know it was you who surprised my army at the Tell al-Safiya?’

Now I was amazed. I imagined he knew I had been an advisor to young Baudouin, not that I had told Baudouin how to attack and when in that battle. I did not ask him how he knew. I was sure he had the better spies and informers.

‘Yes,’ I said with a smile. ‘We sure had you pinned down at Tell al-Safiya, hadn’t we?’

‘True,’ Saladin acknowledged. That time my Amirs forced me to attack the region of Jerusalem. I was not ready, but I had to give in to them a little, let them burn a few villages and give them the illusion we might take Jerusalem, which I knew was impossible then.

Do you know that I had finally convinced them of the futility to take Jerusalem then, and that I was turning back to Ascalon when you caught me? I was really at a moment when my leaders agreed that we had marched as far as we should, when you attacked me! You see, not all of my decisions at the crossroads were the right ones. I should have refused to leave Ascalon in the first place. It was that damn charge in the wadi that broke us. You saved my life there! I saw you! I thank you!’

‘I am not sure you did not do the right thing at that moment, before Ascalon, when you gave in to your war leaders,’ I objected. ‘A true leader knows when to tighten the reins of rule and when to loosen them. Had you not marched, you might have lost not just that one army but all armies. Also, when I rode into the knights that attacked you, I am confident that you would have thwarted their charge on you after all.’

‘No, I don’t think I could have, Daniel,’ Saladin righted. ‘But tell me, why did you first save me, and then follow me right into the Desert of Tih? Did you want to talk to me or kill me yet?’

‘Follow you?’ I feigned.

‘Yes. You followed me into the desert. I had only a handful of men with me, half of them wounded, a couple dying. Do you think I did not see you? I saw you several times, lying on my belly in the sand, on hill slopes, watching you riding in the tracks of my warriors. I saw with some satisfaction that you were wounded, too, and you limp from that wound, don’t you?’

‘I do.’

‘What I don’t understand,’ Saladin continued, ‘is why you did not pursue me to the end. You lost your knights but I lost my warriors too. What would have happened when you had come on to me at last? You had two knights left; I had only one. At that last moment, your knights abandoned you, and you rode straight on, ever southwards, while I turned to the sea. Straight on was the wrong way.

I had the urge to ride up to you and ask you what you were doing, whether you wanted to kill me. I wanted to draw you with me, out of the desert, but I was too scared. You are a better warrior than I, Daniel! I wasn’t sure not more men were following you. Yes, the great Saladin was scared of you. You had been after me for so long in the desert that I thought you wanted to kill me after all.’

‘No, I did not seek to kill you. The truth is I did not know why I rode on. My wound hurt. I had fevers but pushed on despite them. In the end, I came to a monastery in the desert. Monks healed me there; then I returned.’

‘There is only one monastery there,’ knew Saladin. ‘In that desert lays the Monastery-of-the-Mount-on-which-God-walked, the monastery of the burning Bush of the Prophet Moses. I spared that monastery, and I will do so too in the future. It is a Holy Place for us too.

He grinned, ‘it is also a Greek monastery and there is no need to waken up the great giant of Rum at Constantinople!’

‘I was taken there by Angels,’ I continued.

The two men looked intently at me. ‘I guess I was led into the desert too. I was in pursuit of a group of Egyptian warriors. I guess I knew it was you, but I did not really know why I was following you. I believe God led me into the desert, after you, not to kill you, but to lead me to that monastery. Maybe God led you too in the desert for that aim! I stayed at the monastery for many days, and I talked many times with the Abbot. I could think there. It is a place where thoughts come clearer.’

‘Did you find there what you came to our lands for?’ Usama asked. ‘At Aleppo, you said you would go to Jerusalem to find answers to your life. Have you found the answers? Have the stars talked to you?’

Saladin also looked at me in expectation.

‘The heavens have shown me images at various instances of my life,’ I answered, ‘but I have received no answers from the other world to my own questions, no message, no

revelation. I have been no Moses, no Ezekiel, no Mohammed, no Prophet. God has kept me a man of not much substance. Yet, I found some answers in myself, and what I learned I learned at the monastery in the desert.'

'What have you learned then? Tell us,' Saladin asked.

