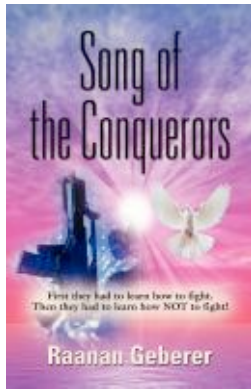


Song of the Conquerors



First they had to learn how to fight.
Then they had to learn how NOT to fight!

Raanan Geberer



Song of the Conquerors begins after the world has been decimated by dirty bombs. In much of the world, there are no real governments, just two paramilitary forces jockeying for power. The book focuses on three young fighters. They soon die, but are reincarnated 40 years later. After an amusing series of coincidences, they come together and are given a divinely-inspired mission: to negotiate with some of the most vicious enemies the world has known!

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CHAPTER ONE

SARAJEVO, 2030

Josh Kagan glanced at his watch. It was a Rolex, one of the few relics of his comfortable life in the former United States, along with his pipe, his electronic drum pad and his old biology teachers' handbook, that he'd taken with him when he came to this remote corner of the world.

Four o' clock. It would be three more hours to go until the fighting started. At least he and his troops wouldn't have to go far to take up their positions--the enemy was right inside former old school warehouse building, two flights down. That's more or less the way things had been since the Java Convention of 2021 confined fighting to indoor locations at night. There had been just too many civilian casualties, and after thousands of years of warfare, the United Nations got fed up and decided to do something about it.

Of course, the nations of the world were prepared to do what they always did – ignore U.N. resolutions – if not for an extraordinary event. Josh still remembered where he was at the time – he had been at a party smoking hashish, and he was sure it had been so powerful, he was having delusions. A mysterious figure who called himself the Healer appeared in public places simultaneously in every country in the world, on every screen, speaking a thousand languages all at once, pleading for the world to adopt the Java ideas. If mankind was too immature to stop war, he thundered, at least war could be contained.

The next day, he spoke again. And on the third day, houses of worship, as if by magic, sprung up fully built on every continent, and the Healer once again appeared. These

sanctuaries, he told the world, were set up for people to confess their sins, to give offerings, to vow to love their brothers and sisters, and to meditate and study sacred texts of all the world's traditions. He bid the world goodbye, saying that he would return every 100 years – but in the meantime would impart wisdom to certain select individuals as well as watch over everybody else. The world's religions merged into one, skeptics became believers, and the Java Convention's resolutions were passed. People's awe of, and fear of, the Healer was so strong that even the most aggressive nations and semi-nations, even the most vicious fighters, scrupulously followed the new rules of combat.

The Java Convention may have put a damper on war, but it didn't stop it. In at least half the world now, there weren't even any nations, just the two shifting alliances--the Force of Honor, our side, and the Confederacy of Twelve, their side. Unlike the nations of the 20th century, which controlled their populations through ideology, religion or nationalism, neither alliance had any ideology to speak of. Instead, they recruited members through neighborhood loyalty, village loyalty, family loyalty. In a big-city neighborhood, one apartment building might be a Force stronghold; an identical building across the street might be a Confederacy stronghold. Everyone knew they both made their money from the sale of drugs and of human organs for transplants. Josh often thought they were more similar to the old-time organized crime families than anything else. And, of course, both of them claimed the Healer was on their side.

Josh stopped daydreaming, rubbed his eyes and looked around the room. The windows, and indeed the walls, of the building were covered with sheets of the new alloy Ziridium. Today's powerful infrared cameras, if aimed from a window across the street, could see every detail of every figure and every movement inside this former school library building. All

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it took was for one Confederacy sympathizer to set up a camera across the street, take his images and transmit them to the Confederate troops inside. Ziridium was the only thing that could block the cameras.

Josh's own troops had no uniforms, although at least half of them wore the wool knit "Goggie hats" that had become the unofficial emblem of the unit. Several of his guys and girls had worn the same dirty, wrinkled clothes for two, three weeks. Some slept, some played cards, some listened to music, some played with miniature gameboards. Mahmoud and Hira slept on mats on the floor. Bucharest Joe, stooped over with an intense look in his eyes, was reading a copy of the Tibetan book of the Dead. I guess that's an appropriate choice for a man who might die at any second, Josh reflected.

The one thing none of the troops were doing was eating. The last rations of edible food ran out yesterday—the United Nations truck was a week late now. The same truck was supposed to take out the garbage, so the room was permeated with the sickening smell of half-eaten, rotting food. Thank the Healer that at least the toilets were working! And under U.N. rules, the only day fighters were officially allowed to leave their positions, go outside and interact with the local population was on Sunday. Then they eagerly ate at local restaurants, even though the only things those restaurants usually had available were sausages, bread and cheese, with a few cucumbers, olives, onions and tomatoes thrown in.

Oh shit, he murmured. Caribou is pacing the floor again! "God damn it!" said Caribou, a short, stocky man who had served with Josh as an observer in Iceland a year or so ago. "Those bums! Who do they think we are! I'll kill them all! God damn it!"

