

CHAPTER 78

The Holy Land. The road between Bethlehem and Jerusalem. June 1608.

“Pelou! Pelou!” the rider cried out at the top of his voice.

The great knight tugged on the reins of his horse and turned to face him. The urgency in the man’s voice worried him. His friend was not one to get excited easily. He had to be the bearer of bad news. “What is it?” he asked, when the rider drew near.

“I see a large groups of riders over the brow.”

“Muslim?”

“Yes, my Lord. They are for sure,” he said between deep breaths.

This was not good news. Pelou tried to keep his calm. “How many of them could you see?”

“Two hundred. Perhaps even three.”

He clenched his fist. “Damn!” he cursed.

His friend chose to ignore it. Such a curse was not becoming of a Knight of the Holy Sepulchre. Pelou did not care if it bothered him. But he did about a group of Muslim riders that large. It amounted to real danger for the people in his care. He had over a hundred with him. They were pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem.

The group comprised women and children in the main. Their journey had started at the place of Christ’s birth. Now they neared the last leg on the way to the site of His death. The Order had entrusted him with their safe passage. Such a large group of riders threatened that. He only hoped they were heading for the nearest oasis.

“Are they carrying weapons?”

“Yes, my Lord. They are waving them aloft as they ride.”

Pelou did not need to give it any thought. “Then they can have only one aim.”

Dujon agreed with him. “How can we protect these people with only fifty men?”

“We will do it,” Pelou said firmly. “It is our duty. Our honour depends on it.”

“There is no shelter for a mile in any direction. The nearest oasis is even further afield. The pilgrims are out in the open.”

Pelou’s horse jostled about in the sand. “Then we fight!” he said out loud.

Dujon nodded. “I will organise the men.”

Pelou was the finest knight in the Holy Land. He chose the same profession as his father at an early age. Like him he fought in the religious wars in France against the Huguenots. He rode under the banner of Henry IV of France at Angers in 1598. The exploits of he and his father brought them fame, as well as titles and wealth.

He had a big hand in the victory at Angers. But an Act of God on the field changed his life forever. In the thick of the battle an arrow struck him in the chest in the area of his heart. On that very same spot on his chain mail he had fixed a crucifix. It was what saved him.

From that day he felt a need to serve God. Yet he was a soldier. He knew nothing else. His mother suggested he go to Jerusalem. The Order of the Holy Sepulchre still existed there as a part of the Franciscans. Being a knight of noble birth they would welcome him into their fold.

The Order dated back to 1099. His mother told him all she knew of it. She said its roots began with the first Christian king of the city, Godfrey of Bouillon. He had led the first crusade there in the same year. The Holy Sepulchre was the sacred

Tomb of Jesus. The Order protected it on their oath. They also watched over the pilgrims who came from afar to see it.

Pelou sat tall on his horse. He showed no emotion, as he watched his men get organised. They herded the people to a small grove of trees just off the road. He did not feel the need to join in. His men knew him well. They knew what he would do and what he expected of them.

The knights sat in a line atop their horses. They looked on as the large force of bandits came over the brow. The Muslim horsemen stopped to study the group below. Their leader then raised his sabre aloft. He screamed out a battle cry and led the charge down the hill.

Pelou did not flinch in the saddle. The Muslims had come to kill him, his men and the pilgrims. Behind him the women and children cried with fear. The men in the party crowded around them in a protective cordon. Pelou turned to face them. "Do not worry," he said. "I will protect you."

A light breeze ruffled his long hair. Even so the sun scorched down on them. In his early days here he had hated the searing heat. But now after ten years he was well used to it. He drew his sword. Gritting his teeth he held it high above his head. Made by the finest swordsmith in France, it sparkled in the sunlight.

To the people behind he looked magnificent. He was their one ray of hope. They had all heard the stories of him. Jean Pelou was the greatest knight in the Holy Land. Many of the women dropped to their knees to pray. They clutched at rosary beads and sped their way through their own novenas. The ones that did not pray held their children close. They would need the Virgin Mary on their side. But most of all they needed Jean Pelou.

Pelou watched them come, though he continued to breathe slowly. He held the hilt of his sword tight in his grasp. His arm did not tire. Nor would it until every last one his enemies was dead. While he waited he thought back to the day he had acquired his status within the Order.

It was his third month in the city. Everywhere he went the people eyed him with suspicion. His was a face they had not seen before. But Saladin's promise remained true. Any man could walk freely in this city. It was a tradition that remained from the earliest days of Christian conquest.

