

Saladin

by Nina Prentice

(Adapted book. Pre-Intermediate level)

CHAPTER 1

A small weak boy

Tikrit - 1138

'Help! Help! He's going to kill me!'

Hearing the screams, Shirkuh ran through the dark streets of the town. Suddenly he came around the corner of a building. A soldier was holding a knife to a woman's neck. Her eyes were wild and afraid. Shirkuh didn't stop to think. In a minute, the two men were fighting for the knife. In another minute, the soldier was dead, his blood bright red on the ground.

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Late that night, Ayyub heard a soft knock at the door. It was his brother Shirkuh asking for news.

'The baby hasn't come yet. The mother's having a bad time.' The father looked at his brother. 'Why are you hurrying?'

'Ayyub. I've just killed a man by mistake, but I was angry.'

'Shirkuh! Why did you do this? It'll be difficult for us here in Tikrit. The man's family will make trouble.'

'I couldn't stop myself. While I was coming home, a woman called out for help. A soldier was going to kill her. I didn't want to hurt him. It was an accident. But now Governor Zengi says that all our family must leave at once or we'll be in danger.'

'Oh, Shirkuh! You're a lighter. You're stronger than most men. But when you're angry, you stop thinking. It's always been this way, but I can't leave until the child arrives.' just then they heard a cry. Ayyub hurried away to the women's side of the house. 'What news?' he asked his sister.

'Good news, thank God! The child is born. But look at him. He's very small and weak. I don't think that he'll live through the night. The mother too is very ill,' she said.

'There's nothing to be done. We must go now!' Ayyub held his new son. 'I'll call you Yusuf because you must find a new life away from where you were born, like the Prophet Yusuf did in Egypt long, long ago.'

Baalbek - 1145

'Please, please tell us the story again! Please!' The three brothers were with their father, Ayyub, in the garden of his fine house in the old town. Turan Shah, the oldest

boy, was next to his father. Yusuf, now seven years old, held Al-Adil, the baby, in his arms and sat as near as he could to listen.

Ayyub smiled and began:

Six years before our Yusuf here was born, I was near the river Tigris catching some birds for your mother to cook for dinner. Suddenly, I saw a man on the other side of the water. He was having trouble running. He had blood all over his face and clothes, but he still carried his sword. Behind him I could see many soldiers riding fast horses. I thought quickly. Near me was a small fishing boat. I jumped in and pushed it across the river with a long stick.

Just then, the soldiers started to get near the water. I called to the man and helped him into the boat. I pushed the boat quickly into the river while the soldiers started shooting at us. Arrows hit the boat, but with God's help, we weren't hurt! At last, we got to the other side. Dirty, wet and tired, we ran back home. Your mother and sisters cooked us a wonderful meal that we enjoyed silently. The next morning I learned the name of my guest. It was the great Zengi himself! His army lost the battle the day before and all his soldiers were dead or prisoners. He wanted to hurry back to Mosul to make sure that the town was safe so I gave him new clothes and my best horse. Riding away, he said, 'I'll never forget your help and will always be a true friend to you and your family.'

'What was the horse like, Father?' asked Yusuf.

'All you think about is horses, Yusuf,' said Turan Shah.

'He was the brother of the wind. It's good to give with open hands. Zengi has been our friend since then. I'm Governor of Baalbek and we're safe and comfortable here because of him.'

Damascus, Syria - 1152

'Yusuf! You must come now. It's time to go to school.'

'Oh, Al-Adil, I don't want to go! Look at my horse, Aneed! I don't know why Turan Shah says that he's bad. He's going to be very good at polo. He always knows what to do!'

The boy of fourteen rode quickly up to the ball with the stick in his hand. He hit it hard and sent it flying over to his brother. Al-Adil stopped the ball with his foot.

'Father says that you're the best rider of all of us, Yusuf. That's why, when Turan Shah couldn't do anything with Aneed, Father gave the horse to you. But you must go to school or you'll be in terrible trouble. Don't forget what Father said the last time that you were late!'

Yusuf jumped down from his horse's back and took him back to the house. Then he ran as fast as he could for school.

The old teacher looked up angrily when Yusuf hurried into the room. He was very late. 'You'll have to stay this afternoon to do all the work that you've missed, boy!'

Yusuf sat next to Turan Shah. 'Where are we?' he asked.

Turan Shah showed Yusuf the words in the holy Koran that the boys were reading. 'It's the story of the Prophet Yusuf and how his brothers left him in the desert because they didn't like him,' he smiled, not very kindly.

'Stop talking and learn!' The teacher's stick hit both boys. It hurt. Turan Shah cried out, but Yusuf said nothing.

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'What am I going to do with you, Yusuf?' said his father later that day. 'Your teacher tells me that you're clever and quick to learn, but that you're never at school. I know that you're always with the horses, but you're not a child any more. You must learn to be a man and a soldier. I'm going to send you to my brother Shirkuh. You know that now he's an important general working for Zengi's son, Nuradin, up in Aleppo.'

'Can I take Aneed with me?'

'No! Since we came to Damascus you've only played. Now you must work. Get ready. We leave in an hour.'

CHAPTER 2

A chance to prove himself

Aleppo, Syria - 1152

Yusuf felt sad saying goodbye to his mother and sisters before he left Damascus with his father. At first, he was excited to be starting a new life, but after four days of hard travel on hot dry roads, he was worried. He asked himself over and over again, 'Will I be a good soldier?'

'Yusuf, look! That's where you'll live,' his father said while they rode through some small villages just outside Aleppo.

