Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Helping you choose books for children

0-5 5-7 7-9 9-12 12+

opening extract from

Crusade

written by

Elizabeth Laird

published by

Macmillan Publishers

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

please print off and read at your leisure.

THE MAIN CHARACTERS

People of the Holy Land

Salim Ibn Adil, a boy
Adil, his father
Khadijah, his mother
Ali, his sixteen-year-old brother
Zahra, his three-year-old sister

Musa ben Aaron, a doctor from Jerusalem
Leah, his wife
Solomon, a pharmacist

Ismail, a young Mamluk soldier
Arslan Ibn Mehmet, captain of the Mamluk troop

People of Fortis, a castle in England

Adam, son of Gervase, a boy
Tom Bate, his neighbour
Jennet, Tom's seventeen-year-old daughter
Tibby, Jennet's daughter

Lord Guy de Martel, baron of Fortis
Lord Robert, his son
Father Jerome, his chaplain
Master Tappe, kennel master of Fortis

Jacques (pronounced 'Jakes'), a pedlar

Sir Ivo de Chastelfort, a knight of Fortis
Roger Stepesoft } Men-at-arms
Treuelove Malter }

Joan, a washerwoman

The Animals

Powerful and Faithful, mastiffs
Grimbald and Vigor, warhorses
Kestan, a Mamluk cavalry horse
Suweida, a mule

The Rulers

Sultan Saladin
King Richard of England

A thousand years ago, a storm swept through Europe. Preachers travelled through every land, stirring the people up to leave their farms, cottages and castles and embark on a great crusade to Palestine. They wanted to capture the city of Jerusalem, Christianity's most holy site.

The people who lived in Palestine were mostly Muslim, but there were smaller groups of Jews and Eastern Christians too. They had all lived peacefully alongside each other for centuries, and Jerusalem was a holy city to all of them.

The first Crusaders thought that Muslims and Jews were evil, and deserved to be killed. The people of Palestine feared the Crusaders, because they were so violent, but despised them too for their barbaric, primitive ways. They called all Europeans 'Franks'.

At first the Crusaders were victorious and captured Jerusalem, killing every Muslim and Jew that fell into their hands. They set up a Christian kingdom and ruled for a hundred years. But then a great Muslim prince, the Sultan Saladin, came to power. He drove the Crusaders out of Jerusalem, and took back most of the cities on the coast as well, including the city of Acre.

When this news reached Europe, the call to recapture Jerusalem rang out again in every town and village, and people began once more to flock to the banners of Crusade . . .

CHAPTER ONE

It was a blistering August day and there was hardly a breath of wind coming in off the dazzling Mediterranean sea, whose waters lapped lazily against the white stone walls of the city of Acre. Several ships were tied up at the quayside, but there were only a few people outside in the hot sun. A couple of men, their bare backs slicked with sweat, were unloading a cargo of wheat on to the baking stones of the quay, and two young boys were diving in and out of the water, shaking the silvery drops off their hair as they came up laughing.

In the great customs house behind the harbour, Salim sat on a bulging bale of cotton, moodily swinging his one good leg. It had been a bad day so far. Adil, his father, had sworn at him twice, once for slipping away from his station at the accounting desk, and once for spilling his pot of ink on the corner of a new bolt of green brocade, which Adil had been counting on selling for a good price. There'd be a beating for that this evening, Salim knew.

The huge square courtyard of the customs house was surrounded on all four sides by two tiers of arched arcades, behind which were the merchants' lock-up stores. There

were piles of merchandise everywhere: bundles of silks from Damascus and muslins from Mosul, sacks of wheat from Egypt and incense from Yemen, dried limes from Basra, spices from India, nuts from Aleppo and jars of oil and honey and olives from just about everywhere. Usually, the courtyard was alive with turbaned merchants haggling over prices, camels and donkeys being unloaded, and sailors staggering in through the gate that led directly out to the harbour quays, bowed under heavy loads.

Today, however, everything was quiet. A couple of mules nodded sleepily in the shade of a wall. A few men stood about in the arcades, talking quietly, keeping out of the broiling sun.

Salim kicked at the bale again. He hated it when things were so quiet. For one thing, it was boring. For another, it put his father into a thunderous mood. Adil, unlike everyone else, was wide awake. He was still sitting cross-legged in front of his storeroom, clicking the beads of his abacus back and forth while the worry lines deepened on his forehead.

