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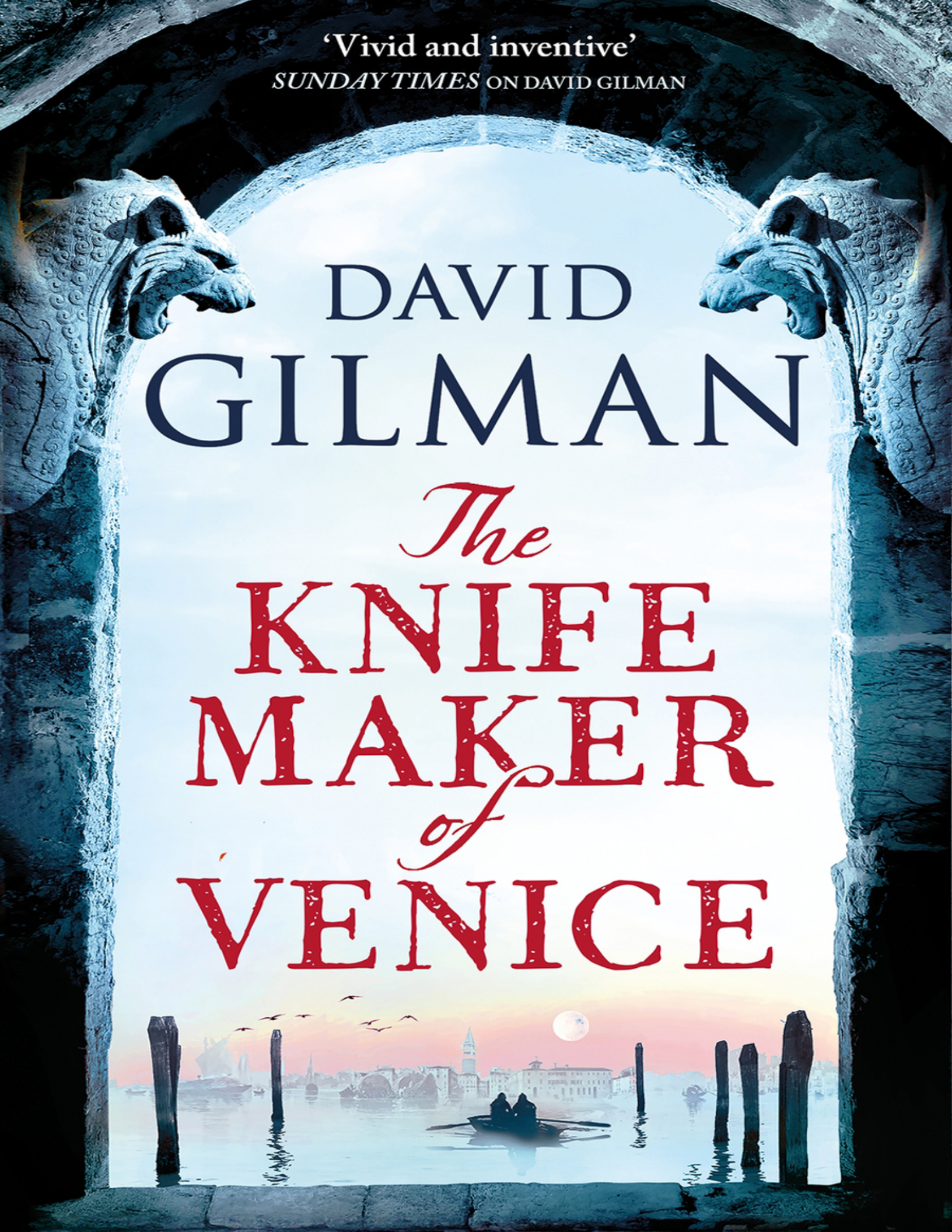
The KNIFE MAKER of VENICE



The KNIFE MAKER *of* VENICE

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CHARACTER LIST

The English
Richard Sheriff: blacksmith
Elizabeth Sheriff: housekeeper
Joshua Conway: Totnes forge owner
Tom: bellows boy
Agnes Cleve: condemned woman
Thomas Henning: Devon merchant
Mrs Henning: his wife
Anne Henning: his daughter
Martin Waterman: ferryman
Widow Harris: landlady
John Challenor: *Falcon*'s captain
Mr Chesney: *Falcon*'s bosun
Mr Pewsey: *Falcon*'s bosun's mate
Willoughby: *Falcon*'s master gunner
Finn: *Falcon*'s sailor
Gabriel Pryor: Puritan
Grace Pryor: his wife
Mercy Pryor: his daughter
Thomas Carey: shipwright
Peter Hoskins: shipwright
William Burghley: tanner
Alice Burghley: seamstress
Christopher Dilwyn: ropemaker
John Cuddy: sawyer
Anne Dulcie: lacemaker
Thomas Gilchrist: shipwright
Zelina Gilchrist: his wife, farm labourer
Frances Tett: fisherman
Goldwin Hughes: tailor