On a high hill in the middle of the town, the boy saw the tall walls of the castle climb up towards the sky. They made Yusuf feel very small and unimportant. The building looked like it was growing even taller while he rode through the town towards it. Yusuf wanted to go back home, but he knew that he couldn't say anything to his father. Ayyub rode up into the castle and Yusuf followed silently. They found the general talking to his men in a large room full of swords. Shirkuh was an ugly man, with only one eye. No one could say that he looked like a general, but he was brave and he knew everything about the best ways to fight and win.

After the soldiers left, the general turned to the boy.

'Well, Yusuf, are you sure that you want to be a soldier?'

'I'll do my best, Uncle.'

'If you want to be one of my soldiers, you'll do what I tell you. Do you understand?'

'Yes, Uncle.'

Shirkuh now turned to his brother.

'Ayyub, I'll take the boy, but only because you and I are brothers. I don't think that he'll be a good lighter or a soldier, but we'll see. If he's any trouble, he goes home - at once!'

Yusuf wanted to do well, but it was difficult. He tried hard to learn. But he was still small and weak and he found the fighting hard.

His sword was heavy.

The other soldiers were fast and strong. His uncle was often angry.

'Hey, Yusuf! You'll never be a soldier if you fight like that! I can't use you as you are. Go and try to understand how the law works from Governor Nuradin. I don't want to see you here again until you can do something better than this! Work hard or you'll go back home.'

Yusuf did what his uncle said. He thought,

'I'll never be a soldier.'

What will my father say if I have to go home? Learning the law is so boring, but Uncle Shirkuh thinks I can't do anything else. Oh, I want to be strong like other boys!'

Now he stood for long hours in the governor's rooms in the castle watching people asking Nuradin for help. At first, everything was hard to understand, but soon Yusuf saw that Nuradin was a great man. The governor always listened to everybody - poor people, and women and children, too - not just rich and strong men. The governor studied the law and talked about difficult problems with wise men. He thought about their words and took time to find the right answer.

After three months, the governor saw that Yusuf learned quickly. People liked the boy because he was friendly to everyone. His thin face usually looked sad when he was alone, but when he spoke to people, he had a kind and happy smile. He also always tried to help anyone with troubles. Nuradin began to talk to the boy about the problems of the castle, the town and the army. The governor also talked to Yusuf about his great hope:

'One day soon I want to make all the Muslim people stop fighting each other. We must work together to take Jerusalem back from the Franks. Palestine isn't their land after all. Nothing is more important than this, and we must all fight to make it happen!'

Now Yusuf wanted to fight the Franks too. It was wrong that they held the holy places. He also understood that Franks sometimes made friends with some Muslims and together they fought against other Muslims and took their houses, land and animals. Nothing was safe. It was also very hard for Muslims to go on pilgrimage to the holy

city of Makkah. The road was too dangerous because of all the Frankish castles near it.

'I must get into Nuradin's army! But how can I do it when Uncle Shirkuh thinks that I'm too weak? I'll have to learn clever ways to win against stronger men. I know that the Franks are good fighters. Their horses are bigger, their soldiers wear a lot of armour, and they have many castles. But I know that we'll win if we work together and make good plans.'

From that day, he borrowed a horse and learned to use his sword day and night when he wasn't working for Nuradin. He wanted to show his uncle that he wasn't just a good student of law, but also a real soldier.

One day, Nuradin asked Yusuf to play polo with him. The boy ran to find a horse. He was so excited, and he forgot about everything - his uncle, the law, and even fighting the Franks! They played inside the castle walls. Everyone watched Yusuf and his horse following the ball closely, without a mistake.

Polo was like a battle, fast and dangerous. Many horses fell, men were hurt, and one died when a horse ran over him, but Yusuf rode wonderfully. He stayed out of trouble and, by hitting clever shots, he helped Nuradin and his players to win.

'How can you play polo so well?' the governor asked the boy.

'I learned it in Damascus, sir. I have a wonderful horse there. My father says that he'll send him to me when General Shirkuh says that I can fight with the army.'

'Tell your father to send the horse now. You're small and not very strong, but you're a clever fighter. You think before you do things, and you want to win. There's nothing more important in a soldier. The general will be happy to have another good man in his army. Go to him now and tell him what I said.'

The general looked up when he heard the news. He wasn't smiling. 'Very well. You can come back, but don't think that you'll be fighting. Polo and war are different. You'll work in my office and learn how to move fighting men and horses quickly and to find food, weapons, and a safe place for them to sleep. Remember that brave soldiers and fast horses are only half the story. We only win wars when strong men are ready to fight in the right place at the right time.'

Yusuf was in the army now, but life wasn't easier. Every day he made sure that the soldiers and their horses had good food to eat. He counted weapons and made sure that they were strong and clean. He paid soldiers and kept the army's money safe. He found answers to all kinds of problems from morning until night, but sometimes he felt sad because he never knew if his uncle was happy with his hard work. There was no fighting for Yusuf, but sometimes Nuradin asked him to play polo and on Aneed's back he forgot his troubles.

Aleppo - 1163

Yusuf was twenty-five, and still working for his uncle, when news came of trouble in Egypt. Vizier Shawar wanted Nuradin's help to keep the country out of the hands of his enemies. He promised to give a lot of money to the Syrians to make them come, but it was only when Amalric, the Frankish King of Jerusalem, decided to move into Egypt that Nuradin began to think about sending his army. 'The Franks mustn't get to Cairo and use the money that they find there to make their armies in the Holy Land stronger,' he said.

