

Chapter 15

Into the Breach

The young man peered into the deep darkness outside the flickering light of the campfire. He looked toward the fortress of Acre and could see nothing in the night, but felt the heart pounding in his chest. *I wonder if Declan can hear it*, he thought. Roland Inness had been frightened many times since landing on these shores, but this was the worst. There would be no sleep this night.

Since the King Richard's arrival, feverish preparations had been underway for this day. During the hours of darkness, English sappers had been filling in the moat at the base of the wall and tunneling under its foundations. The King's great siege tower, Mategriffon, had been built in Sicily and reassembled before the walls of Acre. Now it was rolled forward and manned by Pisans who kept up a galling hail of crossbow bolts on any defenders who showed themselves. The tower was faced with iron and drenched with vinegar, which kept the Greek fire from igniting its timbers.

Richard had assembled almost three hundred catapults, which kept up a steady pounding of the wall until a section near the northern gate had crumbled. Through that gaping wound, the King was sending his men to fight their way into the city.

Roland turned back to the campfire and warmed himself against the chill of the desert night. He shivered and wondered if it was from the cold or his fear of what was to come. At dawn he and Declan would be in the first wave of English troops fighting their way up the rubble of the breach. The defenders of Acre knew the assault was coming and he knew that death waited at the top of that heap of stone.

The King had called upon Sir Robert de Ferrers to lead the first wave of the assault and assigned Sir Roger de Laval to command the second, which was to burst into the city once the wall had been taken by the first men up the slope. Sir Robin, Tuck and the small Templar contingent were assigned to Sir Roger's command.

The Earl had called for volunteers who would join him in the first wave. Most of these were younger knights and squires, many of whom were in search of glory and advancement. Sir Roger had urged his squires not to join them, but was not surprised when they stepped forward with the others of their rank. His squires could not abide being counted as cowards by their fellows.

Of all the dangers of war, forcing a breach was the most desperate. The enemy knew that if the breach were lost, so too would be their cause, their city and likely their lives. They would defend it with the fury of cornered animals. The English attacking force would have to match that fury, fighting its way up a steep and jumbled slope with arrows and stones raining down on them. They would be funneled into a narrow space at the top where all of the might of the enemy would be marshalled. Taking the breach seemed impossible, but take it they must if Acre was to fall. The King had ordered it and they must obey.

The English foot soldiers would man the earthworks to the north to counter any attempt to disrupt the final assault on the walls. Saladin knew Acre hung in the balance and would surely

hurl all of his available forces against the Crusader rear, diverting what strength he could from the English attack. Richard had seen this tactic frustrate Phillip and was determined that it would not alter the outcome of this dawn.

After the evening meal Sir Roger gathered his squires together.

“You lads are the finest squires I’ve ever had the honor of employing...” he began, his voice gone husky.

“Better than Harold, who ran off with the milkmaid?” Declan chimed in with a weak attempt at humor. No one laughed.

“Yes, better than Harold. So stay together—and don’t be stupid,” he said and fell silent. They nodded in response. It was advice the squires had heard many times since arriving in the Holy Land.

Just past midnight a messenger had arrived to announce that the last stones had been placed and the path across the moat was complete. They now had a clear approach to the rubble slope in front of the breach. The bombardment of the catapults had continued through the night seeking to crumble the wall further and to prevent any repairs being made.

Roland turned to watch as Declan pedaled the action of a large grindstone. Sparks flew from the rapidly spinning stone as he sharpened the edge of his sword. He had already sharpened his own sword on the stone. He fingered the longbow by his side. This was his preferred weapon and while it usually wasn’t used in a direct assault like this, Roland was determined to carry it. The bow could kill at close range as well as long. And besides, he felt naked without it.

“Declan, are you afraid?” asked Roland. The young Irishman paused at his labors and gave a slow nod.

“That clattering sound you hear over this way is my knees knocking together. If I had a hole I’d climb in and pull it in behind me!”

“As would I,” the boy replied. “Why are we doing this?”

“Because we are insane and hope to be cut into tiny piece by big Muslim swords,” Declan replied ruefully.

“I think it’s the King,” Roland replied. “He makes you want to risk your life for him. I wonder if he knows that?”

“He knows all right,” said Declan. “It’s a king’s job to send men to die and this king is good at his job. Being king is a bloody business. We have about a dozen kings in Ireland—all with bloody hands.”

“Do you think Saladin is like the King?”

“Yes—and just as bloody,” replied Declan.

As he spoke the first faint light began to appear in the eastern sky. There was a trumpet blast. It was time to assemble.

Roland hitched up the new mail shirt Sir Roger had presented him and pulled the hood over his head. He buckled his sword belt and slung his quiver with twenty arrows over one shoulder and his bow over the other. With one hand he gripped the hilt of his sword and ran the other through the straps of his shield. Declan looked him over as though performing an inspection.

“You’ve come a long way since our meeting on the road to York,” he declared.

Roland laughed. "How so?"

Declan did not laugh. "Ye look like a killer, my friend, and that's a fact."

He waited a moment to see if the Irishman would break out his sunny grin, but it did not come. He looked at Declan and saw little of the carefree Irish boy who had befriended him what seemed an age ago. His sandy hair was long and matted and he had the beginning of a curly red beard that framed his fair face, but it was the eyes that were different. They had seen too much since leaving England. They were no longer the eyes of a boy. He guessed that Declan saw the same in him.

"Killers we must both be this day, my friend," he said after a bit. "Up there," he gestured with his sword towards the city walls still cloaked in darkness, "up there it will be us or them. And I intend for it to be them. What say you?"

Now the grin returned.

"Them I think."