Elaine Ross: fish seller
Eveleen May: glover
Ancilla May: apprentice glover

(*Sir Richard Hawkins: Vice Admiral, Devon)
(*Sir Edward Seymour: Devon landowner)

The Ottoman Turks
Mehmet Artan: Janissary captain
*Redwan: Pasha of Algiers
*Uthmân Dey: Tunisian ruler
Margos Azarian: Armenian slave trader
Yûsuf Bey: Turkish leader, Venice
Ibn al-Jarir: Arab physician
Abdülhamid Hekim: Turkish physician
Safiye: nurse/attendant
Meryem: nurse/attendant

The Venetians
Nobildonna Chiara di Zorzi: patrician slave owner
Nobiluomo Francesco Falconi: patrician
Elias Jordan: Chiara di Zorzi's maggiordomo
Lucia: Chiara di Zorzi's personal servant
Antonio Vieri: master knife maker
Domenico: his grandson
Marietta: workshop child at Vieri's forge
Jacopo: bellows boy at Vieri's forge
Giustina: Venetian widow
Don Marco Barozzi: parish priest
La Ninetta: courtesan
Massimo Marasini: galley slave
Andrea Cassola: galley slave
Leonora Alioni: housekeeper in Challenor's household
Bettina Briani: laundry girl in Challenor's household
Isabella Franco: seamstress in Challenor's household
Naira Petrosian: personal servant in Challenor's household

Lazaro Navagero: guard in Challenor's household
Rocco Basegio: guard in Challenor's household
Maria: cook in Challenor's household
Caterina: kitchen girl in Challenor's household
Gasparo Rossi: butcher
Pietro: butcher
Maddalena: prostitute
Giovanni Caratelli: killer
Piero Vettore (Russo): killer
Tommaso Cavazza: killer

The Germans
Stefan: master stonemason
Marco: stonemason
Gregor: stonemason

(All characters are fictional except for those marked *)

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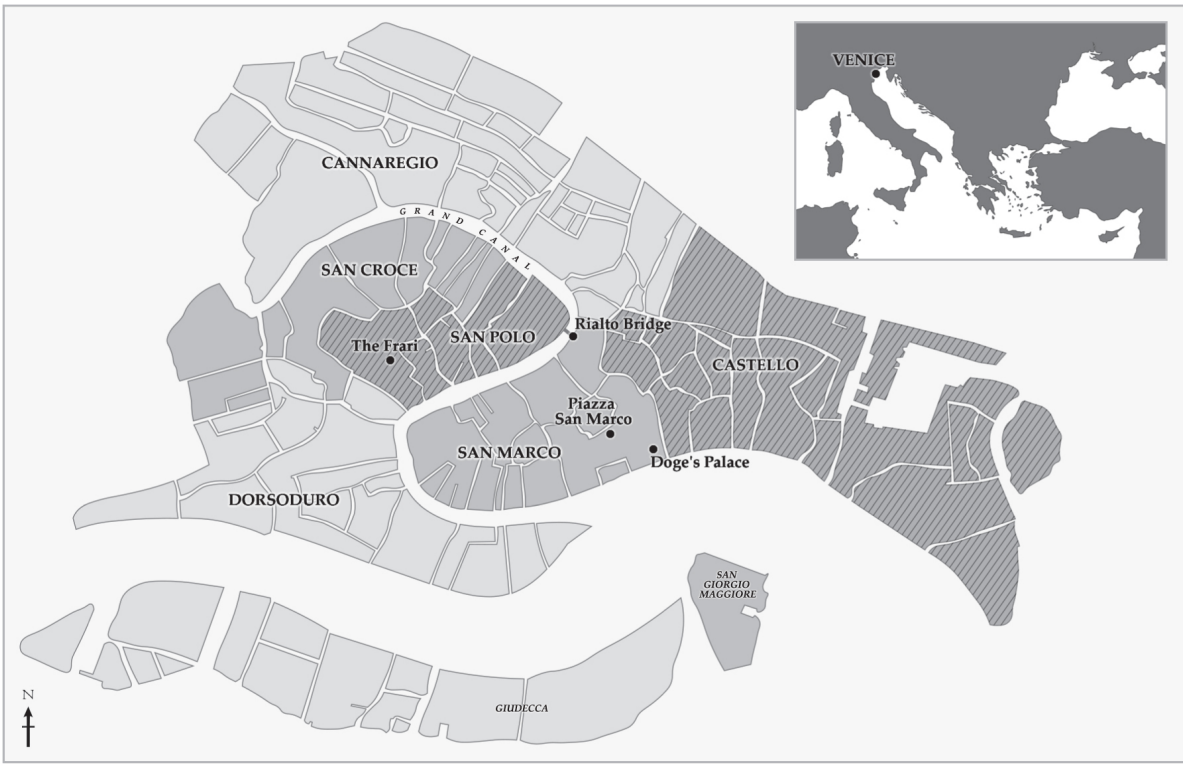
1604