Pelou joined with the Franciscan convent of Mount Sion. Just as his mother had said, they welcomed him with open arms. He made known his wish to join the Order. They advised of the responsibilities that came with the role. He agreed to them and applied to the Franciscans. They accepted him into their fold. This meant he could now join the Order. The night before his investiture he gave his confession to absolve his soul of any past sins. He needed a pure heart and soul to enter this esteemed group.

Unlike other men who had joined, Pelou did not need to prove his lineage. The Grand Master of the Order, Jean Luc Manière, knew his father well. It was he who would conduct the ceremony.

At sunrise it began. He emerged from the convent draped in the heavy white robe of the Order. A red cross adorned both shoulders. Within the arms of the cross were four smaller ones. Beneath the robe he wore his usual battle dress. But over his chain mail he wore a white vest with a tall red cross on the chest. On the left breast the vest showed his family crest.

He walked to the site of the Tomb where the others waited. When he stood before it, Manière stepped up to him. The Grand Master placed a gold belt and sword around Pelou's waist. Pelou's eyes met his when he stepped back. Two

knights approached from either side. They stretched out their arms and held up a bible between Pelou and Manière.

Hundreds of knights and monks stood behind him. Every one of them bore witness to a new investiture. They were already aware of Pelou's might with the sword. He had defeated every last one of them in practice. They knew he was the finest among them and they were glad to have him there. It was a proud moment for one and all.

"Place your right hand on the Holy Bible."

Pelou did as the Grand Master said. He waited for the moment he would make his vows.

"Will you swear an oath to take up your sword in honour and devotion to God? And the Virgin? And Saint George?" the Grand Master began.

"I swear it."

"Will you guard and defend the Holy Church against the enemies of the Faith?"

"I will."

"Will you aid, with all your power, the reconquest of the Holy Land?"

"I will."

"Will you guard and defend God's people and render justice?"

"I will."

"Do you swear to keep faithful your marriage vows? To not engage in treason against your rightful Lord and King? And to defend widows and orphans?"

"I do."

The two knights with the bible moved away. Pelou drew the golden sword from its scabbard. He held it out on the flats of his palms and bowed his head. Manière took the sword from him. He held it aloft before touching the blade twice against each of Pelou's shoulders. When Pelou raised his head he took possession of the sword once more and returned it to its scabbard.

Manière then moved aside. The two knights flanked Pelou as he stepped forward and placed his right foot against the Tomb. The knight on his right side stooped down and attached a spur to Pelou's right boot. The other knight did the same when Pelou placed his left foot on the Tomb.

The Grand Master waited for this part of the ritual to end. He then unbuckled the belt from Pelou's waist. One of the monks took it from him to return it to the safety of the convent.

Someone handed Pelou his own sword back. He attached this around his waist before Manière held out his hand. Pelou shook it and returned his smile.

Manière pulled him close in a tight embrace. He kissed Pelou on both cheeks, and said, "In the name of the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit and Saint George."

When they parted Manière gripped him by both arms. "Be a faithful Knight. But above all stay both pious and just. Welcome to the Order."

The knights behind him all cheered. Manière took a hold of Pelou's hand again and turned him around to face them. "Raise your swords in salute of the distinguished Knight!"

They raised their swords above their heads to honour him. "We honour you, distinguished Knight!" they shouted as one.

That day seemed so long ago now. Pelou returned to the present. His horse jostled about beneath him. It found the vibration of three hundred sets of hooves on the ground unsettling.

He eyed the approaching force. "Get ready!" he shouted to his men. "Lances!" they heard him cry.

They raised their lances high in the air. Pelou waited a little longer. When the Muslim horde was within four hundred yards he gave the signal to his men.

“Forward,” he said, pointing at the enemy with his sword.

The group pushed forward in a perfect line. Their lances remained high, as their mounts broke into a canter. They kept their nerve even though the enemy continued to charge towards them at full gallop.

Pelou reached out to the right with his sword to keep the line. “Steady!” he shouted so his men could hear.

The distance between them closed to two hundred yards. Then one-eighty. One-fifty. “Steady!” he shouted again. One-twenty. “Charge!”

Their horses reached full gallop in seconds. In that moment the knights lowered their lances. They pointed them straight ahead at the oncoming enemy. Thirty. Twenty. Ten.

A deafening crunch filled the air. The pilgrims heard the cries of man and beast as the two sides met head on. The knights smashed through the first two Muslim lines. Their lances ripped limbs from bodies and impaled others. Horse smashed into horse. It sent their riders flying in every direction.

