



CHRISTIAN
CAMERON



TOM SWAN
AND THE HEAD OF
ST GEORGE

PART TWO: VENICE

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Christian Cameron



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Foreword

There's something very . . . historical, about writing an historical serial for e-publication. If it's been done recently, I haven't heard about it, and yet it has impeccable historical credentials – before we had the epub, we had the magazine, and in that format Dumas did it, and Conan Doyle, and a host of other authors with magnificent credentials; Harriet Beecher Stowe, for example, and Charles Dickens.

It's a fine format. Instead of a single pulse of seven hundred manuscript pages, the author can write in blocks with independent storylines that may still have an arc and a complex interweb of characters and motivations. I was resistant – but not for long.

So here is Tom Swan, my first serial character. Tom is firmly based in history; Italy was full of itinerant Englishmen, especially soldiers, throughout the period, and so was Greece. I confess that the man who forms the basis for the character was not English but Italian – Cyriac of Ancona, sometimes known as the 'Grandfather of Archaeology,' who roved the Levant in search of antiquities and manuscripts that he could beg, borrow or steal for the Pope and other rich clients in their burning zeal to rediscover the ancient world. Ancient manuscripts were then, and remain, incredibly valuable; recent re-discovery of a complete text of Archimedes in a [palimpsest](#) shows that such manuscripts are still out there, and give us an idea of the kind of treasures for which Tom Swan – and Cyriac of Ancona – searched.

If this serial has some success, I'll write more – the format, as I say, is fun, and allows me to explore some nooks and crannies of history – and even some characters that I'd love to take to greater depth; Philokles, in the Tyrant series; Archilogos (Arimnestos's Ionian adversary) in the Long War series; Geoffrey de Charny in the late Middle Ages – the list goes on and on. And I'll add pieces rapidly – perhaps even one a month.

Readers of my other books are aware that I'm a passionate re-enactor and also a military veteran, and that these experiences inform my writing. Those who are new to me deserve the following reassurance – I've worn the clothes and armour, and shot the bows, and rowed, and even ridden some of the horses. In the process of working as an intelligence professional, I met people who exercise real power every day, and I got an idea of how they work – and how history works. But I don't do this in a vacuum and I receive an amazing level of support from friends, fellow re-enactors, veterans, academics crafts people and artists. In those last categories, I'd like to thank Dario Wielec, who drew the illustrations; he has a passion for historical detail that delights me every time I see his drawings, from any period, and you can see more of his stuff at <http://dariocaballeros.blogspot.ca/>. Finally, the 'covers' for the Tom Swan series are provided by [Albion Swords](#), who are, to me, the premier manufacturers of accurate replica swords in North America. I use their products every day. How many people can say that – about swords?

Chris Cameron

Toronto, June 2012

Tom Swan – Part Two: Venice

Italy *was* a different world. The air was different. Farms were different. Food was delicious, women were beautiful, they flirted harder and they hit harder when offended. Men were quick to make friends and quick to draw knives.

Swan liked it.

They paused for a week in Florence, where Bessarion had relatives. Swan was enough part of the cardinal's household that he had come to understand that the cardinal had an extensive network of informants and *special friends* who provided him with the essential information that allowed him to remain important and powerful – while impoverished.

Florence was . . . incredible. Swan went from one building to the next, from one magnificent vista to the next, from one Tuscan vintage to the next. One evening, he threw his arms around Giovanni Accudi and demanded to be made an Italian.

'An Italianate Englishman is the devil come to earth,' Cesare said, and laughed.

Two weeks later they were in Rome. Bessarion had a place – a magnificent set of apartments in an old palazzo, the whole decorated in statues pulled from the Forum, with paintings from many of the artists.

Swan had never seen so much wealth in his life. He'd been in the English palaces. They had carvings, old oak, blue and gilt ceilings . . .

They were like merchant's homes in Cheapside compared to this. Every ceiling was painted with a scene – the resurrection of Christ, the birth of Venus, the crucifixion, the rending of Adonis by Artemis's hunting dogs. Swan walked from room to room, his neck strained, watching the scenes go by and bumping into furniture.

Alessandro laughed at him. So did the lawyers, who, home at last, wanted to show off their adoptive city. 'Come out with us!' Giovanni said. 'Meet the most beautiful women!'

'Play cards with them,' Cesare said.

'Bed them,' Giovanni said.

‘If you can pay,’ said Cesare, and he frowned. ‘Do you have any silver?’

Swan made a face. ‘Take me to a pawn shop,’ he said, ‘and I might have a little silver.’

Most of the cardinal’s entourage had their own homes, but the lawyers had rooms in the old palazzo and Giannis, the only one of the regular guards to be unmarried, also lived in the villa. Cesare pounded on his door. ‘Wear a clean doublet – we’re going to visit Aphrodite!’ he called.

Giannis opened the door. He had plainly been asleep. On the road, the guards – among whom he might have been numbered, at least by a casual observer – had been awake a great deal, even in safe towns in northern Italy. In the palazzo, they slept. Contrarily, the lawyers, who’d scarcely ever been employed on the road, were now expected to write all day.

Cesare looked Swan over in the courtyard of the palazzo. ‘You look like a very young assassin, or perhaps a peasant in the borrowed clothes of a relative,’ he said.

Indeed, Swan hadn’t bought a rag since Paris, and his one suit of doublet and hose had been slept in, fought in, and oft mended. Even clean, the doublet was threadbare.

Cesare, by contrast, looked like a different man. Instead of the long gown of his profession, or the travelling gown he’d worn on the road, he had a short doublet and very, very tight wool hose. As he was a big man, edging on to a life of having a roll of fat at his waist, he shook his head. ‘I’d lend you clothes,’ he said sadly. ‘But there’s nothing about you that’s the same size as me.’

The same was true of Accudi, who stood over six feet tall in his stockings and was as thin as a spear.

‘I’m not sure I can be seen in public with him,’ Giovanni said when he came down. His fine brocaded wool doublet contrasted perfectly with his hose and his matching shoes. Even his dagger belt matched, and had gold fittings that looked, to Swan, like real gold. ‘I’m not going to take him to Donna Lucrezia’s house. We’ll be mocked.’

‘I’m more afraid we’ll be killed,’ Cesare amended.

Swan began to be annoyed. ‘Go, then,’ he said. ‘I’ll stay home.’

‘Are you too poor to buy clothes?’ Cesare asked. ‘Good clothes can be had cheaply, if second hand. A good cutter can re sew them in an hour.’

‘I wasn’t born yesterday,’ Swan complained. ‘We have clothes in London, too.’

Giannis came down in a pierced leather doublet and particoloured hose. He looked at Swan. 'He can't go out dressed like that. None of the girls will even look at him. He looks like somebody's country cousin.'

Cesare guffawed, and Swan boiled over. 'Very funny, you bastards!'

Giannis put a hand on the Englishman's arm. 'Never, ever say that in Italian. It is a mortal insult. Swords in the moonlight. Yes? You understand?' He grinned.

'Fine. Let's go to a pawnbroker's. I'll get a little cash, and then we'll get some clothes. If you popinjays are then satisfied, we can go to dinner.' He glared around at the two Italians and the Greek. They all smiled tolerantly back.

'So young,' Cesare said, and reached out to pinch his cheek. Swan's hand whipped out and caught the Brescian's. 'And so touchy.'

The pawnbroker's was nothing like a similar booth in Cheapside. First, the shop was in the front of a very old building of brick and stone near the ancient Forum. The street was broader than any street in London or Paris. The shop – if it was a shop – displayed few wares – a painting, some helmets of Milanese make, and a single, beautiful golden rose.

Swan looked hard at the rose. 'Is that a papal rose?' he asked.

Giovannni barely gave it a glance. 'Yes. No doubt Frederico has a dozen of them. As soon as men get them they pawn them.'

Swan shook his head, shocked. 'The highest award in Christendom?'

Cesare laughed and pounded his fist on the counter. 'House!' he called. 'Customers!'

'Hush,' said Giovanni. 'They'll take us for peasants.'

A middle-aged man emerged from the back in the cap and gown of a rich merchant or a senior scholar – or perhaps a priest. 'Ah – messires. A pleasure. I hope that you gentlemen had a pleasant trip north.'

'Pleasant?' Cesare said. 'Frederico, you know better than that.'

The shop-owner, if he was such, shrugged expressively. 'I hear things. The treaty died in a battle. Constantinople fell to the Turks.' He shrugged again. 'These are hard times. How may I help you gentlemen?'

'My young friend has come into the possession . . . of items—' Cesare smiled. 'To be honest, I don't know what he has. But I assured him that this house was the right house in which to sell them. Or leave them and borrow a little money.'

‘You may tell your friend to step in, then. Is he shy? Waiting in the street? Admiring antiquities in the Forum?’ The man in the cap walked out from behind his counter.

‘This young man right here,’ Giovanni said, pointing graciously to Swan with a sweep of his hand.



‘A servant? My dear friends, I do not lend money to servants.’ The man’s face closed. ‘Are you making game of me?’

Swan wavered between anger and amusement, but amusement won out. He bowed deeply. ‘Messire is mistaken if he thinks me a servant,’ he said. ‘Or perhaps not. I am, in fact, a poorly dressed Englishman. I serve God and my own interest – in that way I’m a servant.’

Frederico returned the bow. He smiled. ‘Ah! Your pardon, messire. A man can be judged only on clothes until he opens his mouth.’

‘And sometimes after,’ Swan said. ‘My clothes are against me, and it is to remedy this important shortcoming that I have come—’ He smiled and coughed. ‘Ahem.’

‘Just so!’ Frederico said.

‘Might we do this in private?’ Swan said.

The other three smiled and withdrew to the front step.

Swan opened his purse. 'I have these,' he said, withdrawing three ivory crucifixes. Each had the image of Christ in carefully carved and dyed ivory on a cross of ivory, about the size of a woman's hand. All three were set in silver.

The banker – he was clearly no pawnbroker – put spectacles on his nose and bent over the ivories. 'Not bad,' he said. 'Paris work. May I ask how you came to own them?'

Swan set his mouth, considered blank refusal, and then smiled. 'Spoils of war,' he said.

'Ah!' said the banker. 'The owner is . . . dead?'

Swan was surprised by the direction of the conversation. 'Yes,' he lied.

'Ah,' the banker said. 'Good. Do you wish a loan, or a sale?'

'How much are we talking?' Swan asked.

'I never bargain,' said the banker. He shrugged. 'I never intended to be in this business and I despise haggling.'

Swan tried not to smile. In this case, he *had* heard it all before.

'Twenty Venetian ducats for the good one, and ten each for the others,' the banker said.

'As a loan, you mean,' Swan said.

'No, that was my final price,' said the banker.

Swan pursed his lips. 'You know, my friends are in a hurry,' he said. 'But I am not in quite such a hurry as that.' He picked them up and dropped them back in his wallet.

The banker plucked the spectacles off his nose. 'What did you expect? A hundred ducats?'

'More like four hundred,' Swan said. He shrugged. 'Good day.'

'You're mad!' said the banker.

'You mistook me for a servant, and then you mistook me for a mark.' Swan smiled. 'Would you like to start again?'

'No,' said the banker.

Now it was Swan's turn to shrug. He walked out into the sunlight. 'Take me where the man behind the counter knows what things are worth,' he said loudly.

'Don't come into my shop again,' said the banker, and the heavy door slammed shut.

'He's the best dealer in Rome,' Cesare said.

Swan shook his head. 'I've seen better dealers in a London thieves' market,' he said.

The third shop they visited was in the Jewish ghetto.

'You are too picky. Are you sure these things are worth anything?' Giovanni asked.

But the Jew was both friendlier and far more accommodating. Swan bowed deeply, was polite, and bargained only briefly. The Jew, Isaac, counted two hundred and fifty Venetian ducats into a bag. When he was done, Swan leaned over the counter. 'Messire, I should very much like to learn Hebrew. And Arabic. I wonder if you know someone who might teach me.'

Isaac called for kahve. They were served the sweet stuff in tiny cups by a veiled woman and Swan felt as if he was living in a fantasy poem. After some sips, Isaac said, 'You intend the priesthood?'

Swan shook his head. 'No, my friend. I would like to travel. And to read scripture.'

Isaac nodded. 'I will consider,' he said. 'I know a rabbi here who teaches foreigners. I could perhaps teach you Arabic. If not, I have a slave who might be of help.'

'I would esteem it a favour,' Swan said. He held out his hand.

Isaac took his hand. 'Very few Christians clasp hands with Jews,' he said.

Swan shrugged. 'I'm told that Jesus's mother, Mary, was a Jew,' he said. He smiled to indicate that this wasn't meant as an insult.

Isaac didn't smile, but neither did he withdraw his hand. 'Very few men think as you do,' he said.

He walked out into the late afternoon sun to find three very disgruntled men waiting.

'You had coffee with a Jew!' Gianni spat.

Swan shrugged. He found that in Italy everyone shrugged as much as he did.

'How much did you get?' Cesare asked.

'Enough. Let's get some clothes,' Swan said.

The clothing trade was one of the most prosperous and raucous in Rome. There was a market, where very pretty girls screamed prices at the tops of their lungs to lure male customers into their booths. It was early evening – the coolest part of the day – and the market was crowded. Most

of the clients were religious – priests and monks who desired to have a second – or third – set of clothes in which to, as Cesare muttered, ‘have adventures’.

‘I don’t see any women’s clothes,’ Swan said.

Cesare snorted. ‘Women don’t *buy* used clothes,’ he said. ‘Or dress up or pretend to be what they are not.’

Swan laughed. ‘Do you know any women?’ he asked.

As a young man, he was immediately drawn to the dark-haired beauty in a gown recut to show her ankles and breasts. It was dark blue velvet. She smiled at him, and he instantly wanted to buy from her.

Giovanni all but boxed his ears. ‘Follow me,’ he said.

Swan smiled at the girl, but when she saw he was headed elsewhere, her eyes moved right through him and she was busy smiling at a young French priest behind him.

He followed Giovanni to a stall well up the middle street out of the market square. There was a dark awning; neatly folded shirts and braes and hose on a low cart in front, and a massive jumble of coats, jupons, doublets and short cloaks littering six tables stretching away into ever darker interior regions.

‘Foglio,’ Giovanni said, waving an arm like a man welcoming a guest into his home. ‘All the best clothing at the most reasonable prices.’

Cesare rolled his eyes. ‘If an Orsini dies, his clothes will be here in three hours,’ he said. He stepped out into the street and looked up. ‘Speaking of which, it is past six. What if I skip along and order dinner at Angela’s? And we’ll meet for mass, then eat and get laid?’

Giovanni put a hand over his eyes. ‘Really, Cesare! To speak of eating and mass in the same breath—’

Giannis smiled. ‘You are all going to hell. But you are poor heretics, so you know no better anyway.’ He nodded to Cesare. ‘I’ll accompany you.’

When the other two were gone, Giovanni turned. ‘What did you sell?’ he asked.

‘An heirloom,’ Swan said.

An old man came out of the shop. He bowed to Giovanni, and then turned to look at the Englishman.

‘This, I take it, is the customer?’ he said. His tone was acerbic, as if it was really too much bother for him to wait on anyone.

Swan smiled as ingratiatingly as he could manage.

Giovanni grinned. 'He can pay,' he said.

'Ah!' said the old man. He managed a smile. 'I sell so much on credit.'

'Last week, a young man who had bought on credit was killed in a street fight,' Giovanni said. 'When they took his corpse to be anointed, there was a man from Messire Siciliano here to take the clothes.'

Messer Siciliano shrugged. 'What can I do?' he said, as if he were the oppressed party. 'And you cannot tell me the young scapegrace needed the clothes.'

The Englishman bowed. 'I would like a suit of clothes. In fact, I would like two or even three suits of clothes. I would like them, if this is possible, in the Florentine style. I would also like that fine leather arming doublet with all the lacing points for armour.'

'Florentine?' snorted Giovanni. 'Don't be foolish. This is Roma. We don't show our parts like Florentines, and we wear sober colours.'

'I'm sure you do!' Swan said.

Siciliano nodded. He went through the shirts, holding them up to his customer. He was quick. 'No. No. Too much blackwork and the fabric is too light – good for a sodomite, not for you. No. Ah! Look at this. Mice teeth on the cuffs – superb work.' He tossed Swan a linen shirt. Then he continued down the pile. 'No. No. Oh, no. Too small. Made for a giant. Made for a humpback. Ah! Try this.'

It took an hour, and Giovanni was a great help, although it became increasingly clear that his tastes were very different from the Englishman's. Besides the arming doublet, which Swan desired with all his soul, he got two doublets of wool – one scarlet, one black. He got two pairs of black hose that didn't fit very well, and one pair of scarlet hose that fitted perfectly, as if made for him. He bought one pair of braes and two shirts.

'You'll want more linen,' Giovanni said.

The Englishman nodded. 'And I'll buy it new. I'm not fussy, but I'm tired of wearing other men's linens.'

Giovanni nodded. 'I know a girl,' he said. 'She sews neatly and she's fast.'

'You can take the scarlet,' Siciliano said. 'The black and the spares need a little tailoring. I can have them for you tomorrow – the day after for sure.'

'How much?'

'In florins?'

'Tell me in ducats.'

‘Ah? Venetian? In gold?’ asked the tailor.

‘Is there another kind?’ Swan muttered. He knew this process, too. The shopkeeper was making time while calculating.

‘Twenty ducats.’

‘Ricardo!’ Giovanni said. ‘For a friend!’

Siciliano pointed at the pile. ‘The arming doublet is worth half that by itself. The scarlet stuff was ten ducats a yard, new. The doublet has one small hole and no stains and is, if I may say so, beautifully made and fits like a glove. Eighteen.’

‘The arming doublet has a triangular hole under one arm where it failed its last wearer and a corresponding stain where his fluids rushed out,’ Swan pointed out. ‘The scarlet is excellent, and I’m at least the third owner. There’s a long strain mark in the wool from the last owner, and a fitting mark where it was recut from another garment.’ He sniffed. ‘And it smells of spikenard.’ He paused. ‘Fifteen.’

‘You bargain well for a foreigner,’ said Siciliano. ‘Don’t you need to be cutting throats or tugging sullied virgins? Isn’t fleecing a poor shop-owner beneath you? Seventeen.’

Swan met his eye and smiled. ‘No,’ he said. ‘I *love* to haggle. Fifteen and a half.’

‘Fuck your mother, you waste my time. You are insulting my shop – and I did extra work for you, you sodomite! Give me back my clothes.’ The Roman reached out and tried to seize the bundle.

Swan held it out of his line of motion. ‘You forgot to add, sixteen and a half.’

Siciliano stopped, slapped his thigh and laughed. The laugh transformed his face – suddenly he didn’t look so old. ‘Bah! Sixteen.’

Swan counted down the coins, then stepped into the darkness behind the sixth table to change.

Giovanni called, ‘It’s all clean! He washes everything.’

‘I do not!’ Siciliano shouted. ‘My wife does.’

Swan came out, lacing his scarlet hose to his scarlet doublet. The shirt felt wonderful. Clean braes felt like heaven.

‘There’s a cloak that went with that suit,’ Siciliano said.

Now it was Swan’s turn to laugh. ‘Of course there was. I imagine it fits me as well as the rest.’

With a flourish, the Roman tailor produced it.

He hung it on the Englishman's shoulders.

Swan looked down and saw that a whole corner was missing. He looked at the owner, who frowned.

'Yes,' he said. 'It took some sword-cuts.'

In fact, it had three long cuts, carefully re sewn with good scarlet thread, but still, in bright sunlight, a little . . . visible.

'Two ducats,' Siciliano said.

Swan rolled his eyes and handed over one more.

'I knew you two would get along,' Giovanni said as they walked on.

Evening mass was a major production at any church in Rome, but Giovanni led him to the former temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus, where the dome rose away in a magnificent sweep that engaged the young Englishman through the whole service. In the portico, they found Cesare just bowing deeply to a beautiful woman in a crimson gown with two blond slaves carrying her train. Giovanni swept a bow and Swan matched his bow.

Cesare reached his whole hand into the holy water font by the centre door and then extended his hand, dripping, towards the woman, who reached out and touched it with the slightest, the very slightest, of nods. She crossed herself, and swept by, dropping a veil of Bruges lace over her face.

'You are a bold lecher,' Giovanni hissed to his friend.

Cesare laughed. 'You only live the one time,' he said.

'Cardinal Orsini's whore,' Giovanni said over his shoulder.

Giovanni had made a serious mistake. He thought that the Englishman was still at his left shoulder, but Swan had been separated in the push of the crowd as the woman passed them, and his comment was delivered, not to Swan, but to a liveried retainer. A man in Orsini livery.

The Orsini man's fist lashed out, and Giovanni folded like a stool over the punch, a great *whoof* coming out of him. He fell, and another man in the Orsini red and yellow kicked him savagely.

There was a scream from a woman in the crowd, and some excitement. Cesare caught a blow on his shoulder and slammed both fists together into one of Giovanni's assailants, who went down as if hit with an axe.

Swan saw the glint of a blade. He wasn't wearing his sword. Few men did in Rome, at least before dark, and never to mass. But he had his knife.

The red and yellow livery was suddenly everywhere. Cesare caught one of them up and threw him bodily into two more.

