

# 1

I was only thirteen the day I killed my first man. It was both an accidental and intentional act. I was on my own, travelling, what I thought, far, far away from the warm comforts of home and family. I was not used to the rigours of caravan travelling: the constant dust and grit in my eyes, nose and mouth. The disgusting smell of the camels. Sleeping on the unforgiving shale of the semi-desert. Food that would never have made the table at home, and constantly sore back, bottom and thighs from riding my ill-mannered pony all day.

Our caravan was travelling from my hometown of Acre, on the coast of Outremer, to Jerusalem. There I was to enter into an apprenticeship with a well-renowned physician named Hadar. My merchant father had arranged the apprenticeship after considering my temperament, talents and aspirations. My father had business dealings with Hadar, mostly supplying the medical goods and equipment he required, but also in the reciprocal trade of the kinds of religious relics that were becoming very sought after in Europe.

Our small party consisted of sixteen pilgrims, three of whom were women. They were all on foot and carried staves or walking sticks to aid their passage. The six of us on horse or camelback were either merchants or bona-fide travellers. Accompanying us was a train of twelve pack animals, mostly camels, all roped together in a line, carrying merchandise and belongings.

Despite the truce between King Baldwin of Jerusalem and the Emir Saladin, no one travelled the roads of Outremer without an armed escort due to the prevalence of raiding bandits and Bedouin tribesmen. It was for this reason that our caravan was escorted by a small troop of Knights Hospitaller. There were three knights all mounted on fierce and warlike destriers, two sergeants and a young squire mounted on the smaller and gentler palfreys.

‘Ippolito. Why so glum?’ asked Raymond, the young Occitan squire from the south of France, as he pulled his chestnut palfrey up beside me. As usual, his still puppy fat and freckled face was smiling beneath its shock of strawberry blonde hair inherited from some distant Viking ancestor.

‘I am not used to this. I suppose I am missing home, and a comfortable bed and seat,’ I replied, giving emphasis to the latter.

‘I suspected as much. You don’t seem your bright and alert self. Cheer up. Tomorrow we should reach Montjoie, The Mount of Joy, and the very well-appointed monastery of Saint Samuel. I can assure you that you will feel very much better when we get there,’ he replied with some enthusiasm.

I was about to ask what made Saint Samuel’s so appealing when suddenly wild ululation and yelling broke out from the heights of a rise to our left. Almost immediately more than two dozen riders on horses and camels appeared from over the top of the rise. They were around four hundred paces away but were charging rapidly down the slope. All were waving swords or short spears in the air.

‘Circle the pack animals,’ came the bellowing command of Sir Giles above the noise of the attackers. ‘Pilgrims and others either in the middle or prepare to defend yourselves.’

Raymond had quickly turned and galloped off to assist with circling the pack animals. This was quickly done as they were all roped together. Most of the pilgrims quickly rushed to within

the circle. A small few of the men, with staves for walking, stood bravely around the circle to help defend it.

‘Knights and sergeants on me to the left,’ thundered the voice of Sir Giles as the Hospitallers raced to join him, drawing their long broadswords. One of the sergeants, Edward, was waving a vicious-looking chained mace above his head. None were heavily armoured, but neither were those attacking us. They bravely formed their small group into a line, with just enough space between each other to wield their weapons without endangering those beside them and charged at the oncoming marauders, yelling, ‘St Jean, St Jean and Jerusalem.’

I saw Raymond standing with the few pilgrims willing to fight. I drew the slim but deadly stiletto my father had given me and ran over to join him. Raymond’s blade was a short falchion. We were both still too small to carry or wield the great long swords the knights used.

‘At least we have weapons and not staves,’ said Raymond, trying to swallow. ‘I pity those with only staves. They will break at the first blow of a sword or scimitar.’

We watched as the two charging parties came together with a great clash of metal. Sergeant Edward’s mace was the first to make a kill as its spiked head smashed into the jaw, mouth and nose of a bandit, leaving a bloody, pulverised mess resting upon dead shoulders. Sir Giles removed the head of another rider with a great, swinging blow that continued to follow through and took the nose off a second rider beside his headless comrade. Within moments, the five knights and sergeants were locked into a whirling melee of flashing swords and spears, screaming horses, curses, dust and blood as they battled twice their number.

‘Oh, Sacred Father,’ gasped Raymond, ‘the rest of them are coming for us.’

About another dozen bandits were charging directly toward our small band of barely defended individuals. Their cries and

yells sent a chill through my mind and body, to say nothing of the small, wet discharge that squeezed through my nether end.