All but three of the knights made it through the first two lines. The three that did not, fell from their mounts in the collision. Each of them got to their feet with sword in hand. The others tossed away the broken remains of the lances they still held in their grasp.

The third line of Muslim riders came towards them. It numbered perhaps forty in all. Each of them stood in the saddle with bows raised. The knights continued forward. They raised their shields in front of their bodies, as they charged the line.

A hail of arrows rained in. Some missed the mark. Others struck the shields. But some found their targets too. One knight caught a missile in the eye that lifted him from his horse. The beast galloped on. He was dead before he had even hit the ground.

Two others took fatal hits. An arrow hit one knight in the throat and the other in the stomach. Several more were hit on the arms and legs, but able to fight on.

They careered into the horse archers with shield and sword. In close combat these Muslims proved no match. Their speciality was with the bow. The knights made quick work of them and hacked them to death without mercy.

The main threat still rested with the two larger lines that had passed them. A part of the first of these continued on to attack the pilgrims. The rest turned to face the knights a second time, their sabres raised.

The pilgrims fled for their lives. The women ran screaming with their children under their arms. The men dropped back to try and halt the onslaught. They had no chance. The Muslim riders brought their sabres down. In only a few moments every one of the men lay dead on the ground.

The thirty riders pursued the women and children. They cut them down from behind. Heads opened in a mass of blood. The lifeless bodies crashed to the ground, taking their children down with them. The Muslims spared none of the infants. They dismounted and hacked them down one at a time.

The main body of the Muslim force charged at the knights again. They numbered almost two hundred against forty-eight. Three of the knights stood on the ground with swords in hand, their mounts killed in the initial exchange.

They eyed the Muslim horde as it advanced towards them. Yet they did not turn and run. Each man whispered a quiet prayer of his own and stood his ground. The advancing force swallowed them up. By the time it had passed by, they were dead.

Pelou and his knights regrouped. They saw the size of the force coming their way, but it did not deter them. Together they turned and in a perfect line charged as one. Pelou took the front with Dujon at his side. They hung low in the saddle with swords raised. Unlike the first charge they had made, their horses now raced forward at full speed.

The battle cries of both sides filled the air. Each Muslim wanted only the death of the Christian knights. The knights, in turn, wanted only to stain the ground with Muslim blood.

They came together. Horses cried out, as their bodies collided. The deafening clang of steel on steel rang in their ears. The knights fought with amazing courage. For every one that fell, three Muslims went with them.

Pelou eyed his opposite. Unlike him the Muslim leader stayed to the rear of the battle. In his heart Pelou knew force of numbers would likely triumph here. There were just too many against them. He identified his best chance of victory in killing the man he had in his sights.

He cut a line straight through the middle. Dujon fought at his side, covering his back. Their superior skill won through. The Muslim leader saw him coming and sent his two bodyguards out to protect him.

Pelou knew these were likely his two best soldiers. But in that same moment the sound of the women and children screaming caught his ear. He looked beyond them to see the pilgrims fleeing for their lives.

His heart raced, knowing that those in his care were under attack. "We have to get to them!" he shouted to Dujon over the din.

"I am with you, my Lord," Dujon assured him.

"When we pass these two we go straight for them."

"I am at your side."

"Then we shall do it."

They spurred their mounts together. The distance between the four men vanished in no time. Pelou was too fast for his rival. He swung with his sword and took the Muslim's head clean off. Dujon attacked with his shield. He blocked the swing from his enemy and drove his blade in low. The Muslim fell from the saddle as the Frenchman rode on.

Pelou eyed the opposing leader. He saw real fear in the man's eyes. *This is no soldier* he thought. *He is a bandit, a murderer and a thief.* The Muslim leader turned his mount to flee. But Pelou was in no mood to let him get away. He hurled his sword through the air, still at full gallop.

The sword spun as many as twenty times in flight. But it found its target. The Muslim managed one slight groan as it ripped through his back and out through his chest. He slumped forward, his blood coating the mane of his horse. Pelou reached out with an arm. Without slowing or changing direction he grabbed the hilt of his weapon and yanked it from the dead man. It lifted him up over the head of his horse. The bandit crashed down under its hooves. It tripped over him and fell down hard. His corpse lay mangled on the ground.

The two men sprinted on at full gallop. They raced past the cluster of trees. The sight that met their eyes filled them with dread. Bodies lay all over the ground. They saw men, women and children. The Muslims did not pick and choose.