The first tough who had hit Giovanni had a dagger in his fist. So did the man kicking him.

The first man saw Swan put a hand on his dagger. He changed direction, came at the Englishman, and his left hand shot out and took Swan by the throat.

Swan wrapped the offending arm with his own and broke the man's arm in a lock. The snap of the bone was audible across the church. He twisted the broken arm and the man screamed.

Swan let him go. He drew his knife and the second man backed away from Giovanni. They eyed each other for a long heartbeat, and then the Orsini man put his dagger away and bent to pick up the man with the broken arm.

'I am Adolfo,' he said. 'You will be hearing from us. You work for that schismatic Greek, yes?'

Swan smiled. 'You serve that whore Orsini, yes?'

Adolfo stiffened.

'Best run away,' Swan said. He was enjoying this.

Cesare caught his arm. 'Leave it alone. This is all a misunderstanding.' He turned to Adolfo. 'He's a foreigner.'

Adolfo's eyes sparkled. He had his dagger out again, and the church was empty. Even the priests and acolytes were gone. 'Even if he kissed my feet, I would not forgive him.'

Perhaps it was the scarlet clothes. 'It's true, I misunderstood,' Swan said. 'My Italian is not so good. I did not mean that Cardinal Orsini was a whore. I mean *you* are a whore, you catamite bastard.'

The Roman leaped.

Swan didn't move.

His arm shot out, and there followed a series of blows so fast that the bystanders couldn't follow them.

Swan took a blow in the gut that wrenched him back against the temple wall. But the wall at his back steadied him, and he got a knee up in time to stop the blow to his groin. Then he and the Orsini thug had each other by the dagger wrists. The Roman was smaller than Swan, and Swan tried twice to head-butt the man—both blows were partly avoided, but the second gave him a fleeting advantage in balance.

He threw his adversary over his extended hip—but the other man held onto his shoulders like a leech, and down they both went onto the hard

marble floor. Swan lost track of the Orsini's knife hand and flinched just as the man's fist crashed into his temple.

They rolled apart—the Roman had lost his knife and Swan, stunned, got to one knee. The Roman went for his knife. Swan hooked his leg. He traded balance for aggression—desperate—and fell heavily atop the man.

The Orsini wasn't moving.

There was blood running out of his mouth.

Swan looked at his dagger sticking out of the dying man's guts. Giannis had his knife out. 'Are you insane?' he asked in a conversational tone.

'He attacked Giovanni,' Swan answered. He wiped his mouth. He couldn't breathe. In truth, he wasn't sure what had made him so high handed.

'He drew first,' Cesare said.

The Orsini retainers were gathering. Cesare got an arm under Giovanni's arm. 'Can you move fast?' he asked Swan.

'By St. George,' Swan answered. He spat some blood. And the four of them ran.

Giovanni was in bad shape, and by the time they reached the palazzo, he was slumped between Swan and Cesare. He stopped in the courtyard to go to the jakes, and scared himself by pissing blood.

'That bastard kicked him in the back, over and over,' Swan said. He was bouncing with the spirit of the combat.

'Giovanni said something very stupid,' Cesare said wearily.

Giannis shrugged. 'Does this mean no dinner?'

'The Orsinis will be out in every street,' Cesare said.

Giannis smiled and held his hands wide. 'I'll wear a sword, then,' he said. He turned to Swan. 'Are you insane?' He clapped the younger man on the back. 'It was beautiful. He never expected it. Hah! "*I mean you are a whore, you catamite bastard.*"' He laughed a long, loud laugh. 'Let me buy you dinner. You won't live long, but you'll be famous.'

Dinner was uneventful and delicious. After dinner they walked to a certain house in the very richest portion of town. Groups of young men with torches went by, laughing and singing, and once they were crowded off the street by a big group, but none of the torches or the fops or the roving swordsmen were Orsinis.

The sun had set, and the night was dark. Madonna Lucrezia's house was an old palazzo, very much in the Gothic style of two hundred years before. But inside – it was a perfumed garden. The walls were decorated in paintings on stucco. The subjects were amorous – and very, very straightforward.

Cesare smiled. 'I've heard she allows the better artists a straightforward trade,' he said.

Giannis grinned. 'If only I had such a talent.'

The women who adorned the rooms appeared perfectly modest, if perhaps a little open. There was dancing, and men played at cards while women watched. A woman worked a loom in one room. In another two women played the lute while a third danced and a crowd of men watched.

An African appeared at Swan's elbow with a tray. On the tray were three glasses – fine Venetian glass.

'What does this *cost*?' Swan asked.

'No one knows. No one knows from whence Madonna gets her fortune.' Cesare shrugged. 'Nothing in Rome is as it seems, my young friend. This woman – like our master – deals first and foremost in information.'

'If the Orsini are so dangerous,' Swan said. He paused. 'Why the gallantry with the mistress?'

Cesare smiled. 'Because I am a large man nearly twice your age, you imagine I cannot be in love, or be gallant,' he said.

Swan had never imagined the Italian as a lover – or as a man of daring. He bowed. 'I will endeavour to think differently of you, my friend.'

'You are such a serious child,' Cesare said. 'In my youth, I was a poet, and I was going to be a second Dante. In middle age, I'm a notary for an out-of-favour cardinal in the Curia in Rome.' The lawyer took a long drink of wine. 'Let me tell you something about age, my young friend. When you are thirty-five, you still have the eighteen-year-old inside you. You are the same man – you just weigh more.' He laughed. 'But since Donna Esperanza is not immediately available to me, I will go and light my candle with one of these delicious young things. You know what we call this house?'

Swan smiled. 'No,' he said. A stunning redhead was looking at him from under her lashes. His head knew her interest to be simulated, but his body reacted instantly to her lowered gaze.

'We call it "The Well of Sanctity",' the Brescian said. 'Because the whole Curia and every priest in Rome drinks here.'

‘Some call them the papal bankers,’ Giannis said. ‘Because the Curia come here to make their deposits.’

Cesare laughed so hard he snorted wine. ‘I can remember when you could scarcely speak Italian, you rogue!’

Giannis smiled modestly.

A tall woman, older than the girls dancing but with the figure of a classical beauty, wearing a dark red gown of Venetian velvet and a fortune in pearls, paused by them. She didn’t bend over their table, but she performed what might have been called a courtesy. Swan rose from his seat, and bowed low. Giannis stood like a ramrod with his flat cap in both hands. Cesare didn’t get up – but he reached for her hand and caught it, and didn’t so much kiss it as breathe lightly on it.

‘Donna, you honour us too much,’ he said.

‘So much that you can’t get your arse off your chair, you fat peasant?’ the woman said. Her accent was charming – the educated Tuscan Italian that Swan was already learning was the sign of breeding. But her words were foul.

Cesare grinned. ‘Not so fat as it could cover yours, Donna.’

She threw back her head and laughed, and her laugh was as beautiful as her body.

Just for a moment, she reminded Swan of Tilda. They were of an age – thirty-five, he guessed – quite ancient. And yet – both of them laughed loud in a way that young women seemed scared to do.

She turned to Giannis. ‘Can you even afford to drink my wine, heretic?’

Giannis nodded, clearly nervous.

‘Was your mother a tyrant, you poor man,’ she said, running a finger under his chin. ‘Do women terrify you?’ She laughed. ‘Come, I have a new German girl from the other side of the Alps. The two of you can be scared together. Come.’ She turned to Cesare. ‘He’s a hardened killer, is he not?’

Cesare nodded, obviously filling his eyes with her. ‘Yes, Donna. A hard man. A soldier.’

‘And yet his hand is trembling even now.’ She turned her brilliant gaze – and her perfect teeth – on the Greek. She had his hand, held high, as if they were dancers in a pavane.

When she had led him away, Swan was a trifle disappointed. She’d looked at him a dozen times – assessed him from the shoes on his feet to the hair curling atop his head. But not a word.

Cesare read his mind. 'Not for you, young man. She'd eat you. And take all your money.' He laughed.

'Who for, then?'

'Rumour is she's the darling of one of the Spanish cardinals and that he's very jealous.' Cesare shook his head. 'Trust a Spaniard to love a whore and be jealous. A nation – no, a race – looking for a fight.'

Swan watched her walk back towards them. She favoured him with a brilliant smile. He rose again from his seat, feeling very young.

Cesare caught one of her hands. 'I have something for you,' he said.

'Who is this boy? Surely he's not old enough to have hair on his parts.' She leaned so close to Swan he thought she was going to kiss him. Then she moved away smoothly, and laughed.

She looked at Cesare, who handed her a scroll.

She blushed. 'For me?' she asked. 'Oh, my heart. Someone give me a knife.'

The redhead reached up – showing a wonderful length of leg – and drew a tiny knife from under her kirtle. She handed it to Donna with a bow, and Donna used it to open the seal on the parchment.

She read, her colour high.

Her chin rose – a hand twitched.

'Cesare,' she said. She snapped her fingers. 'Come – I have something I need to show you.'

Cesare bowed over her hand. 'Always at your service,' he said, and followed her.

Swan watched him go, trying to be amused at her contempt for him – deeply resentful, really.

'I'm called Maria,' said the redhead. She made a nice courtesy. She raised an eyebrow. 'He won't be back.'

Swan felt like the boy he'd just been called. 'He – I – she—' He shrugged.

'Do you know any dances?' she asked. 'I love to dance.'

He shook his head. 'I don't really know a great many dances,' he said, and then, after a pause, he settled on complete honesty. 'I know the May dance, as we dance it in London. That's all. In London, while girls dance, men learn to fight.'

She smiled. 'Would you like to learn?'

He rose to his feet. 'I would like it above all things,' he said.

She smiled. 'Your Italian is very good, for a barbarian.'

Later, after they had made love, he rolled over to her. 'I have never done that – in a bed,' he said. 'It's so – comfortable.'

She laughed, and hit him with a pillow.

He tried to fight her off and found her astonishingly strong – and fast. And agile.

When he finally pinned her arms – after some tickling – he leaned over her. 'You would make a superb swordsman. Woman.' He kissed her.

She used the kiss to get a hand free and thrust a knee between his legs and rolled them both over. 'Teach me,' she breathed at him. Her hair was all around him, and her breasts trailed across the top of his chest.

'Now?' he asked, mockingly, and she giggled.

There was a knock at the door.

She bounced off the bed. 'Are you married?' she asked.

He reached for the knife in his clothes. 'No,' he said. 'Yes?' he asked.

'Open the door, messire. We need to have a chat,' said a voice.

'Violetta,' said the young woman.

'You said Maria,' Swan said.

She shrugged. 'We're all Maria to new customers,' she admitted.

'I was busy dancing,' he said. 'I'm Thomas. The man at the door is my . . . *capitano*.'

'Just so long as he isn't your lover.' She grinned. 'I mean it about the sword. I would love to learn.' She wriggled into her shift, and opened a closet door.

'Do I—' He was trying to get his shirt on. 'Pay? You?'

She laughed. 'Silly boy. The bed costs fifty ducats. My kisses are free.' She gave him one, and vanished into the cupboard.

Alessandro opened the door. Swan had his braes on, and was trying to get his hose over them. The Italian laughed. 'Listen – you are in a bordello. No one expects you to be dressed.' But the *capitano* was fully dressed, and had his sword on his belt and another in his hand, scabbarded. He tossed it on the bed. 'You left this at the palazzo.'

'Thanks for bringing it,' Swan said. 'I . . . didn't need it.'

'You may yet make an Italian,' Alessandro said. 'But there are twenty men in Orsini colours in the street. They mean to kill you and Cesare and Giannis.' He shrugged. 'The cardinal sent me to see to it you came home *without a fight*.' He looked around the room. 'Can you pay for this?'

Thomas nodded.

‘Sold the ivories?’ the *capitano* said.

Thomas nodded and then caught himself.

‘I knew you had them. Listen, boy. You killed a man today – a bad man, I have no doubt. But the way I hear it, all you had to do was walk away, and instead you called him out and killed him.’

Swan was prepared to bridle, but he admired Alessandro, and something in the man’s tone held . . . not so much censure, as weariness. ‘So?’

‘That’s the wrong path,’ Alessandro said. ‘I know this – eh? You kill a man – and it hurts. Yes? Kill another, it’s not so bad. Kill a third, and you think – hey, I’m invincible, and I can do this for ever. I’ll be glorious, rich and famous.’ Alessandro met his eye. ‘Eh?’

‘He was mocking us!’

‘Was he? And did it hurt you?’ Alessandro shook his head. ‘If you do this – the next man, or the next, will kill *you*.’ He shook his head. ‘I will endeavour to teach you the rudiments of defence. You are fast – I’ve seen you. And you know a little—’

Swan drew himself up. It is hard to be proud and haughty without clothes, but he tried. ‘I’m the best blade in London,’ he said. He felt like a fool as soon as he said the words – which weren’t true anyway.

‘I’m not the best blade in Rome,’ Alessandro said, and suddenly his sword was in his hand, pointed at Swan’s throat. ‘It’s behind you, on the bed. Think you can get to it and draw it before I run you through?’

Swan was frozen. ‘No,’ he said.

‘I’m not the best blade in Rome, and I can run you through on every pass – even if you could draw your sword. You stamp your foot whenever you attack. You hold up your left hand as if you have a buckler in it. You don’t know how to roll your wrist with an opponent’s cut. You are good enough to bully peasants but not good enough to fight a trained man. Do you believe me?’

Swan hung his head. ‘Yes.’

‘Excellent. Then you will dress and follow me, we’ll fetch our friends and leave through the cellars. Be sure and pay your bills. The ladies here know everyone. Do not, I pray you, offend them.’

The exit through the cellars was not as dramatic as Swan had expected, and in an hour they were at home in the palazzo.

‘The cardinal will see you in the morning,’ Alessandro said. ‘Expect to be leaving.’

Peter woke him with a cup of beer and a piece of dry bread.

‘You sold the ivories,’ said the Fleming.

Swan shook his head. ‘Why does everyone know what I do?’ he asked.

‘You are young? We find you interesting?’ Peter shrugged. ‘I’d like to be paid. *I* would like new clothes, and a nice ride on a young filly. Eh?’

Swan went to his purse, opened it, and counted out fifty ducats.

Peter grinned. ‘There’s a day’s pay.’

Swan shook his head. ‘A year’s pay.’

Peter nodded. ‘A year for an archer. One night for a girl at Madonna Lucrezia’s.’

‘I doubt the girl sees much of it,’ Swan said.

Peter pocketed the money. ‘I’ll consider this a payment against my wages.’

Swan drank off his small beer. ‘I’d like to be paid,’ he said.

Peter nodded. ‘You should kill more people, then. I hear you put a knife in someone’s hired bravo yesterday – did you get his purse?’

‘No,’ Swan said, sullenly.

‘Really, master. If you are going to kill people, kindly take their money.’

The cardinal was waiting in his library.

The cardinal’s library was the largest single room in the palazzo. It was at the front of the house, and was decorated and arranged like an ancient Greek andron, with couches, side tables and a wall of holes for scrolls. There were more scrolls on the massive tables that filled the ends of the room, and one end had shelves for the newer-style folio books.

Two tall windows illuminated every corner of the room with Mediterranean sun.

Cardinal Bessarion looked up from a scroll. ‘You look . . . prosperous,’ he said.

Swan bowed.

‘Can you buy a horse?’ the cardinal asked, in Greek.

‘Yes. Or rent one,’ Swan answered in the same language.

The cardinal sat back and made a steeple of his fingers. ‘You have a problem, and I have a problem,’ he said. ‘I know you are brave, and I know

you are ferociously intelligent. But – are you loyal? And can I trust you at all?’ He waved to a chair – a new copy of an ancient Greek chair. ‘Sit.’

‘Yes, you can trust me, Eminence.’

‘Really? Even though you lied to me about your birth, your value as a prisoner, your status – and then stole from an abbey and stole from our companions on the road? Even though you come to me still smelling faintly of sin? Where, may I add, Alessandro found you, but did not breathe a word. I have other sources.’

Swan took a breath – started to gather a hot reply in his mouth, and then overcame it. He hung his head. ‘You can trust me, Eminence.’

‘Yesterday you killed a man. Tell me why.’ The cardinal sat back, hands together, like one of the examiners at the grammar school where a young Thomas Swan had endured many horrid hours.

He took another breath and released it. ‘He hurt Giovanni. He might have hurt him worse. He was . . . contemptuous of us. He needed a lesson.’

‘You sound shockingly like an Italian, young man. Listen. The Orsini have been Roman senators since . . . well, since Rome had an army and a Senate and no Pope. They have the sort of wealth and power that other men don’t even dream exists. If Bartolomeo – the old man – orders you killed, he can hire a man to do it who will kill you here, in my house. Or out on the street. Or in the lovely Violetta’s bed. I can buy peace, but it will be expensive.’ He leaned forward. ‘You must pick your fights.’

Swan, who had never been very good at picking his fights, sat with his eyes down.

The cardinal nodded. ‘I need money,’ he said suddenly. ‘I imagine you would not be averse to some?’

This abrupt change of direction left Swan feeling naked. ‘Yes. No.’ He looked around. ‘What?’

The cardinal laughed and rang a bell. Alessandro came in with Giannis.

‘I would like to send the three of you to Greece. To Constantinople, to be precise. I would like you to go to my former house and retrieve . . . things. I won’t endanger you more than this – go to my house, and retrieve what you find there. And get the – hmm – objects on a ship, and bring them here.’

Giannis pursed his lips. ‘The Holy City has fallen, my prince.’

Alessandro sucked a tooth and winced. ‘Ottoman Constantinople.’ He looked at the cardinal. ‘Not easy.’

Bessarion nodded slowly. 'There's a letter – from the Pope – to the Sultan. An official letter. One of the bishops will carry it.' He shrugged. 'I refused the duty. But I offered to provide the escort.'

'How soon?' Swan asked.

'A week, at least. Perhaps more.' He looked at Alessandro.

The Italian shook his head. 'Messire Swan should leave Rome. Will we go by ship?'

'Of course. From Ancona or Genoa.' The cardinal fidgeted with his cross.

'Not Venice?'

'Possibly Venice! Why do you ask?' The cardinal looked at him.

'We could send them ahead to arrange lodgings and so on. Our business for you is secret, yes?' Alessandro leaned forward.

'Yes. I see.' Bessarion leaned back. 'Venice.'

Alessandro nodded. 'I will miss you, Eminence. But the Orsini will not look for this young fool in Venice, and I will enjoy seeing my family.' He grinned. 'Even if they may not enjoy seeing me.'

The cardinal reached into his table drawer and pulled out a box. 'I have heard that it takes money to make money,' he said. 'I have a hundred ducats for each of you, and Alessandro will have another three hundred on account. Any bank will make it good.' He looked at Swan. 'The very best thing to bring out of Greece right now is books.'

Swan nodded. His heart was afire with the excitement of the trip – the adventure. 'Books,' he said.

'Books,' said Cardinal Bessarion. 'Ancient Greek *books*.' He smiled. 'If you can't find books, find relics. Preferably famous ones, and preferably real ones.' He looked at Alessandro. 'There is a rumour that the head of Saint George is no longer in Hagia Sophia,' he said.

Giannis crossed himself. 'Someone saved it?'

'Someone stole it,' Bessarion said. 'See if you can . . . recover it.'

Alessandro fingered his beard. 'The head of Saint George,' he whispered. He sounded . . . awestruck.

Venice was – perhaps – the most wonderful place that Thomas Swan had ever been. Even *more* wonderful than Rome.

First, it was like a floating city. Men said Venice was wedded to the sea. Those men weren't Englishmen, because they said it with disdain, or

wonder. Swan had grown up with the sea, in the form of the Thames, at his bedside and his front door, and something about Venice made him feel very comfortable.

And then there were the ships.

A young Thomas Swan had leaned in the doorway of the Swan inn and watched the ships sail by, row by, be towed by. He'd waved at sailors and dreamed of adventure. He'd served sailors in his mother's inn.

Every street in Venice had ships at the end of it. The great thoroughfares ran to wharves and warehouses, and the smaller streets were canals. The very smallest alleys were paved. There were bridges, and you had to take a boat to get anywhere.

Just like London.

Like London, but richer. The great of Venice were rich to a degree that made London look a little tawdry, but other elements were similar. Alessandro's family – the Bembii – were ancient aristocrats and merchants, with relatives who ranged from members of the inner council to penniless scavengers in the streets. They sent their sons to sea to serve in the navy, or to learn the ropes on a merchantman, and the great round ships filled the harbours and every wharf and strand, and down towards the Arsenal there were galleys and professional rowers, rough, lower-class men who didn't get out of the street for any man and wore swords like nobles and were sometimes the police and sometimes the rioters. And there were the Arsenali, the men who worked in the great military buildings – again, often foreigners or new citizens, but afraid of no one, wearing swords in public.

They were like Englishmen, and Swan felt at home. He prowled the city – alone, or with either Cesare or Giannis or Alessandro or all three, from St Mark's to the Arsenal. He learned the way to the Jewish ghetto, and made friends there.

His last day in Rome, against the cardinal's express instructions, he'd crept out of the palazzo and visited Isaac. He'd deposited his new hundred ducats and left Isaac's house with a letter to a Jew of Venice, with an enclosed letter of credit and a short missive in Hebrew.

