

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

The Bab al-Bahr

A ghoulish spectacle presented itself before the gate where Joao Peculiar had declared war on Al-Usbuna. Standing proud and tall was the reconstructed siege engine. Nicholas was inside with knights and infantry ready to overrun the Moors. The battering ram was primed and ready to smash into the gates and open up an entrance to the medina for the Templars and secular knights. The ox skins had once more been placed all over the engine to protect it from fire. But Geraldo Geraldes had added another ingredient to make the siege engine a much more fearful sight.

Along the top, he had placed some more heads acquired in Almada, which he had not catapulted over the battlements but retained for this purpose. And tied to the front of the siege engine begging for mercy was the extended family of eight he had captured outside the eastern arribalde, lured to their fate by free gifts of food. In four rows of two, they spanned the engine from top to bottom, spreadeagled and screaming.

This macabre scene was sanctified by the presence of Archbishop Joao Peculiar. Resplendent in his most spectacular chausuble and wearing a hulking pectoral cross that heaved with amethysts set in gold, he blessed the siege engine with a liberal sprinkling of holy water.

Behind him, a group of Templar knights held up the True Cross. King Afonso and Hugo Martins rode behind it with the combined might of the Templar Order and the army of Portugal. Afonso felt as if the True Cross was radiating a power across his soldiers that would make them truly invincible. Its presence meant victory was an utter certainty. God had delivered it into their hands and whatever they did that day had divine sanction.

Gualdim Pais had brought his vast Templar army of knights and serjeants into the fray. They had fought so long and hard in nullius diocesis that peace was a mystery to them, a long distant memory. War was their only reality and today Qasim and his men would face an enemy whose zeal could easily match any Almohad. If the Moors of Al-Andalus thought for a moment that they could regain their lost lands, then Gualdim Pais would teach them a lesson that they and their children would never forget.

But Pais had another objective. On his index finger, he bore a ring. Engraved in the gem was a creature with snake coils for legs. *Abraxas!* William had once seen a Templar in Tiberias bearing a similar symbol and not understood why. Pais and battle-hardened Templars like him had sworn oaths to each other. The Old Testament was the Age of the Father who had been a fierce God. The New Testament was the Age of the Son who had created a church that had corrupted his message. But Pais and the Templars who wore this ring would usher in the Age of the Holy Spirit when the church would be swept away and the Trinity would be brought to power through the sword.

We will plant our standard in every church within this city – those jewel-covered prelates will not stand in our way.

From Monte Fragoso came Saher of Archelle and the Norman and English armies to join forces and make the great breakthrough into the city. Pedro Pitoes, Bishop of Porto, stood proudly next to the Norman leader. His time as a hostage had been well spent. With his new friends, he would ensure that mother church was victorious in the city and not the Templars. First he would deal

with the heretical Christians in the city and then he would undermine, using every ounce of cunning and guile he possessed, the Order of the Temple.

This will not be your day!

Notably absent were the Flemish and men of Cologne. Christian of Ghistelles had succeeded in getting his sappers to create a two hundred foot breach in the wall by the eastern arribalde. The gap revealed the streets of the medina and the large dwellings further up in the qasba, as if the skin had been ripped off a portion of the city's body revealing muscle and sinew beneath. The city's people and soldiers were hurriedly filling the gap as best they could. But Christian of Ghistelles could see his opportunity to get into Al-Usbuna before the Normans and sack the city first. He had forbidden all other armies to come near and threatened them with force if they did.

Qasim watched the Franks assembling. The siege engine rolled up the narrow stretch of beach before the Bab al-Bahr. On its front hung Geraldo's hostages, crying pitifully. The al-kaid signalled to his archers to end their suffering.

"Aim well! Kill them quickly!"

With tears running down their faces, the archers dispatched the eight martyrs. Their bodies, pierced by arrows, now hung limp over the ox skins. But the sight struck terror into the hearts of the Moorish defenders as Geraldo Gerald's had intended.