Well, Josh thought, sighing, they're my troops, and it's my responsibility to entertain them.

Josh clapped his hands. Everyone looked up at him. "Hey, everybody, I have an idea," he said. "Let's play a game. This is a poetry game." Josh grabbed some pieces of paper from his notebook and started writing some words on them. "These are emotions--love, hate, disgust, despair, hatred, laughter. I'm going to put them on the floor," he said, placing each one on a different area of the floor. "Now all of you take turns. You have to close your eyes until you feel yourself landing on a piece of paper. Then you have to open your eyes and make up a short poem about that emotion. Okay?" The guys and girls eagerly nodded--anything to break up the waiting. "Okay! Who wants to go first?"

"Come on!" Bucharest Joe said. "We might get killed in a few hours. You want to waste time on games?"

"Look, at least it beats just sitting here, wasting time, getting depressed," Big Szusza answered. There had been a Little Szusza in the unit—she'd been killed in battle last week.

"I'll play," Caribou said, stepping forward. After he volunteered, the ice was broken and the troops began to lighten up. Josh congratulated himself on this idea--he had once seen some neo-hippie types playing this game in Golden Gate Park. He was so involved in the game that he didn't see Bucharest Joe slip out. But even if he did, there was no need to worry – Joe was the unit's scout. Maybe he couldn't leave the building, but he patrolled its hallways, stairways and elevators like a hawk. He looked like a real zhloobie – prematurely bald, coke-bottle glasses, pot-belly – but he knew what was going on.

And so it happened that after about 10 minutes, the good mood Josh had worked so hard to establish was shattered by a knock on the door. The troops froze.

"Who is it?" yelled Big Szusza.

"It's Bucharest Joe! I'm back!" said a voice from the other end. Everybody relaxed immediately. Josh opened the door to

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see Joe breathing heavily. "What's going on?" he asked with concern.

"There's a wounded man on the stairs between the second and third floors. He's one of them--the Confederacy of Twelve--was cleaning his gun when it happened," Bucharest Joe said hastily. He had only the hint of a Romanian accent – his family had come to North Carolina when he was 11. "Wanna carry him back to his own lines?"

CHAPTER TWO

JOSH

Josh Kagan grew up in San Francisco. His father's family was originally Jewish, from Israel, his mother's, Lebanese Christian. He often wondered if members of his family had tried to kill each other during the old days. Not that it really mattered. Since the Healer had made himself known, all of the old religion-related conflicts, from the Arab-Israeli conflict to the Protestant-Catholic conflict in Northern Ireland to the Muslim-Hindu conflict in Kashmir, became much less volatile, although they didn't completely disappear. That's why they called that region "Israel-Palestine" nowadays.

Josh's father was a machinist who became wealthy by making weapons illegally for the Force of Honor when it first started. So Josh always had a better car than any of his classmates. Josh was short, but he made up for his height in sheer energy. In high school, he was a soccer star and played drums in several Bolo bands. No one could play the popular new Bolo style like he could, not even El Bolo himself – although when no one was around, he'd go to his room and secretly listen to old-time artists like Prince and Springsteen.

He was also very popular with women. One time, when he and his friend were hitchhiking in Oregon for adventure, two women picked them up and they were screwing within an hour, before they even knew their names. He'd always have two or three girls hanging around. On top of that, he could drink any of his friends under the table. And still, he was able to maintain a 3.8 average. He couldn't miss. Everybody thought he was

headed for medical school. But at the last minute, he switched gears and decided to become a biology teacher instead.

His problems began when he got married. First, his wife, who was manic-depressive, often refused to take her medication. When she didn't, she screamed and threw things. Second, his daughter turned out to have serious emphysema. By the time she was one year old, she already had to be taken to the emergency room twice. Respiratory-based diseases like emphysema and asthma were among the very few that had resisted a genetic-based cure, Laughing Louie Levinsky's endless fundraising telethons for these maladies notwithstanding. Just recently, geneticists had discovered an experimental cure for emphysema, but it was very expensive – the California health system wouldn't pay for it.

That meant that Josh would have to raise the money somehow. And he couldn't do it on a teacher's salary. His father suggested that he go to one of the Force's recruiting stations and sign up. With his experience as a biology teacher, he reasoned, they'd make Josh a medic, which would be less dangerous than being a fighter.

So Josh was taken into a car, blindfolded and driven to a secret recruiting station in the back room of an import-export company. And indeed, the interviewer promised Josh that they'd make him a medic.

The guy lied. Three months into his service, they told him that there was an emergency, that they had enough medics, and that they needed everyone they could get on the front lines. So Josh fought in some of the hottest spots: Johannesburg, Marseilles, Iceland and now Sarajevo. But at least he had become the commander of a unit, and a unit made up mainly of artists and intellectuals, at that. It was something.