Yusuf worked hard for months to get the soldiers ready for the long journey to Egypt. There was a lot to do and General Shirkuh was always busy. He spoke to Yusuf only to give him more work and more difficult problems to put right. The young man worried that he couldn't go on the campaign, but he worked as hard as possible to make ready all that the army needed. The days went by and still Yusuf heard nothing about going. He knew that the army was leaving in less than a week.

'My uncle will leave me behind, and I'll spend the rest of my life counting swords and paying soldiers!' he thought sadly.

CHAPTER 3

The fight for Egypt

Egypt - 1164

'What are you doing, Yusuf? Why aren't you ready to go?' Shirkuh's face was red and angry.

Yusuf jumped up when his uncle came into his office in the castle of Aleppo. 'Why, Uncle, do you want me on the campaign? You said nothing about me coming, so I thought that you wanted me to stay here to take care of things.'

'Stupid boy! You know everything about my soldiers now. I need you to make sure that they have everything they need. Go! We leave tomorrow at first light!'

It didn't take long for Yusuf to find his sword, a few clothes and his holy Koran, and then to get his horse ready. At last, he was one of Nuradin's soldiers, and not just an office boy for his uncle. 'If I do well in Egypt, perhaps one day I can be in the army that will take back the holy places!' he thought.

'Men!' Shirkuh called, 'To take our enemies by surprise, we must move quickly. The journey will be very difficult, but never forget that you're the best soldiers in Syria. We'll do good work for Nuradin in Egypt, and then the people and the gold of that rich country will help us to fight the Franks in the Holy Land.'

There was a great shout from the men. Then they all jumped on their horses and rode out through the castle gates. While he followed the general and his men, Yusuf thought, 'No one will ever see me afraid! I'll do my very best and, with God's help, my uncle, my father and Nuradin will see that I have done well!' The road was long and hard, but Yusuf worked without stopping to help Shirkuh get the army safely to Egypt. It was important that all the men, their weapons, and their horses were ready for the fight once they arrived.

Yusuf enjoyed the campaign. Best of all was fighting at Shirkuh's side, riding with the Syrian army against King Amalric and his Frankish knights, and against the Egyptian enemies of Vizier Shawar. Yusuf watched and learned while his uncle won quickly with a few short, well-fought battles.

With the help of the Syrians, Shawar was soon the strongest man in Egypt once again. But he wanted to be strong without the help of Nuradin's army, and he did not want to pay Nuradin the gold that he promised him before. Shawar decided to talk to the Franks. 'I don't like General Shirkuh and the Syrians. They want to get their hands on Egypt, so I want your knights to push him and his army out of the country. If you do what I ask, I'll give you the money that I promised Nuradin!'

The Frankish generals agreed to help Shawar, and they battled against Shirkuh and his soldiers and pushed them out of Egypt. The Syrians fought bravely, but in the end, they had to go back to Aleppo with nothing to show

for their hard work. Nuradin was very angry. He thought that the campaign was a bad use of time, money, horses and men. He didn't want his army to go to Egypt ever again. Shirkuh was angry too.

'Don't worry, Yusuf,' he said to his nephew, 'Shawar will never win against me! Just wait. Nuradin doesn't want more fighting now, but when he sees how Amalric and the Franks get rich in Egypt with Shawar's help, he'll send us again. And then we'll make that criminal Shawar sorry that he was ever born!'

Egypt - 1167

The old general was right. Three years later, Yusuf, now twenty- nine, was marching beside his uncle at the head of the Syrian army. 'Why aren't we taking the same road to Egypt as last time, General?' asked Yusuf.

'Shawar and the Franks know that we're coming. We must travel quickly and secretly. My hope is to surprise them by taking the road down to the Dead Sea, and then travelling through the Sinai Desert. We'll get into the country by the back door while our enemies are looking for us through their front windows!'

'But, Uncle, won't it be terrible for the men?'

'Yes, but my soldiers are brave, and they want to win against Shawar and his Frankish friends. They'll do it!'

They crossed the hot dry land and near Suez, there was a deadly desert storm that very nearly killed them all.

Men and horses were ill or died, but Yusuf spoke to the soldiers to help them go on bravely: 'Nuradin needs you to teach Shawar that he can't break his promises to Syrians and stay out of danger! Under Shirkuh we'll have a great victory in Egypt and then he'll give rich presents for the bravest!'

Finally, they arrived. The men were very weak, and Shirkuh decided that they weren't ready to fight against the large armies of Vizier Shawar and King Amalric. He stopped his soldiers at Giza, on the other side of the river from Cairo.

'We'll wait and see what they do. I know that Shawar's in trouble. Most Egyptians don't like it that he's friendly with the Franks. Everyone hates it when he gives Egyptian money to Amalric because they know that he uses it to keep the Franks lighting in the Holy Land. No Muslim wants this! Before long, all the Egyptians will light for us.'

At last, early one spring morning, Yusuf ran to his uncle. 'Sir, the enemy's coming!'

The old general looked at his nephew. 'Today, I want you to do some real fighting, Yusuf. Take the group of soldiers in the middle of my army. Make the Frankish knights think that you and your men are weak and afraid. Turn and run. They'll follow with the hope of killing many of you, but I'll take the rest of our army around them. Then you'll surprise them when you turn round and fight!'

Yusuf was worried, 'Will I do well? Will the men follow me and do what I ask?' But there were no problems.

The plan worked! King Amalric was lucky to get away safely, but Syrian swords and arrows killed many of his knights. It was a great victory for Nuradin's men, but Shirkuh knew that he was not safe.

