

OF PRINCES AND KINGS

A novel by Lawrence D. Brown

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Chapter 1

The Turkish army attacked at dawn. Stephan's only warning was an arrow that pierced his tent, glanced off a wooden pole, and shattered the bottle of black ink on his scribe's writing desk.

"How can the enemy be so close?" Stephan asked his scribe. The siege of the walled city of Nicaea had gone on for five weeks. In that time, the Turkish defenders sent out a sortie of two hundred mounted archers, easily defeated by fifty knights. He pushed aside a tent flap to peer outside while pulling a tunic over his chain mail.

And drew in a sharp breath at the scene before him. Thousands of Turks streamed through the camp, screaming ancient battle cries and cutting down foot soldiers with their curved blades. Mounted archers shot noncombatants who couldn't outrun the horses. Flaming projectiles turned dry tents into bonfires.

This was no sortie of two hundred warriors. This was the fully mounted army of Sultan Kiliç Arslan in an attack they had not expected for months, an army of twenty thousand seasoned warriors. Stephan fought to resist the raw panic sweeping over him. The emperor Alexios dispatched him as an advisor and forbade him to engage in battle, but the onslaught and the carnage he witnessed changed everything. Avoiding battle was no longer an option. He pulled a sword from under his cot and grabbed a small buckler shield where it hung, dusty and unused, on a tent peg. The sword was a little smaller than the traditional one-handed, double edged sword used by knights, but it was more symbolic and never intended to be used as a battlefield implement.

A wave of fear, stark and vivid, swept through him. There was no way the crusaders, weakened by famine and short of men and supplies, could survive an assault on this scale. With only three thousand men at arms and five hundred knights, they were seriously understrength and would remain so until the rest of the army could join them sometime tomorrow. And now it was clear they wouldn't live that long.

A war horn carried the orders of Prince Bohemond to the knights under his command. The shrill, clarion cry to horseback rang through the camp. Every evening, each knight cinched his horse in full saddlery and armor outside his tent in the event of a surprise attack. Now the knights scrambled madly onto their nervous mounts.

Stephan took advantage of a brief retreat to slip out of his tent and assess the situation. It was what he had come to expect, one of the strategies he was teaching the crusaders to anticipate and prepare for. It was no orderly march across the field in formation, the way Europeans attacked. The Turks attacked in random patterns, charging in, loosing arrows, killing anyone without armor, and quickly retreating. And yet, it wasn't entirely random. The hit and flee tactics were cleverly and precisely organized to achieve the maximum fatalities with the lowest number of reciprocal casualties.

His scribe darted to his side, his brown eyes wide with fear and excitement. "Sire, I want to fight with you."

"You don't even have a sword."

“I can find one on the field. And there are loose horses.”

“Paulos Dokeianos, get in the rear with the noncombatants. I’ll join you shortly.” When he used his scribe’s Latin and family name, the order was not to be questioned.

Outnumbered and outmaneuvered, the foot soldiers acted in panic and ignored the orders to form lines of battle. Around the camp, Stephan saw hundreds of dead and wounded, nearly all Frankish foot soldiers. None wore the armor or tunic of a knight. The bleating and terrified neighing of wounded horses punctuated the sounds of battle. A brown and white mare, barbed arrows dangling from its side, stumbled by in blind panic. He quickly found his own horse and pulled himself into the saddle. When his mount felt a rider on his back, it immediately quieted down. He hefted the sword handed up to him and spun it in one hand. He liked the weight and balance, even though it was a little smaller than a knight’s sword. It suited his style of sparring from horseback.

The next wave of Turkish mounted archers swept into camp, an unwavering torrent of death and destruction. Stephan headed to the rear to help defend the noncombatants. His buckler deflected an arrow, but he knew he wouldn’t be so lucky the next time. The archer who attacked him was out of arrows. His mouth curled into a sour grin at Stephan’s lack of armor as he dropped his bow and drew his sword. Stephan maneuvered his horse with his legs while using his sword and buckler to defend himself. He had trained since very young in the art of horsemanship and swordplay, and the assailant soon discovered his opponent was more experienced than his age suggested. A sidelong blow from Stephan opened the man’s throat and he slid off his horse, bleeding from the fatal wound. Stephan thanked his early schooling in guiding a horse through an obstacle course with only his knees.

But over and over the wily Turks swooped in, launched their arrows, and rode out again. Stephan dodged another arrow and watched for the next wave of attack. He was schooled in Turkish strategies and fighting skills, a requirement for every tactical advisor, and worked out in his mind the final result of this battle. It was grim.

The smaller Arabian mares the Turkish archers favored ran at top speed and maneuvered sharply without tiring. The knights and the heavy cavalry rode the larger fully armored destrier, renowned for its ability to carry a heavy knight in full armor, but slower and less agile, and more suited to a joust. Now the Turks ran rings around the knights with predictably deadly results.

