

Acre, the Holy Land
20th August 1191

The air was dry and the golden earth beneath scorching. A thousand crusader soldiers marched forth, escorting two thousand and seven hundred depleted souls across an arid stretch of land. There were men, women and children wearing the same broken expressions of hopelessness on their weak sweat-drenched faces of black and brown. Each soldier beside them, all bearing a different cross, seemed to hold no sympathy, no compassion or regret, only determination and confidence placed there by their noble king, King Richard the Lionheart. Though their worn greaves, battered breastplates and dented helmets seemed to grow increasingly burdensome, they did not break nor hesitate to march onward under the scorching golden sun. Prisoners and soldiers all kept marching forth to the rhythm of ropes tugging on the bodies to which they were bound.

Robert, a Templar knight, watched from underneath a heavy steel helm as an old man beside him struggled to carry on. He knew where it was they were headed. This would be the last journey these souls would ever undertake. Robert's armoured hand clutched the narrow hilt of his falchion and his grip grew tighter and tighter the longer he watched.

"Heretics. All of them. Verily they shall see that God is with us this day." another said, patting his graceful white cloak. He was young and had only just developed a taste for bloodshed.

"Be wary, boy. From this grim task, you must take no joy." He replied, turning away from the crowd of prisoners suffering beside him, though he could not ignore the stench of them. Unwashed, diseased and dripping with salty sweat, they certainly left their mark on the soldiers.

The city of Acre was now miles behind them and the march came to a halt at the foot of a hill. Through the blinding light of the sun the soldiers began to push their Saracen captives to the top, some of them grinning eagerly while others could do nothing to hide their regret. Robert shoved the old man down to his knees along with the others. The children who whimpered while they walked now began to wail in terror. All others, friends, strangers, mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, husbands and wives, they held each other dearly, clung to each other, knowing that this was their end. Robert looked over the crowds of heads gazing up at the clear blue sky whilst others looked down to a site beneath them where an army stood in the distance, just now turning their attention toward the hilltop. Robert brushed his fine white cloak aside and smiled as his king approached the front, though he squeezed the hilt of his blade nervously and let out a deep and uncertain sigh.

Glorious and noble King Richard sat atop his white stallion in a regal red cloak and bearing a bright golden lion on his surcoat. He stared into the distance and called out to Saladin, gesturing toward the stage. Immediately, foot soldiers and horsemen alike began to spill blood. Valiant soldiers became ravenous animals, striking at the helpless with their steel and their fists until finally, when they grew bored, they brought their blades down and struck the earth through the throats of those who had been caught in this war. None were spared but a few who the crusaders had missed.

Saladin, the wise and powerful sultan, watched through eyes tormented by the sharp asperities of his failure, as his people were savagely destroyed before his very eyes. Their screams each sent a powerful ache into his heart and buried in it, his ire. Enraged at the sight of the bloodshed, he sent his forces onward and watched as they too were defeated and destroyed, routed by King Richard's readied forces beneath the hill.

Robert struck the old man and hesitated, constantly turning his gaze toward his fellow warriors who roared with enthusiasm, willingly slaughtering the helpless prisoners. Each one was covered in blood and sweat and tears. The red crosses they all bore had now turned an ever deeper crimson, drowning in the innocent blood that soaked them. Sand shot up as axes, swords, heads, and bodies smashed into the ground. Robert looked to his King who had not turned his sight away from Saladin's tent in the distance. Then he returned to the old man, who held his frail hands in front of him, confused and petrified. He was crying and praying to God that he would survive this as he crawled around the battered and bloodied corpses of men and women he once knew, trapped by the frayed ropes that bound him. Each word of prayer was punctuated with a frightened gasp while his eyes, wide open in a desperate search for hope, scanned the field, quickly filling up with dead. "I will end your misery" Robert muttered as he swung his shimmering falchion with shaking hands through the old man's neck.

He turned to a fearful young boy, clasping his mother's hand and wailing at the sight of her headless body. Bitter and bilious tears dripped down Robert's face to his breastplate before he quickly slaughtered him too. He screamed in anger as his blade ended life after life, desperately wanting to close his eyes but he could not. Suddenly those screams turned to laughter. His heart raced and his mind grew numb with rage and twisted pleasure. His hands no longer shook and his eyes no longer watered. In the sands under the sun, buried in the sound of endless screams and the roaring of warriors, both Saracen and crusader, Robert had become a rabid animal, like all the rest.

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The night following the massacre was filled with celebration, drunkenness and every deadly sin their faith warned against. Robert, too distraught to join the other Templar knights in prayer and meditation, watched his crusader brothers thirstily gulp down many a goblet of wine as they tickled the air with their laughter. Their hands slid down the bare backs of hesitant young girls, unwillingly perched upon their laps with thoughts of the atrocity still fresh in their innocent minds. In his drunken state, the laws of the Templar order seemed to bend until eventually, he broke them.