'Yusuf, you're a good soldier, and one day I know you'll be a great general. But we can't stop now. Take the men to Alexandria where we have friends. I'll get the country people to help me make trouble for Shawar and the Franks here. I'll come and help you when I've finished.'

* * *

It was a long time before Yusuf and his men saw the general again. For months, Yusuf and his small army fought to keep

Alexandria safe from the Franks. The enemy came by land and by sea. No food or help could come into the town from outside and siege engines sent stones and dead animals over the city walls. This made life terrible for the people and the soldiers inside the city. Many were ill, all were hungry, and many died.

But Yusuf kept his men fighting, while he worked as hard as possible to make the lives of the people of Alexandria easier.

'I'm sorry!' he said, 'It's because you're our friends that you're in trouble now. But I know that my uncle will come soon and then the siege will be over. Until he arrives, be strong and brave! I promise that the enemy won't take the town while we're here, and my men and I will do all that we can to keep you safe.' Yusuf was right. At last, his uncle

came with his new army and ended the siege. The town was out of danger, but the war wasn't over yet. And there was a lot of work to do to make the people of Alexandria truly safe. Yusuf went to talk to the Franks to try to find ways to help the sick and wounded Muslims in the town. 'Will the Franks understand that it's wrong to fight old men, women, and children?' he worried. 'I must remember all that I learned from Nuradin about talking to angry and difficult people. If I'm wise and careful, God will help me.'

After the long siege, Amalric's men already knew that Yusuf was a good soldier. While he explained the problems of the people of Alexandria, the Franks learned that he was a good man, too. Humphrey of Toron, an important knight, said, 'General Shirkuh's nephew, Yusuf, is more truly chivalrous than any of us! I wish that we worried as much as he does about those that are too weak or sick to fight. I'd like to make him a knight, even if he's a Muslim.' It was from this time that people in Europe began to hear how kind and generous Yusuf was.

While Yusuf tried to make things better in Alexandria, Vizier Shawar gave the Syrians gold to make them leave Egypt, but Shirkuh was still angry. He wanted to win the war and he wanted the Franks out of the country. Most of all, he wanted Shawar out of Cairo, and he thought that most Egyptians wanted this too. But Yusuf, after his terrible time in Alexandria, was happy to march back home.

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CHAPTER 4

Who will rule?

Egypt - 1168

The people hiding in their houses heard the sound of horses and men in armour first. Then the screams and cries began. Outside in the narrow streets of Bilbais, everyone was trying to run away from danger, but it was hopeless. Amalric's knights on their war horses were everywhere. Their bright swords were red with the blood, not just of the soldiers fighting them, but of the people in the town too. No one was safe, and at the end of that terrible day, the streets were silent and bloody.

After the Franks killed so many people near Cairo, Caliph Al-Adid sent a secret letter to Nuradin. He wrote:

I no longer think that Vizier Shawar is loyal to the Egyptians. He is too friendly with the Franks, and all the money that Shawar pays to King Amalric does nothing to stop Amalric's knights killing my people. They want all the country. Then, when they have it, they'll use all our gold to make their castles and armies even stronger. Shawar's ready to give them anything as long as he can be the strongest man in Egypt. We're all in great danger. Please help us!

Nuradin called Yusuf and said, 'Find General Shirkuh.'

Yusuf went to the old general sadly. When his uncle told him to get ready for another campaign in Egypt, Yusuf said, 'By God! Even if you give me the whole country, I won't go!' He still remembered the terrible siege of Alexandria. But Nuradin's orders were law to all his men. So in a few short days, the army was on its way to Egypt for the third time. Early in January 1169, after three weeks' journey, they marched into Cairo. Everyone was happy to see the Syrians. The Franks left the country without a fight, and the Egyptians felt safe at last. The Caliph said, 'Shawar is a criminal. He was loyal only to himself, not to Egypt or to me, and now he must die. You must kill him, Yusuf.' With Shawar's death, Shirkuh was the new vizier. He gave all the beautiful things in Shawar's house to the people of Cairo. He was also now the commander of the Egyptian army, but his love of food killed him after only two months. One day, halfway through a wonderful meal, he gave a great cry and died.

Important men working for the Caliph asked, 'Who will be the new vizier? We must find a good man.'

'We also need a new commander,' the Syrian generals said.

It was difficult. The Egyptians wanted one of their people as vizier and commander of their army, and Nuradin's men couldn't work for someone from anywhere but Syria.

'I know,' said someone, 'Let's make Yusuf the new vizier. He's only thirty, and knows nothing about ruling a

country. We'll tell him what to do, and he'll do it!' Many agreed that Yusuf was the right man for the job, and so he became both vizier of Egypt and commander of the Syrian and Egyptian armies.

Not everyone was happy to see Yusuf in this important job. A few soldiers went to Syria to tell Nuradin that the new vizier, Yusuf, wanted to take over Egypt. Nuradin was angry. So, to show that he was loyal to his old commander, Yusuf went with the Caliph and the people to pray for Nuradin every Friday.

When his brother Turan Shah arrived from Syria, Yusuf told him, 'It's not easy here but, thank God, I learned the law from Nuradin, and how to organize armies from my uncle because we have enemies everywhere - not just the Franks!'

Yusuf was right. One day, one of his soldiers saw that one of the Caliph's men was wearing very strange shoes on his feet when he left the Caliph's great house. Inside one of these shoes was a secret letter, which Yusuf opened and read.