So early in his visit to Venice, he left Cesare and Giannis drinking in a foreigner's tavern and caught a boat across the lagoon to the *Iudica*, as the locals called it. It had its own gate and a watch.

The young man at the gate didn't look like a Jew. He didn't have a beard, and he didn't have a cap, and he wasn't wearing a long gown. He

leaned against the gate with the negligent hostility of any young man, and he wore a sword, which Swan knew was against the law.

‘Stop,’ he said, when Swan approached the gate. ‘State your business.’

Swan bowed. ‘I have a letter for Aaron Benomye, from Isaac Gold of Rome.’

The young man brightened. ‘Really?’ he asked. ‘May I see?’ He was considerably more polite. Swan warmed to him.

‘Here,’ he said.

The young man glanced at the cover and tapped the envelope of parchment against his thumb. ‘The rabbi may still be with his family,’ he said. He rang a small iron bell, and another surly young man appeared.

‘I’m going to take this foreigner to Rabbi Aaron,’ he said.

And off they went, through a jumble of alleys – dry alleys. The Jews didn’t have to use boats to get around.

They went past a synagogue, and up a set of steps to a private house that didn’t seem to be on any street – it was between one and another. This, too, was like London. The young man knocked, and the door opened a crack. He spoke in low tones, and handed in the letter.

He lounged against the building. Another young man passed, and they engaged in a display of male bravado that would not have been out of place among the toughs of Rome. In his new-found maturity, Swan smiled.

The door opened. A narrow-faced man in a long beard and a long gown was standing in the entrance.

Swan bowed.

‘This is Rabbi Aaron,’ said the young man. He made a sign with his hands and bowed, and walked away.

‘Please be welcome in my house,’ Rabbi Aaron said. ‘I do not lend money,’ he added, somewhat severely.

Swan was startled. ‘Of course not!’ he said.

Rabbi Aaron smiled thinly. ‘I feel I must say it. Why do you want to learn Hebrew and Arabic?’

‘I wish to travel to the East,’ Swan said. ‘As for Hebrew – it is the language of scripture.’

‘Hmm,’ said the rabbi. ‘Yes and no. Greek is the language of much of your scripture. Hebrew – hmm. But yes, it is a useful language for a theologian. No one speaks it – in Jerusalem, for example.’

‘I memorised the alphabet on the road,’ Swan said.

Rabbi Aaron heard him out, and nodded. ‘Very well – you are serious. I will be pleased to have you as a student. How often?’

‘Every day?’ Swan suggested.

The rabbi smiled. ‘So young. Twenty ducats a month.’

Swan bowed and paid in advance.

Time in Venice flew by.

Swan went to the Jewish ghetto every day. After a week, the gatekeepers let him pass without comment. After two weeks, old women began to nod to him as he passed. Hebrew kept him busy inside his head, and Arabic threw him.

He spent long hours lying on his narrow bed in his inn, staring at the crazed cracks in the plaster of the ceiling and chanting verb endings to himself.

Every evening, he would meet Alessandro, and sometimes the other men, in his tavern’s main room. Alessandro was increasingly restless at the delay.

Early in the third week, Alessandro appeared at Swan’s door in the early afternoon. Swan was fully dressed, sitting at a table – a very small table – writing by the light of an open window.

Alessandro leaned over him and watched his pen move. ‘Arabic,’ he said.

Swan nodded.

‘You make a face like a fish when you concentrate,’ Alessandro said.

‘Uh?’ Swan said.

‘I need you for a duel,’ Alessandro said.

‘A duel?’ Swan asked.

‘One of my idiot cousins made a stupid remark in public and now I have to fight,’ said the Venetian.

Swan shrugged. ‘Do I have to fight?’

‘Possibly.’ Alessandro shrugged. ‘I’m sorry. And I meant to give you lessons, but my time is not my own.’

‘When?’ Swan asked, reviewing his list of nouns.

‘Now?’ Alessandro said. The man was so seldom at a loss that Swan took a moment to recognise what was happening. ‘Are you in trouble, my friend?’

Alessandro blushed. ‘Yes. But think nothing of it.’

Swan had been working in his second-best shirt. He wiped his fingers idly on it and made a face when he saw how much ink he'd smeared. He found the inn's towel and wiped his hands on that, instead, but the damage was done. He pulled on his dull black doublet, and laced it. The black doublet and hose were worn by virtually every young man in Venice, regardless of class. The slightly fashionable Florentine cut of Swan's actually added to his anonymity.

'Don't wear your sword,' Alessandro said. 'You aren't a citizen.' He held his hands wide. 'Carry it. With the belt wrapped around it.'

'Do I get a buckler?' Swan asked.

'Of course!' Alessandro said.

Swan perched a small hat with an enormous ostrich plume and a small jewel on his head. Foreigners were not allowed to wear jewels on clothes, but hats weren't included in the sumptuary law. The jewel was glass.

Peter was sitting in the kitchen, drinking wine and helping prepare food. He was very popular in the inn.

'I'm going to fight a duel,' Swan called.

Peter waved. 'If you kill the fellow, take his money. Do you need me?' he asked.

Swan looked at Alessandro, who gave a minute shake of his head. 'Three in a boat,' he said with a shrug.

They walked down to the Grand Canal, caught a boat on the steps by St Mark's, and were rowed across the lagoon, past Murano, to a small island with a monastery.

As they approached, Alessandro began to fidget.

'Care to tell me what happened?' Swan asked.

Alessandro shook his head. 'A matter of honour. But I fear my enemy has brought too many men, and intends a murder.'

As the boat edged up on the island, Swan could see six men standing by the monastery wall.

Swan felt his pulse increase. 'Three each,' he said.

Alessandro looked at him. 'You cannot kill any of these men,' he said. 'You would be imprisoned or killed. Their fathers are very important men.'

'So is your father,' Swan said.

'My father is going to disown me,' Alessandro said, and the keel of the boat touched the muddy shore.

He jumped ashore, and looked back. 'Perhaps you should go back to your inn,' he said, and pushed the boat off the strand. The six men were coming. 'I'm sorry, Thomas. I didn't think it would be this bad.'

Swan ran down the gunwale, as he'd learned to do on London wherries, and leapt ashore. He grinned. 'What did you do?' he asked.

Alessandro shook his head. 'It is difficult to explain. It is an old matter.'

The six men were approaching.

'Let me get this right. They outnumber us three to one, but I'm not to kill any of them.'

'Yes. Do *not* draw your sword. They must make the first move.' Alessandro was calmer now.

'We wouldn't want to have *any* advantages, would we?' Swan said. He unrolled his sword belt and buckled his sword on. He swung his hips to make sure of the hang of the scabbard.

When the six men were ten yards away, they stopped.

'Is this your butt-boy?' shouted one.

All of them were younger than Alessandro. They were eighteen or nineteen. They were well dressed in loud colours, and they all had swords of extraordinary length, with complex hilts – curved knuckle-bows and finger rings in the latest fashion.

Alessandro seemed unable to speak. So Swan swaggered forward. 'Each of us will fight one of you at a time. Who's first?'

'No—' said Alessandro.

One of the young men shook his head. 'I don't—'

Swan drew his sword. 'Coward,' he said. This to the man who'd called him a butt-boy in his odd Venetian accent. 'Poltroon, liar, fool, cuckold. Draw.'

Alessandro was stepping up behind him. 'You are supposed to—'

Swan took another step forward. His sword was out, his buckler was on his hand, and he was in his favourite stance – sword under the buckler, pointed up at his opponent's throat.

The Venetian seemed confounded by his advance. 'What are the rest of you doing!' he yelled at his friends. He didn't draw, and Swan feinted and smacked him in the side with the flat of his sword and then stepped with one leg past him and threw him to the ground with his buckler arm while the young man felt his side to see if he was cut.

The other five were stepping back, and Swan put his sword-point on the fallen man's sternum. 'Why, exactly, can't I kill him?'

'He hasn't drawn his sword yet!' Alessandro said.

'Oh,' said Swan. He grinned down at the Venetian youth. 'My apologies, messire. Please get up.' He stepped back and saluted.

Alessandro turned as the young man scrambled to his friends. 'You have rattled them. That was . . . well done.'

'Bembo!' shouted another. His voice rose too much. 'Bembo, don't hide behind your foreign assassin. You are here to fight me.'

Alessandro bowed.

'Oh, it's a duel?' Swan said. He walked forward again, and had the pleasure of seeing the whole crowd of them take a step back. 'It looked to me as if the six of you planned to murder him. Which one of you is the injured party?'

Alessandro sniggered. 'He is the challenger.'

'Is this the ground?' Swan said, trying to remember everything he'd ever heard about duelling. It wasn't very common in London. Street fights and tavern brawls, yes. Formal duels . . .

But he'd read a book . . .

'Right here is good enough for me,' said Alessandro. The seagrass was short and thick. The ground was flat, if a little damp.

'Very well. You others, stand over here with me. Alessandro, this is your ground. Messire – I don't know your name.'

'What? How can you not know my name. Don't you know who I am?' the young duellist asked.

'If you have to ask that . . .' Swan said. 'Never mind. Stand here.'

'Jacopo Foscari!'

'Splendid, Messire Foscari. Please stand here.'

'My father is Francesco Foscari! The Doge!'

'If you insist, although, to be fair, I should tell you that your father probably doesn't approve of duelling.' Swan bowed. 'I read a pamphlet about it. Messire Foscari, who is your *secondo*?'

None of the other five volunteered.

'I can fight him if he wants, or we can all watch from a safe distance.'

No one moved.

'Very well. Let me see the swords.' He was acting – enjoying himself. The young men were all too scared to interfere, and he knew – in his heart –

that as long as he could continue his patter, he'd rule them, the way the snake charmer rules the snake.

Foscari's sword was a handspan longer than Alessandro's.

'I am content,' Alessandro said.

Swan had no idea what he was supposed to do, so he shrugged. 'Very well. On your guards, then.'

Alessandro drew. He had a buckler, and he flipped a casual salute, and then cut at the face of his buckler, tapped it with his pommel and took up a guard.

Foscari did almost the same, moving with dancing steps.

The two men began to circle.

Foscari took a long, gliding step and cut from a high guard at Alessandro's buckler. Alessandro collected the heavy blow on his sword and drove it into the ground with a counter-cut, and he stepped forward with his left foot and cut with the back edge of his sword, and Foscari sprang back, dropping his sword and swearing. He had a long line of blood on his forearm.

'Fuck you, cocksucker.' Foscari turned to his friends. 'Get him.'

'Uh-uh.' Swan had his sword in hand. He'd never put it away. He stood between the five men and the action. 'Fair play and all that.'

One of them – a blond man with a fuzzy blond mustache – reached for his sword.

Swan's buckler licked out and caught him in the arm with a sharp *crack*. He swore.

Foscari realised that his friends weren't coming to his aid, and he picked up the sword. 'Your turn will come, Bembo.'

Swan continued to smile at the five young men. 'If any of you would like to fight me,' he said, suggestively, 'I am completely at your service – now, or at any hour you would prefer.'

'You are scum,' ventured the one he'd thrown to the ground.

'Alessandro? Can I challenge him?' Swan asked.

'No,' Alessandro laughed. 'That would be foolish.'

'So I'm scum,' Swan agreed. 'And you are a coward, a poltroon, a cuckold, a fool, and a . . . damn. What was the other? Liar. Can we agree on this?'

The young man flushed bright red.

'Bastard?' Swan ventured.

The red on the man's cheeks grew brighter.

'Stop!' Alessandro said. He was suddenly at Swan's shoulder. 'I order you.'

Swan smiled innocently at his victim. 'Well,' he said.

'I will have you killed,' the young man said.

Swan nodded. 'That only proves the coward part,' he said. 'The liar, the fool and the poltroon are yet unproven. The cuckold—'

'Thomas!' Alessandro said.

Swan realised that he had enjoyed himself. He bowed. 'At your service, gentlemen,' he said.

He backed away, and walked to the boat.

One of the youths threw a clod of mud. It missed, and Swan smiled. 'Boys,' he said.

Alessandro shrugged. 'We lived,' he said. 'They're about a year younger than you.'

'Care to tell me what that was about?' Swan asked.

Alessandro looked at him for a long minute. 'No,' he said. 'But I think I should teach you to fence.'

The duel made him a three-day-wonder at the tavern. People knew about it before he got back. Joanna, the tavern slut, threw him admiring glances, and young men swaggered more when they were close to him.

Cesare sat with him drinking wine, a few nights later. 'You'll get yourself killed,' he said.

Swan made a face. 'Maybe,' he said.

Cesare laughed, and so did Giannis. 'You are young, and think you will live for ever,' Giannis said.

'Yes,' admitted Swan.

Cesare leaned forward. 'You weren't like this in France,' he said.

Swan sat back. 'It is hard to explain,' he said. 'I see the fear in their eyes – and it makes me . . . an animal.'

Giannis nodded. 'I know it,' he said.

'And they were all rich boys. I grew up *hating* rich boys. When I was a royal page—' He paused.

Cesare shrugged. 'Tell us how you became a royal page.'

Swan held out his cup. 'If this avatar of Aphrodite come to earth will refill my wine cup, I will tell everything.'

‘How’s your money holding out?’ asked Cesare in Latin.

‘Well enough. Why?’ Swan answered.

‘We’re here at least two more weeks. And I’d like to play cards.’ Cesare smiled at the serving girl, whose pockmarked face was not *quite* that of an avatar of Aphrodite. But she smiled well enough, and poured them wine from a pitcher.

‘Here?’ asked Swan. Giannis had taught him to play piquet, but he’d never yet played for money.

‘No!’ Cesare said. ‘Tell your story.’

Swan rocked his head back and forth. There, for good or ill, were his friends. He was tired of trying to be mysterious. ‘My mother owned – owns – a tavern in London.’ He shrugged. ‘Shall I tell you the truth?’ Neither of them looked appalled – indeed, Giannis looked . . . relieved. As if low birth made him more of a man, and not less. ‘I think she was a whore.’

Giannis looked shocked.

Cesare laughed. ‘Mine too!’ he said.

‘What a terrible thing to say of your mother!’ Giannis said.

Swan laughed. ‘No, no. Listen. When she was young, my mother had me. My father . . . is someone very important. I think he bought her the inn. I think she surprised everyone by running it well.’

‘Any other family?’ Cesare asked. ‘Some thieves? A Pope?’

‘My uncles,’ Swan said. ‘Both archers. Mother got them posts in the king’s bodyguard. They retired to the inn and drank and kept order.’ He smiled. ‘Jack and Dick. They taught me . . . everything.’

‘Interesting,’ Cesare said. ‘How did you get to be a royal page?’

Swan drank more wine. ‘Every year or so, my father would remember I existed. He’d buy me something, or send me something – a tutor, an invitation to a school. I . . . got in some trouble, when I was fourteen.’ He shrugged. ‘But I was, at least technically, a clerk, and so I couldn’t be tried.’

Cesare shook his head. ‘You killed someone.’

Swan nodded.

Cesare shook his head. ‘Why do I like you? You are a murderous barbarian.’

‘He was trying to rob me. And maybe more. His hands . . . anyway, I took his knife as my Uncle Jack taught me, and used it.’ For a moment he was there, with blood all over him and the other man lying under him gurgling. He shivered. ‘Anyway, my father collected me from my mother

and I lived in one of his palaces for a year, and had tutors. It was—' He couldn't decide what word to use.

'Not what you were used to?' Cesare asked.

'Exactly,' Swan said, and drank more wine. 'Sometimes they treated me like a servant, and sometimes as if I was a lord. Nothing belonged to me. Except the tutors, and their learning.' He shrugged again. 'I'm not telling this well.' He looked into his empty wine cup. 'So he sent me to court. It wasn't bad – it was like the tavern, except everyone was richer. I didn't have nice clothes. I got tired of being treated like a servant.' He left a lot out, and skipped to, 'and then I ran away back to the tavern.'

Cesare nodded. 'It's us against them,' he said. 'Even when they treat us decently, we're never allies.'

'You like Alessandro,' Swan said.

Cesare shrugged. 'He's a rebel, too,' he said. 'He . . . isn't one of them. Let's play cards.'

They took a boat to another tavern, where the tables were larger. Cesare paid a small fee, and was provided with a pitcher of dark red wine, and a table and two decks of the new block-printed cards.

An hour later, Swan raised his hands. 'I surrender,' he said. There were six men playing, and he tossed in his cards at the end of the last piquet.

'You weren't doubled,' said Cesare.

'I'm losing a ducat every game and sometimes two,' Swan said.

'Don't be a Jew,' Cesare said.

'Do Jews play cards badly, or do they just want new clothes? Jews aren't so bad, when you get to know Italians.' The hit went home, and he grinned. 'Either way, I'm out.' Swan counted his tally on the abacus. 'Thirteen ducats. Jesus, Mary and Joseph.' He clambered over the bench.

'Jews are cheap,' Cesare said.

'Not in my experience,' Swan said. 'They're thrifty and exacting and good at maths. But not cheap. Now, excuse me, gentlemen.'

'It's fun!' Cesare called. 'Sit and drink, at least!'

Swan went back to his inn, lit a candle and did some Arabic.

Rabbi Aaron seemed to know everyone in Venice. Perhaps more importantly, he seemed to know everyone in Constantinople. He began to draw little charts for Swan – this street had the goldsmiths, this street had moneylenders. 'The Genoese used to hold Galata,' he said. 'But they tried

to help save the empire and they lost everything.’ He drew a small map in the corner of a text. ‘Galata is a city of its own, across the Horn from Constantinople. My brother Simon has a house there.’

Gradually Swan began to understand the layout of the Holy City, girded with ancient walls, with suburbs across the Hellespont. Galata was a walled city unto itself, now held by Venice. Aaron wrote him letters – to Simon, to a dozen other men and one woman. He hid them in his secret pocket.

Rabbi Aaron fingered his long, elegant beard. ‘My brother used to travel four times a year – bringing jewels, taking wools.’ He shrugged. ‘We’re old. You are a good listener, young man. I understand you are a ruffian.’

Swan’s head came up at that. He’d been copying Hebrew nouns. ‘What? Oh, yes. I’m a hardened killer.’

‘You . . . engaged – with the youngest Foscari.’ Rabbi Aaron smiled. It was a hard smile, and just for a moment, Swan wondered what it was like to *be* a Jew – to never fully speak your mind to a Christian. Yet in that half-smile, Swan read a very definite dislike of Foscari.

‘There was a duel, yes.’ Swan smiled.

‘Beware. He is unhappy. And very rich, and you can buy a man’s death in Venice for about the price of a hat.’ Rabbi Aaron’s eyes met his. ‘A good hat.’

Swan found it difficult to hold the rabbi’s eye. The man – his *goodness* rolled off him – seemed to look directly into his soul. ‘I understand from a friend,’ the rabbi said gently, ‘that there are men from Rome looking for you, as well.’

‘Rome?’ Venice had so captivated Swan that he’d forgotten Rome.

‘The Orsini are as much masters of Rome as the Foscari are of Venice.’ Rabbi Aaron nodded. He smiled. ‘You are young and hot blooded. But please accept a word of advice from an old Jew. If you must make enemies, make powerless enemies.’

Swan laughed. But it hit him in the gut. ‘Are the Orsini looking for me?’

The rabbi nodded. ‘That’s my understanding. Listen – you are doing me a favour, carrying my letters east. I shall do one for you in return and introduce you to a man. He is the one who told me about your . . . problem. Yes? He may ask you for a favour. I recommend you do it. He is powerful – in a different way to the Foscari.’

Swan had grown to manhood in an inn on the wharves of London. He thought he had a shrewd notion of the kind of man they were discussing. 'Thanks,' he said.

'Now,' the rabbi said. 'Let's go back to work.'

'May I ask you one more thing?' Swan asked.

'Yes.'

'I'm hoping to purchase books. Ancient Greek books. In Constantinople.' He tried to frame his question. 'Can your . . . people help me?'

'Books? Greek books?' Rabbi Aaron looked off into his study. 'You should go and look at the monasteries on the mainland. Each of them has a fine collection. Now let's look at how we say "thank you".' Rabbi Aaron nodded. 'Because if you plan to deal with *my people*, you may find it a useful phrase.'

The next morning, as he left his lodging, Swan turned to flirt – somewhat automatically, it's true – with Joanna, the slut of the place. She was washing the floor, but she managed to wash it with energy, grace and a remarkable length of bare leg that deserved a glance and a word.

She blew him a kiss. Swan didn't particularly want her, but was as delighted as any young man would be by the invitation. But as he turned back to the street, he caught a glimpse of a man in an ill-fitting black doublet. The man had missed a lacing hole – so his too-small doublet was bunched to one side.

There was something about his glance that made Swan note him. Then he set off for the Rialto and then, in the afternoon, the Jewish quarter.

There was a small, dark man hovering by the gate to the ghetto. Conscious of the rabbi's warning, Swan was wary of the man, but the man met his eye and bowed. 'You are the English foreigner?' he said.

'Yes,' Swan said. He was late – he was falling in love with fencing, and in addition to lessons from Alessandro, he was talking lessons from Messire Viladi, whose fame was that he was a pupil of the great Fiore, and had, in his youth, fought a famous chivalric deed of arms with Galeazzo of Mantova. But all the time the sword was cutting into his time to do Arabic .