CHAPTER THREE

SARAJEVO, 2030

When Bucharest Joe told him about the wounded enemy soldier on the steps, Josh thought for awhile. He looked at his watch. Still two hours to go. According to U.N. rules, they couldn't start shooting until then. Five years of being in the forces told him that you couldn't trust anybody. But he knew that Manuel personally was an honorable man, as Shakespeare would have said, and that Manuel's troops would do what he told them to do.

He turned to Josh. "Let's go for it," he said. "But if they start shooting, we leave him there and run for it. Our lives are more important than his."

Josh was halfway to the door when Bucharest Joe tried to block him. "Josh," he pleaded, "let me go. As the leader, you're too valuable. I'm a scout, remember? I know my way around."

Josh shook his head. "As the leader, I'm responsible for everything that goes on here, and it's my duty to go," he said.

"Well ... OK," Bucharest Joe said hesitatingly. "But I'll go with you."

They both exited the door and started descending the cinder-block stairway of this former school building, Joe leading and Josh following. They knew every step might be their last. Well, Joe thought, it's all karma. The smell of urine was everywhere. As they walked, they gazed at the generations of graffiti on the wall and the broken, long-obsolete fluorescent lights on the ceiling.

Half a flight down, they saw the guy, clutching at his stomach, bleeding and groaning. Josh took the guy's arms, Bucharest Joe his legs. They carried him down the stairs, blood dripping onto the floor and onto their clothes. They reached the Confederacy's headquarters and knocked on the door.

"Who's there?" a voice from the other side of the door cried out.

"Josh and Joe from upstairs," Josh cried out. "One of your men wounded himself cleaning his gun on the stairway. We've got him right here. Let us in, OK?"

There was a long silence. Then the door opened. Josh and Joe brought the guy in. Almost as soon as they entered, two of the Confederacy guys took the wounded man away from them and whisked him into an Ultrasonic Healing Booth at the other end of the room. In a few minutes, the machine began to emit a pink light and a soft hum. It's nice that these guys can get a hold of this new medical technology, Josh thought, bitterly remembering the painful stomach infection he had to suffer in Iceland.

Josh and Bucharest Joe looked around. The Confederate fighters, both male and female, were lounging around, listening to music, playing board games, reading, waiting for the hour of combat. In other words, the scene was more or less the same as in the Force of Honor headquarters, except for the fact that the Confederates all wore spotless, olive-green uniforms.

A door opened from an inner office, and Manuel, a short, dark man, came out smiling, reaching to shake Josh's and Joe's hands. Manuel was a former Bolivian soccer star who had fallen into disgrace because of his involvement with a drug cartel. In the aftermath, he threw in his luck with the Confederacy of Twelve. He motioned toward the Ultrasonic Healing Booth. "He'll be all right in a day or so," he said, with only a hint of a

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Latin American accent, "although it may be a week before he can fight again. Won't you two come into my office?"

Without a word, Josh and Mike followed Manuel. They couldn't believe what they saw. Manuel had decorated his command office with wood paneling, a glass-topped mahogany desk and plush red chairs. On the wall were portraits of the Confederacy's founders: the Texas oilman Bobby Lee Prescott, the Russian Admiral Vladimir Roschenko and the Saudi Imam Abdullah al-Husseini. But what interested Mike and Josh most was a working solar-powered coffee machine, together with a big tray of bread, rolls and cookies accompanied by butter and jam, on the desk.

"What's going on?" Josh asked with a trace of anger. "We haven't gotten any deliveries in a few days. The only things we could buy the last time we were outside were a can of soup, some powdered eggs and a few pieces of fruit!"

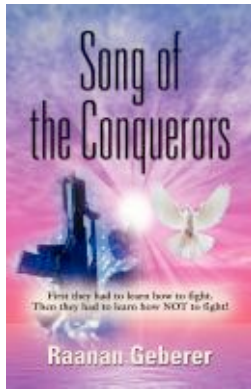
"Well, you must understand," Manuel said, smiling, "We have our connections. But why don't you sit down?" He poured two cups of coffee, adding milk from a small refrigerator behind the desk. "Why don't you sit down and eat?" Josh took little sips of coffee, and carefully removed the crusts from the rolls before he bit into them. Bucharest Joe gulped down the coffee and stuffed himself with bread like there was no tomorrow. Josh asked if he could take some cookies for his other troops, and Manuel nodded his head in the affirmative.

"Ah," Manuel said, lighting up a cigar, "it is truly unfortunate that I would have to meet two such distinguished gentlemen as you in such circumstances. After the war, I invite you both to the new, expanded Confederacy of Twelve as my guests!" He puffed away. Too bad they don't have any pipe tobacco, Josh reflected, on guard all the while for any sudden moves.

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Josh and Bucharest Joe both finished. Joe wiped his mouth with his sleeve while Josh looked at his watch. "Time to go," he said to Manuel.

"Aha! Very well. I'll escort you to the door," said the Bolivian, getting up. "Ah, war! Even the great writers like Hemingway, Stephen Crane, Tolstoy, Remarque and today's best-seller, McCallister, haven't been able to fathom it," he exclaimed as Josh and Joe exited and walked the stairs back up to their own base.



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