In the tumult, he nearly collided with an armored knight wearing the herald of Prince Bohemond, a yellow lion rampant on a red field. The knight sneered at Stephan. “So this is the best the great emperor could send, a boy barely out of the cradle, with his little sword and shield.”

Stephan understood his anger. The Byzantine army was the most powerful and effective military force in the world. No army from Europe could match the strategies and the efficiency of their army or navy. And yet, instead of a full contingent of soldiery, the emperor elected to send a court envoy, in an advisory capacity, to assist the Frankish crusaders. His job was to instruct the crusaders on Turkish fighting strategies and to teach them what to expect from an attack by the Sultan’s army. He was ordered to avoid combat and the crusaders considered it cowardly. It became clear to the Franks that the emperor put his own ambitions and the interests of his empire above the those of the crusade.

He gave his horse a chance to rest. The sharp point of an arrow scratched his calf, stinging like a dozen bees. He was glad the archer was too far away to score a fatal hit.

It was true the emperor Alexios had little faith in the crusaders, which was another reason he stayed in Constantinople and chose not to accompany them on their quest. Stephan

understood that he wanted to maintain ongoing negotiations with the Turks and not be blamed for the invasion by the Frankish crusaders from Europe. It took the emperor three decades of internal strife before he restored a semblance of order to the region. Through a combination of luck and military genius, his army kept the Seljuk Turks from moving into western Turkey. He didn't want to give them any excuses or opportunity to seize more territory than they already controlled. After the so-called People's Crusade was annihilated last year, he had even less faith in this crusade.

Beyond the camp, Stephan saw the main host of Turkish warriors circling and forming up lines for their next foray into the battlefield. Dashes of colorful robes and plumed helmets streamed in the wind as they wheeled their ponies and prepared for the assault. It seemed totally disorganized, but in reality was structured with a tactical precision typical of the eastern tribes. Thousands of lightly-mounted archers carried powerful bows made of bone and horn. Today their primary incentive seemed to be driven by their massive numbers and sheer lethal passion.

Stephan knew it was the intention of the emperor to maintain diplomatic relations with the Seljuk Turks by blaming the siege of Nicaea on papal primacy, on the Catholic church of Rome and not on the Eastern Orthodox Church, which broke with Rome in 1054. At the same time he had to maintain a convincing threat against the Turks. It was all a delicate balance of power, a dance that the emperor had mastered long ago.

But he had another reason not to help them. Less than twenty years ago he was forced to defend Constantinople against Norman invasions, led by Stephan Guiscard. Now these same princes were begging his help in their quest to wrest Palestine back from the Turks. It was in the Byzantine emperor's interests if the crusaders could win back territory from the Turks, but no great loss if they failed.

The next wave came sooner than he expected. The horde swept over the battlefield with a sound like thunder and the destructive force of a storm at sea. As he watched the bodies mount up, Stephan calculated there was no way they could survive against these numbers.

This may have been the first real battle for him, but it was also the first time any of the European knights faced the tactics and frenzy of the Seljuk Turks, so he didn't feel quite so alone.

Three horsemen with pointed brass helmets and green and orange robes over plated armor headed straight for him. In moments they were close enough that he could see the blood spatters on their finely embroidered robes.

Stephan stroked the muscled neck of his jennet, a Spanish riding horse. "Ready Shadow? Let's show them how we took gold at the last tournament."

With the slightest touch of his heels, Shadow pitched forward and wheeled to one side, sliding between two of the surprised warriors. Stephan stabbed his sword into the man's leggings just above his boot as he twisted by and was rewarded with a howl of pain mixed with anger and rage. With another touch Shadow wheeled and Stephan was behind him, neatly slicing his neck with his sword as he swung by. The warrior plummeted to the ground and Stephan wheeled again, coming up on the left side of a warrior clutching his sword in his right hand. Stephan's blade went through his ribcage as he passed by, turning his horse and swinging his sword in one move. The remaining warrior was on him in an instant. Stephan just had time to swerve out of the way as the rearing head of the Arabian surged towards him, nostrils flaring but skillfully directed by the rider. His mount collided solidly with Shadow and Stephan found himself thrown to the ground.

The Turkish warrior howled in anger at the loss of his comrades and directed his mount to trample Stephan on the ground. Stephan rolled away from the lethal hooves moments before they smashed into the blood-soaked earth. The warrior caused his horse to rear up again, hooves thrashing dangerously. Stephan rolled under the horse's belly and clambered to his feet behind him. But his opponent wheeled his mount expertly and rode straight at him.

Moments before impact, Shadow collided with the Arabian, throwing horse and rider to the ground. The warrior was on his feet in an instant, sword in hand, moving toward Stephan with deadly purpose.