..

'I am Balthazar,' said the little man. 'I arrange loans.' He raised his hands. 'My apologies. Rabbi Aaron said I must approach you directly. I

have a . . . package. For Constantinople.' He smiled thinly. 'And I believe Rabbi Aaron passed on my . . . warning.'

Swan shook his head. 'I don't have a ship or an itinerary,' he said. He returned the man's bow with a deeper bow. 'But I appreciate the warning, messire.'

He paused. Balthazar smiled. 'Pardon me, but you do have a ship. You will leave on the Venetian state galley *Nike*, at the end of next week. The papal ambassador will be the Bishop of Ostia.' The man smiled shyly. 'I collect such useless facts,' he said, turning his head aside, as if ashamed.

But Swan stopped dead. 'How do you know that?'

The man smiled slyly. 'I have friends. Clients. Men who need a favour or a loan.' He extended a hand.

Swan took it. 'If you are correct, than I will do your favour.'

Balthazar smiled and bowed. 'I have something you might like. To trade.' He nodded. 'I have heard you are a man of blood.'

Swan laughed, and two grandmothers across the street glared at him.

After he was done with Rabbi Aaron, one of the rabbi's sons walked him to the pawnbroker's. Balthazar greeted him and served him wine, and two servants brought in a wicker basket.

Swan wondered how important the package was, that this man with a house full of servants and a silver candlestick on every table should have come to meet him in person.

'A man left this with me,' Balthazar said. 'He won't ever be coming back.'

The wicker basket proved to hold a fine breast and backplate, a matching helmet – an armet in the new style – with plate arms and beautiful Milanese gauntlets.

'It is very fine,' said Swan, aware he was being bribed.

'Try it on,' said the Jew.

'I'd need an arming doublet,' Swan said, but it was a quibble.

When he left England to be a soldier, he'd had a breastplate, an old chain shirt that had belonged to Uncle Dick, and a pair of mitten gauntlets from a bygone age with a new sallet from Germany that his father had provided, albeit unwittingly. The French looters had all that.

Every item in the basket was better than any of the items he'd owned in England. There were marks on the gauntlets – they'd been worn. One deep dent atop the left pauldron. Not a mark on the breastplate.

‘But armour has to fit,’ he said.

The Jew steeped his hands – he looked exactly like Cardinal Bessarion for a moment. ‘So I understand,’ he said.

The arms were heavier than he had imagined and wearing them felt odd. The breast and backplate were too tight. It took one of Balthazar’s sons and both his daughters to get the breast and back closed on his waist.

On the other hand, once it was on, it felt fine.

The gauntlets were very fine. The helmet and attached gorget went on well, but helmets tended to fit from man to man.

Balthazar’s daughter Sarah clapped her hands. ‘Oh,’ she said. ‘A knight!’

Balthazar glared at her, and she pulled her veil over her face and vanished up the stairs.

‘If there was somewhere to lace the arms,’ his son said. ‘I’ve seen it done,’ he went on. ‘I love to watch them arm the knights for jousting.’

Swan laughed. ‘If I ever joust, I’ll call for you,’ he said.

After he had it all off, he said, ‘That’s worth a fortune. What do you want me to carry?’

The Jew nodded. ‘Not to me, it isn’t. I want you to carry two letters, and a single packet, which I will provide on the day you sail. That’s all you need to know.’

‘The Rabbi Aaron knows of this?’ Swan asked.

‘No,’ Balthazar said. ‘This is between us.’

‘And I get the armour?’ Swan asked.

‘No,’ Balthazar said. ‘You get the armour regardless. I mean what I say, Englishman. It is useless to us here, and no Jew should have taken it in pawn. But I’m pleased it fits you. What you get from me is contact with my friends in the Golden Horn. The rabbi says you are a good student and a good friend to the Jews. Jews need friends.’

Swan sipped the wine, which was splendid. ‘And if I cut open your package and sell the contents?’ he said.

Balthazar made a face. ‘No Jew in the world will ever do business with you,’ he said. He laughed. ‘Eh – listen to me! What a lie. There’s always a Jew to eat another Jew. But no Jew in Venice will do business with you. And – it wouldn’t do you any good.’ He laughed. ‘And don’t you have enough enemies?’

Swan nodded. 'I will need to ship some things out of Constantinople,' he said.

Balthazar nodded.

'I think I would like very much to be your friend,' Swan said. 'If only for your magnificent present and your splendid wine, and your very pretty daughter, I would value you.'

'Our family was exiled from England two hundred years ago, after our women were humiliated in public, the men beaten, and all our property seized,' Balthazar said. 'Why are you . . . a friend? Of Jews?'

Swan shrugged. 'I've never really thought about it.'

Balthazar shrugged back. 'Perhaps for the best.'

At the door, Balthazar's son Solomon stopped him. 'What would you charge to teach me to fence?' he asked.

Swan had some idea that this might be illegal. But so was gambling. And prostitution. And smuggling.

'Do you have a pair of swords? Safed swords?' Swan asked.

Solomon shook his head.

'We'd need a pair. They would have to be kept somewhere, yes? Illegal for you to own, I think?' He looked around. 'Or for me to bring to the ghetto.'

Solomon put a hand on his shoulder. 'But you . . . would.'

Swan shrugged. 'Yes. I'm not that good – I'm taking lessons myself.'

Solomon smiled. They were the same age. Solomon looked so different he might have been an alien – different clothes, different face, different manner. But there was something – a piratical gleam – that made Swan take to him instantly.

'We need a place – somewhere we can both get to. With the equipment, and no nosy neighbours.'

'In Venice?' Solomon shook his head. 'Let me see. It is a foolish thing. I have always wanted to do this. I saw you – you aren't like my father's bravos.' He shrugged. 'And the rabbi said you were a good man, for a Christian.'

Swan bowed deeply. 'Your servant. Send me a message.' He frowned. 'I leave in a week.'

Solomon's face fell.

Swan smiled. 'Listen – your father must have a way of moving things in and out of the ghetto. Get a pair of swords, and I'll give you a first lesson in

the garden.'

Solomon smiled. 'Thanks. My father may see this as a Christian's attempt to entrap him.'

Swan shrugged. 'Your servant,' he said.

Walking along the wharf, looking for a boat, he couldn't quite see why he'd liked the young Jew so much. It was like seeing a girl – he didn't want to follow *that* thought too closely.

A boatman waved, and poled in. As Swan stepped into his boat, he saw the ill-laced doublet standing behind a pile of barrels. He saw the man only for a second, but it was enough.

He forced himself to smile and make a remark to his boatman.

He sat in the cupola at the back of the boat, and managed – without too much effort – to sneak a look behind him.

Another boat was leaving the pier. Was the black doublet in it? He wasn't on the wharf.

Swan wasn't armed beyond an eating knife. Venice had laws about such things.

Alessandro, despite his murmurings about being 'disinherited', was living at his father's palazzo on the Grand Canal. Swan didn't know exactly how to approach him. He got out of his boat on the Rialto and walked along the waterfront, enjoying the great cogs, the nefs and the galleys that stretched away like an aquatic forest to the south.

He walked into an alley after the first bridge, and walked up the street quickly to a small bakery that Cesare liked. He turned in the door. The whole shop was the size of a lady's wardrobe. There was just room for a customer or two to stand – then the counter, piled high with bread, and behind it, the ovens. It was hot.

He bought a sweet roll. The *very* pretty girl behind the counter called them Hungarian. The girl almost distracted him from his intention, but he managed to be in the doorway lingering and munching when the black doublet went past him. Swan glanced back at the girl – Cesare's interest revealed, although the Hungarian roll was miraculous – but she didn't spare him so much as a look, and he stepped out into the alley, leaped over the very narrow canal, and ran along the walkway behind St Mark's into the square.

Black Doublet walked into the square and then began to search. He stopped and cursed.

It was as good as anything the travelling mimes could produce. The man was truly angry, and he walked around the square, and then back along the wharf. Swan followed him warily. This was something he'd done often enough in London, as a youth. For various purposes.

The man walked up an alley and came back down and almost caught Swan flat footed, but a stack of cloth bales saved him, and the man had no notion of being followed himself.

He went up the next alley, saw the bakery, and stopped. Ran a hand through his thinning hair and stepped on to the portal. He said something. Nodded, and smiled – a terrible grin.

When he emerged, he was moving quickly. Swan assumed he'd realised that Swan had stopped, and was now giving up. He walked west, through St Mark's Square, over the bridges. It would have been faster for him to take a boat, but he didn't – he was cheap.

As darkness began to fall, he went into a maze of alleys behind the Grand Canal palazzi. After one turn and an ill look from a man who seemed as dangerous as Swan's quarry, Swan gave up and walked back to the canal, catching a boat in the last rays of the sun.

There was a magnificent palazzo dominating the canal just there. On a hunch, Swan pointed at it. 'Who's is that?'

The boatman looked at him as if sorry for his provincial ways. 'Where are you from? Naples?' he asked, as if this was the worst insult a man could be offered.

Swan laughed. 'Yes, Naples,' he said.

The boatman smiled, seeing that his passenger wasn't a complete fool. 'That's the Palazzo Foscari,' he said.

The next morning, Swan met Alessandro for a lesson. They were swaggering swords in a dry alley behind the inn. The watch had come and gone.

'We're to travel on a state galley,' Swan said.

Alessandro had taught him six positions. The positions were called 'gardes'. His feet had to go . . . just so. His arms and his head also.

It was very different from standing in the inn yard of the Swan with one uncle swinging at him while the other drank and made comments.

'Look – if he covers his head, what can you hit? His legs, boyo! Cut at his legs. High, low. Left, right.'

In fact the instructions often ended in the same place, but approached the subject from different angles. It was remarkably like learning a language from a new instructor. One started with verbs, another with nouns. Swordsmanship had a grammar, and Alessandro insisted that he learn it properly.

‘Do not just cut at my buckler!’ Alessandro said. ‘Have I not told you ten times to make a *provocazione*!’

‘Cutting at your buckler *is* my *provocazione*.’ Swan stepped back.

‘No! No, it is not! If you make such a move, it is an attack. It uses your effort, and now I will get to respond. Look!’ The Venetian came on garde – not, in fact, a garde that he’d taught to Swan yet.

Swan got his sword and his buckler up, and the swords crossed at the tips.

‘Look!’ Alessandro said, and he stepped forward powerfully, his sword now crossed almost to the hilt with Swan’s. Swan pushed the sword away, and as he pushed, Alessandro’s weapon vanished under his and was at his throat, instead.

‘I provoked you by walking into your measure. I forced you to act. You acted as I expected, with pressure to my blade. I left your blade to have a picnic by itself, and I kill you, thus.’ Alessandro nodded. ‘That was a proper *provocazione*.’ He nodded. ‘Now you.’ He paused. ‘State galley?’

Swan smiled, but he kept his sword up. He’d seen all this before. Alessandro insisted that he be on his garde all lesson. He reinforced the point by cutting suddenly at his pupil while they talked.

‘I have a source who says we’ll sail on *Nike*. And that the Bishop of Ostia is our patron.’ He adjusted his point until he was in the garde that Maestro Viladi called ‘*Porta di Ferro*’ while Alessandro called it ‘*Coda Lunga Larga*’. So many names.

A language of its own.

Alessandro stepped back with a flourish. ‘You are already much better. Maestro Viladi is very old fashioned, but he has improved your stance.’

‘He knows how to wrestle, the old maestro,’ said Swan. He still had a sore hip where he – all cocky – had attempted to throw the maestro.

Alessandro laughed. Then he became serious. ‘We need to find you some armour that is presentable,’ he said.

‘I have it. At least, half-armour.’ He smiled.

Alessandro shook his head in mock wonderment. 'You work miracles. Have you had any trouble from Foscari?'

'None,' Swan said. Then he shrugged. 'Perhaps.' He told the story of Black Doublet.

'That's lucky,' Alessandro said. Then he sighed. 'Foscari can't have *me* killed. But he can have you killed.'

'One of my new friends says the Orsini are looking for me here,' Swan said.

'Christ crucified!' Alessandro laughed. 'You may be the only man in Venice for whom a trip to Constantinople is the safest option.'

Alessandro suggested a few options to him. One was to spend a little money among the streetwalkers and derelicts around his lodging. He put this plan into effect immediately, paying a few centimes to each of a dozen vagabonds, and paying Joanna half a ducat to collect their information at the inn door.

On Wednesday, he saw Black Doublet in the square of St Mark's. But they were fifty paces apart, and he didn't think the man was following him.

He went to his lesson with Rabbi Aaron, and then took a boat across to one of the small islands – mostly to see if anyone would follow him. No one did.

On Thursday, after mass, a boy approached Swan and handed him a note.

'Have a sword,' it said in Hebrew.

Swan smiled. He went to his room and picked up his sword, wrapped the sword belt around it as Alessandro had taught him, and walked to the door. He flourished the sword at his landlord.

'Messire Niccolo – may I walk abroad like this?' he said.

'Why?' Niccolo asked. 'Arsenali will ask you.'

'I'm going to pawn it,' he said.

Messire Niccolo belched a great laugh. 'You lie. But it is a good lie, and nothing the Arsenali can disprove. Go with God, my young friend. Don't kill anyone I like.'

In fact, no one gave his sword a second glance.

At the gate of the ghetto, Solomon was 'on duty'. He grinned when he saw Swan's sword. 'I have to take that from you,' he said. 'No Christian may walk armed here.'

Swan handed it over. Another young man came to the gate, and Solomon escorted Swan to his father's gate.

'My father has sent the servants away,' he said. 'Just in case. This is my birthday present.'

Swan went into the garden, where Solomon's sisters watched from windows as the Englishman taught the Jew everything he knew about fighting with a sword in three hours.

Solomon was an excellent student. Immediately, Swan discovered that the other young man knew a great deal about boxing and wrestling.

'The laws only require that we not carry weapons,' Solomon said. 'There is a book by a Jew of Warsaw on wrestling. I have read it. My grandfather was a famous wrestler and boxer.' He made a head motion – something not Italian. 'My father is more of a fighter than some of the men who work for him think.'

The sun began to run down the sky. Swan was learning – as all swordsmen learn – that teaching another man to fence is the very best way of learning yourself. Teaching Solomon, just for one afternoon, had caused him to question a hundred things Alessandro and Maestro Viladi had taught him. Solomon couldn't stop asking *why* and Swan found he had almost no answers.

'Now let me exchange a few cuts,' Solomon begged when Sarah, his sister, brought them watered wine.

Swan shook his head. 'Too dangerous. You have no control. No – stop – I have something just as good. Let me see your blade.' He took the sword. It was the newest type – a strong, stout blade, but with the new hilt that Swan himself wanted, a backward-curving knuckle-bow to protect the hand from cuts, a finger ring so that the wielder could more accurately grip the sword for a thrust. The new hilts were all the rage in Venice.

He tried the edge on his thumb, especially up near the point.

'Is it a good sword?' Solomon asked.

Swan nodded. 'Excellent. The latest-style hilt on a good German blade.' He laid it on a blanket next to his own, which was an inch longer and had more of a taper to the blade, smaller finger rings, and no knuckle-bow. 'Mine is Milanese, from about – eh – twenty years ago. A fine sword.' He flexed it between his hands. 'Heavy, but beautifully balanced for the weight. Yours is . . . lighter and quicker. When we come to fighting, I'll show you how each has its advantages.' He smiled, unrolled his cloak, and

took out two bucklers – his own and Cesare's. 'Now we'll have a little duel. But all you want to do is strike my buckler. This is how we practise in England,' he said.

For as long as it took for the shadows to reach across the garden, they were at it, swash and buckle. The sisters applauded from the windows, and Solomon grew bolder. And at last, when Solomon tried a great leap forward, and Swan had to drop his sword to avoid spitting his student, there was the sound of one pair of hands applauding from the end of the garden.

Balthazar stood there dressed, not as a Jew, but as a gentleman, in a short cloak. And wearing a sword. He bowed, gloves on heart. 'My thanks for sparing my son,' he said.

That marked the end of the afternoon. Solomon embraced him. 'I told Father you'd do it,' he said. 'That was . . . amazing. Promise me we'll do it again?'

Swan smiled. 'I wish all my friends were so easily satisfied.'

In the gateway, Balthazar held out a purse. 'I hope that this is enough,' he said.

Swan shook his head. 'You must be . . . messire, I did that for friendship.'

The Jew looked as if he'd been struck. He stepped back.

Swan shook his head. 'Damn it, I mean no offence!'

There was a long pause – too long. Then the other man stepped forward again. 'My package is at your lodging,' he said. 'I hope that all goes well for you in Constantinople. Your Orsini problem is – hmmm. Very close to you.' He bowed. 'I am . . . honoured that you have chosen to befriend my son.' He turned in a swirl of his cloak and vanished into the ghetto.

Swan walked carefully down to the wharf, but he didn't see Black Doublet or anyone else he recognised. It was dark by the time his boat left him at the entrance to the canal nearest his lodging.

He knew the old whore who stood under the overhang of the last warehouse by the water. It was her turf – possibly her home. She had hennaed red hair and white face paint two days old, and was possibly as old as forty. He bowed.

She nodded. 'There's a man,' she whispered.

His shoulders tensed, and ice ran down his back. *Your Orsini are very close*, Balthazar had said.

‘Ah, Madonna, not tonight,’ he said with a bow, and put a silver coin in her hand.

‘By the church,’ she said. ‘Joanna said to tell you.’

He walked on. He felt as if he was being watched – felt naked. And the darkness seemed to hide a legion of enemies.

At the next cross-alley, he turned and walked north, jumping over a dead dog and a steaming pile of fresh human excrement just dropped from a chamber pot. The alley was so narrow that his hips brushed buildings on both sides, and he was completely blind for seconds at a time. If they took him here . . .

He emerged in the tiny square behind the church – the nearest building had a triangular floor plan because of the limitations of the two alleys, merging, and the square itself was only six paces across – the width of the small church of St Peter, the neighbourhood shrine. He stayed in the shadows by the triangular building. He could hear voices.

Men on the edge of violence have a sound to them. The sound alerted him. He stood listening, indecisive. Make for the inn where he lodged? But if they were assassins, they might come in and kill him – and Niccolo and Joanna.

Here in the darkness, he had an element of surprise.

And a sword. And room to use it.

He drew his sword and laid the scabbard carefully on a garden wall where he could reclaim it if he lived. Then he moved cautiously. Because he’d gone out to give a fencing lesson, he had on light leather shoes, like dance shoes, and he blessed them. He was *silent*.

He moved to the corner.

He could see one man at the church corner. That man was leaning forward to talk quietly to another, whose voice came back hollowly, echoed by the next alley.

He stood at the corner and listened.

The man closest to him said something.

The voice floated back.

‘I said, maybe he stayed with his Jews. Do you think he’s one of them? Some sort of sorcerer?’

The disembodied voice came back.

‘Fuck your mother!’ said the man closest to him, and Swan started across the square. He had to be *sure*, so he caught his sword with his left

hand at the midpoint – *mezza spada* – and ran light footed in on his opponent, who had leaned into the alley.

‘What?’ he said.

Swan used his sword the way a workman might use a pick. His sword-point rammed right through the back of his skull, killing the man instantly. He fell, and his fall seemed very loud to Swan, who froze.

It must have actually *been* loud, because he saw a shadow move at the far end of the alley.

And then the man was on him.

Swan retreated in a single leap – to get more light and more room to swing a sword. He was shocked at the man charging him, but only as shocked as the assassin was himself, to find himself facing a sword an ell long with a dagger.

Now he stepped back into his alley.

Something in his stance gave Swan an instant of warning. There was the scrape of leather on a cobblestone.

A third man.

Swan whirled and cut – on instinct. He missed, but the new assailant sprang back.

With two men coming at him from widely divergent angles, Swan knew he had to attack one. The new man was closer.

Swan cut back up the same line he’d cut down. He dropped his cloak, keeping hold of one of the bucklers inside. He stepped forward with his left foot and punched with the buckler, and caught the man’s dagger more by luck than skill, and his counter-cut took the man high on the dagger arm.

He screamed.

Swan punched him in the head with his buckler and the man crumpled, and Swan pivoted as Alessandro had taught him, on his hips, and got his buckler up. The third man stood for the count of three. And then he turned and ran.

Swan let him go. Running through Venetian alleys in the dark seemed like a sure way to die – or merely ruin his clothes. He reached down and the man at his feet stabbed at him and he caught the stab on his arm. The buckler took some impact, but the man’s knife scored into the meat of his bicep, and the pain enraged him, and he cut viciously at the man with his sword – not once but three times.

Then he shook his head and cursed himself for a fool.

And then he took their purses. Searched their clothes. No one had called the watch – one scream and one clash of blades wasn't enough to upset most Venetians.

He picked up the first one and carried him a block, to the canal. And dropped him in.

Walked back, picked up the second, and repeated the exercise.

When he was done, his hands didn't stop shaking. He almost couldn't walk.

There were two torches burning outside the inn, and if another man had tried to kill him, he'd have died. He didn't take any precautions, but walked up to the door. Only when he saw Joanna did he fully appreciate how foolish he'd been.