'Even in the bad old days,' he'd been grumbling all morning, 'when the Franks ruled Acre, and we had to put up with their filth – pigs running everywhere – the stink of wine – the way they never washed – business was never as slow as this.'

The other merchants were used to his complaints. They'd nodded politely, but without much sympathy. Most of them had been trading in Acre only for the past two years, since Saladin had captured the city from the Franks. Adil was one of the few Saracen merchants who had lived in Acre before that time. It had been hard, they knew, living as a Muslim under Crusader rule, and Adil had certainly had much to bear. But in Frankish times the city had been one vast marketplace, with caravans of laden camels pouring through its gates from the far corners of the Muslim east, and ships full of merchandise scudding into the harbour from the fabled cities of Venice and Genoa and every part of the Christian west beyond. The city

might have been the dirtiest place on the entire Mediterranean coast, and Adil might have had to put up with endless humiliations at the hands of the European overlords, but everyone knew that trade in those days had offered wonderful possibilities for enrichment. In spite of his constant air of anxiety, Adil had done well for himself.

Salim jumped off his bale and limped out through the sea gate to the harbour. Just outside the customs house, against the wall, were stone benches, covered in rugs. A few officials usually sat here, their ebony inkwells at their sides, writing in huge ledgers lists of the tax due on unloaded goods. No one was here today, not even Salim's older brother Ali, who was usually hanging about with the other merchants' sons by the harbour when there was nothing else to do.

I can slip off home if Ali's not around to stop me, Salim told himself. *I'll tell Mama I've got a headache.*

With luck, his mother would plead for him and stop him from getting a beating. She'd get Selma, the servant girl, to give him honey cakes, and let him go up on to the roof where he could have a quiet game of knucklebones without his little sister, Zahra, interfering.

Shouts from inside the customs house made him hobble back into the courtyard. A caravan of camels was swaying in through the northern landward gate, their drivers, covered with dust and limp with heat, yelling impatiently at them.

The customs house sprang to life at once. Merchants hurried forwards from their shady storerooms. Slaves were kicked awake, and clerks appeared as if from nowhere, ready to get to work.

The camels, groaning like weary old men, sank down to their knees. Usually, the unloading began at once, but today everyone was clustering round the camel drivers, who were waving their arms and talking excitedly.

They'll be in a stupid fuss over something boring, like the prices in Damascus, Salim told himself.

This was his chance. In the commotion, his father and Ali would never notice that he'd gone. He sidled round to the far arcade and slipped out through the gate, then set off, walking as quickly as his short left leg would let him.

The way home led through the covered silk bazaar. The light was dim here, though sunbeams fell at intervals through the round holes pierced in the bazaar's high stone-vaulted roof. Salim was so used to the bazaar that he usually barely noticed the small booths on each side, piled with brightly coloured silks and velvets, or the mass of people, speaking a dozen different languages, who crowded round them. But today things were different. Half the booths were already closed, and the owners of the others were quickly fetching down their displays of cloth and putting up heavy wooden shutters, ready to lock up. The few people hurrying down the narrow walkway between the booths had faces set with purpose.

What's happening? thought Salim.

He turned a corner out of the half-empty covered bazaar into a narrow open street that was packed with people, camels, horses and mules. A man with a handcart piled with household goods was trying to thrust a path for himself through it.

'Let me through, in the name of Allah!' he was shouting, fear in his voice.

Salim shuddered.

The plague! Perhaps it's the plague!

When the plague came, it could strike people at any time, killing them after a few hours of terrible agony. The last outbreak had been in Frankish times. The sickness had sent terror through the city, and hundreds of people had died. He put his hands up over his mouth and nose, afraid of breathing in infection, and hurried on.

There was a mosque on the next corner. It had been a church in Frankish times, but the crosses had been taken down and the pictures of the Prophet Jesus and his saints had been removed. Sacred inscriptions from the Holy Koran now covered the walls instead. Salim hesitated as he passed its open door. His mother was always urging him to pray. Perhaps he should. Perhaps if he did, the plague would pass him by.

The mosque seemed to be unusually full. There was a high pile of slippers by the door, and he could hear the voice of a preacher raised inside.

The doorkeeper appeared, a bunch of heavy keys jangling from the loose belt that gathered in his gown.

'What do you want?' He raised his chin aggressively when he saw Salim hesitating by the door.