'I understood several things,' I started. 'First, I understand now why Jesus Christ suffered his death at Jerusalem to redeem us. Of course I am different from you in what I believe as religious matters. We three believe in one God, whether his name is Yahweh, God or Allah. But I also believe in Jesus Christ and believe he was God, not just a man and not just a part of God. He was God. He lived here and died here, because this land is an eternal place of suffering. What else could the Christ do at Jerusalem but suffer? Where else could the Christ be sent but here? All who believe in one God, Jews, Christians of all faiths, the men and women who follow Islam, and the infidels as well, all have fought in this land, before this city for thousands of years and I am sure they will continue to fight for thousands of years more. I stayed at Jerusalem to witness the skirmishes and battles, one after the other, with awe and wonder, transfixed by all the events, until I understood.

Jerusalem concentrates the universe onto it. Jerusalem is the vortex of God's creation. God has created the universe with Good and Evil in order to give us, mankind, freedom of choice. The clash between Good and Evil in the creation is at Jerusalem always, as if Jerusalem were placed in the eye of a whirling desert wind around which turns the world. Jerusalem therefore can have no peace.

There will be wars still after your victory, Sultan Saladin, which means – as you may have felt indeed already – that more battles will be fought in these lands and that you will find no rest here, no more than I. When Jerusalem comes to rest and peace, the universe, the creation will stop to be. Then will come the day of reckoning for mankind, the last day of our being in God's creation, the day of Last Judgement, the day of which our Prophets and your Prophet have spoken. I am not sure whether such a day will ever come, and I do not know what will come next, but I can hardly believe the creation will stop with us. I cannot imagine a God without a creation, a father without a Son.'

'Why have you stayed to live here then?' Usama asked.

'I stayed and stayed until I understood what was so special about Jerusalem,' I answered. 'I understood this only recently, at the monastery in the desert. Maybe it was the time for me to understand; maybe God led me there with that intention, and maybe the pursuit of Sultan Saladin was just an instrument that led me to the monastery.

I had a vision after the battle of Puthaha. In that vision I heard a voice entreating me to lead my people away. I have only known these three last days what that voice meant. There can be no peace at Jerusalem! Maybe the Christians of Jerusalem are the beloved of God. I have to say that to the people. Those that want to follow me I will lead away not only from Jerusalem, but from Outremer. The people that want peace will have to leave Jerusalem, travel to a harbour and depart for the homelands across the Sea, to anywhere but Outremer.

I think the port of Alexandria would be best. There are many traders there, many ships of Genoa, Pisa and Venice. There will be no Latin Christian bishops there to persuade or force the people to stay. I fear the preachers and Bishops gathered at Tyre, and the other ports have been captured by your Amirs, Sultan Saladin. The Christians of Ascalon and Gaza are marching to Alexandria too. I would like your permission and

aid, Sultan, to do the same. I do not believe very many will want to come with me, but those that want to follow me I would like to lead out.

I will never reach your venerable age, dear Usama. The wound in the desert has festered. The wound healed, but something is burning inside me and consuming my body. I will die not long from today. I am sad to leave my children, my son and daughter, but I prefer to go while I am still in some good health, so that they do not see me pass away in shame and helplessness. I said goodbye already to my son. He is a Jewish merchant at Tyre and will do well. My daughter is married to a Jewish Rabbi of Jerusalem. They will stay around Jerusalem, for Jerusalem is the home of the Jews. God will protect them, as He promised in his Covenant to the Jews. That Covenant is still valid, you know. One day, I hope soon, and granted your mercy, Sultan, they will return to the city.

Before dying I would like to return France and visit the tomb of my mother and father. It is time to tell them how much I loved them and how much I missed them. It is time for me to tell the words I could never say aloud while they were alive. Maybe I will stay at the Paraclete, their monastery, and find peace. If I live long enough I may come back and stay in Alexandria. I may die at the Paraclete, like my father. Miriam, my wife, wants to come with me, to France. She says I need a doctor and with that, she has told me enough to know I will not live long.'

Saladin and Usama drank and stayed silent when I had spoken. We drank our infusions and let time pass.