As the bandits drew closer, I noticed one of the pilgrims step forward from our line. He was tall, more powerfully built than the other pilgrims and had a much heavier and longer stave than his fellows. Grasping the stave at its narrow end, thereby giving him the length to stay out of sword reach, he swung the stave at the legs of the leading camel, bringing the rider down in front of our group. Immediately three of the pilgrims fell on the unseated rider with their staves, beating him about the head and quickly rendering him unconscious and bloodied.

The four pilgrims were joined by some others from both outside and within the circle, and they set about to repeat the strategy in two separate groups facing the hostile on-comers.

‘We have a better chance if we work together as well,’ said Raymond.

We moved together, drew and pointed our weapons. Unfortunately, the pilgrims had brought down a number of riders but not all had been subdued, continuing to fight with swords on the ground. The slaughter they wreaked among the pilgrims saw most of them fall. I watched as the tall pilgrim was felled by a slashing cut across his abdomen, spilling his bowels, their contents and his blood onto the desert shale.

Suddenly Raymond and I were faced by a wickedly grinning bandit with great gaps between his few blackened teeth, raising his sword ready for a swipe at one or both of us. He appeared to laugh at our much smaller blades and raised his sword higher for the kill.

‘Now!’ yelled Raymond.

We ran simultaneously at him, blades raised, which put him off guard for a second, allowing both of us to barrel into him and bowl him over along with Raymond and myself. I felt the stiletto rip from my hand as I rolled away from the bandit and jumped

to my feet. Raymond was on his feet as well, an unbloodied falchion still in his hand. The bandit lay on his back, gripping the handle of my stiletto buried to its hilt in the soft part of his body immediately below the sternum and rib cage. The bandit was grimacing and staring down in shock at the handle. His legs suddenly kicked and jerked, his eyes rolled back in their sockets as blood flowed from his mouth and nose, and then he lay still.

Raymond and I were both stunned and did not notice the remaining raiders had penetrated our perimeter and were breaking into the circle of pack animals. They were busy leading them away from the fracas by the conveniently tied ropes. One of the raiders had a struggling female pilgrim slung across his saddle and with his free hand was beating her into subjugation about the head and shoulders.

I looked again at the dead bandit, his face frozen in its rictus of agony and death, my blade still inside him, the blood slowly spilling from his mouth and suddenly, I vomited all over the corpse.

‘Nice touch.’ Raymond laughed.

## 2

There was no point in pursuing the bandits as they herded our pack animals away, whooping and yelling with delight over their captured bounty. We were simply too few to even contemplate such a rash action. Of our original party of twenty-eight, only sixteen still stood upright. Eight pilgrims lay dead on the bloody ground, some still grasping the staves with which they had bravely defended themselves and the group. Of the Hospitallers, two, a knight and a sergeant, lay dead. The other three, one of them very pale and only semi-conscious, all carried wounds of varying severity. Their horses were not unscathed either. Of those who had taken refuge within the pack animals, the only victims were the kidnapped woman and a merchant who died defending his pack camel from abduction.

Of the bandits, sixteen lay dead, eight around the skirmish with the knights and eight around the pilgrim perimeter. We had taken a heavy toll on the bandits, just as they had on us. The big difference was they had our pack animals, belongings, shelter, food and water.

Sir Giles did not waste any time in assessing the situation, and while Raymond was still bandaging a long but shallow gash to his left forearm, he called us all together.

‘We have all lost friends and comrades here today but there is no time to grieve if we are to stay alive. It is over a day and a half of arduous uphill travel to Montjoie, the nearest refuge to

our current location. We have no food or shelter and only the limited water left in our personal skins remain to us. We do have six serviceable horses that are unscathed and can be ridden on rotation every hour to ensure we all get some rest in the journey that waits ahead of us. Be aware we must walk through the rest of this day, through the night and into late tomorrow before we can have any real rest or sustenance. We do not have the time, or the body fluids, to bury our dead in this heat. All of you gather what you still have and be ready to move on in fifteen minutes.'

We all had misgivings about leaving our dead unburied but Sir Giles had been correct about there not being the body fluids in all of us to bury eleven men in the desert scree and make the journey as well. We were already thirsty from the heat of battle as well as the heat of the day. I checked my water skin and found it only half full. I imagined it was probably the same for the other travellers. Knowing a little of what lay ahead, I resisted the urge to take a pull of water from the skin.

I had one last task to perform and that was to retrieve my stiletto from the bandit's dead body. I wandered over to where he lay and stared at the mess of blood and vomit, the hilt of my blade standing up in the middle of it. I gingerly grasped the sticky handle and pulled. I was surprised by the resistance to my effort as the soft flesh of his torso clung lovingly to the blade. I tried harder a second time and the blade came free with a wet sucking sound. I cleaned the blade as best I could with some leaves from one of the hardy desert shrubs that grew there before putting the blade back in its scabbard.