'To pray, *ya-sheikh*. The plague's coming, isn't it?'

The old man stared at him.

'The plague? Who told you that?'

'No one, but the bazaar's closing early, and I thought—'

'You thought!' The doorkeeper laughed scornfully. 'Where have you been all afternoon? Haven't you heard? A Frankish army's on its way here. They'll attack tonight or tomorrow. You'd better get on home.'

Salim's heart gave a violent thud and he felt the blood drain from his face. The Franks fought like devils, with wild courage and blind fanaticism, not caring if they died in battle, as long as their side won. And when they'd conquered a city, they'd kill and destroy without mercy, looting everything. The Frankish forces had been cooped up in the northern city of Tyre since Saladin's armies had swept through Palestine. No one had expected them to break out again.

The doorkeeper's eyes had softened at the look on Salim's face.

'It's all right, lad. This city's as strong as a fortress. And our lord Saladin will come rushing to help us, with all his knights.

You'll see. The Franks are nothing compared to him.' He stopped and nodded piously. 'The forces of Islam will not be overcome by the infidel, may Allah curse them.'

Salim frowned.

'You needn't think I'm afraid,' he said stiffly. 'Not of a bunch of Franks, nor of anyone.'

'Are you coming in here to pray, or not?' The man said, unimpressed.

Salim felt obliged to go inside. He kicked off his shoes before entering the small washroom, in what had once been the church's side chapel, to perform his ritual wash. From here, he could hear the preacher's loud, clear voice. He dried himself hurriedly and went to sit at the back of the congregation.

'Muslims of Acre!' the preacher was calling out. 'Will you forget your sacred duty? Will you flee like rats from the path of the infidel? How can you bear to see this sweet city once more overrun by the wickedness of the barbarians? Why do these foreigners come here, to a land that isn't theirs, wave after wave of them, slaughtering us like beasts? I'll tell you. They hate the truth and justice of Islam! They want to insult the Holy Koran and take back the sacred city of Jerusalem in order to defile it! They come to set their crosses up on our mosques, to take our women, and force our children into slavery!'

Salim shivered, in spite of the heat, and plucked at the belt of his tunic.

'Believe me, brothers,' the preacher went on, 'to fight the Franks is not only to defend ourselves, our cities, homes and families. It is a holy act. It is jihad! And who will take up the challenge? The warrior of Islam. Who is this warrior? What is he like? The jihad warrior must be like a lion in courage and a leopard in pride, a bear in strength . . .' His resonant voice was making the hair rise on the nape of Salim's neck, and his

fists tightened as he listened. 'He must be a wild boar in attack, and a wolf in the speed of his escape!'

If Salim had been afraid before, he felt the courage of a lion now. He was listening open-mouthed, seeing himself dressed in gleaming new chainmail, a sword in his hand, astride a noble war horse, charging down upon an infidel knight, running him through with his lance, while his father and Ali watched in amazement, cheering him on . . .

The preacher dropped his voice to a lower, thrilling tone.

'All this, my brothers, the jihad warrior must be, but do not forget, never forget, that the greater struggle, the true jihad, is against your own lower self, your baser nature, your cowardice and selfishness. Purify yourselves! Make ready for the trial ahead! Stay in the city, pray for victory and fight! Only then will Allah reward you and save you and your families from perdition.'

The word 'families' jerked Salim back to reality. What was happening in the city outside? What if his father and Ali had already run home and were packing up to leave? What if they'd fled Acre by now and had left him behind?

He shot up and pushed his way to the door. It took him a moment to find his scuffed shoes in the heap outside, but once they were on his feet he was off, moving as fast as he could, working his way through the tortuous maze of alleys to the scarred wooden door set into a high stone wall that led into the small courtyard of his home.

'Mama!' he was calling out before the door had banged shut behind him. 'Baba! Are you there?'

Khadijah, his mother, came unhurriedly out of an inner room, wiping her hands on a cloth, her round face as untroubled as usual. Little Zahra toddled out behind her, lifting her arms to be picked up.

'Is that you, *habibi*? Why are you home so early? Where's your father?'

'Haven't you heard?' He couldn't believe how calm she was. 'A Frankish army's coming! The bazaar's closed up and everyone's running away!'

She gasped and swept Zahra up in her arms, staring at Salim over the little girl's head.

'It's one of your stories, Salim.'