RICHARD'S JOURNEY TO VENICE



1604

VENICE



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PROLOGUE

MARCH 1594

North Atlantic

The Terror Roared out of the night. White-tipped mountainous seas overwhelming the black horizon, tearing sailors from decks and ripping iron-hard sails from their masts. The *White Dove,* one hundred tons, thirty-four crew and a cabin boy, was struck broadside. Hurled into the trough's maw and almost overwhelmed by the breaking water, the valiant ship attempted to right itself and claw up the face of the wave, although its helmsman had already been swept into the icy depths. Timber splintered. The ship's death throes vibrated through the desperate survivors clinging to life with silent determination. Men of the sea did not cry out at their misfortune.

The storm struck eight days after the ships sailed from Dartmouth on the English south coast. *White Dove* and twenty-eight others had departed for the forty days' windward journey to the Newfoundland fishing grounds, to return in August with their abundance of salted cod. Richard Sheriff, cabin boy and son to a fisherman father, wedged between fallen spars and tangled ropes that had saved him from being sucked overboard, screamed as the sharp talons of fear hooked into his mind.

The ten-year-old had seen winter storms at home, tossing waves high on the cliff face and the castle at the mouth of the River Dart. A sea monster hurling its way skywards. He had begged his father to leave him ashore. Embarrassed him in front of the men gathered at the tavern. *Let me stay with my sister,* he had pleaded. Elizabeth, four years his senior, was now in

service at the merchant's house at the top of town. *The sea is the mother you never knew,* his father had told him. *She will rock you to sleep with her gentleness, but we must hope she never scolds you.*

He did not want the sea to be his mother, he insisted. The men around him laughed but his father's voice was stern. They would sail for Newfoundland.

And now here he was: soaked and frozen from the brittle, cold Atlantic, surrounded by hundreds of rats swarming onto any solid surface, spray stinging his face. The ship was dying beneath his feet. Sobbing with terror, he squinted at his father crawling crab-like towards him, fighting the pull of the sinking ship.

His father, bloodied, head cut, arm gashed, untangled him. Shouted above the wind's roar: he must survive. Then the boy saw the rolling white water tumble from the foredeck. Heard the ship's back breaking. He felt his father's strong arms embrace him, his bearded face close to his. His last words bellowed against the howling wind. *Live, boy! Care for Beth! Protect her!* They rolled, pounded through the tumult. The ship was going down. A wave tore them apart. He choked. Kicked hard. Not knowing up from down. Blind. Finding strength he had never known, gasping, he broke the surface amid the flotsam, cresting an immense wave. He clung to splintered wood, sweeping aside ship's rats. He raised a desperate arm at another ship, one that had turned, its damaged sails flapping, and was rescued.

The wild night exhausted itself hours later. The ship limped back to port, bearing the only crew member saved that night from the *White Dove*. Richard Sheriff swore never again to give the sleeping monster lurking below the surface the chance to drag him down into its savage maw.

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PART ONE

PURSUIT

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Chapter 1

February 1604

Totnes Town ForgeDevonshire

The Water Boiled, hissing its resistance to the heated metal plunged into it. Outside the forge's warmth a cold dawn eased into the sky, ghosting the River Dart in early mist. Richard Sheriff pulled the forged blade free from the water trough under the watchful eye of Joshua Conway, fifty years old, owner and master of the town forge.

'Aye, good enough, now scrape it, lad, get that scale off the metal,' said Conway. 'It's a working man's knife you're forging there. Right now it's brittle, so what do we do next?'

'We temper it, Master Conway.'