Then, Saladin said, 'I will give you an escort, to you and to all who want to travel to Alexandria. Provided of course the agreement of payment for those people holds. I can help get you aboard ships at Alexandria. I have not too much confidence in my Amirs there, nor as much as I would want in the Vizir of Egypt, but I know a man there who will help you. He lives in Cairo, but he knows everybody in Alexandria, also the traders that have ships. He came from a land over the Sea and he has been to Jerusalem, but he did not stay there. He is a doctor. He is my doctor whenever I am in Cairo and he was the doctor of my brother, the Vizir of Egypt. I talked with him for days and days about Allah and Faith. He is the most intelligent man I ever met, but he is not one who walks with the stars, like you, Daniel. He is a man who seeks God by Reason. He is a Jew. His name is Mussa bin Maimun ibn Abdallah al-Kurtubi al-Israili or in Jewish Moshe ben Maimon.'

Usama ibn Munqidh was a little disappointed. He said, 'Daniel, was the fact that Jerusalem is a place of suffering and a place that can never have peace the only truth that you discovered? I thought you were looking for much more, for the mystery of the universe, for the final answers to why we humans were on earth, and to how we should behave to God. I lived to hear those answers, for I thought you were the only man capable to find them. I am sure Yusuf here, too, is eager to hear more.

'Yes, I found out more,' I said.

'I have been sure for many, many years, that God created the world with Good and Evil so that we would be free to choose. Giving somebody the freedom to make his own choices is an act of love. When does a man really love a woman? When he imprisons her in a cage and hides her from the world, or when he lets his wife wander about on her own and do the things she wants to do by herself, and only helps her when she asks for it?'

I was on dangerous ground with this example, for Saladin must have had a harem with at least a dozen women in it, secluded, and Saladin must have thought that this protection was the best token of love he could give to his women. He did not even blink an eye, though. I continued.

‘One does not force help on someone one loves; one waits until it is asked for, and then gives plenty. With God, that is why we pray. God gave us freedom of will and therefore nature had to include Evil with Good; nature had to be created with this duality from the start. Our universe had to be not a totally nice place to be in, but one in which we have to fight for our survival. Without that, we, humans, would not be free creatures. Nevertheless, we can decide on our own, and in doing Good seek happiness both here and in the afterlife, where we are united with God. By doing Good we will be saved.’

‘How can we be certain to be saved?’ Saladin objected, interrupting me. ‘I know of the writings of a wise man called abu al-Hassan ‘Ali ibn Isma’il al-Ash’ari. Al-Ash’ari wrote a story which he presented to the Mu’tazilites, the Islamic scholars who believe one should comprehend Allah by man’s Reason, men you would call philosophers with the Greek word. He said: consider three brothers born from the same mother and the same father, brought up exactly the same way by their parents. The first brother was a wicked man who lived in debauchery and went to hell after his death. The second one was a righteous man who lived by the Qur’an, regularly gave alms and respected his neighbours. He went to paradise. The third brother was a sickly child who died young. This last brother said to Allah: why have you not let me live so that I could be a righteous man and go to paradise like my brother? And the first brother said to Allah: why did you not let me die young, like my second brother, so that I could avoid hell? According to our early wise men, the Mu’tazilites who reasoned, God is a God of love so that he cannot do wrong to his creatures and if he had let the young brother die, it was only to avoid hell for him. But then, said al-Ash’ari, Allah should never have left the first child live in sin, since He knew from the beginning that that son would not reach heaven but be thrown in hell.’

Usama stopped Saladin here and added, ‘if Good and Evil can be reached only by human freedom of choice, then a man who wants to be with Allah can force Allah by doing Good and only Good, and such a man could be able to write his fate in the Book of Last Judgement himself, thus doing God’s work himself, which is presumptuous, is it not?’

‘I know of the notions of the kasb,’ I said. ‘This is the notion of the theological scholars of Islam called the al-Mutakallimun. The scholars state that each act is a given from God, a grant from God. Even the al-Mutakallimun however do not stop there. Such a notion would abolish free will indeed. It would abolish not entirely love, but mostly. Even the al-Mutakallimun believe that we are free on the outcome of our acts, the choice between Good and Evil in the God-given act that we do. And thus we can acquire a place in heaven or in hell. Moreover, who can say he or she is so perfect as not to need the final Grace of God? Even the Prophets of the Jews and the Saints of the Christians told humbly how much they had sinned, and they begged for the pardon of God. In the Evangelists, the perfection that Jesus Christ asks of Christians can be reached by no human.