'No!' He was offended. 'It's true! I went to the mosque on the way home. The preacher was calling for jihad. He says nobody ought to leave. We've all got to stay in Acre and fight the Franks.'

'*Ya-haram!* Where's your father? Why did he send you home? Does he want me to start packing?'

He put his head affectingly on one side.

'He didn't send me home, Mama. I've had a headache all day. I came home on my own.'

She was too shocked by his news to show her usual sympathy.

'I can't see to you now. Go on up to the roof. It's cooler there. And all this happening on the very day that dratted Selma goes sick!'

She hurried into the back room of the house where the chests of clothes were kept, and he heard her opening and shutting them, while Zahra began to cry. He went across to the water jars which stood out of the sun under an awning and took a long drink. Then he scrambled up the steep stairs to the flat rooftop where a vine trained over wooden struts made a pleasant shade. There was a good view from here across the huddled, cramped streets of Acre. He screwed up his eyes, looking out for anything unusual and listening for shouts or the clash of arms, but a moment later he heard the street door open and turned to look down into the courtyard. His father had come home.

Salim was about to duck out of sight, when he saw that a stranger had followed his father into the courtyard. Surprised,

he stayed a moment too long, and his father looked up and saw him.

'Salim! What are you doing up there? Come down here at once,' he called out.

Nervously, Salim stumbled on the steep stone steps and nearly fell. To his relief, his father was no longer looking at him, but was ushering the stranger hospitably into the long, barrel-vaulted room that ran down one side of the courtyard. He would take him, Salim knew, to the dais at one end, where rugs and comfortable cushions were set out.

'Tell your mother we have company,' Adil said over his shoulder. 'Bring mint tea.'

Salim hurried to the storeroom. Khadijah was on her knees in front of a chest, pulling out clothes and piling them on the floor.

'Baba's home,' Salim said. 'He's got a guest. He wants mint tea.'

She turned an astonished face towards him.

'*Tea*? When the Franks are coming any minute to murder us?'

He shrugged.

'He doesn't seem worried, Mama.'

She sat back on her heels, frowning at him.

'You've been exaggerating again, Salim. Why do I ever listen to you?'

He saw a familiar look in her eyes. She was about to give him a talking to, and would end up by telling him to look after Zahra. Quickly, he slipped out of the room and went to fill a jug from the water jar. Taking a bowl and towel, he carried the water carefully into the big room and went up the few steps to the dais, where his father and the guest had settled themselves cross-legged against the cushions.

'Good.' Adil looked at him with unusual approval, and waved him towards the mysterious stranger. Salim held the

bowl under the man's hands with his left hand, and poured water over them with his right, as he'd been taught to do. He passed the stranger the towel, and held the bowl for his father too. Then he stepped back, hoping to be allowed to stay and listen. His father made no sign, so he limped to the door and leaned against the lintel, pretending to look bored and idle.

'Not a great force, you said?' Adil was asking the stranger.

'No. A few hundred knights, if that. And they're not madmen fresh out of Europe, but Franks from up the coast here, who've lived in Palestine for years. It's no more than a show of bravado, if you ask me. The Franks – may God frustrate them! – have been buzzing like angry bees since Saladin took Jerusalem. They're beaten, and they know it.'

Salim saw that Adil had pulled out a string of worry beads from the folds of his gown. He was passing them quickly through his fingers, as he always did when he was anxious.

'It's worrying, though. If the gates of the city have to be shut it'll be another blow to business. Trade's been terrible these past two years. I used to be able to sell an inlaid tray to an ignorant Frank for five dinars. I'm lucky if I can sell a spoon to anyone now.'

His guest raised his huge eyebrows.

'You don't regret that the Crusaders were driven out of Acre?'

Adil looked uncomfortable.

'Of course not, Doctor Musa. But we were used to them. They'd been here for a hundred years, and some of them had become quite civilized. Say what you like, the European trade is most profitable.' He sighed. 'But what worries me more is that the fanatics in Europe are raising a storm over our conquest of Jerusalem. You must have heard the rumours! Huge armies! Thousands of Frankish knights and foot soldiers. Kings, too. Richard of England, may God deliver him to

perdition! Philip of France, a devil incarnate. And that red-bearded monster, the Emperor of Germany! They won't rest till they raise their cursed crosses over the holy mosques again.' He was tugging at his thick black beard as he spoke.