I offered the first ride on the pony I had ridden to one of the women who was particularly distressed, as I learned, by the death of her pilgrim husband and the abduction of her sister-in-law. Her name was Enid. I felt sad for her in her grief and gently assisted her to mount. I then took the lead by the reins and led pony and rider over to the caravan line. It was only a moment before Sir Giles waved his fist forward in the air and our tiny

caravan moved off to the east.

About an hour later, Sir Giles called a brief halt to change riders. Raymond came up beside me, leading one of the destriers with the more seriously wounded knight in the saddle. At some stage, he had become unconscious and was strapped to the saddle's cantle to prevent him from falling. He was deathly pale.

'Ippolito, your face is redder than a cardinal's cap.'

'And my feet hotter than the Devil's kitchen,' I replied between teeth, lips and tongue that were becoming stuck together in a thickly cloying paste of what little saliva I could produce in my mouth.

Raymond reached down and picked up a small smooth pebble, wiping the dust off it onto his tunic.

'Here,' he said, handing the pebble to me, 'put it in your mouth and gently roll it around. It will help keep your mouth moist.'

I thanked him and put the pebble in my mouth. Within a few moments, it was working.

The day's heat and hardship drew itself out. Only after everybody had had a rotation on horseback did I allow myself to take my turn. The sun was mercifully setting behind us and the heat of the day slowly dissipating. I allowed myself a small mouthful of water to rinse and swallow. The temptation to guzzle more of the precious fluid straight down was enormous, but I resisted, stoppered the skin and put it back by my side. As I did so, I saw Raymond smiling and nodding approvingly at my self-control.

Sir Giles was unrelenting in keeping us moving on, even as darkness took hold of the land around us. Fortunately, the desert skies were clear and the stars and a gibbous moon were bright in the sky, effectively reducing the risk of injury whilst journeying at night. Even so, Edward, the remaining sergeant, went ahead with an improvised torch its light reflecting off his bald head.



As he went, he called out any potential obstacles such as holes and other trip hazards.

We plodded our weary way on through the night. Fatigue and the shock of the day's events kept us mostly silent with very little conversation passing between us. The desert night was cold and I was glad that despite my fatigue, I had to keep on moving. It did help keep me warmer than I would have been had we been resting and trying to sleep on the desert floor.

It was on one of our hourly change of riders that I saw Raymond lead his horse and its rider over to Sir Giles and quietly say something to him. Sir Giles moved his great horse next to Raymond's smaller pony and felt the neck of the rider in several places, searching for a pulse. He slowly looked down and then nodded his head to Raymond. Sir Giles got down from his destrier and quickly tied it to a nearby gorse bush. Together, he and Raymond unbound the knight from the cante and gently lowered the body to the ground. Again, there was no time for a burial or last words.

Sir Giles was all business again as he mounted his horse and called out to the troupe, 'Spare mount over here for whomever needs it.'

It was the two surviving merchants who immediately moved to grab the chance of an hour off their feet by claiming the mount. What was ridiculous in this midnight moment was that both merchants came to blows with each other trying to mount the beast from opposite sides and headbutting each other as they tried to step into the stirrups and swing into the saddle. Amidst a lot of cursing and swearing at each other, Giles swung his gauntleted fist across both their heads, sending the two tumbling to the ground.

'Enid,' called Giles, 'the saddle is yours. These two fools can keep walking.'

Enid came up to the horse and Raymond assisted her to mount

bringing her almost eye to eye with Giles.

‘Thank you, Sir Knight,’ she said.

We continued through the night. I maintained the rationing of my water by only taking a small mouthful, rinsing and then swallowing at every change of riders. Despite this, I still felt tormented by thirst and my tongue was constantly dry. I was a growing thirteen-year-old boy and by this time was also ravenously hungry. I imagined Raymond felt the same. He was not complaining and I followed his example.

We continued making our slow way through the night in tiredness and silence. Eventually, the sky in the east began to lighten and before too long a burning, bright yellow sun began to bore into our tired eyes. In the distance, I could just see the silhouette of what looked like a monastery sitting atop one of the mountains in the range ahead of us.

‘Behold,’ called Sir Giles, ‘Montjoie and Saint Samuel’s. Be of good cheer. We shall be there before the end of day.’

A very brief and ragged cheer greeted this news. We were all just too tired, sore, thirsty and hungry.