I believe no man and no woman, because of the Good and Evil in us, can be sufficiently good to inscribe his or her name in the Book of Last Judgement. Divine Grace is always needed. However, the evil that is inside us is life itself: the wish to

survive, to be preserved, not to be crushed. Therefore we do evil things. Therefore we seek to acquire goods and power and therefore we kill when other humans come on our territory. That centring on our own life, however, is part of the nature God created, without which we would have no freedom of choice. Ultimately, God is love.'

Usama objected, 'how can God be love and Good when children die of famine in the streets of our cities, when people are born misshapen, when the warriors who fought for truly good causes are wounded or maimed and then have to live as beggars in misery?'

'I am not so haughty as to believe I can understand the designs of God,' I replied.

'Still, this point too bothered me all my life and I had no answer for it and I revolted against God often because of it. Now I believe that the universe and nature are what we call imperfect, which for God only meant that it had to be created that way to grant us freedom in his act of love. The gift of freedom meant that nature had to be the way it is, inevitably. Nature produces early deaths, miserable lives, leprosy in people that had everything otherwise to be happy, and so on. That is part of the creation, part of the love. It is hard to accept such tragic randomness, but there is hope and consolation. Happiness is in the acceptance of the Grace of God, not in the revolt against the creation. For the creation could not have been otherwise. That also is what the monastery thought me. I repeat: creation and the universe could only be what it is; any other way we would have no freedom. The misery is the price to pay. Yet, we, humans, can alleviate the pain and misery. We should do better with our doctors. We should give alms, as the Prophet said. We should do much more good to the poor and the miserable. And that we can do!'

'For all the power and wealth and glory I acquired in my lifetime,' Sultan Saladin said, 'you were closer to Allah than I, Daniel. We all have these same questions. You sought the stars and have found them, to live in peace with the world as it was created. Allah has granted the Sultanate to me. Our lives are ordained by the Grace of Allah. I failed to understand Allah though, so I surrendered to his Benevolence, which is the best most people can do – at least those with a humble heart. Why Allah granted me power and my enemies perdition, I do not know. Yet Allah is one and He is Great.'

'So it is,' I concluded, 'but do not forget that if Allah presented to you the crossroads, you had the freedom to choose the paths. So the Sultanate for you is of your own doing too, Yusuf – if you allow me to call you once again by your boy's name.'

'I am glad I could speak to you, Daniel,' Saladin said after a while. 'I truly believe now that Allah put you on my trail ten years ago in the desert to lead you to the monastery. Our lives have thus been linked in a design we cannot fully understand. I am happy to have been part of that, and that is sufficient proof to me of the existence of Allah. It means for me that Allah knows me, too, personally. Usama surely was part of the design too. He saved you at Aleppo. Because of you we know that Allah exists. His existence can even be proven by Reason. That God has created the universe, but then He has not abandoned His creation to its fate. Allah has a design with each of us personally. The creation is not what we call perfect, but that is because Allah has created us in love and given freedom of choice. We must do Good, but still need his Grace to reach Paradise.

It must be awesome to experience visions of the other world. I will help you to leave Jerusalem.

I cannot make exceptions on the agreement with Balian of Ibelin, though, for my Amirs would detect a weakness in me and I cannot afford that. If you leave the lands of Syr and Egypt, we will not meet again. You will travel to peace and rest.

According to what you said, you predicted a terrible fate for me and my family, but these lands are my home. I have not the freedom to leave all this. My family would suffer even more. So I will have to continue to fight.

It was a privilege to have met you, my friend. As you said, we are far from perfect, so we will need the grace of God to meet in Paradise. I am sure you will have a place there. Whether I and Usama will ever be there too, is another matter. I pray for Allah's forgiveness and lenience!'

We continued to talk until sunset. Saladin said he would not destroy the churches of Jerusalem. He would allow a few Christian priests indeed to serve at the Holy Sepulchre. He would allow the Jews to dwell freely in the city, much more than the Frankish Kings had accepted. He was happy to re-open the Holy Sites of Islam in the town, the Qubbat al-Sakhrah and the Mesjid al-Aqsa. He told me he disliked all killing in the war with the Franks, but he did not regret having given the first stroke of the sword that killed Renaud de Châtillon. He smiled when I said how much I had loathed that man, how I had already fought Renaud when I was still a young boy, and understood well why he had had Renaud killed. We diverged on the Orders of Knights. I disliked the Templar Order, but told him how much good the Hospitallers had done in Christendom. He did not change his opinion. I did not tell him I was still a Hospitaller knight. We looked at the sun set red over the horizon. Jerusalem basked in the fading, orange light of the dying day.