Robert found himself emerging from a room, leaving behind him a melancholic woman over whom he had inflicted his carnal desires. She grasped at the wall and hesitantly pulled her robes over her body. There was no satisfaction as he rejoined his brothers in arms, in fact an unnerving feeling of disgust soon washed over Robert and he attempted to quell it with more fine wine. Around him, the crusaders jested and jeered at some of the women, pulling a few toward them like wolves taking meat. Uncomforted by the unruly companionship that surrounded him, he retreated to a corner to watch his fellow crusaders. Some still wore their stained armour. They drank and reaped their unjust rewards, enjoying the hypnotic dances of undressed women, slipping linen scarves off their bodies that their tempting bosoms would glisten seductively for these holy warriors.

He had departed from England with a noble heart and noble Templar brothers and yet before his very eyes, there were crusader soldiers carrying no more honour in their hearts than prayers on their ale drenched lips and he was no better, though he should have been. As a Templar knight, he should not have been here. He should have been at his prayers and yet his broken heart would not allow it.

One of the crusaders, a younger man by the name of Edward, rested his back against a wall next to Robert. His arms were crossed and he looked on in disgust, as though the world in front of him had

warped into the depths of hell, littered with the same heresy and blasphemy he had sought to fight against.

"Why is it you sit here? Why do you watch as they defile these people?" he asked in the king's Occitan tongue. He turned to Robert who stroked his thick hazel beard and shook his head slowly. It sickened young Edward and he spat on the ground.

"Men of god, you call yourselves. Those words could not be more hollow!" he yelled aloud. The tavern quieted and Edward cried, "Do you not worry for your souls? We fight to redeem ourselves, to reclaim the Holy Land in the name of our lord! Yet here you are, committing yourselves to foul sin after foul sin. You disgust me!", and Robert grabbed the man by his throat and threw him out of the brothel, for each word had been a grain of salt upon a gaping wound.

Edward rose to his feet and struck the knight hard and fast. Robert, in a drunken fury, quickly knocked the man down and wrung his hands tightly around his throat. Edward choked and gasped as he struggled to no avail, pushing his hand against Robert's face, fighting to push this bear of a man away. His blonde head was being pressed into the dry dirt and he needed to escape this madman.

Robert saw nothing but red rage and could not stop his mighty hands from crushing his victim's throat. He could feel it bending within his grip, he could feel the body shaking and suddenly, he heard the scraping of a blade against a sheath before he felt a cold sting in his side. He could feel something moving beneath his chest, slowly being drawn out before being struck into him again and again. The stings grew into a terrible pulsating pain and he tumbled back, releasing Edward from his clutches. His eyes were wide with shock, though, not because of the wound, for he had faced these wounds so many times. It was because he knew that this time, he would most certainly die. Clarity returned to his mind and he watched a frightened Edward, sheath his dripping blade and run.

The knight clutched the wound in his side and wrapped his cloak around his body as it grew colder. The stars were beautiful that night and the sky could not have been clearer. For all his sins, it seemed heaven might still have welcomed him into its world of delicate celestial beauty.

It was not to be.

Skulking through the streets were three figures in the darkness. Each one was cloaked and hooded. Robert called to them weakly, his own lion-like voice had now degraded into an incoherent grumble and yet, the strangers halted in their steps and turned toward him. His garments were soaked now in blood, profusely leaking out of his wounds.

He heard them whispering, but while his mind grew numb and slow, their words were inaudible to him. His eyes however, functioned well enough and as the group neared him he could see that their robes did not belong to peasantry. Their tunics were elegant and bore such striking designs of many colours. Even in the shadows, beneath the moonlight, their colours seemed to glow.

They seemed to argue as they approached him, two of them tried to pull another away. It was a woman. She tore away from her friends' protestations and knelt beside the dying knight. When the sand beneath her settled, she slowly tucked her long ebony hair back behind her ear and stroked his wound curiously. She seemed to be whispering something to herself and though Robert tried to listen for words he could understand, he could not interpret what it was she was saying, he did however, notice her breath-taking gaze, shining with the moon in her eyes. Perhaps the last ounce of beauty his

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eyes would ever see. They were caring as they closely watched his wounds, flicking constantly between them and his eyes.

"Infidels" he muttered as his ever enfeebled hands reached for his sword and tears rolled down his cheeks. The woman muttered things too, but he could scarcely hear them. She closed her eyes in what seemed to be prayer, holding her hands out in front of the dying man. Her eyes began to glow and suddenly, she dashed forward, biting down into his throat. He wanted to scream out in agony, he wanted to fight this strange creature, but he could not summon the strength.

Blood was rushing and he could feel his heart pounding as though the Saracen war drums were being beaten within him. This woman, this beast, wrapped her hands around his shoulders and buried her fangs even deeper, intoxicated by the taste of death while her friends simply watched, holding each other tenderly as they guarded this woman from any crusaders who might walk by. None came and Robert found himself slowly surrendering to a different fate.