The blacksmith made no reply. He had cared for Richard Sheriff since he was orphaned. Given him a trade. Taught him step by step to work metal: pitchfork tines, ploughshares, boat hooks and chains. Watched as the lad's skill had grown so that he could finesse horse bosses intricate enough to please the local landowner for his prized mounts. Now the lad was being taught how to forge a working man's knife. Durable, wooden handle, a decent tempered blade for farm labourer and fisherman. And if the apprentice could master the skill, that would free Conway to undertake other work to give the forge extra income. God knows they needed it. These days spent teaching his apprentice to make a knife were worth the patience required.

A child, only eight or nine years old, stood ready at the firepit. Richard nodded at the bellows boy. 'Tom, not too much heat. Give it a steady blow.

Watch the colour of the coals – when they turn bright orange then ease off.'

Richard gripped the cooled blade with tongs and eased it into the coals. The gradual heating of the blade allowed the cutting edge to stay harder than the spine. The bellows boy's face was a study in concentration, eager to please. Richard gave him an encouraging smile.

'We're learning together, Tom. Watch the dance. Don't let the flames get too high.'

As the child pulled down on the bellows bar, increasing the coals' glow, Conway stood on the other side of the firepit. 'Get the heat up slowly, Richard.' There had been mistakes in the past. A blade that turned blue in the heat was over-tempered and would have to be rehardened and the entire process started again. That was a costly error in time and fuel.

Richard worked the blade into the firepit, waiting until the coals changed the blade's edge to a light straw colour. 'Steady, Tom,' Richard warned the child. 'A little more now.'

The flames remained constant. A purple hue tinged the blade's spine as Conway stepped away and eased closed the forge's door. The breeze had picked up from downriver. Even a slight increase from a draught could affect the heat in the coals. Joshua Conway had a lifetime of experience and made Richard temper the blades before dawn when the air was at its stillest.

Satisfied that he had achieved the right colour, Richard pulled the metal free of the firepit and laid it on the anvil. Conway always insisted that no blade to be tempered should be quenched when it came from the fire, but left to cool in the air. Then the colour along the edge could be checked. Richard raised his head, his concentration momentarily broken. He sought affirmation with a glance at Conway, who nodded. His apprentice was always absorbed in his work. A sign that meant every touch, smell and sight of the metal being forged came as naturally to him as breathing.

A couple of years before, Richard had helped Conway with a new fire cage for the beacon that stood on the Kingsbridge road a mile above the town. The Queen of England had reigned for forty-five years and England was never stronger than when she had died the previous March. The beacon had been lit by the county's principal landowner, Sir Edward Seymour, and watched by a crowd of hundreds. The flames fought their way through the cage as the townspeople mourned the loss of their queen and celebrated the coronation of the new King, James I.

Joshua Conway had turned to his apprentice. ‘That beacon will be lit to warn of danger or in celebration. It’s a testament, lad, a part of your heritage.’

‘*Our* heritage, Master Conway,’ Richard had replied.

Conway checked the blade. Once cooled, it would be cleaned with abrasive sandstone and then sharpened. He was grudging in his praise, but when given, it was genuine. ‘Another few months with me keeping an eye on you, and I reckon you’ll be a knife maker in your own right. The extra money will help get us through next winter.’

Richard’s pride glowed. ‘But the real money is selling to the merchants, Master Conway. They would spend handsomely for something more elaborate than a fisherman’s blade.’

‘Aye, well, don’t get ahead of yourself. Fancy knife making needs a wealthy sponsor to buy what’s needed to make it fancy. You stick to making an honest knife. A wooden handle, horn if someone’s prepared to pay extra for it. Blacksmithing puts the food on the table, not blade making.’ He reached for a cloth-covered iron lock and key on the workbench. ‘Get this up to the jail and fit that door we measured last week. We’ll finish the blade when you’re back. And don’t linger up there. I reckon there’ll be trouble brewing by ten o’clock and they’ll want any agitators locked up.’ He thrust the lock into Richard’s hands. ‘And they’ll need that to keep them under lock and key, won’t they? Then get yourself back here and finish what you started.’

Richard wrapped the lock in the cloth and pushed it into a satchel. ‘The hanging?’ he asked.

‘Aye, the hanging. Poor wretch.’

*

Despite the hour and the chilly wind funnelling up the Dart, crowds were already gathering on the High Street. Stalls were being set up amid the smell of cooked pies in baskets; a dog whelped from a kick as it sniffed too closely. A brazier glowed, its coals soon to roast chestnuts. Richard crossed the street, shouldering his way through the gathering spectators. Most had come from nearby villages. The Castle Arms alehouse already had men

spilling into the square, their boots and cloaks mud-caked from having walked the miles to get to the hanging.