She looked around – Cesare and a group of other men were playing dice.

'Come!' she muttered fiercely. She dragged him into the kitchen. Then ran back and closed the front door.

He sat on a settle by the fire and wondered if he would throw up.

Then he looked down and saw the pool of blood on the stone floor under his feet.

He came to to find his right arm wrapped tightly – perhaps too tightly. It was all pins and needles. Something was pressed against him.

He moved his right hand and found that what was pressed against him was warm.

'Ah,' Joanna said. 'You were cold.'

She was naked.

He found that he was, in fact, still alive.



In the morning, he went to his room and found an oiled silk envelope that weighed two pounds. With it was a scroll tube sealed with a red seal in heavy wax.

Swan took them both. He put the silk envelope into the wicker basket with his armour.

He watched the basket and his heavy leather bag sway up over the side of the state galley *Nike*, and down on to the deck before going down into the shallow hold under the rowers.

‘We’ll sail after matins,’ said the mate, a young Venetian aristocrat with a full beard. ‘Good to have a couple of knights aboard. Will you fight as marines if we have a scrap?’

‘Of course,’ Alessandro said. ‘Show us our stations.’ He turned to Swan. ‘I’m going to assume you were attacked,’ he said.

‘Not exactly,’ Swan answered.

He told the story and Alessandro laughed his unpleasant laugh. ‘So – for all you know, you attacked an innocent man,’ he said.

Swan shrugged.

‘I don’t think so, either,’ Alessandro said. ‘But next time, leave someone alive, eh, Barbarossa?’

As Alessandro's harness and arms were swayed aboard, Swan saw that he had a long sword, four feet of steel with a heavy cross-guard, a long hilt and a spiked pommel.

Giannis had one, too.

Giannis saw what he was looking at and leaned over. 'In a ship fight, it is good to have reach and power,' he said.

Alessandro opened Swan's basket. 'Fine armour. Milanese. Does it fit?'

'Well enough,' Swan said. 'Better than the stuff I wore at Castillon.'

Swan had been to sea – twice – in great ships. A galley was a very different ride. He was close to the water, and it felt faster and more personal.

As a 'knight' in the train of an ambassador, he rode in the captain's luxurious 'coach' with eight other men – the bishop, his two priests, the captain, the mate, their two men-at-arms who were well-born Venetians training for the sea, and Alessandro.

After one very uncomfortable night, Swan joined Giannis under the awning. The deck was as hard as rock, but the space to roll over was better than a feather bed. The third night, Peter showed them both how to rig a cloak as a ring for the hips, and Swan slept well.

They put in almost every night after the first week at sea. They touched in Dalmatia, every day, and down to Ithaca and Corfu. Then they turned east, and they were in a sea that was supposed to be friendly, because Venice and the Turks were at peace.

But Ser Marco, the captain of the galley, was very watchful. He was different from the aristocrats that Swan had seen in France. He was very professional, and he was on deck at all hours. He had grey in his beard, and no front teeth – when he smiled, he looked like a drunken bully Tom had known in his youth. But there was nothing drunken in his style on deck. He was demanding, and his men loved him.

He was also very cautious. He seemed to expect pirates from every headland. He made them practise arming and disarming every day. Every day at dawn he had all the marines and all the archers on deck, fully armed, unless they were in port. When he discovered how good Alessandro was, he had the young nobleman direct a sword exercise – every day, rain or shine, on the gangway down the centre of the ship.

The ports were pleasant – small towns, carefully fortified. The Venetian fortifications were always modern and well maintained. The guards of their

garrisons turned out with a flourish.

Venice took care of its overseas empire, that much was obvious.

On the west coast of the Peloponnese, Genoa still held sway, and the Venetian galley stayed out to sea and didn't touch land except for headlands. Swan stayed on deck all the time, watching the distant shore and trying to guess what part of the classical world they were passing. That low-slung isthmus – was that Sphacteria? Was that towering summit Mount Olympus?

He got used to donning and wearing armour. He fenced with Alessandro every morning, and with Giannis, and with the three Venetian men-at-arms. The oarsmen would watch them, sometimes wager, and always offer raucous comments. They were *not* slaves.

Around Attica, they put in at Piraeus, and the scarred Parthenon towered in the distance.

'I must see it,' Swan said. Cesare agreed, and when the *capitano* said they had a day, the two men rented mules and rode up from the port to the ruins of Athens. The Dukes of Athens maintained a residence on the summit of the Acropolis, but the duke wasn't present. Swan climbed to the summit of the Acropolis in a state of near-awe, and stood on the steps of the Parthenon, looking up at its dazzling white stone, the miraculously intact roof, the carved coffers in the ceiling, the frieze of endless, marvellous statues – the gateway . . .

He spent three hours wandering the crown of the Acropolis. Cesare sat down in the shade of an ancient olive tree.

'Too damned hot. Enjoy yourself,' he said.

On the way back, Cesare cursed his mule, and then said, 'You really love all that.'

'It is *right there*,' Swan said. 'It's . . . as if Pericles might come out and speak.'

Cesare shook his head. 'Insects and hot sunlight and greedy peasants,' he said. 'Much like home, but without the good wine and the taverns. And the cities and the money and the good roads.'

'I copied down some of the epitaphs,' Swan said excitedly. 'Aeschylus!'

'You sound as if you didn't believe he was real before.' Cesare shook his head.

'*The long haired Persians remember me in the grove of Marathon*,' Swan quoted. He looked at his tablets. 'The wax is melting,' he said,

disgusted. 'I copied one about another solider – Diodorus something. Fought in Egypt.' He looked at the Italian. 'Yes. It seems more real here than in England.'

Cesare shook his head. 'And you waited tables in an inn? What a fascinating country England must be.'

At Naxos, the bishop, who hardly ever showed his face on deck, went to pay a visit to the Duke of Naxos, who was, of course, a Venetian.

The Bishop of Ostia was a papal courtier. It was not his first trip outside of Rome, but one would never have guessed it. The man's world view was utterly dominated by Rome, and he seemed to feel that the world existed to serve the Pope, which, as Alessandro said, was going to make his visit to Constantinople very exciting.

Alessandro went with him to the Duke of Naxos. Swan looked at a temple of Apollo, paying two local men to be guides. He took Giannis, who was at least as bored as Cesare had been. The temple of Apollo was on an islet just off the coast. The local men spoke a dialect of Greek that Swan found incomprehensible at first, but by the end of the day he could joke with them and buy sausage from a woman in the streets of the principal city. While the bishop was feted in the palace, he sharpened his spoken Greek every day.

On the third day Cesare was summoned to the palace, and he joined Swan in the cool of the evening, sitting on a terrace – really the roof of a large taverna. 'This is more like it,' Cesare said, drinking wine and admiring the girl serving at the next table.

'What did the bishop want?'

'A letter to the Pope. He thinks he's the legate. I think the Pope will not thank him for dabbling in local politics, but I'm a mere notary.' Cesare knocked back his wine. 'I met a monk – a Greek monk. We had a bit of a debate.' He smiled. 'I liked him and invited him to come over for a cup of wine.'

In fact, when the monk came, the tavern owner treated him with the kind of respect that an Italian tavern keeper kept for beautiful women and the very, very rich. The wine at their table was taken away, and replaced with a fresh pitcher that was, upon tasting, of much higher quality. The monk, who insisted that they call him Fra Demetrios, waved at the wine and said it was from Nemea.

‘With the lions,’ said Swan, in Greek.

Fra Demetrios laughed. ‘Not bad. You are Florentine?’

‘English,’ said Swan.

Fra Demetrios nodded. ‘Fine men, the English.’

‘You know England?’ asked Cesare.

‘I am from Lesbos,’ Fra Demetrios said. ‘The Gatelusi have maintained English soldiers to guard us from the Turks for . . . oh, I don’t know. A hundred years.’ He smiled. ‘The English are great pirates – but like good sheepdogs, they prey only on the wolves, eh?’

The wars of the Gatelusi led to the fall of Constantinople.

‘The end of everything,’ said Fra Demetrios, and he shrugged. ‘Venice does not yet realise with what she is dealing. The Turks are ten – twenty – fifty times as powerful as Venice. That foolish old man – Foscari – is busy fighting petty lordlings in Italy, and the Turks will take all Greece.’ He looked at a pair of Turkish soldiers lounging in the street. They were mercenaries, serving with the Duke of Naxos, but they were, nonetheless, Turks. ‘In truth, they have already conquered us. We merely await the axe.’

After another pitcher of wine, he laughed at Cesare’s pretensions to learning. ‘Any Greek monk has read *all* the ancients,’ he said. ‘Not just the bits that have wandered out of our libraries to the west.’

Cesare didn’t rise to the provocation, but smiled agreeably. ‘What texts do you have that we don’t?’ he asked. ‘I mean, I’ve read Aristotle.’

‘How many books?’ the monk asked.

‘Of Aristotle? All three.’ Cesare nodded. ‘*De Anima*, *Ethics* and *The Athenian Consitution*.’ He winked at Swan.

‘Three!’ said the monk. ‘By Saint George, my Latin friends, Aristotle wrote more than twenty books.’

By the fourth pitcher of wine, Demetrios was writing the titles of every Greek book he’d ever read on Cesare’s tablets.

In the market, Swan found tables of curios – dozens of classical seals and coins, as well as several small statues, rings, heads of gods, a bronze spearhead, a butt spike. He bought several of the seals, and the spearhead and butt spike.

Alessandro shook his head. ‘What will you do with this junk?’

Swan handed over a silver coin with the owl of Athena on one side and a magnificent head of the goddess on the other. Alessandro pursed his lips

in appreciation. 'That is pretty,' he admitted.

'Worth money in Rome?' Swan asked.

Alessandro shook his head. 'I have no idea.'

Giannis looked at the coin. 'You'll find mountains of this old rubbish in Constantinople,' he said.

'How will we ship the cardinal's things back to Rome?' Swan asked.

Alessandro stroked his beard. 'Christ on the cross, I had forgotten. The bishop has me dancing attendance every day – I think he imagines I actually work for him.'

Swan nodded. 'Each port we've visited, they are expecting a Venetian squadron bringing soldiers.'

Alessandro shrugged. 'I heard of it in Venice. Genoa is losing a great many towns. They'll need garrisons.'

'Galata, too?' asked Swan.

'I see where you are going. I'll ask around.' Alessandro nodded. 'You think the troopships will go home empty?'

'Even if there's cargo, chances are we can get some space,' Swan said.

If Swan thought that Ser Marco was cautious before Naxos, he redoubled that caution after they sailed for the Golden Horn. Twice they made long legs out to sea to avoid Turkish ships along the coast.

But off Samothrace, they ran into thick morning mist, and when the hot sun burned it off, they were hull up and in clear sight of a pair of galleys.

'Arms!' ordered the captain, and he put the ship about. 'Nothing to worry about yet, friends. We are at peace.'

Peace or not, the ship's archers were in the bow and stern in a hundred heartbeats, and the men-at-arms had their armour on deck in the grilling sun.

The Turkish galleys paced them. By the time Swan was armed, there was a galley on either side, a few hundred paces away, matching them oar for oar. The Englishman walked to the side, trying his arm harnesses, feeling his stomach press against his ribs.

Peter was leaning nonchalantly against the ship's side, bending one of the archer's bows. His own was strung, and he had twenty arrows stuck point up through his belt. He grinned at his master.

'Look at this bow,' he said. 'It's Turkish!'

The Italian archer nodded. 'Horn, and sinew,' he said.

‘As heavy as my bow,’ Peter said. ‘I would like very much to try it, when we are ashore.’

‘Perhaps we could have a little contest,’ said the Italian. ‘If we aren’t taken and enslaved in the next five minutes, of course.’ Swan admired the archer’s sangfroid – the Italians had various words for it, and Swan’s favourite was *sprezzatura*: effortless performance, whether of bravery or of swordsmanship or just the recitation of poetry. He smiled at the man, who nodded coolly. Then he smiled. ‘Best get your breastplate on.’

The ship’s trumpeter sounded a long note, and the drummer beat ‘To Arms’. Swan saw Alessandro beckoning. ‘He wants us all in the stern,’ Alessandro said.

Ser Marco had his eyes on the island to port. ‘I am going to bear up and leave the island on our port side,’ he said. ‘It’s good sailing anyway, but it will force them to commit. If they want to continue flanking us, that bastard there will have to row across the wind.’ The farther Turk had a striped sail as big as a ship.

He gave the order, the timoneer repeated his orders, and the Venetian galley spun in the water and went due east.

The captain watched the Turks for a minute. ‘Very well. They’re coming for us,’ he said.

Swan didn’t see whatever it was that gave the captain this information, but his stomach flipped over again.

Alessandro nodded. He drew his long sword.

One of the ship’s men-at-arms turned to Swan. ‘Would you like a spear?’ he asked.

‘Of all things,’ Swan answered. He took a light partisan and a rotella, a steel shield a little more than two feet across and slightly convex. He strapped it on his arm, tried it, and heard a shout.

The farther Turk had turned and was coming straight for them.

The captain held up a hand. ‘Archers – whenever you have the range.’

Peter loosed the first shaft. He shot high, and the arrow went on the wind and vanished.

The Italian archer said something to Peter that made the Fleming laugh, and his bow came up and he loosed at a much lower angle. His arrow fell into the sea just short of the Turkish galley.

A dozen arrows rose out of the Turk and fell well short of their ship.

‘Wind in their teeth,’ Alessandro said.

Swan didn't like the feeling – the slow creep of fear. He remembered it from the first hours at Castillon, when they overran the French archers on the road and then waited, and marched, and listened to the officers dicker. He wanted to get it over with. It was very different from a street fight, or the duel.

One of the Venetian archers called something, and all of the ship's archers drew together and loosed, their arrows vanishing into the onrushing ship's hull. Peter drew, loosed, and watched his arrow. Shook his head.

Swan turned to see the other Turkish galley. It stood off and seemed content to let its consort do the dirty work.

Peter looked at the Italian. 'Ask him how he aims when the two hulls come together so fast.'

The Italian shrugged. 'Like this!' he said, and drew, and loosed. His shaft fell like a thunderbolt into the group on the command deck of the enemy ship. It was a spectacular shot, more than a hundred paces.

Peter grinned and loosed.

His arrow fell into the same group.

The Italian laughed, loosed, and then slapped the Fleming on the shoulder.

Turkish arrows were beginning to find marks among the Venetian oarsmen. A man on the second oar from the bow gave a cry, thrashed, wrecking his oar's timing, and then slumped over the shaft, and two of the deck crewmen pulled him off his bench.

The Venetian galley had just one oar deck. There were three men on each oar, on long benches set at a definite angle to the centreline of the hull. The ram was above the waterline forward, and above the ram was a small bow where the marines waited. Swan headed there, aware as only a classicist could be that galley warfare had hardly changed in two thousand years.

A Turkish arrow got past his round shield and hit the top of his helmet, making his ears ring.

He got his shield up and an arrow struck the steel face and ricocheted off it, hit the bulkhead and came back, broken. The arrowhead – twice deflected – scored a deep gash in the top of his thigh, narrowly missing his testicles, and he winced.

He found himself behind Alessandro. The Italian had excellent armour, all Milanese, all matching – a small fortune in steel. He had to admit to

himself that it was comforting to have a highly trained friend in head-to-toe steel between himself and the enemy.

Spent arrows rattled around the marine box. The Venetian archers were loosing so fast that it looked as if lines of arrows connected the two vessels.

The Turk was coming up from abeam, and then the Venetian captain changed course. He turned to starboard, so that he and the Turk were on parallel courses – and then he had his starboard oars retract as far as they could while the port oars drove on. The Venetian ship turned so suddenly that everyone aboard was thrown to starboard.

The Venetian archers, obviously forewarned, poured shafts into the waist of the Turkish ship, and the Venetian's cathead caught the Turkish outrigger a hard blow. It wasn't like a ram attack, but oars splintered, and the Venetians seemed to be winning the archery exchange.

Giannis was quite coolly cocking his crossbow and sending shaft after carefully aimed shaft into the enemy's boarders.

And then the Turkish galley was falling away behind them, oars damaged, and with her waist a bloody chaos of arrow-shot men. For a few seconds, the Venetians had been at point-blank range, just a few paces away and eight feet higher in the water. A dozen of them had loosed perhaps six shafts each, and the result was that the Turkish ship, although undefeated – yet – was crippled. So many men were wounded that as she sagged away, blood ran from her scuppers – as if the ship herself was bleeding.

The Venetian galley settled on a new course and carried on, the sailors mending cut lines and trying to replace one oar that had been broken in the collision and wounded all three of its oarsmen.

Swan could hear his breath inside the confines of his burgonet. His hand found the catch and he got his visor open.

One of the Venetian men-at-arms slammed it shut just as another volley of arrows caught them.

He glanced to port. The other Turk was coming for them.

'Mary, Mother of God, stand with us in our hour of need,' said the Venetian who had closed his faceplate. He turned and saw a third Turkish galley emerging from behind a rocky islet on the coast of Samos.

'Amen,' said Swan.

Arrows fell like hail, and Swan was hit repeatedly – twice on his helmet, at least twice on his shield, and one that went between his foot and his boot sole, penetrating the boot on both sides and barely cutting his foot.

‘You have the luck of the devil,’ said one of the Venetians. He grinned inside his barbute, and in that moment took an arrow under his arm and fell to the deck, dead.

Alessandro turned. He looked behind them for a long time. ‘They’re going to ram us in the stern and board,’ he said. ‘Follow me.’

Swan didn’t ask questions. He ran the length of the ship through the arrow storm with the Italian, one stride behind. The Turkish galley was a horse length from the stern, bearing down on them, and the arrows were as thick as snow in London at Christmas.

Ser Marcos turned to port, hoping to confuse the pursuing Turk by turning *towards* his consort, but the captain of the enemy ship read his intention and turned inside the nimble Venetian, ranging alongside, and the grapples flew as the enemy ram touched them – the Venetian rowers pulled in their heavy oars and reached for weapons. Venetian oarsmen were among the most feared fighting men in the Inner Sea.

The Turkish borders came in a rush, with screams to Allah. They had round shields and scimitars – many had long spears, and a few had European-looking long swords. The whole swarm came for the Venetian command deck – forty or fifty men.

Swan found himself between Ser Marco and Alessandro. He got his rotella up as the first scimitar came at him, and then . . .

It all happened . . .

So fast . . .

That . . .

There was a sort of hideous pause as his partisan went, untouched, into a gap between a Turk’s shield and his sword, right into the bridge of his nose, killing him instantly . . .

There was another moment – one Swan remembered for many nights – when his partisan got stuck in a screaming *ghazi* and the man went down into the oar benches and then – powerless, as he tried to free his weapon – he saw the scimitar that would kill him, coming for his neck. His shield was on the wrong side, and the weapon floated, undefended, into the gap and slammed full force into the place where his neck muscles meshed with his shoulder muscles.

His armour held. It hurt, but the edge didn’t bite, and he let go of the partisan and reached for his sword. Drawing it seemed to take for ever.

And then the pressure on him eased. He had been fighting multiple opponents for as long as . . . as there had been time. Beards, teeth, screaming.

Suddenly just one man, covering the retreat of his fellows. A big, brave man, his sword everywhere.

Alessandro caught the fellow's scimitar in a rising, false-edge parry, and Swan was there, following the rising sword into the created opening. His blow wasn't strong, but strong enough. The Turk dropped his weapon, one finger severed from his hand.

Then he managed to block two killing blows with his round shield alone. Blood was gushing from his severed finger. He sprayed it at Alessandro and punched with his shield.

Swan got a foot behind the Turk's front foot and slammed him to the deck.

He knelt on the man's chest and put his sword across the man's throat.

The man was beaten. He was down. The sound of fighting was dying away.

The Turk was smiling.

Swan had time to think – *Damn, this bastard is brave.*

I could capture him.

That's foolish. I could just . . .

I could capture him.

And then he couldn't kill the man. An Arabic word came to him. Did Turks even speak Arabic?

'Stop!' he said.

The Turk looked at him, raised an eyebrow, and said something rapidly in Arabic.

Swan had to shrug. 'Just stop,' he said, in English, of all things.

Alessandro helped him up. The oarsmen were killing the wounded and throwing the last Turks over the side. The third Turkish galley was standing off. Even as he looked, the archers aboard the third galley lofted a flight of arrows – into the second Turk.

'We don't generally take prisoners,' Alessandro said.

Swan looked at the Turk. The man looked exactly as Swan himself had felt at Castillon in the shattering moments after the end of fighting.

'He's—' Swan looked at the Italian, too wiped by the fighting to come up with the words.

‘I agree. Ser Marco?’

The *capitano* looked at their prisoner. ‘He’s someone important. He fought gallantly, I’ll give the bastard that. But the Arsenali will kill him.’

Events proved him wrong. The third Turkish galley had an enormous red flag amidships, and it drove the second galley off quite convincingly.

‘Ottoman galley,’ said Ser Marco. His voice sounded thick – his slight lisp was very pronounced. He watched the enemy ship. He spoke again after minutes had passed and they hadn’t been attacked. ‘Those are Smyrna galleys. There’s a hundred flavours of Turks – and Syrians, and worse.’ He shrugged. ‘By God’s nose, they may even be renegade Greeks.’ He spat over the side. ‘The new galley is Ottoman. He may recognise our flag. He may even—’

Swan pointed. ‘You’re bleeding, messire the *capitano*.’

