

Amir's Dilemma

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The view from the turret was astonishing. Rank upon rank, the barbarian hordes stretched to the horizon. Red and white banners in the fore. Individual coats of arms at the rear. Further back, the silken tents of what the heathens called their nobility, each sporting their family pennant. And there, in the far distance, at the back of them all, the large black and gold tent and arms, of the infidel king.

These city walls had never been breached, and the Kalif's Forces were better trained, with superior weapons. Unfortunately, such skills and weaponry were fulfilled only in the field. Not cooped up behind walls. But, against such numbers? Only a fool would commit an army to the inevitable slaughter of open battle. And the ignominy, if rumours were true, of rape, dismemberment and torture, for men, women and children alike, was... Unthinkable.

If a long siege were to be maintained, Allah only knew what abuse their enemy would inflict on the land and inhabitants beyond the city walls, to sustain their needs. And no matter how tenacious the citizens were, after the ravages of twelve moons at most, the city would fall anyway. Those within would, by then, be savages. But that would not happen... With such numbers at his disposal, the infidel would have no reason to delay incursion into further territory with a long siege, and would attempt to take the city immediately. In Amir's mind that would be a better result. There would be huge losses of course, but some glory, for what that is worth. It might ease the death throws of some. Much damage could be inflicted on their foes in the process. The next city might then face a weaker and somewhat depleted force. But that was not his immediate concern. It was his people who were about to suffer annihilation. Despite the city's vaunted reputation of being impregnable. Kalif Amir had no doubt that such an army as this would succeed... No! A way must be found to negotiate a peace. But what could he offer to this monster king, who must know the certainty of his own victory, that would induce him to parlay?

Marriage to a favourite daughter would hardly gain his interest, when he would soon be able to have them all, to use in any way, his doubtless perverse proclivities directed, for his gratification. Gold he can take. Slaves he can make. There was nothing he could offer this tyrant that he could not take for himself. How then might he gain the ear of this, self professed, 'God fearing' man? Who waged a war, that in his eyes was divinely inspired. These thoughts troubled him deeply. A 'GOD FEARING' man...? he continued to muse. What would move a such as he to put his blood-lust aside and leave his enemies unmolested? A city intact, and the mass conversion of its citizens to Christianity. Perhaps... This God was not so different. Was Abraham not the father of both races, both religions. Alas, his people would never agree. Surrender, and his own head on a platter. Maybe. No again! If the glory of battle was taken from him and his vile horde. Such capitulation would be seen as cowardice. There would be no quarter to be had there.

Victory cannot be given, it can only be won. And this king would have his glory soaked in the blood of his enemies... 'Allah, as you once did for Solomon, give me the wisdom to find a way, if not to victory, then at least to temper the heart of this blood-thirsty monarch...' Amir descended the battlements and wandered aimlessly in his weariness. Dark and disturbing were the thoughts and discarded strategies that crowded his troubled mind. His meandering took him through the market square, where vendors stoically continued to ply their trade. And on, into the cobbles of the street of artisans. He walked past the burning braziers of the smiths and armourers. Stopping briefly to warm his hands at a forge. The smith acknowledged him with a nod but did not pause in his work. It was all futile of course, but the populace must never think so, or all hope was lost. And if fight we must, then it will be a glorious fight. To the death, for the lucky ones.

The engineers in the open field, near the inner wall, at the end of the street, were manoeuvring trebuchets, for hauling up to the battlements, under the command of the captain of the guard. Amir waved and walked on... In the military quarter. A beggar, being ejected from the hospital, was inadvertently thrown at his feet. Amir assisted him to stand. He had to hold his breath to avoid the reek of body odour, and bad breath. He questioned the medical orderly's rough handling. 'A thousand pardons effendi. Our hospice is full with the sick and dying. The master is clearing out malingerers to make space for those who will need it in the coming battle.' The threads of an idea began to tug at Amir's mind
'Take me to your master..!'

Dr Hussein greeted Amir respectfully.

And showed him sanitising preparations, and the clearing and make shift facilities that were in hand.

'We continue to care for those with life threatening injuries or disease. But room must be made for our brave soldiers effendi.'