The smell of fresh bread assailed him. He had not yet had breakfast, given Master Conway's insistence on blade making before dawn brought the inevitable breeze upriver. His mouth watered and he thought of buying a pie or a small loaf before fitting the lock. But the lock was important. It needed to be done and then he could turn his back on the ugly sight that was soon to take place. By then the atmosphere would have taken on a mixture of awe, grim anticipation and the sense of a festival gathering. The Candlemas candles had only just burned out; these crowds now showed little of the solemnity that had marked the holy day. They had come for a spectacle. A fiddle player struck up a tune; a drummer beat out a repetitive rhythm on his tabor; notes from a penny whistle fluttered across the gathering. Men and women danced a jig. Cackling laughter pierced the air. There would be enough drunkenness to contend with once they had stretched the poor woman's neck.

Richard turned his back on the crowds, went down a narrow passage and up steps leading to the town walls that would take him to the guildhall jail. Nothing more than three windowless cells with straw bedding secured by plank and batten doors, it was known as the Darkhouse: in Richard's mind, the most loathsome of places for a prisoner to be kept. He shifted the weight in his satchel. A fortnight after forging it, the ward lock felt heavier.

The constable on duty nodded at him. A local blacksmith posed no threat to the prisoner he guarded. Richard had previously measured the door needing the replacement lock. As he worked away, he heard the whimpering of the condemned woman from the adjacent cell. Forcing himself to concentrate on the job at hand, he urged himself to hurry so that he could get back to the forge and leave this place of death. Agnes Cleve was a homeless woman, a common sight in the parish, particularly where the soldiers drank. Seen as a perpetual offender, guilty of petty crime, begging and prostitution, now she was going to be hanged. As anyone with a conscience knew, the Poor Law discriminated between the deserving and undeserving and according to the ill-thought laws she was a vagrant. That she had remained in the parish for so long was only because some townspeople took pity and gave her scraps. But then her child, an infant, was found dead. The court accused her of its killing and sentenced her.

Only God knew the truth. The mite likely died of hunger. But the woman was a blight on the town and there were enough voices raised against her.

The lock fitting was more difficult than he anticipated but after a final test he was satisfied. He bagged his tools in time to avoid the half-dozen constables and their soldier escort who arrived to take the woman to the gallows. One constable gestured him away from the door. Stepping back he watched as two men went into the cell and dragged the distraught woman from the darkness. She struggled, hysteria giving her strength, and the men tried to restrain her.

'For pity's sake give her some ale!' Richard cried. 'Dull her mind to what awaits her.'

A soldier snarled at him: 'None of your business, smithy. Get your arse back where it belongs.'

Two men grabbed the woman by each arm. One of them laughed cruelly. 'Waste ale on this? I'll dull her senses for you.' His fist punched the side of the woman's head. Her legs gave way.

Richard hurled himself at the men. His sudden attack caught them by surprise. His tool bag swung, sending one of them flying. The woman dropped to the ground. Richard fought hard, ignoring the flurry of blows striking him, drawing blood and curses. He didn't see the raised musket. And then came the shattering pain. Before he fell unconscious the last thing he heard was the dull finality of the key tumbling the metal wards of the new lock into place.

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CHAPTER 2

River Dart Devonshire

The Rowing Boat's prow pushed through the river's mist-laden shroud, which parted to reveal only the few yards ahead. There was scant danger of being struck by larger vessels since the river had silted up the year before. Flat-bottomed boats were used for trade, but tonight, with no wind for their sails and the camouflaging mist, sailors would not risk poling their vessels in case they ran aground on one of the shifting mudbanks.

The twenty-four-year-old woman pulled the oars with an experienced stroke, her shawl gathered around her shoulders, warming her neck against the clinging river mist. The child from the forge lay curled asleep in the stern, oblivious to the river's chill, the boat's rise and fall in the swell and the rhythmic scrape of the oarlocks his lullaby. The boy had run nine miles on an uneven track from Totnes to Dartmouth with his message, driven on with the promise of an extra penny from his employer if he got to the downriver port in good time. He had reached her house as the mist settled on the river. Despite the urgency, she had given the child food and drink; his hands, coal-smudged from his life at Totnes forge, blackened the coarse bread.

Elizabeth Sheriff's strength came from a lifetime of hard work and from the added resilience needed to deal with her younger brother's scrapes. Finding trouble forged his life as surely as his blacksmith's hammer beat hot metal into shape. And now he was in jail. Another two hours would see her at the end of the twelve-mile river journey when she would face his employer's displeasure and discover the seriousness of her brother's crime. She raised the oars, wiped her dripping nose, and pulled the damp shawl over her head. Taking up the stroke again, she hoped they could swiftly

settle whatever trouble her brother was in, then she could catch the turning tide home.