A discreet cough from the far side of the courtyard made Salim turn his head. His mother was holding a tray in her hand and nodding at him. He went across to her.

'Who is he? Who's with your father?'

'I don't know. A doctor, I think.'

'Ah.' She looked pleased. 'At last.'

'Why, Mama? Is someone ill?'

'No, of course not. What did you hear? Are we to leave Acre or not?'

'No,' Salim said, feeling embarrassed. 'It's only a raiding party, after all.'

'What did I tell you?' She shot him a triumphant glance. 'Now mind how you go with the tea.'

Salim carried the tray carefully back into the big room and up the dais, walking as smoothly as he could. He hated it when people noticed his limp for the first time. He felt the doctor's eyes on him as he approached, and looked up, setting his face in a repressive frown. But there was only interest in the doctor's eyes, and none of the expected pity or contempt.

'Lame from birth, is he?' The doctor was addressing Adil.

Adil shook his head.

'He was born perfect. A fever struck him when he was about two years old.'

The doctor nodded.

'No other impairment down that side?'

'Some weakness in the left arm. Doctor, is there anything you could—'

'I'm sorry. Such conditions can't be treated. Some strengthening exercises perhaps, a careful diet . . .'

Salim was taking in the stranger's appearance now. He was

a round little man, quite elderly, with long-fingered, delicate hands. His gown was made of fine stuff, but was rumpled round his belt, and his turban seemed about to slip down over one ear. His eyes were penetrating, under their bushy black brows, and Salim had the uncomfortable feeling that they had seen right inside him, and knew everything.

'A clever boy, no doubt,' he said, talking to Adil while looking at Salim. 'He'll live on his wits. What could be better?'

Salim scowled. He resented being talked about as if he wasn't there.

Adil poured out a glass of mint tea and handed it to his guest.

'Live on his wits? We all have to do that nowadays. And though I'm his father, I must say that Salim has more wits than most. Quick as a bagful of monkeys, he is.'

Salim had never heard praise from his father before. His mouth dropped open with astonishment. Then he shut it again, and tried to look intelligent.

'Oh yes,' Adil went on, sipping his tea and looking at his visitor. 'The boy's gifted. Especially with language. He reads and writes like a scholar. He even speaks Frankish!'

Salim felt a blush of embarrassment surge up into his face. He had learned to speak Norman French from the Frankish merchants' sons, who had hung about the customs house in the days when the Crusaders had ruled Acre. They'd teased and tormented him, but accepted him in a rough way. There had been no one else to play with, anyway. In the two years since they'd gone, he'd almost forgotten their sharp, crude language, so different from the fluid, gutteral Arabic of his parents. Speaking French was a skill he was ashamed of and he couldn't understand why his father was boasting of it.

But the doctor's eyebrows had lifted with interest.

'Ha! Unusual! You really speak Frankish?' he said, addressing Salim for the first time.

'Try him,' Adil said eagerly. 'Say something, Salim.'

Salim's mind went blank. He licked his lips, anxious not to look a fool.

'Um – *Good day to you, sir,*' he managed at last, in halting Norman French. '*The weather is hot.*'

'Yes, yes, and? What does it mean?' Adil said impatiently.

Salim translated. The skin round Dr Musa's dark eyes crinkled into fine lines as he began to laugh again.

'Ah, the Franks! The Franks! Always talking about the weather. Not surprising, I suppose. Think what cold wet lands they come from. Cruel, fanatical people. The humours of their blood make them hard and merciless.'

Adil coughed delicately.

'I hear that your people have suffered again? In the land of England?'

Dr Musa shook his head, as if trying to clear it of an unpleasant vision.

'Yes. Hundreds massacred, in many cities. They hate us Jews. What God-forsaken people they are. If only I was young and strong, I'd . . . But what can I do? A poor old doctor. And I tell you this, Adil, they'd treat you Muslims the same if you dared set foot in their cursed lands. You're quite right to be scared of a new invasion from the west. Richard of England is terrifying. Terrifying! Tall as a tree! Strong as a lion too. And cunning – he'd trick his way out of hell. If they come, Acre will be their first target. They'll have to take this city before they can go to Jerusalem. May the Lord be our refuge if they succeed.'