Stephan's heart pounded and his vision blurred. *This is bad*, he thought. *I shouldn't have spent all my time at horsemanship. A little more sword work might have been a good idea.*

He parried the first few blows of the curved sword, deflecting it harmlessly away twice. At the third blow he miscalculated and took a shallow cut to his hand. The man snarled above a thinly curving mustache and came at him again, swinging his sword more in rage and bloodlust than skill.

It was exactly the opening Stephan needed. The cold knot of fear in his stomach was the only emotion he felt, but it wasn't going to make him strike out in blind rage. He fought back the emotion, forcing himself to recall the finer points of his training.

The screaming warrior raised his sword high for a mortal blow. Instead of raising his sword to block the blow, Stephan waited until the last second, thrust his sword forward, and let the man run into it. Then he pushed until he felt a vital organ and twisted. It all happened in an instant and the soldier fell to the ground in agony. It was a classic defensive move taught in his sword fighting classes and one of the few he actually remembered. His teachers drummed it into him - *Anger is your worst enemy in battle. Keep your wits about you and you'll keep your head.*

He leapt on Shadow's back and surveyed the field of battle. Raw fear choked him as the ferocity of the Turkish attack and the sheer number of the warriors continued to build. His sword arm was numb from fighting and he knew he couldn't last much longer. All around he saw men-at-arms and foot soldiers mercilessly slaughtered. Only the knights in their armor had any protection against the arrows and swords of the mounted warriors, and now even those knights were being overwhelmed, pulled from their horses and bludgeoned to death. As he twisted around to find an escape route, an arrow missed his neck by a handsbreadth.

Through the din and smoke of battle, he saw a contingent of fifty knights appear at the left flank, fighting through the Turkish horsemen to reinforce Prince Bohemond's forces. Most of them were able to break through the lines, thoroughly baffling the Turks who were unfamiliar the polished, curved armor that efficiently deflected both arrows and sword blows.

The knight's attack was vicious, and Stephan knew they must have been the new order of knights who called themselves 'Templar', for he had never seen such lethal skill on the field of battle. As they drew nearer he recognized the sandy brown color of their robes, designed to match the sands of Palestine. They called it 'camoufleur', a concept unfamiliar to the crusaders with their bright colors and frilly designs. A Templar once explained to Stephan that the bright marking of a red cross on a crusader's robe made an excellent target for an archer in the field of battle.

The Turkish attack faltered. A signal flag waved in the distance, a colorful speck on a distant hillock, and the Turks turned back once again to prepare for another organized onslaught. It was just long enough to allow the crusaders to rally and reform their lines of battle.

Even with the addition of the knights who survived the incursion, they were still outnumbered by a wide margin. Once again, more than ten thousand Turks attacked in force.

Stephan finally fought his way back to the river where the noncombatants were sheltered and posted himself in a defensive position. The occasional Turkish warrior who made it back that far would face his blade.

He felt briefly buoyant when he spotted his scribe Paul huddled with the servants. He saluted with his sword and Paul smiled in confident approval. A thin, tight-lipped smile.

Over the next five hours of fighting, other groups of crusaders arrived to fight their way through the Turks, but without armor many were killed. Seeing the body count rise, the Turks became even more aggressive and their howls and screams sounded more blood thirsty than before. The entire vanguard of crusaders was slowly being pushed back to the river. They would soon be either slain or drowned. Thousands of Frankish bodies now littered the field. There was no sign of a Byzantine force, and Stephan understood there would not be. He was certain God surely abandoned them and they were all going to die.

Then he saw it. Far behind the Turkish lines, thick columns of gray smoke poured skyward. Stephan guessed what had happened. A few hours ahead of schedule, the army of the Papal Legate finally arrived, the host the crusaders were praying for. Stephan later learned they fell on the Turkish camp, torched the tents and slew the noncombatants and supporters. Then they attacked from the rear, causing the Turks to panic. When the Turks saw the size of the papal army and their camp in flames, they abandoned the field in all directions.

Stephan's body shook with exhaustion. He was ready to drop, but held tightly to his saddle pommel and forced himself to breathe, in and out, in and out. His vision blurred. Someone wearing the colors of the Byzantine court was riding toward him. He forced himself to focus.

"By your colors and your standard, are you Stephanos Komnenos, ambassador of Byzantium and liegeman to Emperor Alexios Komnenos, by the grace of God emperor and ruler of Constantinople and the empire?"

It was some time since Stephan heard the formality of court greetings and he smiled grimly at it. "I am."

"A sealed message from the emperor." The young man handed Stephan a leather pouch, performed a shortened bow from horseback, and rode off. Stephan removed the rolled parchment, broke the seal, and scanned the message. What he read, direct orders from the emperor, appalled him beyond measure.