We drank from our cups, and let the silence envelop us.

Chapter Nine. Epilogue. Alexandria 1188

The Latin Christians, dear Moshe ben Maimon, left the Holy City of Jerusalem in the beginning of October of last year, 1187. For thirty thousand Bezants, which Balian of Ibelin and I scraped together, we freed about seven thousand men and a numerous score of women and children among the poorest. The other Christians owned themselves the coins to pay for their freedom. We had to use violence to force the Grand-master of the Hospital to hand over his treasure. The Order of the Templars gave the minimum, and we expected they had hidden more, but we could not find the money nor force them into giving us their lot. We brought the ransom to the Citadel of David, which we had let Sultan Saladin occupy. The Patriarch Heraclius pleaded with the Sultan, and Saladin released an additional five hundred poor. Saladin gave a thousand more to his brother, the Malik a-‘Adil, and al-‘Adil promptly released these also. The remaining people would be enslaved. More than fifteen thousand men, women and children had to stay behind because we had no money for them.

Then, the exodus out of the city began. I never witnessed a spectacle sadder than this.

A long, silent column of miserable people walked out of the Gate of David. Saladin’s warriors counted every person. Balian and I stood at the gates. We saw Patriarch Heraclius leave with his priests, drawing with them their gold and silver, their tapestries, chandeliers, crosses and cups studded with precious stones. We were disgusted when we watched these riches suddenly appear and pass the gate, but we dared not intervene there and then, and Saladin’s guards let the treasure of the churches of Jerusalem be taken out. The Patriarch stole more from the Church than the army of Saladin.

The Franks gathered in a large camp outside Jerusalem. There, Saladin’s Amirs divided them in three groups. One convoy was led by Balian of Ibelin, one by the Hospitaller knights and on by the Templar Knights. Saladin gave each group an escort of fifty Saracen warriors to protect them during the first days from pillagers. The columns set in motion and I saw them march north.

There was a fourth column. About two thousand men, women and children desired to leave Outremer forever. They agreed with me that the best route to escape would be to walk the long road to Egypt, to Alexandria. I convinced them of the protection of Sultan Saladin. I led this group southwards.

We had walked for two days when Saracen cavalrymen suddenly rode along our lines. There was instant panic in our group, for the people feared being enslaved after all. Yet, the Amir that led the warriors rode on, forward, to the head of the group, shouting my name. I stepped out of the column and spoke to him. The man saluted me politely and said he brought gifts from Sultan Saladin. We stopped the march. The Saracens handed to us more than a hundred horses, mostly pack horses, and numerous carts drawn by other horses. Saladin’s Amir also brought provisions. He said he had orders to guard us to Bilbeis and to Cairo. We placed the women and children in the carts and had the elderly ride on the horses. Saladin sent us provisions until we reached Cairo.

The rest you know. We arrived at Cairo and I sought you out. Miriam, my wife, was exhausted from the voyage and she did not recover. You cared for her, but she died in my arms. She was then a plump, nice, old lady no man would have remarked. But she was my Miriam. Whenever I think of her a knot develops in my throat and tears well up in my eyes. I thought I could not cry anymore, but for Miriam I cried like a child. I regret she could not die among her children and at Jerusalem. I regret she was buried in Egypt, but such are the ways of the Lord.

My people reached Alexandria. The Christian ship captains refused at first to take our people aboard their vessels, but with your influence and Sultan Saladin's coercion, with the help of the Qadi of the town who was a confident of Saladin, the Genoese and Pisan and Venetian captains were forced to take the Christians on board. The people that had come from Gaza and Ascalon joined them. At the end of March of this year 1188, the last of my Christians sailed from Alexandria.

We are here now, Moshe ben Maimon, in your splendid house of Alexandria, looking over the wide port of the Egyptian town. A magnificent view you have from here! Alexandria is not really a fine town, but it is life itself, and the view of the chaos of houses and alleys is impressive.

It is very agreeable to be here with you. I admit you are probably the wisest man I met in my life, and you are a great scholar. I explained to you all I found out about God and you also proposed your own, new ideas on the matters. Maybe the example of my life may help you understand certain subjects of your study better. We checked out most of your ideas together.