Dr Musa and Salim's father sat talking for a long time while the sun faded from the wall of the courtyard and the leaves of the vine on the roof were rattling in the evening breeze. Salim stayed where he was, in the doorway, pretending to whittle a piece of wood with his pocket knife, trying to listen, but the

men had dropped their voices and he couldn't hear what they were saying. Though the doctor was so short, and so rumpled in his appearance, there was something impressive about him, something different from the merchants and money traders his father usually entertained.

At last the doctor made a move to go, pulling his flimsy cloak carelessly over his shoulders and shoving his turban back in place. Salim scrambled to his feet as the two men emerged into the courtyard. Just then, the street door opened with a crash and Salim's older brother, Ali, burst in.

'Ali!' Adil called out sharply. 'Stop charging about like that. Can't you see we have a guest?'

Ali made himself slow to a walk and went across to his father.

'*Salaam alaykum*,' he said, bowing to the doctor.

'A firebrand!' Dr Musa's eyebrows had risen. 'A young man of passion, Adil.'

'You don't have to tell me,' Adil said, shaking his head disapprovingly.

Salim could see that Ali was burning up with impatience, absolutely dying to speak, but didn't dare until he'd received permission.

'Two fine boys. God has blessed you,' Dr Musa said.

Salim felt a small glow of pleasure. It wasn't often that praise came his way. It was usually reserved for Ali.

'Your sons, I'm sure, are better than these worthless rogues,' Adil responded politely.

Dr Musa shook his head.

'The Almighty didn't see fit to make my marriage fruitful. I shall die childless, unless he takes pity on us in our old age. Who knows? Think of Abraham and Sarah.'

Ali, who had been bursting to speak, could keep silent no longer.

'Father, excuse me,' he burst out. 'I must tell you. The

Franks are moving south fast. And it's not just a small raiding party, like they were all saying this morning. There are thousands of them! The Sultan Saladin has sent a messenger. I saw him. Father, you should have seen his horse! Black, and the biggest, most beautiful—'

'Never mind his horse!' Adil had stepped backwards, shocked. 'What did this messenger say?'

'He's ordered the city to prepare. We've got to get in as much food as possible before the gates are closed, and sharpen our swords and everything. There's going to be a siege!'

The preacher was right, Salim thought, with a lurch of his stomach. *Mother should have listened to me.*

'Sharpen our what?' Adil was saying distractedly. 'Swords? What swords? What would I do with a sword?'

'Everyone's leaving who can,' Ali was running eagerly on. 'But we're going to stay, aren't we, Father? I spoke to one of the garrison sergeants. They're handing out weapons already. I told him you didn't have any. Not even a dagger. The sergeant promised me a sword, one of the finest, if I join them.'

Adil was struggling to keep up.

'A siege? Are you sure?'

'Yes! Certain! Everyone's running to buy food.'

Salim's skin pricked with excitement and fear. He was watching his father's face, and saw with alarm that Adil was chewing his lower lip with anxiety.

'How far away are the Franks? How long have we got before they close the city gates?'

'Several days' march, I think. And there are ships moving alongside them up the coast.'

Adil smacked his hands together in distress.

'Ships! They'll close the harbour. It'll be ruinous!'

'The Sultan's sending reinforcements, Father. The messenger said so. They'll be here in a week. I don't know when they'll shut the gates though.'

Salim couldn't hold back any longer. His heart was pounding.

'I'll join the garrison too, Baba. Please let me. I can shoot arrows really well, I'm sure I can, and you know how good I am at throwing stones.'

Ali turned on him.

'Shut up, you fool. Who do you think you are? They don't want kids, especially cripples like you.'

'Kid yourself,' Salim shot back at him. 'Just because you're three years older than me . . .'

Adil, ignoring his sons, had jumped to his feet.

'A week till the Sultan gets here!' He was talking mainly to himself. 'And an enemy fleet to blockade the harbour! We must leave. At least get Khadijah and Zahra away. But my galley! It's at sea now, not due back till next week. I have to be here to unload it. I'll lose a fortune if it falls into the wrong hands. I can't possibly leave Acre now.'

Dr Musa had stood up too.

'Is the Sultan's messenger still here?' he asked Ali. 'Is he staying in the city?'

'I'm sorry, sir. I don't know. He had a troop of Mamluk soldiers with him. They're amazing! They've got so many weapons. And their saddles! You should just see them. They're . . .'

He stopped, as if lost for words.

Salim crept forwards, fascinated, wanting Ali to go on. He had never seen Mamluk troops. They were the best, the fastest and the bravest of all the Turks.