The Egyptians wanted Amalric and his knights to attack Yusuf and the Syrians, but the Franks never saw that letter. In the end, the Franks came, but Yusuf and his army were ready for them, and sent them away again without any problems.

Yusuf was a careful ruler, and Egypt quickly grew into a strong country under him. He decided that it was wrong to have a rich life, and that it was more important to

help people in trouble. So he took a new name, Saladin, which means 'the good of religion', to show that he wanted to be a good Muslim. And he gave all the expensive presents that people gave him to the Egyptians and to his soldiers. He lived in a small house, and used his money as a vizier to build schools and hospitals. He also made the walls of Cairo stronger, and built a great castle on the Muqattam hills. 'I want the Egyptian people to know that we are on their side, and that we want their country to be strong and safe. Then they will be happy to fight with us against the Franks,' he told his Syrian generals.

But Nuradin was more and more angry. He wrote:

Yusuf - I'm your commander! You're spending all your time ruling a country that doesn't belong to you. You're getting strong and rich with Egypt's gold, but I want you, your new soldiers, and the money that you've won with me, here, to fight the Franks in the Holy Land. Unless you come back to Syria immediately, I'll attack you!

Some young men in Saladin's army said, 'If the King of Syria comes here, we'll fight him and send him back to his country!' But Ayyub, Saladin's father, told him, 'I'll kill you myself if you go against your commander!' Saladin listened and waited.

In 1174, Nuradin died. His last words were, 'Only one thing makes me unhappy: what will happen to my family at the hands of Yusuf, son of Ayyub?'

Because Nuradin's son, Al-Saleh, was only eleven years old, many people wanted to rule Syria in the boy's

name. Then two months later, King Amalric of Jerusalem died too. His son, Baldwin, was thirteen, and was ill with leprosy. Saladin, now thirty-six, saw that it was a good time to move against the Franks, but he needed a bigger army.

'If I can teach Nuradin's son how to be a good ruler while he's still young, and I can rule Syria in his name, then all Muslims will help my soldiers fight for the Holy Land,' he thought.

But many Syrians were afraid of Saladin. The emirs said, 'You go too far, Yusuf! You were just a soldier, and now you want all of Syria! You came from nothing. You are nothing. And we won't listen to you!'

But Saladin wanted to make Nuradin's dream of winning back the Holy Land come true. He took Damascus with little trouble. Then he moved on to Aleppo. This was where the young Al-Saleh went with his emirs after they saw how quickly Saladin was winning the country. But Aleppo was difficult to take, so Saladin attacked the castle of Azaz first. It fell after thirty-eight days of fighting, and then Aleppo surrendered.

The emirs didn't trust Saladin and thought that he really wanted to be King of Syria, so they asked the Assassins, a secret group of killers, to kill him. They tried twice, while Saladin was asleep, but he was lucky and lived. He decided to fight the Assassins in their mountain home, but it wasn't easy. Some of his soldiers said, 'We were near Sinan, the Assassins' general, but he has great

powers that we can't explain. He looked at us, and we couldn't lift our swords to fight him!

One night Saladin made a trap to catch anyone trying to get near him while he was sleeping. In the morning, he found some sweet bread near his head. A knife through it held a message saying: You are under our power! No one could explain how the things got there.

'Perhaps Sinan does have special powers!' thought Saladin, 'We must stop fighting him and his people.'

No one knew what Saladin and Sinan agreed, but the Assassins never tried to hurt Saladin again. By 1177, most of Syria wanted to help Saladin, who was now thirty-nine. Then the news came that the Franks and the people in Byzantium were no longer friends. Saladin felt that perhaps now was the time to start a holy war to take Jerusalem back from the Franks.

CHAPTER 5

Defeat and victory

Saladin's army marched out of Cairo singing war songs. A young soldier riding beside Saladin asked, 'Why do the Franks hold Jerusalem when it's so holy for us Muslims?'

'It's a very long story,' said Saladin:

The problem is that the city of Jerusalem is holy for the Franks too. Jesus lived much of his life in the city, and also died there. Jerusalem is the most important place of pilgrimage for people from Europe, but when the Turks took it in 1071, it was more difficult for Europeans to visit. They were angry about that and they decided that they wanted Jerusalem back. They called their campaign a crusade. They came from across the sea and in 1099, they took the holy city. They killed nearly everyone in the place! Now, after almost a hundred years, many Franks are born in Palestine and they think that it's their home.

Of course, as you know, Jerusalem is a holy place for Muslims, too, because the Prophet Mohammed, peace be on him, travelled from there up into the sky to meet God and the prophets. Also the Al-Aqsa Mosque is one of the oldest holy places of Islam. It's wrong that the Franks are using the building as a church and praying in it. Nuradin wanted to bring Muslims together to win it back, and I want to make his great hope come true!

Planning this new campaign, Saladin remembered Shirkuh saying, 'Never waste time. March quickly and take the enemy by surprise!' At first, Saladin's soldiers followed his orders. They were fast and deadly. The Frankish knights weren't ready, and the Muslims won without trying very hard. But then Saladin's men slowed down and stopped being careful. They thought that they could take Jerusalem without any trouble!

King Baldwin the Leper was only sixteen when he learned that Saladin's army was attacking Palestine, and that there was no one to stop them. He called all his knights together from their castles with letters that his soldiers carried secretly through the Muslim army lines. It was a dangerous plan, but it worked. The Franks arrived to help their king and they surprised Saladin's army at Ramla. Saladin's soldiers had to run to escape and the Franks nearly killed Saladin. It was a very bad defeat, and after it, many emirs no longer wanted to be in Saladin's army.