*

It was night by the time she reached her destination. The boy woke as the boat scraped along the quayside. He jumped clear and tied the mooring rope as Elizabeth shipped the oars.

‘Tell your master I am here,’ she told him. She gathered her skirts and stepped ashore, watching as he ran across the bridge to the other side, disappearing into the veiled darkness. On her side of the river a cobbled street rose through the town lined with tall timber-framed merchant houses, home to men whose wealth came from wool and trading with continental ports. She walked to the foot of the hill, where the mist stubbornly clung to the lower part of town. Soft candlelight from a first-floor window illuminated an ornate plaster ceiling. Another sign of wealth. Totnes merchants were men of influence and power who protected their prosperity, trading as they had always done, not only with France, Portugal and Spain but as part of the national defence network, sending sailcloth, timber, cheese, ale and cider to English naval bases. These merchants liked stability in their town. Law and order kept their profits safe. The bailiff and constables dealt with people who caused trouble, and she prayed her brother had done nothing to cause offence or injury to any of these influential men. Keeping trouble at bay was to their benefit. Sixteen years ago, they had raised money to equip fighting ships to strike against the Spanish armada that threatened their trade. They habitually held their purse strings tight, so the fact that they had been prepared to finance such an expensive enterprise was warning to anyone local posing a threat to their well-being or livelihood. Such a person could find themselves at the end of a rope. She made a silent plea to the Almighty that her brother’s outspoken ways or physical strength had not caused injury to anyone of importance. To anyone at all.

A lantern approached through the mist from across the river. A scuff of boot leather and then the man bearing the light emerged. Thirty yards away, and he was already berating the night’s coldness and the woman waiting for him.

‘Elizabeth, your brother causes vexation, and I am the man who pays the price.’

Joshua Conway strode past her. She quickly caught up with him.

‘I sent him to the jail to fix a new lock and key and two hours later, he is incarcerated. And I have lost two shillings for the lock and not a penny for the work for it to be fitted.’ He wiped a sleeve across his nose and took a breath. ‘You know there was a hanging,’ he said, his voice tinged with sadness.

She was breathless, maintaining his pace. ‘Yes. Tell me what he’s done. Has he hurt anyone?’

‘Only me and a constable, damn him. I have lost good money and now a hard-working smith. No one spoke for the condemned woman except your brother. He saw her being taken. From what I was told he attacked the constables after one of them struck the woman. Some soldiers restrained him, but he punched one constable, who is still in the infirmary. And then they beat Richard with their musket butts. His arm was broken. They threw him in the Darkhouse without a crust of bread or a jug of ale.’

They were two-thirds up the cobbled street, dimly lit from first-floor windows. The ominous sentinel of the castle at the top of town loomed into the night sky, towering above the guildhall and its jail.

‘Money has changed hands. He’ll not go in the bailiff’s book if we can get him out tonight. I’ve seen to that. But he’ll need to be kept away from the town for a while. He draws trouble to him like filings to a magnet and the constables will have an eye out for him now. They’ll need little excuse to keep him shackled.’

He shook his head. ‘I was your father’s closest friend, and I swore if anything happened to him, then I would do what I could to keep an eye on you both. Aye, well, I have done that these past ten years. Done my best. Took your brother in to give him work.’ He glanced at her. ‘Kept him away from the sea.’

They reached the guildhall and its high wall that stood between them and the jail.

‘He has added to his list of misdemeanours and unpopularity, and that reflects poorly on me.’

‘Master Conway, we are grateful for you being my father’s true friend and for extending that promise to me and my brother. But I have no money

to pay for a doctor.'

'It was a clean break. I've paid the doctor to splint it and I've bribed the constables and ensured the bailiff has some fine brass bosses for his horse's bridle. If Richard can be taken from the town tonight, no more will be said.' He placed a compassionate hand on her arm. 'Elizabeth, he is no good to me with a broken arm. You must take him home and keep him there until he is healed. Then I can take him back into the forge. But first you must calm his anger.' He saw her quizzical look. 'He wants to go to Sir Edward and take the issue of the hanged woman further. It is an injustice he cannot remedy. It will not go well for him if he does so.'

She nodded. Last year her brother had refused to join Sir Edward Seymour's militia and had been roundly admonished for failing to serve and protect the town. But regular soldiers were billeted and trained on the Longcause close to the forge, so there was no reason for a militia to be formed other than to boost Seymour's vanity.

'Take me to Richard,' she said.