Dr Musa was gathering his gown up, ready to hurry away.

'I must go,' he said to Adil. 'Thank God my wife is in Jerusalem with her family. She'll be safe there for the time being. I'll take what I can carry on my old mule, and get off on the road tomorrow. Eh, my poor old bones! Racketing

round the country, an old man like me, soldiers running everywhere . . .'

'You must go, of course. No! Wait, please, a moment.' Adil put out a hand to stop him. 'There's something I must ask you. I hadn't intended – in such a rush – without proper preparation – but this changes everything.'

Dr Musa was already at the street door, but he turned politely.

'You'll be surprised, perhaps, by this request.' Adil was looking harassed. 'It's – well, it's about Salim.'

Salim started when he heard his name, and looked over his shoulder, almost as if he expected another Salim to be standing behind him.

'You've seen the boy, doctor,' Adil went on. 'I've been wondering for months now what to do for the best. He's not suited to my business. Besides, Ali will take over from me, when the time comes, and no business does well with two masters.'

Salim, stunned, was looking from his father to Dr Musa and back again, filled with a growing dread.

'I'll come to the point,' Adil said quickly. 'The long and the short of it is, my dear sir, that I've been wondering if you would take Salim on as your servant apprentice. Train him in the arts of medicine.' Salim took a step backwards, his mouth falling open in horror. Ali gave a snort of derisive laughter, quickly suppressed. 'He's quick,' Adil went on. 'You've seen that yourself. His lameness would be no bar to success in your profession. In trade – you know how people are. So superstitious where money is involved! They see ill luck everywhere. A merchant with a limp – well . . .'

He stopped. Salim screwed his eyes tight shut, blocking out his father's supplicating look and the astonishment on Dr Musa's face.

No! he was screaming silently to himself. *No!*

'Are you sure about this?' Dr Musa said doubtfully.

'Wouldn't you rather apprentice him to a doctor of your own faith?'

Adil shook his head.

'You're the best, Dr Musa. Your reputation is supreme. You'd give my boy a wonderful start in life.'

'I don't know.' Dr Musa's voice was so doubtful that Salim opened his eyes again in hope. 'I'll have to think about it. An apprentice! What an idea! Obedience, of course – I'd insist on obedience. And hard work. How strong is he? Could he manage my mule? She's a devil, I tell you.'

'The idiot couldn't manage a kitten,' Ali muttered under his breath.

For once, Salim felt grateful for his brother's ill-natured scorn. But Adil shot Ali a furious look to silence him.

'He's much tougher than he looks, doctor. And growing stronger all the time. You won't be leaving Acre tonight? It's too late, surely. It'll be dark in half an hour. I'll come to your house first thing in the morning, and you can give me your answer then. Just consider it, think it over, that's all I ask.'

Dr Musa was already down the steps, and halfway across the courtyard towards the door.

'I will, *ya*-Adil,' he called back over his shoulder. 'Come to me in the morning, and bring the boy with you. An apprentice! It's quite a thought.'

Salim tossed and turned on his sleeping mat throughout the long night. He had been away from home only once before. Two years ago, Saladin had reclaimed the city of Acre from the Franks, and raised the banners of Islam over its domes and turrets. Just before the battle, Adil had quietly evacuated his family, but they had stayed away for only a few short weeks. The idea of going away for a long time, perhaps forever, was impossible. Salim couldn't take it in. Twice he was woken

from a nightmare by a nameless terror, and had to stifle a yell of fear in case he roused Ali.

Adil woke him from an uneasy sleep just as the approach of dawn was tinging the black sky with grey. At once Salim was wide awake, his heart thudding uncomfortably.

'Baba, please, I want to stay at home. Don't send me away,' he pleaded.

Adil frowned.

'Stop that, Salim. I've made up my mind. This is a good chance for you. It's for the best. There's no use whining to your mother, either. If you disobey . . .'

He left the threat open.

Salim struggled after him into the courtyard where Khadijah was pouring water from a large jar into a small pot. Her eyes were red, and her hands were trembling. She tipped some water over his head and smoothed his hair down, then pulled him into a fierce hug.

'Always remember your manners,' she said in a thick voice. 'Don't follow the ways of unbelievers. And never drink too much cold water on an empty stomach.'

He pulled away and looked up at her face, trying to make out her expression in the dim light.