The bandits stopped the slaughter. They turned their attention on the two knights when they saw them ride up. Pelou and Dujon took out the first four men they encountered with ease. Two more came at them and fell. A half a dozen of the Muslims continued the attack on the women and children. Some of the women they

seized and threw across the saddle. Pelou heard them scream as their abductors made off with them. But there was nothing he could do to help.

The eighteen bandits in the group that remained organised themselves quickly. They split into two groups. The two knights managed to take one more each before they faced a proper counter attack.

They had to fight for their lives. Their ability as horsemen, even against this enemy, stood them in good stead. No more than two men could engage them at any one time. Their superior skills came to the fore. Only for the fact that they had to kill these two knights, the Muslims would have fled.

In the thick of the fighting the Muslims drew the two knights away from each other. Fighting alone they were not as strong. One of the bandits got in behind Dujon and drove a blade into his lower back.

His body turned cold in an instant. He managed to raise his sword to fend off another blow, but could not avoid a second that came from the opposite side. The sword struck him across the side of the head. A huge gash opened above his ear. He sagged forward, though still conscious. They converged on him as one. Blood gushed from his mouth the moment four of them drove their blades into his torso.

Pelou cried out when he saw Dujon fall. In a fury he lunged forward and drove his sword straight through the eye of one of the Muslims. The seven that remained circled him. He spun around on his horse many times, as he fought them off. It was as much as he could do now. But with each moment that passed both he and his mount grew more and more weary.

Sweat poured from his brow and trickled into his eyes. The salty fluid stung them and obscured his vision. His long hair stuck to his face and head. Every muscle and sinew in his body ached. Slowly he felt his strength begin to ebb away. Every swing and block with his sword sapped a little more of it. Only his adrenaline and a fear of death urged him on.

He gasped as a blade sliced his left arm. His chain mail was not strong enough there to fully protect him. When he swung around a rider charged his horse from behind. His mount staggered sideways and the sudden jolt knocked him from the saddle. He grabbed desperately for the reins with his other hand. In the process his shield dropped to the ground. His efforts proved in vain. As his horse struggled to keep its footing his feet slid from the stirrups. Fear gripped his heart, as he crashed down against the hard earth.

Pelou survived on his wits now. He blocked another downward blow, holding his sword high in both hands. With a deft flick of the wrist he disarmed his enemy. He saw the shock in the man's eyes before driving his blade deep into his heart.

He spun around just in time to fend away another two strikes against him. His strength and courage amazed them. Six onto one he still remained on his feet.

"Give me strength, God!" he cried. "But if it be Your will, Father, then take me. I commend my spirit to You!"

The Muslims stopped for a moment. He seemed to mesmerise them as he spoke, but it did not last. Pelou knew he had to even the odds if he were to survive this. He stooped down and drove his sword through the chest of the nearest horse. Before he got up again he swung and hacked off the leg of a second. Both beasts cried out and came crashing down. Their riders hit the ground hard. One broke an arm, but the other got slowly to his feet.

Pelou spun again to face the four others. Blood oozed steadily from the wound in his left arm. Still he fought on. One of the riders engaged him. In the same moment another got in behind. He could do nothing as the Muslim lunged at him.

The sabre pierced the padding on his back. He cried out as it cut two inches into his flesh.

It caused him to lose his momentum. Another rider charged him from the side. He staggered to the left when the horse clattered into him. With no defence now he walked straight into the arc of a sabre that slashed the whole of one side of his face. His vision clouded before he fell face first against the ground.

The main battle had ended. Every one of the gallant knights lay dead. Less than fifty of the Muslims they had fought remained alive. Of those, at least half carried wounds of one kind or another. They joined up with the few that Pelou had resisted.

The group looked down at his body. Normally they would have hacked him to pieces. But he had shown courage none of them thought possible. They left him there and rode away, a sixth of their original number.

Pelou awoke hours later, his head throbbing badly. Blood caked his vest and armour and the ground around him. He managed with an effort to get to his feet.

The buzzards circled overhead. Some had already feasted on the dead that lay all around. He looked to the women and children. Tears welled in his eyes. He had failed them. His heart broke in two at the gravity of it all. He dropped to his knees and cried harder than he had ever done before. "I am sorry," he choked over and over. "I am sorry."

A terrible pain passed through his head. He clutched it in both hands, as he continued to cry. A black wave passed over him a second time. He did not resist it. He wanted death. His eyes closed. Then he collapsed again.