Ser Marco looked down, saw the blood running like a fresh spring stream over the *cuisse* on his hip, and fell flat to the deck.

They had to cut the straps on his leg armour – hours of work for an armourer to replace – to get at the wound. His blood was spurting away, his boots were soaked, and Alessandro whipped a sharp knife out of Swan’s hand and slit the man’s hose.

The wound was just below the groin. Alessandro looked at Swan, who shrugged. He tried putting pressure directly on the wound and the blood spurted past his fingers. He tried to put pressure above it – the man’s muscles were as hard as rock, and he could slow the flow but not stop it.

Cesare, wearing a corselet and an open-faced bassinet, leaned over, pulled off his helmet, and spat. ‘The bishop has a doctor,’ he said.

Swan knelt there, feeling like a fool, his hand pressed into another man’s groin. The blood seeped past his forefinger slowly. He pressed as hard as he could – Alessandro pushed back from the other side of Ser Marco’s hip. He wanted his helmet off. He wanted all his armour off, and he wanted to know what was happening. The mate was down – dead, Swan assumed – and Alessandro was issuing orders as if born to it, which indeed he was.

The silence from the oarsmen was ominous.

The bishop’s doctor was sent for. The bishop and all his suite had spent the battle in the captain’s coach in the stern. Swan thought the worse of them for it – Cesare, for example, had blood on his sword and four long cuts on his forearm, like the claw marks of some great beast.

Ser Marco's eyes fluttered open. 'Make sail!' he said, and raised an arm.

Swan refused to be distracted, and kept the pressure on.

Alessandro slapped Cesare on the hip. 'Take over,' he said.

Cesare knelt in a clatter of metal. 'So much blood,' he said. His face was pale. 'Such a fight.'

Swan just wanted his helmet off. There was shouting behind him. The only man he could see through the forest of legs on the quarterdeck was the Italian archer, who had just wiped his forehead and put a fresh arrow on his string.

The doctor burrowed through the crowd, his black clothes flapping like a raven's wings. His face was as pale as milk, and he was obviously terrified. But he knelt, ran his hand down the *capitano's* thigh, and nodded.

He was a small man, and his hands shook. 'Give me room,' he said acerbically. He looked at Swan. 'Do you know any anatomy?' he asked.

Swan couldn't shrug, owing to his kneeling posture and his armour. 'Yes. No.'

'You found the artery.' The doctor nodded. 'I need a sharp knife, some vinegar, a needle, and thread.' He looked at Swan. 'Don't let go, young man. Your captain's life depends on it.'

Alessandro leaned in. 'I need him. If they come at us . . . they're coming alongside. Thomas—'

The doctor shook his head rapidly and looked even more like a bird. 'If he lets go of the artery, Ser Marco dies.'

Alessandro sighed. 'If they board us—' he said. His eyes met the Englishman's.

If they board us, let the capitano die and come and fight.

The sun was grilling him. His slightly too-tight breast and back armour was biting into his hip and the base of his waist, and the pain was growing, running slowly up his side.

The bishop was there. 'I must shrive him,' he said, and pushed against Swan's back. 'Out of my way.'

The doctor looked up. 'Back off,' he said, his voice full of authority.

Bravo, little man.

'You—' sputtered the Bishop of Ostia.

'Off the deck, Your Grace,' Alessandro said.

'Ser Marco is my—'

‘Clear the deck, Your Grace. The Turks are coming aboard.’ Alessandro’s voice was low and gentle.

The bishop turned and fled.

An Arsenali brought vinegar. Peter leaned over, a threaded needle in his hand. ‘Heavy linen cord. I waxed it,’ he said in his Flemish-accented English.

Swan translated but the doctor had already snatched the needle. He nodded at Peter and turned to Swan.

‘This is what we’re going to try,’ he said. ‘You hold on. As hard as ever you can. I will open the skin a little more, catch the end of the artery – I hope – in this loop.’ He’d made a loop like a horse breaker’s lasso. ‘I pull tight. You *keep holding*. Let me pass seven loops around the artery and put the needle through and tie off. Then you let go. Any time before – *pfft*. He’s dead. Yes? Are you ready?’

Swan knew that it was foolish to feel that the pain in his hip was important when they were trying to save the captain’s life – but he muttered, ‘Hurry, then!’

The doctor took a deep breath. He was praying.

This is a man with a genuine courage, Swan thought. The Turkish galley was towering over them. The oarsmen were silent. Twenty heads leaned into the circle to watch the doctor work.

‘I need light,’ he said.

Men made room.

The doctor’s hands moved. He slashed the skin. Blood flowed. He folded a flap back, and his left hand went in, the loop trailed in the blood. The blood spread over Swan’s hands, and he felt the artery under his forefinger begin to slip.

The loop missed. Swan couldn’t really see – he couldn’t get his head at the right angle, and his armet suddenly weighed a ton, and there was sweat flowing over his eyebrows and he couldn’t move. He grunted – it was not exactly pain, but it was a lot of minor discomforts piled one on another.

‘Fuck!’ said the doctor. ‘Tell the Dutchman to prepare me another loop.’

Swan said, ‘Peter—!’ but the Fleming understood enough.

‘Here! I’ve made three.’

The doctor muttered – something about the white of the waxed thread his only hope.

Something happening aft.

‘Got it,’ said the little doctor. ‘Got it! Hold hard!’

But the artery was slipping. It felt like a snake, a hard worm under Swan’s finger, and he brought his thumb down alongside the finger.

‘One. Two,’ the doctor counted. ‘Three!’

He paused. There were a series of rapid motions – the Turkish ship was doing something, the sailors were moving, the doctor thrust the needle hard – hard enough to make the muscles stand out on his neck.

‘Five,’ he said. ‘Six. Seven. Second stitch. Third stitch.’ The man looked triumphant – like a man who had won a serious fight, or won a fortune on the turn of a card. He *radiated* joy.

He looked over at Swan. Took Peter’s third loop, and took a deep breath. ‘Let go,’ he said. ‘Slowly.’

Swan found it hard to let go. His thumb and forefinger were stuck together with blood and pain.

‘Swan!’ Alessandro shouted.

He got to his feet. His knees and stomach muscles didn’t want to hold him up.

The doctor raised his face. ‘It’s holding,’ he said. He was staring into the blood and flesh.

Swan stumbled.

The Turkish ship, oars folded in like a bird’s wings, lay alongside. A man in a magnificent turban with a jewel holding an ostrich plume was standing at the base of the aft mast, hands on hips. He roared something.

Alessandro turned to Swan. ‘Do you understand him?’

Swan leaned out on to the oar box, put his bloody hand to his mouth, and called ‘*Shukraan!*’ *Thanks!*

The man at the mast grinned. ‘May I come aboard, Frank?’ he called, in Arabic. From his accent, it wasn’t his first language.

‘May we speak Greek?’ Swan shouted back, and the Turkish officer waved. Without any further ceremony, he swung out on the spar of his lateen and landed accurately on the deck by Swan’s feet.

The Turk was taller than Swan by a head, with a magnificent beard as good as Rabbi Aaron’s, heavy chested, with a long, curved nose and heavy black brows. On the Turkish ship, a row of marines were pointing hand cannons over the rail, and two officers were screaming at each other.

Giannis snarled. ‘I know this one,’ he said.

The Turk inclined his head. He was more like a king than anyone that Swan had ever met – certainly far more like his idea of a king than Henry VI of England.

‘Omar Reis,’ spat Giannis. ‘Christ the Saviour.’

The Turk smiled, showing a mouthful of teeth. He wore a silk robe worth a thousand ducats and a gold-hilted sword worth as much again. The emerald in his turban was worth another thousand. At least. ‘The Greeks call me Omar Reis. I am Turahanoglu Omar Reis. You are in some small difficulty,’ he said. He was looking around.

Alessandro’s Greek wasn’t up to the exchange. Swan translated, and then said, ‘No difficulty, my lord. Just some pest control.’

Omar Reis smiled again. ‘Yes. I see that some of the rats had teeth.’

‘And blood. Quite a bit of blood. May we offer you a cup of fresh apple cider, my lord?’ Swan was quite sure there was cider somewhere in the bishop’s gear.

‘You are very kind,’ said the Turkish lord.

The wounded groaned, and the ships made all the small sounds of ships at sea, but otherwise there was complete silence on both ships. An oarsman went below for cider.

‘We have a safe conduct,’ Alessandro said. ‘And an ambassador from the Pope to the Sultan.’

Swan nodded and repeated Alessandro’s statement. ‘This is our captain, Alessandro of the illustrious family of the Bembii of Venice,’ he added.

The Turk inclined his head very slightly. Alessandro matched his inclination to the degree.

‘And you, Bloody Hand?’ asked the Turk. ‘I cannot place your accent.’

‘I’m an Englishman,’ Swan said. Some devil made him add, ‘My great-uncle is the King of England.’

Omar Reis had begun to step past him, but he paused. ‘Really?’ he asked. ‘King Henry has no brothers.’

‘John of Gaunt was my grandfather,’ Swan said. This Turk seemed to know quite a bit about England.

The Turk scratched below his beard at the base of his neck. ‘I see,’ he said. He bowed his head – just a little. ‘How may we be of service?’

Alessandro was glaring at him, but he folded up the glare and put it away before the Turk could see it.

Giannis said – in French – ‘He’s looking us over to see if he wants to take us.’

Alessandro nodded.

On the Turkish galley, the slow-match for the hand cannons burned, and minute whorls of smoke rose from the marines’ hands and curled away into the sun.

Swan was working through the problem in his head. Fighting didn’t promote careful planning, but now that he was no longer holding a man who was bleeding to death or fighting for his life, certain thoughts started to percolate through his mind.

First, that Omar Reis had to have known that the other two galleys were there. After all, the third galley had emerged from behind an island. The two ‘Smyrna’ galleys had been out in the current – but they must have rowed hard to get there and hold their stations.

The captain would have known all this.

Swan made a devil’s-horn sign with his left hand and flashed it to Alessandro behind the Turk’s back.

Giannis grabbed his hand. In French, he said, ‘He’s the most powerful Turk on the Greek mainland. His father is Turahan Bey and he’s the Lord of Thrace.’

Swan was watching the young man he’d taken prisoner. Peter was standing by him, and the young man’s eyes were glued on the Turkish lord, who looked around, never quite seeing the prisoner.

Alessandro bowed. A servant presented a tray with a silver goblet full of cider. The Turk took it. He looked at Alessandro.

‘We must share, my lord, if you want me to try it first,’ Alessandro said, and Swan translated.

The Turk handed him the cup.

Alessandro drank and handed it back to him with a bow.

The Turk drained it. ‘Let me see this safe conduct,’ he said.

Swan, watching him like a hawk, saw his glance pass over the prisoner – pause, and move on.

It was like watching a boy trying not to look at a girl with bare legs or nice breasts.

Alessandro was looking at him. In Latin, he said, ‘All three galleys serve Dido of Carthage.’ He smiled.

The Turk turned to look at him.

‘The boy with Peter must be his son,’ Swan went on in Latin. ‘Look at him.’

Alessandro nodded. He gave that thin-lipped smile he adopted when he was going to do something nasty.

The bishop came on deck. He was a heavy man, and he made heavy work of crossing the deck from the coach. ‘Who is this infidel?’ he asked in Italian.

Omar Reis smiled. In Italian he said, ‘I might ask the same,’ and waved. ‘I will have to take this ship until all this is sorted out.’

Alessandro snapped his fingers and motioned to Peter. Peter put a dagger against the young man’s throat.

The bishop had a scroll in his hand, and Alessandro snatched it without a word of apology. ‘My lord, please allow me to offer our safe conduct, signed by the Sultan, Mehmet the Second of that glorious name, and issued to the Bishop of Ostia and his train, so long as they are transported by a Venetian ship. This is a Venetian ship. Venice is at peace with the Sultan, but if you attempt to impound us, I promise you three things; first, that you will die; second, that your son will die before your eyes; and third, that your ship will be as easily defeated as your two consorts have been. I’ll add a fourth, my lord – that Venice will go to war for us.’

Omar Reis didn’t show a shadow of fear. He smiled, and looked around. ‘Son? I have no son,’ he said. ‘Your threats are as empty as air. I have driven off your enemies. I am the Lord of Thrace – these waters are mine, under the Sultan, who’s slave I am. If you touch me, all of you will die, crucified after you have been degraded by my galley slaves. Ask your pet Greek what I do to my enemies.’ His smile deepened. ‘Come – you have made your threats, and I have made mine. I would like my food.’ He snapped his fingers, and an oarsman brought him the safe conduct. He read it as if they were of no further concern to him.

Swan thought it might be the finest performance of bravery he’d ever seen.

Omar Reis shrugged. ‘I do not read Latin,’ he said. ‘This might be the directions to a brothel.’ He was looking at Swan, who grinned. Alessandro couldn’t stop himself – he grinned too.

‘But I will issue you my own safe conduct. If you are a Venetian ship, why is your flag not flying?’ he asked. ‘The Lion of Saint Mark is

sacrosanct in these waters.’ In fact, the red flag with the lion was flapping away a few paces behind the Turkish lord.

Giannis snorted.

Alessandro shrugged. ‘It must have been cut away in the fighting,’ he said. ‘Or perhaps it was difficult to see from the angle at which you approached.’

As the two galleys had both attacked from astern, this was preposterous. As everyone present knew.

Omar Reis nodded. ‘Is your uncle really the King of England?’

‘Great-uncle,’ Swan said. In Arabic, he said, ‘The boy is your son.’

Omar Reis met his eye. ‘Your Arabic is terrible,’ he said. He nodded very slightly.

‘Peter, let the young man go,’ Swan said.

There was a grunt, and Omar Reis’s eyes moved, just for an instant.

‘I will escort you to Constantinople,’ said the Turkish lord. He turned to Swan and bowed. ‘I thank you.’

Swan waved the Turkish lord on his way, just as he’d seen his father do a hundred times. ‘It is nothing,’ he said, in his most haughty voice.

When the Turks were gone over the side, Alessandro embraced him. ‘I think that one is on you,’ he said. ‘I owe you a fine cup of wine. And the Virgin a hundred candles of white wax.’

Giannis shook his hand. ‘You have matched wits with Satan’s own son,’ he said. ‘And the Virgin will do well from me, as well.’

The Golden Horn was perhaps the most magnificent sight that Swan had ever seen, and the towers and palaces of Byzantium – even six months after a brutal siege and sack – were the most splendid he could imagine. The tower of Galata on the Asian side was matched – or exceeded – by the golden onion domes of the great churches – some already converted to mosques. Two new minarets towered over the centre of the Palace of Blacharnae, and yet the great breaches blown in the walls by the Turkish cannon remained unrepaired.

The Turkish warships ‘escorted’ them all the way to the harbour mole for Galata. The fiction that the two ‘Smyrna’ galleys were somehow enemies of Omar Reis was thinly preserved – the two ships followed the Venetian at the distance of a few leagues, while the Turkish lord himself was always hull up, often broadside on a mere two hundred paces away.

For the last three days, they were on deck all the time – strings to bows, in harness. Swan had never worn armour four days running. The breast and back – slightly too tight – cut into him like a blade. He had constant diarrhoea, as did half the ship, and the wounds on his right leg bled yellow pus, and still he didn't take off his armour.

The bishop's doctor worked double tides. He proved an increasingly confident professional, and he seemed to grow in stature each day. By the time they sighted the tower of Galata, he seemed four inches taller, and six men owed him their lives.

Ser Marco was one of them. He was awake, and he screamed each day when his bandages were changed – Messer Claudio insisted on pouring vinegar on wounds. But aside from the screams, he seemed better.

They landed to a silent, hostile town. Most of the citizens were Genoese, and resented the handing-over of the town to Venice. Turkish soldiers still roamed the town.

'It was bad here,' Alessandro said, after he'd been ashore.

Swan had his armour off for the first time in four days. He had open sores despite his heavy leather and linen arming doublet, and a wound he'd missed altogether, a long cut that had somehow gone up under the skirts of his fauldrand cut above his buttocks into the base of his back. It wasn't bad, but it explained why he'd hurt so much.

He stank.

The pus kept coming out of his leg.

'Fuck it,' he said to Alessandro, and jumped into the sea.

The pain was intense, but he swam through it as the salt searched out every abrasion, every wound. It felt to him as if tiny doctors were cleaning him with tiny, sharp brushes. He swam and swam, until his arms wouldn't support him, and then he climbed up the anchor cable, feeling curiously heavy.

Dr Claudio hauled him inboard. 'You are the merest Empiric,' he said. 'You don't know that salt water is good for wounds.' He leaned over. 'Let me look at your back.'

He scrubbed the wound with vinegar and then did something that hurt like fire. Swan screeched like a small girl who burns herself on a candle.

Claudio laughed. 'Alum,' he said. 'Nothing cleans a wound like alum.'

The bishop disembarked and moved into a house in the town. Swan heard about his embassy from the doctor, who, as it proved, was much

happier caring for the soldiers than being ignored by the churchman.

‘I was the tenth choice for the embassy,’ Claudio admitted. ‘He fancies himself a great man on an important mission, whereas the rest of us know that he’s the only man who’d take the job, and what he’s doing is a formality.’ The doctor shrugged. ‘He wanted a famous medico, and he got me.’

‘You are very good,’ Swan said.

‘You are very kind,’ Claudio said. ‘Before I threw my little loop over Ser Marco’s artery, I had never – in a practical way – manipulated a human body. One that was alive, anyway.’

‘By God!’ Swan said.

‘Oh, I have experimented on myself,’ the little doctor said, as if that made it all better.

A Turkish boat came across and the embassy loaded up to move to Constantinople. Giannis came down to the ship and took Swan, Peter and the doctor and their gear to the Turkish boat, and they were rowed across the Horn – a curious and very exacting piece of small-boat handling, given the current. Giannis chatted with the boat’s crew in Greek.

‘What do they say?’ asked Alessandro.

‘That the taxes are lower,’ Giannis said. He was angry. ‘They are traitors.’

Swan shrugged. ‘I’m not sure they are,’ he said, thinking of the Gascons and the ‘Englishmen’ of the Dordogne. ‘People need peace in order to live.’

Giannis glared at him, and he hid his smile and watched the rapid current sweep them north towards the Euxine.

It took twenty days for the bishop to present his credentials. He was outraged by the wait.

Swan was in heaven, and would happily have had the embassy delayed another twenty days.

It was like a journey to some exotic dream, peopled by the best of classical antiquity and a thousand Sir Palomides, the Saracen knight of King Arthur’s court. The Greeks looked haunted, but shops were open. If there were gaps – enormous gaps, where fifty buildings had burned, where a whole square of shops had been looted and destroyed – there were also whole quarters that looked untouched by war. Many establishments smelled of fire, and in one small square, Swan could smell the unmistakable smell

of human corpses rotting. The magnificent Hagia Sophia was a stable for the Sultan's horses. Swan paid a ducat – a staggering sum – and was allowed to walk around. Earth had been put over the floors, and men on scaffolds were painting whitewash over the mosaics of gold and lapis and marble.

He kept his thoughts to himself.

At the great doors, he met a young man who bowed to the ground. 'You are the English prince?' he asked.

Swan was seldom confounded by his own tales, but this gave him pause for a moment – and then he recognised the young man. 'Idris? Son of Omar Reis?'

The handsome young man bowed again. 'The same. I . . . owe you my life.'

Swan returned the bow. 'Well – it proved to be a fine decision on my part,' he said. 'I have a suspicion that if you'd been lying in a pool of your own blood, your father would have killed us all.'

Idris shrugged. 'Perhaps. Truth to tell, I am *not* my father's favourite.' He shrugged again. Greeks and Turks had that shrug in common. 'Come and have coffee. Tell me how I can be of service to you.'

'How is your hand?' Swan asked, all contrition.

Idris bowed. 'I can still hold a sword,' he said. 'One small finger – a small price to pay for my life.'

As they walked across the great square, Swan reflected briefly on how narrowly he and this other man had come to one killing the other – and now, under a change of circumstance, they sat together drinking tiny thimbles of hot, sweet liquid and talking about language.

'I have learned Turkish, of course, and Arabic. Italian. But the most beautiful is Persian. I write poetry in Persian.' Idris stared off into space. 'My father disapproves of my poetry writing. And my taste in friends,' he added with the frank bitterness of the young. 'I went to sea to prove to him that I am a *man*. He is such a barbarian, he thinks that the ability to ride a horse and fight with a sword defines you. But of course, I was captured.'

Swan flashed briefly on the fierce eyes – on the man parrying with his shield alone, after he'd been hit in the sword-arm. 'I'll be happy to testify to your bravery,' Swan said. 'May I have another?'

'Effendi,' murmured the Greek shopkeeper.

'I owe you too much already. How can I repay you?' asked the Turk.

Cash? A bloody great pile of ducats?

‘You could teach me Turkish,’ Swan said.

Idris made a face. ‘Perhaps,’ he said.

Next day, Swan took Peter as a guard and went to find the Jews.