Saladin told his men, 'Thinking that Baldwin the Leper is weak because he's young and ill was a mistake! We'll have to work harder to take Jerusalem. Some of you must ride the fastest camels to Cairo to tell the Egyptians that we're safe. We've lost a battle, but we can win the war if we fight together!'

The only good news for Saladin was that, after Ramla, Baldwin's army wasn't ready to keep fighting. 'But we must do something to stop him,' Baldwin said to his knights. 'Make all your castles strong and next time we'll be ready for the enemy!'

The knights decided to build a new castle on the Jordan River. King Baldwin said, 'Don't build at Jacob's Ford! Franks and Muslims live on both sides of the river and everyone can cross the Jordan freely there. We'll have trouble if we change things.' But the knights didn't listen and built the castle there, and in 1179 there was a fight about the land. During the battle, a small group of Saladin's soldiers nearly caught King Baldwin. Old Humphrey of Toron helped his king escape, but the knight was badly wounded and died. Saladin, now forty-one, was sad. 'Humphrey was my good friend in Alexandria after that terrible siege finished. He was a chivalrous man and a brave knight. I wish that more Franks could be like him!'

After the battle of Jacob's Ford, Saladin sent his army in small groups to attack Palestine. 'It'll be easy to catch Saladin's men when they come back,' Baldwin said. 'They'll be tired and we can fight small groups of soldiers and win!' Near the Litani River, they met some of Saladin's men on their way home. Baldwin's knights quickly won the battle, but before they knew it, Saladin and the rest of his army arrived. Saladin's soldiers killed hundreds of Franks, and caught many of their important knights.

Three years later, Baldwin and Saladin agreed to stop fighting for a while, but the peace was short. One of Baldwin's knights, Reynald of Chatillon, was a man who was hungry for gold and for power. When he married, his wife gave him Kerak Castle which looked down on the road that ran between Damascus and Makkah. This castle

made it easy for him to attack Muslim pilgrims and to take their money from them.

'Reynald, you are breaking the peace,' King Baldwin told him angrily. 'We have promised the Muslims that the pilgrims' road will be safe.'

Later, King Baldwin went to help Reynald. Together they ended the siege and pushed Saladin and his army back. After this, Reynald went on attacking Muslim pilgrims.

'We must stop Reynald and the Franks,' Saladin said to his generals, 'But we must make them fight in open country. They're too strong in their castles!'

'Your promise doesn't worry me. Anyone crossing my land must pay!' said Reynald.

Saladin thought that Reynald was a man without honour, and he decided to stop him. He marched to Kerak with his men. But when Saladin was just going to attack the castle with siege engines, he heard that Isabella of Jerusalem was marrying the grandson of his old friend, Humphrey of Toron, there. 'Find out where the party will be,' he said to his soldiers, 'I don't want to hit that side of the building!' To thank Saladin for this, Isabella sent food to the men in his army.

CHAPTER 6

A great general

After Nuradin's son Al-Saleh died in 1181, Syria and Egypt could fight fully on the same side at last. At the same time, the Franks had terrible problems. King Baldwin's leprosy made him weak; he couldn't see, and he couldn't fight. It was hard for him to be King of Jerusalem and he had no son. Two people wanted to take his place and be King of the Franks. One was Raymond of Tripoli. He spoke Arabic and he understood both Muslims and Franks well. But there was another knight, new in the Holy Land - Guy of Lusignan. He arrived from Europe and married King Baldwin's sister. When Baldwin died in 1184, the Franks made Guy King of the Franks, because they thought that Raymond was too friendly with the Muslims.

In 1187, Saladin, now forty-nine, spoke to his generals:

'The Franks' new king is weak, but they are still brave and, when they fight together, their armour and their big horses make them very strong. Our horses are smaller, but faster. We wear less armour, but we move more quickly. We're better at fighting in the desert. We're also much faster at sending news to each other with carrier pigeons. We must be clever if we're going to win against them, so I have a plan. We'll attack Raymond of Tripoli's castle near Lake Tiberias and my hope is that they'll hurry to fight us,

forgetting the problems of moving a large army over that part of the country.'

When the Franks heard that Saladin's army was at Tiberias, many of them wanted to match at once, but Raymond said, 'Tiberias belongs to me. I've never seen so strong a Muslim army and I think that we're not wise to fight them even if my castle and my wife are in danger!'

But Reynald of Chatillon replied, 'You're trying to make us afraid because you prefer the Muslims to us!'

Raymond then said, 'I'm one of you. I'll do what you wish and fight at your side, but you'll see what happens.'

* * *

In early July, Saladin was waiting by the lake. He took time to look carefully to find the best place to fight. The Frankish army left from Saffuriya. It was only about four hours' journey for a man on a horse to get from there to Lake Tiberias, but moving an army with foot soldiers and knights in heavy armour under the hot summer sun was difficult. There was no water on the dry road and men and horses were very thirsty. Saladin's men spent the whole day attacking the slowly moving soldiers, shooting arrows at them to make them travel even more slowly. The Franks wanted to get to the lake before evening, but they only got to Hattin. There they had to stop. Looking down the hill, they saw Saladin's army waiting by the lake. They couldn't get to the water, and no man or horse in the Frankish army had anything to drink all through the night.

Next morning, Frankish foot soldiers ran to get water, but many died under the swords and arrows of the Muslim army.