Qasim gave his last orders before combat got underway.

"Prepare the Greek Fire. Heat up the braziers. Have the garrison ready to defend the Bab al-Bahr. Archers – draw your bows."

Once more the walls of Al-Usbuna pulsed into life as a hail of arrows spewed out, followed by heavy rocks and stones from the ballistae. Every watchtower hurled down great missiles that demolished rows of Franks. An arrow struck one of the oxen towing the siege engine and its progress stalled.

"The tide is rising," called a Norman knight, pointing at the estuary. "The wheels need support!"

The dead ox was cleared and a group of serfs from Ipswich in Suffolk volunteered to go in front of the siege engine and lay down wooden planks that would give the wheels more purchase. To do this without being killed by the Moorish archers, they hid under a large wicker roof that resembled a small house.

This house ran along the beach absorbing arrows as it went. Working at speed as rocks and boiling sand were dropped on top of the roof, its inhabitants dug away at the sand and laid down wooden planks. Then the wicker roofed contraption moved away.

"Welsh cat got here in time," an English knight said to Nicholas.

"What?" The boy answered. "I see no cat."

The company inside the siege engine laughed.

“There it is.” He pointed at the roof now moving at breakneck speed to dodge the Moorish missiles. “That’s a Welsh cat!”

Sidray squinted to view the unfolding battle from the qasba. The calm detachment with which he’d observed the conflicts before had gone. He no longer had the True Cross to flourish at Ibn Arrik if he got too close. As an apple tea was brought to Sidray, he sent it flying across the cobbles with a furious sweep of his hand.

“I have no time for that!”

His thinkers had been caught trying to leave the city under cover of night and he’d placed them under arrest in some rooms in the qasr – not an uncomfortable prison. But some in Al-Usbuna were fairing a lot worse.

Market traders and their customers in the souks had been overheard disparaging their ruler.

The taifa is weak. Allah is not with him. He is a vain tyrant.

These wagging tongues were now nailed to the door of the Great Mosque as an example to anyone else who might think of expressing dissent.

Sidray had forbidden his Scorpions and Jackals to enter the fray. These African warriors, the Tangerines, were to stay in the qasba for his own personal protection. Not that Sidray wished to countenance the idea of the Franks bursting into the medina. But he had the eventuality covered.

“Sulayman.”

The taifa’s astrologer bowed low before him.

“Yes, great lord.”

“If your horoscope proves to be in any way wrong, I will have you crucified on the walls of Badajoz. And I will force feed you your charts.”

William watched the siege engine’s uneasy progress, unable to help Nicholas, as Qasim unleashed Greek fire on to the tottering machine. Screeching, blazing jets arched out of the city’s watchtowers. The great tongues of hot yellow liquid filled the air with an acrid, sulphurous aroma. Nicholas gasped as the curling flames howled out of the city walls and spread over the front of the siege engine, cooking the eight bodies tied to the front instantly.

The Welsh cat reappeared, only this time to pour water over the flames.

“Get that engine moving before it is destroyed,” Hugo Martins yelled.

“I want to be inside that damned city,” King Afonso chimed in.

The oxen were whipped mercilessly. Crusaders took the ropes and pulled as well. Bit by bit, the siege engine moved. There were pockets of flames all over the front of the machine but this time Nicholas could see the walls of the city getting ever closer.

Qasim ordered more Greek fire and his soldiers fired endless arrows at the deathly contraption as it neared. The top of the siege engine was now visible within the medina and the womenfolk joined their husbands with burning material to throw at it. Anything that could be set on fire and hurled was now aimed at the devilish machine.

Boom.

The first thud of the battering ram against the Bab al-Bahr resounded, but the formidable wooden doors barely moved an inch. Frustrated, a group of Norman soldiers burst out of the siege engine and pushed against the doors. But being out in the open, they were at the mercy of the al-kaid who signalled to his guards. In no time, boiling sand coated the over-enthusiastic infantrymen, cascading over their brimmed kettle hats and sticking to their bodies. The agonised screams chilled Nicholas's blood.