*

Once inside the guildhall grounds, the night jailer escorted them to the jail along a narrow outside passage overshadowed by St Mary's Church. Those prisoners permitted to see the sky once in a while would wash and exercise in this meagre yard. The jailer led them to three hefty plank-and-batten doors, behind which were cells little better than a cave. Windowless, dank, furnished only with straw. The Darkhouse lived up to its name. The jailer heaved one door open. The stench of fouled straw, not cleaned from previous inmates, made Elizabeth gag. She covered her face with her hand. As Conway stepped inside, his lantern cast its light on her brother lying crumpled in the corner. He was in a pitiful state. His face bruised and cut, an eye closed and swollen. There was dried blood on his scalp. His forearm looked to have been bound tightly with a piece of cut leather and then splinted with two stout pieces of flat wood, bandaged to restrain the arm.

'Help me,' Conway said to the jailer.

The man grunted but knew better than to argue with a man who was a linchpin of the community. He passed his lantern to Elizabeth and helped drag the barely conscious prisoner to his feet. Conway and the jailer each

took one of Richard's arms and hauled him into the chill night air. Once they had propped him against the wall, the jailer undid his prisoner's leg irons and stepped back, reclaimed his lantern and stood waiting. Conway pressed a coin into his hand.

'Will you help me get him to the river?' said Conway.

'And leave my post?' He shook his head and turned away. 'There's a handcart outside the church the grave diggers use.'

*

Conway and Elizabeth got her brother into the cart. He was slipping in and out of consciousness. By the time they reached the quay, the boy was waiting at the boat with a bundle of Richard's clothing and had already placed a lantern on the stempost at the bow. It was unlikely others would travel upriver by night but when the trees closed in and blackened what light remained from the darkening sky, it was better to show caution. Revived by the fresh air, and with their help, Richard clambered unsteadily into the boat. Twisting his body around, wincing from the pain of his bruised ribs and broken arm, he said, 'Thank you, Master Conway. I'm obliged. Next time, I'll look out for the soldier behind me.'

'Next time I won't be able to get you out of the Darkhouse.'

Conway pushed them into the running tide. Elizabeth dipped the oars.

Conway's parting words followed them. 'They'll probably hang you.'

*

The River Dart needed skill to navigate as it meandered south to the sea, especially in darkness. In places, hidden sandbanks pushed the current aside and the unaware might find themselves suddenly deep in the reed beds and mud. Those like his sister who knew the river understood its fickleness and Richard was confident her skill would pilot them to her cottage. The rocking of the boat and the rhythmic grind of the oarlocks lulled him, easing his pain.

The slow journey to Dartmouth was one of quiet despair. His sister glared and then shook her head. Was that in pity or anger? he wondered. The darkness of the river engulfed them, overhanging trees, bare branches

arching over the water swaying from the freshening wind, silent accusers of his misdeeds.

Dreamlike, he let his unbroken arm rest over the side, fingers loose in the undulating swell of the boat’s wake. Water yielded when it was calm but could change as quickly as his temperament. He had a better understanding of fire, having learnt to harness its power that enabled him to heat iron and bend and shape it to his will. And if the coals flared and spat, he knew how to control it. He was its master, unlike his temper when faced with injustice.

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CHAPTER 3

The Fishermen's Cottages at Dartmouth's Bears Cove were cramped and huddled, spilling south along the river towards Warfleet Cove. A nearby mill stood upstream of Elizabeth's house, offering scant protection from the north wind that swept down from the desolate moorland twenty miles upriver. Richard Sheriff stood outside his sister's cottage, a place they'd managed to hold on to since their father's death aboard the *White Dove*. He looked across to the opposite bank, watching the lone ferryman begin his journey from Kittery Point on the Kingswear side.

'Stay out or come inside,' his sister called. 'The cold, Richard! For pity's sake.'

Richard stooped beneath the lintel and closed the door behind him. It had been six weeks since his sister had brought him downriver. The pain in his broken arm had nagged day and night, as persistent as the chill wind across the harbour, until one day the pain settled into a dull ache, as dull as the boredom of being confined in a town for which he held scant affection. Its only blessing was that his sister lived there.

There was little for him to do. Each day, when Elizabeth returned to her duties at the merchant's house, he would make his way along the waterside to watch those craftsmen who had remained after the fishing fleet had set sail for Newfoundland. The yards were quieter now, but sufficient skilled labour remained to give the injured blacksmith a diversion. Dartmouth was one of the few ports where shipwrights and carpenters, as well as sawyers, smiths and caulkers, exercised their skills to build and repair maritime projects, while the town warehouse supplied canvas, cables, rope, and anchors.