'Where are your dead? Are there many? How do you dispose of them? Show me!' Amir was offered a scarf soaked in rose water to cover his face, and was reluctantly conducted to a cool cellar.

'Those of good family are returned to them for burial. The others remain here until we have sufficient time to open a mass grave.'

'How many currently?'

'Some fifteen effendi.'

'I have heard some of your profession study the anatomy of the dead with surgical intervention. Is this true?'

'Such a thing would be an outrage to Allah your eminence.'

'Saving the population of a city would justify such an outrage would it not..? Please answer my question.' After some moments, Hussein responded.

'Some do yes.'

'And you doctor?' Hussein tilted his head non committally.

'Is it possible to change the appearance of the dead to mimic a particular condition, sufficient to fool someone without your expert knowledge..?'

Catching the timbre of Amir's thoughts, Hussein smiled sadly.

'Yes, I believe it is.'

'Will you do it?'

Averting his face from the dead, he whispered

'Yes'..

Several attempts were made to parlay. All were ignored. Eventually, a delegation was sent out under a flag of truce. Archers opened fire on them, and the bombardment of the walls began. Only half the delegation returned alive, bringing the dead with them. Against the protestations of the military, Amir insisted that there was no return of fire until he personally had seen to the loading of the trebuchet's. Eight in all. Doctor Hussein arrived on the battlements with a number of orderlies. Carrying with them misshapen objects wrapped in white truce flags. With reluctance, great suspicion, and much cajoling, the loaders were persuaded to place the packages. And on Amir's order, they were fired in unison, into the ranks of the enemy...

The King had received the earlier attempts to parlay with disdain. Although, he had promised punishment to the archers who had fired on the delegation.

He had little sympathy for these heathens, who had occupied this and other Christian cities, during the expansion of their empire. They had given no quarter, and neither would he. He could not understand, however, why there had been no return of fire now that the bombardment of the city had begun and his troops were advancing. Not one life taken amongst his men so far. This, despite the envoys having been fired upon. And already their walls were sustaining damage... A shout rang out from one of the captains in the ranks.

'My king, they return fire.' At last! Now, in the name of the true and living God most high, would these savages know the wrath, the vengeance, and the might of God's holy army... Another shout. 'They fall short your highness.' Now what? He grabbed a spy glass from an aide. And then another missile launched. This time directly at the king. Smaller, to attain more range. Though still short of the king. He was amazed at the depth and the accuracy of the throw. What trickery was this? He turned to his commander.

'Is that thing wrapped in a bow?' He asked. Regrouping, some distance to the rear, he waved forward an aide. The aide dismounted...

'Don't just stand there man! What's in it..?'

'The keys to the city your highness... And a note...'

'Well..! What does it say man?'

'It says "the city is yours." There is more... 'Before you enter. If you would know mercy and be spared God's punishment, it would be wise to examine the gifts we have placed before your army. The king was unsettled and wary. This was not the way he had thought to begin his holy war...

'Get me the archers who fired on the delegation... 'You men, who have acted without my order. If you would once more find favour with your king. Go and examine the gifts of the heathens... Jonas, yeoman to the king, was first to pluck up the courage to cut the bindings. The wrappings opened like flowers, displaying the dismembered head, hands and feet of several corpses. Despite being a hardened veteran of many battles, he staggered back in dismay. And then, knowing his fate, he sobbed quietly.

'What is it man..?'

'It remains my king... remains of plague victims. Any who enter the city are dead men. May heaven help us.' The silence of eighty thousand warriors was thunderous.

The king sat stone still and near apoplectic. For several minutes, veins pulsed visibly in his neck and face. Then, he turned his horse. At his signal, a volley of arrows despatched those sent to examine the remains. Silently, the army broke camp and withdrew.

Amir and the doctor looked on from the battlements.

'Do you think me damned good doctor, for my mistreatment of the dead..?'

'I think many will see it that way while secretly thanking you for our salvation. A city full of souls saved. This must surely be joyous in the eyes of Allah... And the dead will be grateful for an easy passage to paradise, through their belated martyrdom. Come... Let us tidy up the mess left by our enemies, gather the remains of our dead, and ease their passage to the afterlife with prayers and funeral rights fit for the heroes they are become.