The sudden loss of their comrades stunned the Normans and, at all levels in the tower, nobody moved or said anything. The ram fell silent and the wheels of the siege engine ceased to turn.

Till one voice piped up.

“Come on - we're that close, aren't we? Don't let them drive us back now. We are nearly there.”

The seasoned battlers regarded the small figure in his borrowed soldier's tunic which was slightly too big for him. Nicholas waited for the dismissive aside that would put him back in his lowly place.

“He's right, lads! Put your backs into it.”

Boom.

Shock had turned to fury as the men within the siege engine sought to avenge their comrades. They pounded the gate over and over.

Boom.

The splintering of wood and groaning of an iron bolt as it buckled under the strain raised morale. The siege engine was like a maddened giant pounding at the entry to Al-Usbuna.

Boom.

An almighty crack resounded as the thick iron bolt broke and the doors slowly swung open. Behind them, the soldiers and citizens of the medina frantically tried to close the Bab al-Bahr, but it was as if the gate itself had surrendered and given up the fight. As the ram burst through, the drawbridge from the top of the siege engine lowered on to the ramparts and knights scurried up the wooden stairs within the engine, clambering on to the battlements and slaying the waiting guards.

“Charge!”

Pais, Martins and a vast mass of Templars stormed in through the gate followed by the Portuguese. The Moorish guards struggled to push them back but the warriors in white mantles

hacked them down. William's sword flashed this way and that, killing all around him. Martins felt a strength he thought he had long lost return to him as he felled one guard after another. Pais could be seen moving at lightning speed across the battlements, finishing off every sentry and archer he encountered.

Qasim was incredulous. The medina was falling to the Franks. Hurriedly, he pushed his men back towards the qasba. They would fight house by house but he could see the forces of Ibn Arrik had the advantage. As he retreated, the al-kaid ran straight into the Flemish and men of Cologne. They had broken into the city before the rest of the Franks and had set about looting. They were so pre-occupied with seizing wealth that they ignored the Moorish military governor and he fled with his men in another direction.

Dom Afonso was dismayed to see the Flemish stripping the city when it had not yet been taken. Sword in hand he fought alongside his men and they advanced slowly across the medina. But as he turned into one souk, a familiar figure staggered into his path with a large, stained sack in his hand.

"Geraldo, I have not seen you for hours." He looked at the sack, sadly. "Please, old friend, do not say you have been looting as well."

"No. Well – it's a kind of booty. Not gold. Something I like to collect."

"What?"

"Oh," Geraldo shrugged, "you know what I have in here."

"I do not," the king persisted.

This was something the knight had not shown his king before. Not that Geraldo was ashamed, but Afonso could be such a prude at times.

"It is nothing important."

"Show me what you collect, Geraldo."

Slowly he opened the bag and Afonso peered within - several sets of eyes stared back - decapitated heads, both male and female. No wonder the sack was stiff with blood.

"My queen is right," Afonso said bleakly, "I keep bad company. I really should mix with better people."

"Ha!" Geraldo scoffed. "Would they take Santarem? Sintra? Attack Moorish towns with no care for their safety. No! But that's what I do for you, Afonso, while that French *bitch* sneers."

Afonso reeled from his words.

"You have shown me your true worth today, Geraldo. We are no longer friends. Leave my sight and never return to court."

The dinar rolled along Geraldo's lower lip. Picking up his sack, he turned his back on Dom Afonso and stomped off. Refusing to look back, he turned into an alleyway in search of another

head. But suddenly, Fearless Geraldo realised he was fighting back tears. Drunken tears maybe, but tears nonetheless.

“I will make you pay, Afonso,” he sobbed to himself, “I will make you pay very dearly.”