You proved that God exists from the fact that every motion must have a mover. I know of a similar proof given by Abraham Ibn Daud forty years ago and of course, these proofs originate in the works of Aristotle. I do not doubt the existence of God. You have proved God to be one and incorporeal. I have heard other proofs of that earlier on also. You proved that God lived for he created, was eternal, powerful and wise and had a will. You have proved that the universe was created and thus did not exist since ever. I believe all that. You told me you were writing a book on philosophy and might call it the 'Guide for the Perplexed'. That is a good title and I would have liked to read your book. I certainly have been perplexed in my life.

You told me that the gift of prophecy was an inspiration from God, mediated in me through the soul to my rational powers and my faculties of imagination. I hope one day you will study this item further. I never considered myself a special man, morally purer, more perfect in brain, with more imagination or with better abilities to reason than most men. I think I have been courageous, but I don't think I had special, divine inspirations.

You say that when Angels speak to a man, then that man has reached the highest form of prophetic vision. Have I been a prophet then? I think not, but I was certainly an instrument of God. You believe in the Angels, and I have seen them with my own eyes. My visions were not just in my mind. I could see, hear and smell my visions. I never touched the objects that I saw then, but I am sure that had I tried I would have

touched substance. So God interfered with me and if with me, with us all. God is with each one of us. God indeed knows all. Is not ignorance a defect whereas God is perfect?

I certainly have a very rational soul! I was quick of insight and had a clear perception of events. I think I have been a rather virtuous person. I have not been reckless or foolhardy. I have not given myself to self-debasement, to vice and also not to ascetics. I lived a normal life. I was in every respect a common man.

When my visions came, I could have given in to them and chosen the life of an ecstatic mystic, as Bernard de Clairvaux showed me in Hildegard von Bermersheim. He was clever, Bernard, when he sent Hildegard to me, to show me a way. But I always refused that way. I did not want to become a monk, a mystic, or a scholar. I needed life! I had the intuition of Faith in me, but Reason too was part of my nature. It is strange that the Heavens seem to have relented, for with age my visions receded and disappeared even. Then, God sent his angels to let me find out on my own, by my own human Reason, what the universe is made of. Only then could I abandon to the design of God. For me, there is no greater proof for God's love to me than in that act. We are reconciled now, God and me. Could it be so for all men!

Like you said, it has been my purpose in life to seek God as far as possible, to understand Him and His actions. I have not come far in that, but I believe I got a little further than most men.

I have been much a free man. I respected Kings, but no King was my master.

I also think I have been a good man overall, though I may be presumptuous in that statement. I killed, but I never cheated. I have not done Good everywhere and at all times, and you believe Evil is only absence of Good. In that sense I may have done evil.

You say there are four excellences in humans. One is the acquisition of wealth. I gained enough wealth for my family, though much of that was Old Jacob's work. Two is physical perfection in strength and beauty. I am not very handsome but I was a knight. Three is moral perfection. I think I have been a more virtuous man than an evil man. The last excellence would be intellectual and spiritual perfection. I reasoned with the best philosophers of our time, including you, and held my line. So I can be moderately satisfied with the life God granted to me.

My ship sails tomorrow. I will die soon. Nothing really holds me on in this world since Miriam has gone. I do not fear death, for what is death but a profound sleep? I do fear the instant of dying, that final moment when the soul clings to life yet knows that life will end. May that instant pass as swift as the fall of a drop of water in the desert! May God, Yahweh and Allah by name, grant me the passage to the other life in my sleep. I hope to die at the Paraclete.

Fare well. Please send a note to Young Jacob and Young Sarah. Tell them I love them, that I miss them and that I regret every sweet word I might have said but couldn't because I had to be their father.
God bless you all.

Historical Notes

This book contains many Arabic names. I have not retained the diacritical marks on the letters a, i and u that are necessary to indicate the Arabic sounds in our alphabet. I thought these would unnecessarily complicate the text. I did keep signs for the Arabic letter ‘ayn and for the hamza, by our opening and closing quotation marks.

Daniel’s story plays in France and in Frankish territories of the Near-East; I therefore let the French names as they are, and have not translated for instance Guillaume de Tyr into William of Tyre; I also continued to use the French characters such as â and é and è.

I used our normal way of starting the year at the month of January. This was not so in the Middle Ages, but this other manner would have rendered the text unnecessarily complex.