Then Saladin told his men to light fires in the dry grass in front of the Frankish army. Smoke filled the Franks' eyes and mouths. They couldn't see the enemy, but still they fought. Twelve hundred knights left the day before from Saffuriya. Only one hundred and fifty knights were alive when Saladin's seventeen-year-old son Al-Afdal described what he saw that day:

Hattin was my first battle and I was at my father's side. In the end, the King of the Franks was on the hill He and his soldiers made an attack that drove our men back to where my father and I were standing. My father cried, 'They mustn't win!' and our men attacked the hill again. I was happy when I saw the Franks fall back. I cried, 'We've won!' But the Franks attacked again with all their strength and our men were all around us again. Then my father told them to attack once more, and they pushed the enemy up the hill another time. Again, I screamed, 'We've beaten them!' But my father turned to me and said, 'Be silent! We'll win only when that red tent on the hill falls!' Before he finished his words, the king's tent fell. My father then got off his horse, bowed down and thanked God, crying happily.

After the battle, Saladin's men took King Guy and Reynald of Chatillon to their commander's tent. Saladin asked both of them to sit. He then said to Reynald, 'How many promises and agreements have you broken?'

Reynald answered, 'Kings have always done things in this way! I did nothing more.'

King Guy was very thirsty and afraid. Saladin spoke to him kindly and gave him cold water. The king drank and then gave some water to Reynald.

Saladin said, 'You gave him water, not I. He isn't my guest so I don't have to be merciful to him!' Then he took his sword and cut off Reynald's head. Guy was afraid, but Saladin said to him, 'True kings don't kill each other!'

After Hattin, Saladin spoke to his generals, 'Many of you will think that it is time to go home to rest. We've won a great victory, but we can't stop fighting now. We must take all the towns and the land that the Franks hold in Palestine!'

They went on attacking Raymond's castle at Tiberias. His wife fought bravely, but she had only a few men to help her. In the end, she surrendered. Saladin let her leave the castle safely with her children. By September, the Muslim army held the towns of Acre, Nablus, Jaffa, Toron, Sidon, Beirut, and Ascalon. Only Tyre still fought against Saladin, but he decided that his men were really tired and could not go on with the siege there. 'It's better for us to take Jerusalem,' he said to his generals, 'But I don't want to be like the Franks all those years ago, killing everyone. Let's see what we can do.'

CHAPTER 7

The City of God

'I want to be like Caliph Umar,' said Saladin to his men:

When his armies won all of Palestine in the early days of Islam, he took Jerusalem peacefully and entered the town like a poor man, on foot. The Patriarch Sophronius gave him the keys of the town after they made a peace agreement. It said that the Franks, their houses and churches were safe, and that they could pray in the way they wanted, and that no Muslim was going to hurt them or take their money. Then Umar visited the town with the Patriarch. When he saw that people used the Holy Mount in the middle of the town as a place for rubbish, he started to clean it with his own hands. Then he asked men to build what is now the Al-Aqsa Mosque there. After that, when he went with the Patriarch to see the church where they buried Jesus, it was time to pray. Umar left the church to pray outside. He said, 'If I pray inside the church, then one day other Muslims will want to make it into a mosque!' He was generous to all religions.

'We agree that we don't want to hurt people in the town. But the Franks fight to the last man!' Saladin's generals said.

When Saladin met the Franks, he said, 'I think - like you - that Jerusalem is the City of God. I don't want to attack God's home. So, if you surrender, then you will all

be free to leave it with your things. Your churches will be safe, and when people want to make a pilgrimage to the holy places, they can travel freely into the town at any time.'

The Franks knew that they weren't strong, but they said, 'How can we give you the town where Jesus died? If we let you take Jerusalem without fighting, people will rightly say that we're afraid to die for Jesus. We must do our best to hold it!'

'Then I'll take Jerusalem by the sword, and many people will lose their lives!' Saladin promised.

* * *

The Franks' commander was Balian of Ibelin, one of the very best of the Frankish knights. He fought bravely at Hattin, and after he escaped from the battle, he went to Saladin. He asked the Muslim commander, 'Can I take my wife and children out of Jerusalem to Tyre where they will be safe? I promise that I'll never carry my sword against you again, and that I'll only stay one night in the town.'

Saladin said, 'I'm sure that you're worried about your wife in these difficult times. Go at once and get her. I know that you'll keep your promise not to fight my men.'

But when Balian arrived in Jerusalem, all the people there said.

'You must stay here and be our commander. How can we fight the Muslims without someone to tell us what to do?'

'I can't! I gave my word to Saladin that I wouldn't fight against him. I can't break my promise,' Balian replied.

The men of the church said that it wasn't wrong to break a promise to a Muslim, but Balian was a man of honour. He wrote to Saladin and said:

The people of Jerusalem have asked for my help as their commander. What shall I do?

Saladin answered at once:

You must help your people. Forget your promise to me. And don't worry about your wife and children. I know that you cannot take care of them now. Fifty of my best men will take them safely to Tyre!

Tears came to Balian's eyes when he read Saladin's answer. He thought, 'Why aren't our people as good as Saladin?'

Balian did his best to make the town ready for the siege, but there were only two other knights to help him.

He said, 'This city is full of people running away from the other towns in Palestine that the Muslims have taken. Most of you are women and children, but I'm going to make every man here over sixteen into a knight, and we'll do our best to light for Jesus and Jerusalem!'