'You don't need to say goodbye, Mama. We're only going to see him. He won't want me. I know he won't. I'll be back in a little while.'

She turned away, putting the corner of her headdress up to wipe her eyes, then picked up a bundle lying by the door and put it into his arms.

'Your other tunic, *habibi*. I washed it last night. A cloak for when it gets cold. And there are some honey cakes. Your favourite.'

He stared at her, anger pulsing through him.

'You're sending me away! You want to get rid of me!'

Ali stumbled outside, yawning.

'Of course she does. We all do. Specially me.' But there was no sting in his voice for once.

Salim stepped backwards away from them all.

'You can't do this, Baba. I don't know Dr Musa. I don't know anything about being a doctor. I want to stay at home and fight the Franks. You've got to let me!'

Adil had already drawn back the heavy bolts and opened the street door. He lashed out suddenly with his hand and caught Salim a stinging blow on the side of his head.

'You think I've got all day? Come on.'

Salim had never disobeyed his father and he couldn't now. He clutched the bundle to his chest and began to limp after him. Before he had gone more than a few paces he felt Ali's hand on his arm. He flinched, expecting a slap or a pinch, but Ali put a rough hand round his shoulders and squeezed them.

'*Rahmat Allah aleik*, little brother,' he said. 'God bless you. Admit it, you'd have been a useless merchant.'

The streets of Acre were unusually crowded at such an early hour. People were hurrying grim-faced towards the food bazaar, and some were already returning, driving donkeys laden with sacks of corn and jars of oil.

'The prices will be out of reach by midday,' Adil muttered. 'Come on, Salim. Don't dawdle like that.'

That stupid doctor won't take me. He won't want me. We'll be home again soon, Salim kept saying to himself.

Dr Musa's home was on the far side of the city, in the Jewish quarter. The narrow streets were so packed that Adil and Salim could barely cut their way through. People were throwing bales and bundles out of the windows, loading pots and pans chaotically into carts, tying chests to the backs of protesting mules and screeching to children to get out of the way.

Adil turned out of the main thoroughfare into a dead end.

'This is the place, I'm sure of it,' he said uncertainly.

A lattice window above rattled open and Dr Musa's bare head poked out.

'Is that you, *ya*-Adil? I'm coming down.'

A moment later, Salim heard the bolts on the street door squeak back and they were inside a cool narrow passageway.

'This comes at a fortunate time,' Dr Musa said, running a hand through his thick curly hair. 'My rascal of a servant came to me last night. Pleaded with me to let him go. His wife – sick in Haifa. What could I say? I was in two minds about the boy, but that's settled it. I'll take him. Am I insane? Of course I am! Anyway, it'll have to be an informal arrangement till things settle down. I'm not committing myself to keeping him if he doesn't suit me. If there's laziness or bad behaviour – but I'm sure you've trained him too well for that.'

Salim's heart plummeted. He took a step back, and had to stop himself crying out in protest. Then he saw with disgust that his father was almost cringing with gratitude in front of the doctor, and felt a wave of shame and anger.

'The first test comes today.' Dr Musa looked harassed and spoke briskly. 'I'm leaving now, for Damascus. We'll be walking all day. You can walk far and fast, Salim, on that leg?'

No, Salim wanted to say. *I can't walk far at all. I'm not used to it.*

'He'll be fine.' Adil was groping inside his cloak. 'He's much stronger than he looks. He's been spoiled by his mother. Toughening up will do him good. Don't let him fool you with his play-acting. Don't stand any of his nonsense!' He took out a leather pouch and put it in the doctor's hand. 'We haven't discussed the terms of the apprenticeship, doctor, but there are ten gold pieces in there.'

'Good. That'll do.' Dr Musa pocketed the money. 'I would ask you to seal the matter with a sherbet, but I must be off this

morning. The long road to Jerusalem! Think of it. At my age! Say goodbye to your father, boy.'

Salim, looking up through eyes blurred with tears, heard his father's impatient words of blessing and felt his hand rest briefly on his shoulder. He wanted to protest, to dig his heels in and refuse to budge, but he knew it would do no good. Questions raged through him. Would his family be staying in Acre, braving the Frankish army? And if they fled, where would they go? How would he ever find them again? How long was he supposed to stay with this stupid doctor anyway?

But Adil had already turned and was hurrying away.

'Goodbye, Baba,' Salim called out miserably after him.