Book II. Jerusalem

Antioch is a city of Turkey. Its region enters deep to the south into Syrian territory, but Antioch – now called Antakya – is Turkish. This Hatay region decided just before World War II to join Turkey. Antioch was largely an ancient Christian and Byzantine town held by Saracen Amirs when the Crusaders captured it, and many Christians still live in the town today. Very little remains of the Frankish period of the Middle-Ages however, the times of Prince Raymond de Poitiers. The town is renowned for its rich Roman ruins and the museum of the city preserves many fine mosaics. The Cave of Saint Peter, the supposedly first church of Christianity, remains, but parts of the cave ceiling have recently collapsed. The fine front of the church can be visited.

The Holy Lance mentioned in this book, also called the “Spear of Destiny”, the lance with which Saint Longinus pierced Christ’s side on the cross, might be currently in Echmiadzin, the spiritual centre of Armenia and the seat of the Catholicos of the Christian Armenian Church. But other scholars believe the lance was recuperated by the Turks when Antioch was captured, and still later sent by Sultan Bayezid II to Pope Innocent VIII (1432-1492) so that the true lance would now be in the Vatican. The lance was miraculously found during the first crusade under the pavement of the Saint Peter Church of Antioch.

King Louis of France arrived with a large part of his army at Port Saint-Siméon on the 19th of March of the year 1148. The Queen accompanied him. The Royal Couple stayed less than a month at Antioch. They arrived at Jerusalem about the same moment as Emperor Conrad III, who had sailed with a Byzantine fleet from Constantinople. Conrad disembarked at Saint-Jean-d’Acre around the 20th of April of the same year.

There has been what historians have called the “incident of Antioch” between King Louis of France and Queen Aliénor. The King, indeed besotted and jealous, probably

reproached Aliénor to have been too intimate with her uncle, Raymond de Poitiers, Prince of Antioch. What happened exactly will never be known, not in the least because Eudes de Deuil's chronicle stops exactly at that date. Incestuous relations between Aliénor d'Aquitaine and her vain, charming uncle seem highly improbable. Historians of the times have mentioned however that the Queen wanted to stay at Antioch and also that she wanted at that time to divorce from the King. King Louis left Antioch at night, forcing his wife with him, without saluting the Prince of Antioch.

The Frankish Palace of Jerusalem was first in parts of the al-Aqsa Mosque. It was soon transferred to the keep of the David Citadel. The Templar Knights occupied the mosque on Temple Mount.

Ascalon is now Ashkelon, a town of Israel, situated just north of the Palestinian Gaza territory. It was a very old Philistine city and much later a Christian Byzantine town, before the Arabian conquests. The buildings, walls and citadel the town had in the twelfth century have almost all been destroyed during the ages. Some remains of the old fortress, the Crusader city walls, the earthen ramparts and Byzantine as well as Christian churches remain, some in Ashkelon's National Park, the site of Ashkelon's ancient cities.

The capture of Ascalon by the Crusaders in 1153 happened much as told in this book, including the building of the wooden tower, the ensuing burning of the walls and the blocking of the entry to the gap by the Templar knights.

Thierry d'Alsace, Count of Flanders, made three pilgrimages to the Holy Land. From one of those pilgrimages he brought back some of the Holy Blood of Jesus, which Joseph of Arimathea allegedly had caught in the Grail, to his wealthy city of Bruges. Each year still, Bruges stages a marvellous Procession of the Holy Blood, in which Thierry d'Alsace rides with the Holy Blood through the city.

Renaud de Châtillon was only 2 or 3 years younger than Astralabius. He arrived in the Holy Land in 1153. The Châtillons were the Counts of Châtillon-sur-Marne, in the valley of the Marne River, in the Champagne Region, between Reims and Epernay. Châtillon-sur-Marne is now eminent Champagne wine country. Very little remains of the ancient castle of the Châtillon family. The current town of Châtillon-sur-Marne has fewer than a thousand inhabitants, but it prides an enormous statue erected in 1887 of Eudes de Châtillon, born there in 1042 and who became Pope Urban II in 1088.

Châtelain was a common name in medieval France for the Commander of a Castle.