They weren’t allowed to bear weapons openly, but both of them had daggers under their cloaks. Swan was sure he was followed every time they left the small inn where they were lodged in what had been the Venetian quarter. His experience in Venice had made him aware of people following him, but it was difficult here – every street was a sea of new faces; there were refugees and beggars on every corner. Still, he had an idea that the very tall, thin man he’d seen a few times was a shadow, and he tried various tricks – going down a very narrow alley he’d located in the old arcade of silversmiths, walking around by the old palace.

There was a Turkish guard on the gate of the Jewish ghetto. Swan took one look, scratched his chin, then walked back to the inn and sent a note by a beggar boy to Idris. Then he scribbled a note of his own and folded it inside Rabbi Aaron’s letter.

Idris was delighted to accompany them to the gate. He spoke a few words to the gate guard, and Swan guessed that he’d just been described as the Prince of England. He bowed, the gate guard bowed, and the three of them were allowed into the Jewish quarter.

There was damage, here – the synagogue had taken a cannonball, and Swan could see the glitter of magnificent mosaics inside. The three men stood at the entrance to the ghetto, and a pair of young men approached them.

Swan stepped forward, bowed, and asked for the house of Simon the merchant. ‘I have a letter from his brother in Venice,’ he said.

The two young men took him to Simon’s house. He was led inside, and servants bustled about. Simon was far more prosperous than his Venetian brother, the rabbi – he had a pair of Nubian slaves and half a dozen Slavic slaves, like the richest Venetians and Florentines. They were offered coffee, which was, apparently, to Turks what wine was to Italians.

Simon came, and Swan introduced himself and his two companions. He handed over the letter.

Simon bowed. ‘You will pardon me,’ he said. ‘With the siege, it is more than a year since I have heard from my brother.’ Swan saw him palm the

inner note expertly and he relaxed. Simon left them for a few minutes, and they made stilted conversation and admired the calligraphy on scrolls around the walls, all of which Idris proclaimed to be Persian.

‘Except this one,’ he said, puzzling over one particularly odd scroll. The letters were both large and violent – square, almost. And yet oddly beautiful.

‘Chinese,’ said Simon, coming back into the room. ‘I thank you very much, Messer, for your kindness to an old Jew. May I be of service?’

Swan bowed. ‘I am interested in purchasing old manuscripts – old Greek manuscripts. I collect them,’ he said. ‘Your brother suggested you might help me.’ In Hebrew, he said, ‘Do you know the house in the note?’

Simon nodded. ‘I have sent a message,’ he said. ‘I expect he will come and fetch his package in person.’

‘I have it on me,’ Swan said. In Italian, he went on, ‘My poor Hebrew doesn’t go as far – could you direct me . . . to the . . .?’

Simon smiled. He waved a hand, and one of the servants led him to the neatest and sweetest-smelling jakes he’d ever seen. There was a basin of water and a basket of towels. Swan opened the basket of towels and put Balthazar’s package inside.

Then he racked his brain for the Hebrew word for ‘towel’.

Nothing came to mind. When Simon looked at him, he gave the man a small nod and mimed washing his hands.

Not even a blink of recognition.

He wasn’t going to discuss any more business with Idris present. So they spoke at random of a dozen things, asked after the family, and the business, as if he were truly an old family friend. He heard a stir in the doorway, and then there were bows.

The man who was presented – yet another Isaac – might have been Balthazar’s second son. He was the right age, and had something of Solomon’s eager friendliness. He also appeared simultaneously too friendly and ill at ease. Idris in particular seemed to excite him, and he flattered the young Turk unmercifully.

At last, Swan managed to withdraw with many protestations of future visits. They walked out the main gate, escorted by two local men, who bowed low as they passed. The janissary saluted.

Idris laughed. ‘Franks are famous for their bigotry,’ he said. ‘And you seem to be friends with everyone.’

Swan shrugged. 'I make a habit of pulling thorns from the paws of every lion I meet,' he said.

'My father likes you,' Idris said. 'He's going to invite you to go hunting with him.'

'Should I?' Swan asked.

Idris thought for a moment. 'It would help me,' he said.

'Will your father give me a safe conduct in my own name?' Swan asked. It was a little too bold, but he wasn't sure how often he'd have access to the young Turk.

Idris smiled. 'So – that's what you want. Why? These old books?'

'What would you do, to have unlimited access to Persian manuscripts?' Swan asked.

Idris smiled. 'You are too intelligent, and I suspect you are using me. But you saved my life – you are entitled to a little use.' He inclined his head – very like his father – and his bearing reminded Swan that he was not always as clever as he thought he was. 'I will ask on your behalf.' He looked at Swan. 'Listen – promise me something.'

Swan laughed. 'Yes?'

'Promise me you aren't after this thing. This head that all the Christians want. The Sultan spoke of it today. My father has men all over the city looking for it.'

Swan looked confused, or at least, he hoped he did. 'Head?' he asked.

'Christians worship the parts of dead men,' Idris insisted. 'In their churches. Feet. Toenails. Arm bones. This is the head of the great warrior.'

'Maurice?' Swan asked. He was sweating now. It wasn't really very funny.

'Saint George.' Idris's brown eyes bored into his. 'Promise me you are not trying to steal it.'

'Because you Turks stole it first?' Swan asked. Sometimes, according to his uncles, it was best to attack.

Idris met his eye – and laughed.

Almost a week passed in which they weren't allowed out of the Venetian quarter. No reason was given, and the janissaries were polite but absolutely adamant. Swan walked to the market every day, and purchased anything that caught his fancy and that he could afford. He received notes and invites from Aaron's brother and from Balthazar's business associates. He had to

decline them – he wrote careful notes in stilted Hebrew accompanied by other notes in Italian, trying to make clear that his refusal was not his own choice.

The bishop, who had never deigned to notice him, turned after one of the messengers had gone away, and said, ‘How is it that you have friends in Constantinople? Infidel friends?’

Swan bowed. ‘Your Grace must know by now that I took young Idris prisoner in the fight on the boat,’ he said politely.

‘I know nothing of the kind. But I forbid you to have any further communication with him.’ The bishop looked at him. ‘His father is the most terrible of men – an enemy of God. The Greeks call him the son of Satan.’

Swan was about to remonstrate, but Alessandro, who was forced to spend most of his time attending the bishop, made the motion of a blade crossing his throat, which Swan took to mean he should shut his mouth.

The bishop moved on, as if, having given instructions to a servant, he had no further need to communicate. Which, as Swan considered it, was probably how the bishop viewed him.

Cesare sat back and dealt another hand of piquet. ‘If only . . .’ he said. ‘God forgive me for what I’m going to say, but if only he was an aristocrat, and not a jumped-up little Romagnol peasant.’

Swan had to laugh. ‘This from you?’

Cesare spat. ‘Bah,’ he said. ‘Now that I see you are the lost Prince of England, I no longer believe that you are a true man like me, anyway.’

Then he grinned. ‘You are the bastard of a great man. I am the bastard of some roadside tryst.’

‘I’m a better swordsman, too,’ Swan said, and Cesare aimed a swipe at him that almost connected. The four of them – Alessandro, Swan, Giannis and Cesare – fenced with sword and buckler every day. Cesare was growing better by leaps and bounds, closing the gap between his ability and Swan’s even as Swan closed in on Giannis and Giannis drew fractionally closer to the gifted Alessandro.

There was little else to do. Sometimes they fenced for three hours, drank wine and ate good bread in olive oil, and fenced again. The janissaries came and watched. And wagered.

One day Alessandro paused, buckler high, and said – quietly – ‘Can your Jews cash Bessarion’s bill? We’re running low on money.’

‘Not all Jews are moneylenders,’ Swan said. He shrugged. ‘But let me ask.’

He sent Simon a note.

The next day, Simon sent back that he would be happy to change the note for cash. And the janissaries bowed, their high hats nodding on their heads. ‘You are free to visit anywhere inside the confines of the city walls,’ said Murad, the corporal.

The bishop sent word that none of them was to leave the inn.

Alessandro waved him out. ‘I’ll explain,’ he said.

‘Tell him I’m on an errand for the cardinal,’ Swan said. ‘Listen – tell me the address and I’ll take a look at the cardinal’s house.’

Alessandro wrote it down for him.

He went to the Jewish quarter first.

Isaac met him inside the gate, and walked with him to the house of Simon. ‘Your embassy is very carefully watched,’ he said. ‘You know the Sultan is contemplating war with Venice? And the Pope?’

Swan started.

Isaac went on, ‘You Franks are the most arrogant creatures on earth. Do you think that the Sultan is fooled by Venice? He plans to take all Greece – indeed, Omar Reis, who I understand you have met, is even now raising the troops to take the Duchy of Athens and the rest of the Morea.’

Swan stopped in the narrow alley. ‘I know you mean well,’ he said, although he wasn’t sure of that at all. ‘But I am the lowest member of the embassy, and I have no idea what you are talking about. I am a mere soldier.’

Isaac frowned. ‘I am informed that you are, in fact, an agent of Cardinal Bessarion.’ He met Swan’s eye. ‘Are you here for the head of Saint George?’ he asked.

Swan felt as if he had no ground beneath his feet. He couldn’t decide how to answer this accusation. He wasn’t sure why it would be a bad thing to admit to such a status.

‘Messire, I am a poor man who performed an act of friendship for Rabbi Aaron, because he has been kind to me. He is my Hebrew teacher in Venice.’ He paused and looked at Isaac to see how this speech was going down.

‘You are the friend of young Idris, the Wolf of Thrace’s youngest son. You are, I understand, an English prince come to threaten a crusade against

Islam.’ Isaac all but snarled.

Swan laughed. ‘I am no prince of England,’ he said.

Isaac smiled for the first time. It was a very small smile, but it changed his demeanour and made him seem very much less threatening. ‘For such a young man of no apparent power, you have quite a few rumours surrounding you,’ he said. ‘But Balthazar said I should help you. At the same time, there’s so much happening here that I’m not at all sure that I *can* help you.’ He paused. ‘The Turks are ripping the city apart for the head – or so they say. It may be a pretext. Some people say the head is in Athens, and some in Corinth, and some that it is already in Rome. Some say that the Christian princes have a great army, and are luring the Sultan to his doom.’

It was obvious he had something more to say, but they had arrived at Simon’s house. Isaac bowed. ‘I will attempt to see you again. Let me say, Englishman – if you need to reach me, ask any beggar to get a message to King David.’

He nodded and walked off down the alley.

Simon received him like a visiting prince, and gave him every centime of three hundred ducats in gold.

Since it was traditional to discount a bill the further it was from its origin, Swan bowed. ‘You are a true friend.’

‘You came well recommended, and in truth, sir, I will send this bill back to my brother to be changed.’ Simon smiled. ‘I assume that you will take a packet of letters back to him?’

‘Of course,’ Swan answered. ‘If we ever leave. The Sultan seems in no hurry to receive the Pope’s ambassador.’

‘A few more days. He is preparing his armament against the Morea. He wants the campaign to begin before he receives the bishop. It is, I’m afraid, the way of the Turkish mind – to deliver an affront to Christendom while receiving Christendom’s ambassador.’ Simon shrugged. ‘Is the ambassador a man of status? Is he intelligent?’

Swan was about to answer honestly when he perceived that perhaps Simon was compromised – or perhaps, living in Constantinople, his interests were very different from Swan’s.

The world was, indeed, a very complex place. And yet, at another remove, not so very different from the world of his mother’s inn. ‘He is a famous man, in Rome,’ Swan said. ‘As for his intelligence . . .’ He shrugged. ‘He’s never said four words to me.’

Lying was best done with a tinge of truth. Uncle Dick used to say that, and it always seemed appropriate.

Simon nodded. 'A famous man, you say?' he asked.

Swan shrugged. 'Even in England, I had heard of him,' he said. Well, that was a lie. But he'd heard of Ostia.

He took the money, bowed agreeably, and escaped as soon as he could, meeting Peter at the gate.

There was a new man near the gate, an Arab in a filthy robe, whose yellow complexion and turtle-like neck would not have recommended him anywhere. His nose was large and pockmarked. His eyes were piercing and far too intelligent for the mean clothes he wore. Swan marked him with a glance, and saw him again, six streets away, emerging from an alley.

Swan walked for an hour, and the yellow-faced man was always there – not every time he glanced, but often enough that, although Swan walked past the cardinal's house, and noted it well, he didn't pause. Peter looked at him, and he smiled. They didn't ask directions – all those hours learning the streets with Rabbi Aaron had had their effect – and eventually they walked past another church, and Swan made a show of being bored. In truth, he was hot and tired – the Jewish quarter was a mile from the Venetian quarter, near the Philadeption at the foot of Third Hill. And Bessarion's house was in the palace quarter, the oldest part of the city east of the Hippodrome by the Bucoleon Palace. The area was swarming with Turkish soldiers – filthy ghazis, magnificent cavalymen, janissaries as proud as Lucifer, who were magnificently accoutred in mail, plate brigantines, yellow leather boots and tall felt hats, and yet reminded him of the English archers he'd served with in France.

The cardinal's house was like a tall palazzo, the portico decorated with original Greek columns from one of the ancient temples, and the windows edged in marble. A man's head was at one of the windows, but when Swan's apparently casual glance swept the building a second time, the man's head was gone.

They walked home.

The moment they turned south, the yellow-faced man was no longer with them. But now Swan saw the tall, thin man from the first days – first waiting ahead of them in the street by the Hippodrome, and then watching them pass, and finally, trailing along behind them all the way to the gates of the Venetian quarter.

He breathed a sigh of relief as they entered the Venetian area.

Peter looked at him. 'Trouble?' he asked.

'We are in over our heads,' Swan said.

'More than usual?' Peter asked.

'I don't even know what the game is, much less the stakes,' Swan said.

He told Peter the whole of it, down to Isaac's comments.

Peter picked his teeth contemplatively. 'It's always better to be thought a prince than a beggar,' he said.

Swan nodded. 'I know.'

'But you told him you were a mere soldier.'

Swan laughed. 'If you were a visiting nobleman in disguise, what would you say?' he asked.

Peter shook his head. 'I'm better putting arrows in things,' he said. 'Intrigue makes my head hurt.'

Swan stood on the sea wall and looked across the Horn at Galata. 'Somewhere in all of this is a way to make money,' he said. 'I just have to find the right string, and pull.' He grinned at Peter. 'I doubt it's a bowstring.'

Peter shrugged, and continued picking his teeth. 'Don't go getting us killed,' he said. 'Master,' he added, as an afterthought.

The next day, Idris sent a note inviting Swan to drink sherbet and ride.

Swan met the young Turkish aristocrat at the gate to the Venetian quarter. 'No Frank can ride a horse in the city,' Idris said, as if it was a matter of no moment. He leaned over and handed Swan a bag of carefully woven wool – the bag itself was beautiful. 'Go and change,' he said. Behind him were a dozen other Turks. 'Friends. We'll wait.' He grinned.

Swan didn't need to be told twice. He stepped back into the Venetian quarter and laid out the foreign garments – baggy trousers of cotton, a doublet very like a European doublet, but buttoned, not laced, and a middle-length coat like a jupon. He knew that this was called a *kaftan*, as he'd enquired. This one was of a rich blue wool, embroidered with flowers, and with buttons of solid silver, shaped like pomegranates. There was a felt skullcap and a turban.

Alessandro came in while he was changing. He wasn't attempting to hide, and a number of them shared a room. Alessandro looked at him.

'It is against the law for a European to dress as a Turk,' he said.

‘Idris will see me out of any trouble with the law,’ Swan said.

Alessandro made a face. ‘You are the only one of us getting anything done,’ he admitted. ‘See if you can keep the costume when your outing is over.’ He pinned the skullcap against Swan’s head with a dextrous finger and began to wind his turban.

‘These were all the rage in Venice when I was a boy,’ he said.

The stirrups were short, the saddle virtually non-existent, and the other Turks laughed at his attempt to lengthen the leathers. A servant – a Turkish servant – slapped his hand away and motioned for him to mount, and he did, vaulting into the saddle because the stirrup was so high above him he couldn’t dream of getting a foot into it.

Once he was up, the servant tucked his booted feet into the very light stirrups.

Idris pulled up next to him. ‘I have ridden on one of your knight’s horses,’ he said. ‘It is like riding in a sedan chair. With us, you must actually ride the horse.’

Swan was not a great rider – life in London offered little scope for riding, and his periodic time with his father hadn’t offered him any more than a cursory education. The small saddle made him uncomfortable, and he almost missed the ride out of the city, he was so focused on staying on the horse. The Turks were all superb horsemen, and they galloped, cantered, walked and trotted, changing gaits to suit the length of the street and the thickness of the crowd.

On the other hand, the Arab mare he was riding was, without a doubt, the best horse anyone had ever put him up on. The horse was small by European standards – like a lady’s riding horse – but she seemed to carry him without effort, and she flowed along under his inexperienced seat without offering any protest. At one point, on a long straight stretch just before the Belgrade Gate, when the other young men were galloping and an old beggar stepped into the road, she pivoted neatly under him and then – it seemed to him – rolled her own hindquarters to keep him in the saddle.

By the time they had crossed the great walls, heading for the farm country to the west, he was in love, and although there was no one to tell him so, he was riding better than he’d ever ridden in his life. And enjoying it.

Idris was laughing with his friends, and servants met them – a pair of carts with a dozen hawks and two more young men. But after they had reined up and let the carts join them, Idris came back down the cavalcade to Swan. ‘Do you like her?’ he said, pointing with his jewelled crop at the mare.

‘I love her, Idris. She is . . . superb.’ Swan grinned.

Idris grinned back. ‘You English are so honest!’ he said. ‘You are like Turks. You think a thing – you say it. Venetians never tell me this horse is wonderful. They are always cautious.’ He looked at the horse. ‘To us, her colour is not so good. That golden coat – we call it yellow – is . . .’ He shrugged. ‘But she is among the smartest of my horses.’ He leaned over. ‘I beg you to accept her.’ He frowned. ‘Or anything else you see that you want.’

Swan laughed. *If only you knew*, he thought. ‘I love the kaftan,’ he said.

Idris nodded. ‘All that is yours. You cannot ride without it. Indeed, all of your guards know now that we are friends. If you are found in these clothes . . .’ He smiled again. ‘Call for me.’

‘You are very like a prince, I find,’ Swan said.

Idris shook his head. ‘Now you sound like a Venetian,’ he said. ‘Flatterer. Listen – of all my friends, none speaks Italian. So none of these men can speak with you, but all know that you saved my life.’ The other young men bowed from their saddles or saluted with their riding whips as they were introduced – a long string of Turkish names that even Swan had trouble understanding, much less remembering.

Swan’s training as a royal page came in handy. He understood – intimately – that Idris was the great man here, and that he couldn’t monopolise him. So he bowed to the various Suleymans, Murids and Bazayets, and smiled at all of them, and occupied himself riding.

Idris rode superbly, of course. He took a hawk on his wrist and offered another to Swan, who had to profess complete ignorance.

‘Another time I’ll teach you,’ he said. He looked grave. ‘See you at lunch.’

And he was off. He loosed his bird at a series of ground targets, and Swan felt this was vaguely at odds with English practice, but then the prince sent his largest bird into the air after something that was a speck above them, and then the whole cavalcade galloped away across the fields of the Greek farms that ringed the fallen city.

Swan reined his little mare in and stayed with the carts. He noted that the two men who'd joined with the carts – also obviously gentlemen, in that they had rich kaftans and jewels in their turbans – both stayed with the wagons. The nearer young man – a boy, really – flashed a smile at him, and he bowed in the saddle. His mare misinterpreted the shift in his weight forward and went directly to a gallop, stretching away over the fields to the south, towards the sea.

It might have been exhilarating, except that, at the very moment when the horse exploded into motion, Swan's foot slipped out of his left stirrup. He sat down, hard, and tried with increasing panic to find the stirrup under his left foot. The little mare turned in a very tight circle to the left, and suddenly he hit the ground.

He lay there and his shoulder hurt. And he felt like a fool. His mare came and stood by him.

After a moment, he heard hoof-beats, and suddenly one of the boys was there. He dismounted from a dead gallop, actually running alongside his horse for two or three paces, and flung himself down by Swan.

'Are you alive?' the Turk asked in a lilting Italian.

Swan looked up into the Turk's eyes.

Eyes with smudges of kohl around the thick lashes. Wide-set, deep brown eyes above a slender, arching nose and a heavy, sensual mouth.

'You are *not* a boy,' Swan said. 'Oh, my neck hurts.'

She laughed good-naturedly. 'How . . . kind of you to notice,' she said. 'Are you unbroken?'

He sat up.

The second *boy* was riding towards them. 'It is – how do you Italians say this? A *polite fiction* that I am a boy today. Yes?'

Swan rotated his head from side to side. 'A fiction I will endeavour to maintain, demoiselle,' he said gallantly. Her very palpable presence at his side – her hand on his arm – reminded him that he hadn't talked to a woman in two weeks. The siege had emptied the great city of women – there weren't even prostitutes in the Venetian quarter.

She put a strong hand in his hand and hauled him to his feet. His horse was two steps away, and he mounted as efficiently as he could manage. He knew he looked like a fool to the Turks. He couldn't help it.