The siege began, and at first, the Franks held the city. But after a few days, Saladin moved his army and all his siege engines to attack the town's walls from the Mount of Olives. Muslim arrows made the blue sky as black as night, and fell like rain on the Franks. Worse was 'Greek fire', a

terrible weapon that Saladin's soldiers shot from their siege engines. It lit fires at once on anything that it hit, and so the town began to burn, and the city walls began to fall. The Franks prayed for God's help in their churches, and mothers cut their daughters' hair very short in the hope of making them ugly, to keep them safe from the soldiers. People remembered what happened when the Franks took the town one hundred years before. They couldn't stop thinking about how many people died then.

Patriarch Heraclius not only worried about the people, but also about all the holy things and the gold in the churches. He told Balian, 'Go and see Saladin. He's always generous.'

'My men are already on the walls!' the Muslim commander told Balian when he came to talk, 'You said that you wanted to fight, so the time to be merciful is over!'

Balian answered, 'Many of the people are not fighting very hard in the hope that you will be generous with us as you have been with other towns in Palestine. But we soldiers, when we see that a fight to the death is the only way, we'll come out and fight you and we'll die for God. We'll take as many of your men as we can with us, or we'll win with honour!'

Saladin liked Balian's brave words so he turned to his generals and the imams and said, 'What must I do? I promised to take the town by the sword, and I can't break my word!'

CHAPTER 8

A man of honour

'We must save the holy places!' went on Saladin.

But the imams said to him, 'The Franks will be our prisoners. To be free, they must pay a ransom: ten gold pieces for a man, five gold pieces for a woman, and one gold piece for a child. They'll have forty days to find the money. It's the only way that we can pay for the war!'

Saladin spoke to Balian. 'Our soldiers will watch the streets to stop criminals hurting people and stealing things,' he said. 'Churches will be safe, and people can come on pilgrimage here when they want.'

Balian answered, 'You're very generous, but I'm worried about the poor. I'll pay for as many poor people as I can to go free.'

When Saladin's brother Al-Adil heard this, he said, 'I want to help too! I'll pay the ransom for a thousand poor people!'

Saladin said, 'I have another good idea! Old people and men with young children can go free too. Also, many women have lost their husbands in the fighting, and many children are without mothers or fathers. To all of these I want to give money.'

Saladin's treasurers were worried. 'If all these people can leave freely, how will we pay our soldiers? We must ask the rich people to give more!' they said.

When the Patriarch left with all the gold from the churches, many Muslims were angry, but Saladin said, 'We won Jerusalem to give the city back to God and to Islam, not to be rich!'

But Saladin's work wasn't over. Tyre was still in the hands of the Franks, who came from all over Palestine when their hometowns fell. Now they were ready to fight from Tyre to get their land back. Some of Saladin's generals said, 'We're afraid that the Franks will get help from their friends in Europe.'

But Saladin answered, 'If they come from across the sea, they'll be far from home and they won't win.'

* * *

In 1188, Saladin, now fifty, said that King Guy could go free if he promised never to fight the Muslims again. But Guy broke his promise in 1189 and attacked Acre, beginning a long and terrible siege. By then there were many more European knights in Palestine. After the fall of Jerusalem, the Franks told European kings that they needed help to win back the Holy Land. Many answered the call for a new crusade.

In 1191, the King of France arrived in the Holy Land, and two months later Richard, King of England, came too. The Muslims knew that King Richard was brave and strong.

Acre was a dirty town, and King Richard was ill the minute he arrived, but he went on telling his men what to do from his bed. He was a good commander and the town,

already in great trouble after two years of endless war, couldn't fight any more. People were dying of hunger because the Franks had the town under siege, and they stopped all food getting into it by land or by sea. Richard told his men to make better siege engines and the new attacks from these never stopped. The falling stones killed twelve men at a time, and the Muslim generals knew that this was the end.

They sent a letter to Saladin saying that they couldn't fight any longer. Saladin thought that one last fight could win the day. He asked all of his men to attack, but the emirs said, 'We can't win now. There are too many Franks.'

In July 1191, the town surrendered. Saladin asked King Richard to treat his Muslim prisoners well, but the English king wanted to win back other towns in Palestine that the Muslims held. Most of all he wanted Jerusalem, so all Richard's prisoners - Muslim soldiers of Acre, their wives and their children - died under the swords of the Frankish knights that day.

The Franks now marched towards Jerusalem, but it was summer and it was hot. They tried to stay near their ships, which were sailing down the coast. But Saladin's men never stopped attacking them. Richard's men were brave and they went on, but the army could march only five miles a day. At Arsuf, the Franks won a small battle, but the war wasn't over.

The next year saw a lot of fighting, but no real victory for either army. Saladin knew that time was on his side.

Richard needed to go home. In the end, they agreed to stop fighting. The Franks kept the land between Tyre and Jaffa, but Saladin kept Jerusalem and the other towns in Palestine that he held. European pilgrims could visit the holy city without danger, and many European knights travelled there to pray, but Richard never went. He left for England without ever seeing Jerusalem.

* * *

These last years were difficult for Saladin. After Acre, his emirs were not as happy to fight as before, and it was hard to keep his army together. He was fifty-five years old now, and often ill and tired. 'I wish I could go to Makkah,' he said, but he was now very weak and could not make that long journey. 'At least I can still meet travellers to Makkah when they come home,' he said to himself. He rode out of Damascus early in 1193 to meet a group of pilgrims coming back from Makkah, but the cold weather that day made him ill. Forty-eight hours later he was dead. When they went to bury him, they found that there was no money to pay for his funeral. He was always so kind and generous to others, and in the end he left nothing for himself. Many people mourned his death at the time, and people everywhere still know of Saladin to this day. We remember him not only as a great general, but also as a good man who was merciful, wise and generous.

- THE END -

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