The medieval town of Baniyas in Syria does not exist anymore; it should not be confounded with the modern port town of Baniyas in north-western Syria, south of Latakia, which was called Lavénie by the Franks. The Baniyas of this book was the ancient town called Caesarea Philippi by the Romans. Nothing more but a few old ruins remain. Its environment is still very fertile and the waterfall that gushes out of the mountain cave there is still one of the sources of the River Jordan.

It is very difficult indeed to study human intuition, which is probably why science has not advanced far into understanding its processes. Intuitive intelligence has received more attention these last years, mainly in the sciences of management. People who specialise in human resource management have come to realise that many decisions of management are made by intuitive intelligence rather than by reasoning. Several recent books (by French and Dutch authors for instance) testify to the renewed interest in intuitive intelligence.

The Byzantine titles of Sebastus and Protosebastus, meaning something like majesty and first majesty, were reserved to the Imperial family and to the men married into the Imperial family of Constantinople. These titles were introduced to distinguish them from other aristocrats at the court of the Emperor.

The figures of the Isma'ili Abu Ahmad al-Din Saif ibn Muhammed, Benoit d'Enraygues and Isaac Ben Asher are fictitious.

The Lake of Tibériade is the Lake of Galilee. The Desert of Tih is the Sinai desert.

The Sacred and Imperial Monastery of the God-trodden Mount Sinai is also called the Monastery of Saint Catherine in the Desert. It is a major tourist attraction in the Sinai Peninsula and indeed the oldest monastery in the world. It contains a large library of early manuscripts and of old icons. It is a UNESCO World heritage site.

Saladin lost indeed a battle in the winter of 1177-1178 against King Baudouin IV near Tell al-Safiya and his army was defeated decisively. King Baudouin IV surprised Saladin's troops in a wadi, descending from the north instead of from where Saladin might have expected him, and destroyed his enemy's army much as told in the book. Saladin had to flee through parts of the Sinai Desert before returning to Cairo.

The siege of Jerusalem happened much as I wrote although of course, the chroniclers mention no Daniel du Pallet in the town.

When Saladin conquered Frankish Palestine in 1187, the Christians of Ascalon and Gaza walked to Alexandria to leave Palestine. They embarked there on ships bound for France and Italy. The Franks of Jerusalem, however, walked in three columns north, to Antioch. Saladin's soldiers escorted them a while, but the refugees were treated badly on their way by the Franks of those lands. There is no mention by the Frankish chroniclers of a fourth column that walked to Alexandria.

Abu al-Hassan 'Ali ibn Isma'il al-Ash'ari was an Islamic theologian who lived in contemporary Iraq (873-935 AD). He founded the theory of the Kalam, literally the Word (of God), the speculative theology of Islam. His followers are called the al-Mutakallimun. Al-Ash'ari founded a movement of thinking which bears his name: al-ash'arism or al-ash'ariyya. Ash'arites remain close to the Qur'an for their interpretations of theological subjects.

Al-Ash'ari started his theory by questioning the view of the Mu'tazilites on God's actions: are these actions to be based on rational consideration, and is God bound to do what is best for humans?

The story mentioned in this book's last chapters of the three brothers was first mentioned by Ibn Khallikhan as a public discussion between al-Ash'ari and his

Mu'tazilite teacher abu 'Ali Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab al-Jubba'i. Al-Ash'ari solved the issue by stating that God is the creator of all human actions (indicated by the word *khalq*). Humans are not capable of actions, only God. Humans acquire actions from God (indicated by the word *kasb*). God creates in man the power to make a free choice between right and wrong in the actions and also in intending the act, acquiring thus either the merit of the act and the award for the right choice, or the punishment for the wrong choice. So, man has no free will in the Mu'tazilite sense since he has no real power, but man has derived power by which he acquires a share in the result of the act (the *kasb*). Thus, the al-Mutakallimun also believe in freedom of choice though not in the same way as the Mu'tazilites.

The twelfth century Jewish philosopher and physician called in Arabic Mussa bin Maimun ibn Abdallah al-Kurtubi al-Israili and in Jewish Moshe ben Maimon is now better known by his Greek name of Moses Maimonides (1135-1204). He was one of the greatest Jewish philosophers of all times.

Of the life of Astralabius, son of Abelard and Héloïse, little is known. He was born at Le Pallet, was educated by his aunt, and probably died at the Paraclete, where an entry in the books testimony to his death as the son of the founder of the monastery. This book therefore is a novel, not an historical account of his life. It is as a life might have been, not as it was.