'My brother has given you this mare?' she said.

'Khatun Bengül!' shouted the second 'boy'. In Arabic.

‘Shush!’ the Turkish woman said. ‘I am Salim.’

‘You *touched* him.’

‘He was on the ground and needed help.’

‘And now he knows you are a woman!’

‘You shouted my name across the world!’

‘He is a Frank. They are as stupid as cattle.’ The second woman was ten years older than Khatun Bengül, and several inches shorter. Under her mantle and turban, Swan judged her to be every bit as attractive, with beautiful eyes and high cheeks. Khatun Bengül, however, had a translucent skin that Swan had seldom seen – hers was the colour of oak newly split – not white, but like slightly aged ivory – and her brows were black and strong.

He was staring.

‘Now he will be besotted with you, you little witch.’ The older woman laughed.

‘He does not seem very stupid, Auntie,’ Khatun Bengül said.

‘Bah – all Franks are stupid. I’ve owned dozens. Look at him. He can’t even ride properly.’ The older woman gave him the once-over. ‘Handsome, though. Look at those lips.’

The two women tittered together.

Swan, who had laboured for months at Arabic, had a sudden love for the language that no amount of Rabbi Aaron’s teaching could ever give him.

‘I like his hands,’ Khatun Bengül said.

‘Perhaps we might ride back to the carts?’ Swan said in Italian.

Khatun Bengül nodded.

‘But he rides like a sack of camel shit. Really. What do they teach Frankish boys?’ Auntie asked.

The falconers returned an hour later, and they ate a sumptuous picnic of mutton with a dozen sweet things and some spices that Swan loved, and chicken. They all drank an odd, salty drink that Swan disliked at first taste, but grew used to with practice.

‘What is it?’ he asked Idris.

‘The drink?’ Idris asked. ‘It’s just . . . milk. Hmm. And some salt and spice and water.’ He shrugged. ‘There’s a word I don’t know in Italian. When milk . . . isn’t milk any more.’

‘Cheese?’ Swan asked.

Idris shook his head.

After lunch, the falconing party rode off again, leaving Swan with the servants. He didn't mind – he rode his mare into the fields, going more slowly then faster, changing gaits – learning to ride.

He was resting, drinking more of the salty drink from a glass bottle provided by a servant, when he heard the auntie shriek.

'You cannot, you hussy. Your father would burst himself. He'll gut me – and you.'

Khatun Bengül – if that was her name – appeared around the wagon, riding as if she was a satyress – the image came quite spontaneously to Swan. There was something erotic in the way she rode.

'You do not fly the falcons?' she said in her curious and, to him, very beautiful Italian.

'I do not know falconry,' he said, smiling his most ingratiating smile.

'I could teach you a little,' she said. 'We are not . . . expected to gallop over fields. But I was going to fly my birds.'

Her aunt rode around the side of the wagon.

'Look at him – he knows you are a woman. It's written all over him,' said Auntie, in Arabic. 'Listen, my little filly. I was young once, too.'

'You are a coarse old woman,' Khatun Bengül spat. 'I want to teach him to fly a bird.'

Auntie said something in Turkish.

Khatun Bengül flushed.

Swan would have given a year of his life to know what had been said. He turned the sounds over in his head – one of his special skills, and the reason he could learn languages so very fast. As fast as the two women could spit at each other, he processed the syllables. He had no idea what they meant. But he would.

Auntie seemed to be backing down.

'If you would care to ride with us,' Khatun Bengül said, 'my auntie will keep a very careful watch on us.' She spat the words.

'Don't think I can't understand when you talk love words to the dirty Frank,' said the auntie.

Khatun Bengül flushed red. 'This is Italian,' she said. 'Nothing to do with love.'

However, despite their inauspicious beginning, the next hour was a pleasure. Khatun Bengül flew her two small birds with expertise, gossiping in Arabic and Turkish with her aunt on the one hand and coaching Swan to

fly a gyrfalcon on the other in Italian. And when the gyrfalcon, tired of his inept hand motions, bated, and then slipped his jesses and flew into an oak tree, the women laughed, and Swan laughed, and when he dismounted, stripped out of his kaftan and climbed the tree, successfully retrieving the bird, the two women clapped their hands together as if he were a conjuror.

‘He really is handsome,’ Auntie said. ‘Pity he isn’t a slave.’

That took the wind out of Swan’s sails. Auntie was looking at him with the sort of appraisal with which older women had been examining him since he had turned fourteen, and ordinarily he’d have arranged . . .

But he couldn’t take his eyes off Khatun Bengül.

Perhaps fortunately for all of them, Idris returned shortly after the adventure of the gyrfalcon and the tree.

He clapped Swan on the back. ‘I see you have learned the first lesson of falconry – how to retrieve a lost bird,’ he said. ‘You have done this before?’

‘One of the boys is teaching me,’ Swan said.

Idris laughed and slapped his thigh. ‘My father will indeed have us all killed,’ he laughed. ‘You know she’s my sister, eh?’

Swan sighed. ‘Yes,’ he admitted.

‘And a force of nature,’ Idris acknowledged. They had turned their horses towards home. Most of the Turks had mounted a second horse.

‘She was very . . . courteous to me,’ Swan said.

Idris laughed, his head thrown back. ‘She makes boys bark at the moon,’ he said. ‘Ah, my Englishman. Do not cast languishing glances on my sister. She spits on the men who worship her.’ He took a flask out of his kaftan, drank, and handed it to Swan, who drank. Greek wine – sweet and strong.

‘All the good Persian poets were drunks,’ Idris said. ‘I’m working on it.’ He smiled. ‘Of course, Holy Koran forbids it. Or so my imam insists.’

Later, after they had passed the Belgrade Gate, Idris said, ‘Listen – I owe you my life, but you must never mention that my sister was here today. When I saw her . . . never mind.’

‘I will swear,’ Swan promised.

‘It’s a hard life for her,’ Idris said. ‘In Thrace, when my father is commanding an army, she rides like a man – shoots a bow, sleeps on the ground. It is how we were raised. My mother – she was a tribal woman, you know?’

Swan didn’t know, but he nodded.

‘Owned her own horses. Owns farms in Anatolia. So we were raised to the saddle. And in this cursed city, poor Khatun Bengül must pretend to be a good girl, a nice girl who stays at home and has slaves take money to the poor, who never shows her face, who never rides a horse.’ Idris shrugged. ‘We don’t always get along.’

Khatun Bengül leaned in from Swan’s other side. ‘He uses me to protect him from Father,’ she said.

Swan looked at her. When he breathed in, he tasted her scent over the smell of flowers and grass and horse.

‘She uses me to protect her from Father, too,’ Idris said.

‘I *am* a nice girl,’ Khatun Bengül protested. ‘I just like to ride.’ She shrugged. ‘And I can do anything a man can do. Better. Men are all fools.’ She tossed her head.

Behind them, all of Idris’s friends were watching her.

Swan took a deep, steadying breath. ‘Yes,’ he admitted. ‘Every one of us.’

‘Sufia will be in our stables – but available for you at any hour,’ Idris said. They rode past the great aqueduct, through the forum of Constantine, and past the north end of the Hippodrome to the great houses beyond Hagia Sophia.

Swan breathed a sigh of relief when his horse was not stabled in the great cathedral. Sacrilege had its limits.

They rode into the palace quarter and dismounted in the courtyard of a fine square of buildings. Workmen were facing the front of the stables with beautiful fired tiles in a rich blue with the trailing cursive of Persian script. Less than a hundred paces away, a tall minaret was being built on to a low Byzantine church.

Swan handed his horse to a pair of slaves. He put a hand familiarly on Idris’s arm. ‘You have your friends,’ he said. ‘I should go.’

Idris bowed. ‘You are a good guest. Will you come riding again?’

Swan smiled. ‘My lord, the bishop will probably give birth to a cow when he hears that I spent the day with infidels.’

Idris laughed. ‘Tell him my father will have his guts ripped out of his fat stomach if he stops you.’

Idris meant these words as a joke, but they chilled Swan.

Idris leaned closer. 'Listen – you know this is all a sham? Don't you? In the spring, my father will lead an army into the Morea and we will take everything Venice has. It's not even a secret.'

Swan struggled to maintain his composure.

'Don't let it come between us,' Idris said. He smiled. 'I treasure you. Come ride with me again tomorrow.'

Swan bowed low. 'I'll try.'

He was pleased when several of Idris's friends offered him casual salutes. As if he was a person. Others remained studiously aloof.

He turned and crossed the courtyard. But Auntie blocked his route with her pony. She smiled at him.

He smiled back at her. It was his habit to smile at any pretty woman who smiled at him.

'She'd like to have you in her bed,' Khatun Bengül said. 'But she doesn't know how to ask.'

Swan, seldom at a loss for words, had none for this situation.

Khatun Bengül laughed. 'You flush like a girl,' she said. 'Will you come and fly a bird with us another time?'

Swan bowed. 'Perhaps, if my duties allow. The company was . . . divine.'

'Divine?' Khatun Bengül giggled. 'Now, from one of these young men, that would be blasphemy.'

Swan wasn't sure whether he'd scored or not. So he smiled, bowed again, and walked out the gate.

Despite feeling utterly smitten, he walked straight into the alley that separated Omar Reis's palazzo from the next magnificent structure and walked south. He was disappointed that his sense of direction had failed him – he didn't emerge into the street on which Bessarion's house was situated. He looked behind him, and at the cross-street. He didn't see any sign of Yellow Face or Tall Man, as he had christened them.

So he followed the next alley south.

There was Bessarion's house. It rose three stories above the street, and was surrounded by a high wall. There were outbuildings – a stable, a slave or servant quarters, and perhaps a workshop.

He walked all the way around the compound. The gates were locked. There were beggars living in the arch of the front gate.

He paused.

‘Effendi!’ said one woman. ‘Do not harm us!’

‘Do you speak Greek?’ he asked in that language.

All of their faces brightened. There were four of them – filthy, but well enough fed, he imagined.

‘Whose house is this?’ he asked.

The old woman shrugged. ‘Some dead Frank,’ she said.

‘No infidel lives here?’ he asked.

They looked fearful.

‘Has a Turk taken the house?’ he insisted. He was dressed as a Turk – the word *infidel* could go either way.

‘None yet in this street,’ the old woman said.

She was obviously concealing something.

He dug into his kaftan and produced a silver byzant of some value or other – the Turks hadn’t produced a coinage yet, and Byzantine coins were notoriously debased. But it must have some value.

He tossed it to the old woman. ‘How can I get in?’ he asked.

She looked at the coin.

‘I can come back with janissaries,’ he said.

She looked terrified. ‘Effendi – we live in this gate.’

‘You may continue, for all I care,’ he said.

‘We know how to open the gate,’ she said.

He produced another coin.

But it was all taking too long. And it was late afternoon, and the Turks were hurrying to the little mosque for prayers, and suddenly the once-empty street was full.

‘Perhaps another day,’ he said, turned on his heel, and walked away.

Something felt wrong. He didn’t know what, but something felt wrong.

He walked all the way to the Venetian quarter. He was afraid that he’d be stopped because of his Turkish dress, but no one stopped him. In fact, a janissary in the street saluted him.

It was almost dark by the time he reached the Venetian Quarter.

He sat in a tavern with Giannis, Alessandro and Cesare, and related the events of the day. He left Khatun Bengül out of it.

When he spoke of the spring campaign against Venice, Alessandro swore.

‘I heard the same from some of the Jews,’ Swan said.

Alessandro shook his head. 'Foscari is so focused on the war in Italy, he's forgotten the Turks and how perfidious they are.'

Giannis agreed.

Swan took a drink of wine. 'They seem . . . fairly straightforward to me.' He wanted to say '*compared to Italians*' but he knew the audience was wrong.

Alessandro sighed. 'If only the bishop were not a complete fool,' he said. 'I feel I cannot share this with him.'

Giannis scratched at his hairline. 'I could perhaps rent a boat. Go to Galata, and inform Ser Marco.' He shrugged. 'But I couldn't come back.'

'Surely they know?' asked Swan.

'Let me speak on behalf of my beloved Signoria,' Alessandro said. 'We are a nation of sea merchants, most of whom would sell their mothers as whores to make a profit. Money, and the search for money, has its own blindness. And its own pitiable lack of scruple. If a Venetian thinks he can make a profit . . .' He shook his head. 'Perhaps some know, but conceal the knowledge. Perhaps others close their minds to the news.' He shrugged. 'Perhaps it is inconvenient,' he said.

Giannis spat carefully. 'In the Morea, we say that the difference between a Turk and a Venetian is that at least the Turk believes in something,' he said.

'Blessed Virgin,' Swan said.

'You must go,' Alessandro said. 'I cannot – my absence would be obvious. Swan would be missed by his Turkish friends, and so far, he's the only one of us to see the cardinal's house.'

Giannis finished his wine. 'I'll be in Galata before the sun rises,' he said.

'It's after curfew!' Alessandro said.

'Give me your Turkish clothes,' Giannis said.

Swan thought for a moment. 'I love that kaftan,' he said, but Giannis, who hated everything Turkish, assumed he was kidding.

At nightfall, the janissary at the gate sent for Swan. When he presented himself, the janissary bowed, and handed him an ornate parchment. A firman. A pass, signed in Persian script, for Thomas Swan, Prince of Britain.

At daybreak, an African servant handed a note into the Venetian quarter asking Swan to come for a ride in the countryside. The note was unsigned. On the back, in neat Italian, it said, 'Come in secret.' Swan smiled to himself.

'Cover me with the bishop?' he asked Alessandro.

Alessandro nodded. 'If I didn't know better, I'd say there was a woman involved.'

Swan wondered how it was that this foppish Italian could read his mind. 'No,' he said, lying.

However, being besotted with Khatun Bengül, whose deep brown-black eyes had occurred in every dream he could remember from the night before, didn't prevent Swan from leaving the Venetian quarter with all the care his youth had taught him.

First, he no longer had Turkish clothes.

Secondly, he didn't want his watchers – Yellow Face and Tall Man – to see him at Idris's palazzo. Once they had followed him there, they would watch the place.

It was early. He was in European clothes, and he took a dagger under his doublet. Then, before the side streets were full of vegetable stalls, he climbed up on the wall that separated the Venetian quarter from the Amalfian quarter, and without too much thought, jumped down inside. He walked across the Amalfian quarter, drew some cautious stares, and duplicated his efforts, jumping on to an awning in the Pisan quarter and receiving a torrent of abuse from a young man with a Florentine accent. He mollified the man by buying an apple.

The Pisans, as he'd noticed a few days before, had a tower by their gate. He climbed the tower – empty at this hour – and looked down into the busy square outside the European quarter.

He didn't recognise anyone outside the gate.

He passed the Pisan sentry without being challenged, and walked rapidly towards the Hippodrome. He passed the Severan Wall at the first gate and breathed a sigh of relief. The two janissaries at the gate looked at him carefully, but let him go.

East of the wall, he followed the broad main thoroughfare towards the magnificent bulk of Hagia Sophia. He couldn't see whether he was followed, but the great avenue was packed with early morning traffic to the market north of the Hippodrome, and he slipped from cart to cart, trying to

be both invisible and normal. He was the only man on the street in European dress. But he didn't regret it – he didn't believe he wore the Turkish dress well enough, and didn't want to give anyone an excuse to arrest him.

His intention was simple – to use Idris's morning ride to cover a visit to Bessarion's palazzo. The groundwork was laid – he had a dagger and a purse with twenty ducats to buy the co-operation of whomever he found on the premises.

And he was going to see Khatun Bengül. He was sure of it. He hoped . . . well, it seemed possible she'd sent the note. Idris, after all, came in person.

A regiment of janissaries was forming on the open ground south of the Hippodrome, as well as sipahis – the elite cavalry of the Ottomans. He was pleased to note that few of the sipahis had a horse as pretty as his mare. He thought of her as his own.

He made his way through the crowd, feeling safer, and walked south around the cathedral and the Patriarchate to come on Omar Reis's palazzo from the east for safety.

He was as cautious as youth and love could make him. But he didn't see the two faces he dreaded – nor would he have said that he'd spotted any figure, Turkish or Greek, out of place, or two places well separated in time.

The great gate of Omar Reis's palazzo was shut, but as he approached, he saw the African from the sunrise visit beckon from a postern gate. He walked along the wall, took one last look over his shoulder, and ducked through the iron-studded door.

Something heavy struck his head, and he was . . .

He came to with a soft hand over his mouth.

'You hit him too hard,' said a firm voice in Arabic.

'No, mistress,' said another voice.

A woman's hand ran down his shoulder to his arm, and then his chest, which was bare.

'What a fine slave he will make,' said Auntie.

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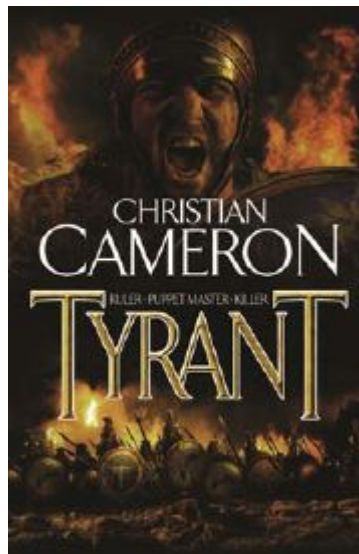
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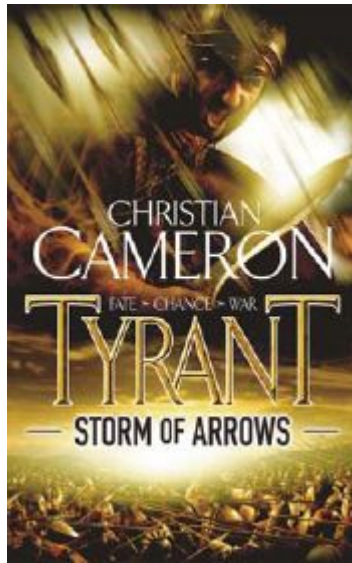
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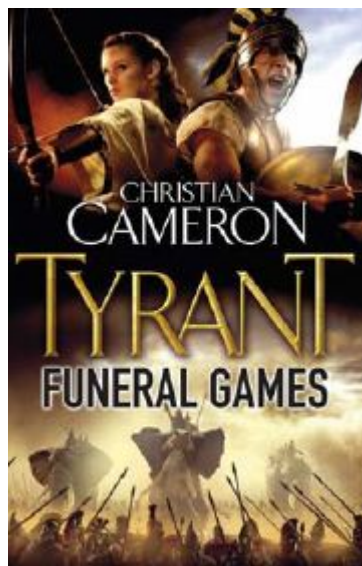
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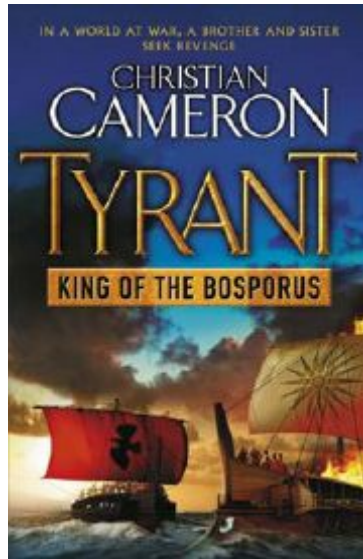
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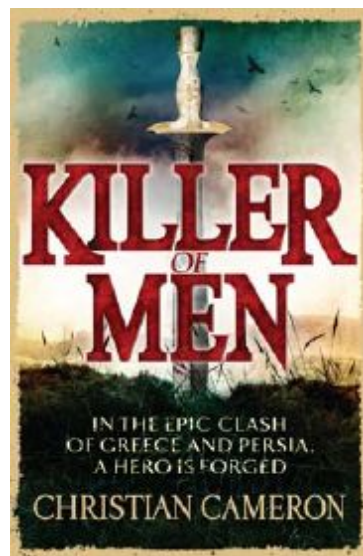
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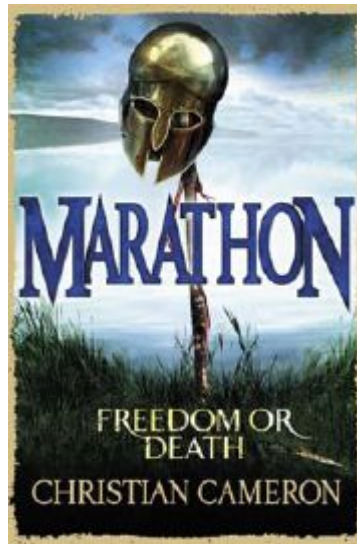
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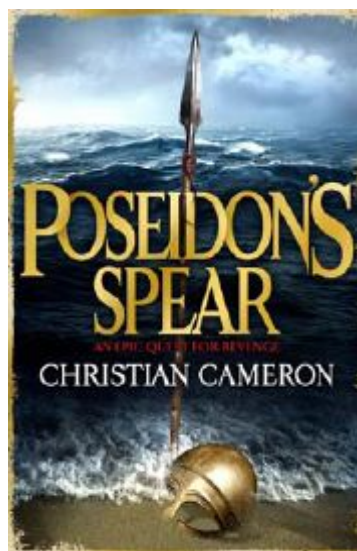
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