The Bears Cove gun fort, built more than seventy years ago into the thirty-foot cliff, was a few hundred yards from Elizabeth's cottage. Unable to work, Richard still needed to pay his way. Feeding two instead of one

was an added burden on his sister. Gambling and drinking with the soldiers stationed at the fort were a distraction from his own idleness, and he always made sure he drank less than the indolent men. Staying sober bettered his chances of winning at their card games.

The stone wall artillery blockhouse was a place as inhospitable as the dank two rooms he shared with his sister. The fort housed a small detachment of soldiers who spent a listless time supposedly guarding the narrow stretch of water between their riverside and the opposite Kingswear bank. The gun fort's three-foot-thick walls kept out the seeking wind but did little to retain the warmth from their brazier. There were never more than a half-dozen soldiers on duty, rotated each month with those who relieved them, bringing their own rations for their tour of duty. It was an unenviable posting. There was little to do in the town and the cramped fisherman's inn had scant welcome for soldiers. The fort was a secondary defence a mile upriver from the castle at the mouth of the Dart. Invasion scares from Spain had faded, but the castle was still manned by men ready to put their backs into a windlass in the gun tower and raise an underwater chain across the river to stop enemy ships entering the deep-water harbour. The Bears Cove men knew therefore there was little chance of an enemy passing the castle, and this was reflected in their boredom and lack of interest in their duty.

The soldiers knew nothing of Richard's background but welcomed the distraction and the fiery liquid he now brought with him: flagons of brandy supplied by the ferry boatman from Kingswear. Using his winnings from gambling, Richard had begun to buy brandy, stolen or salvaged from ships wrecked on the inhospitable coast, and then sell it to the soldiers at a profit. Richard Sheriff's reputation for standing up to authority in Totnes had spread downstream across the river to Kingswear, and the one thing that Devon smugglers admired was a man who flaunted authority and accepted the pain it could bring. His access to brandy was assured.

That reputation, however, held little sway among the fishermen in his native town. He had kept his distance from them as they prepared the cod fleet in the deep-water harbour to undertake their yearly journey, the same voyage he had endured years before. Most of the fishermen had been on the other ships during his own ill-fated passage. By the time these men had returned, all those years ago, the boy had already been taken upriver by

Joshua Conway and given a place at his Totnes forge. These fishermen saw little of the sole survivor from the *White Dove*, and during his infrequent visits to his sister in Dartmouth, they ignored him. The boy who had begged not to be taken to sea, and been the only one on his ship to survive, was a Jonah, best to be avoided. The years and good catches with fair winds had softened some men's animosity and they might nod their head in acknowledgement of his greeting, but the only relief he got from the unfriendly stares of others was when the ships sailed. Now the harbour was empty except for a few small flat-keeled boats waiting to ferry goods up- and downriver.

Elizabeth lifted the lid on her cooking pot, glancing at him as he stood staring out of the window, his right hand rubbing the swathed arm. 'It still hurts?' she asked.

'A little. Two more weeks and I'll cut it free. Damned if I won't.'

'Then you'll pay the consequences if it's not healed.'

'It'll be healed,' he said, still watching the ferryman's slow progress through the window.

Wiping two bowls, she settled them on a spindly table. In the weeks that followed his arrest she had not raised the issue, preferring first to let his physical pain heal. 'Richard, you must stop challenging the law.'

'I was wondering how long it would take you.' He shrugged. 'Beth, the woman did not deserve to be hanged.'

'The law said differently.'

'And they were wrong.'

'And last year? I had to pay your fine because Master Conway couldn't risk being involved.'

'I paid you back,' he said simply, not wanting it to sound accusatory.

'That's not the point. You tried to stop the portreeve in his duties. He's the town warden, Richard, warden of the wealthiest town there is around here. He has his duties.'

'You weren't there.'

'That doesn't alter your behaviour. You interfered.'

Richard's offence had been to speak out against a woman being tied to the back of a cart and whipped up the High Street. Unable to pay her rent, she had stolen a skillet worth pennies and tried to sell it.

Richard faced his sister. ‘She didn’t deserve such a harsh punishment. Stripped to the waist. Humiliated and beaten. Portreeve or not, what man takes fourpence as payment from the Justice of the Peace for whipping a woman half-naked and dragged behind a cart? I’d have damned myself had I not spoken out. Beth, if any man laid a hand on you, I would do more than shout a challenge. I would kill him. There are times in life when you have to act and damn the consequences.’

Elizabeth sighed. She knew it would be futile to continue the conversation as surely as it had been many times before. She understood her brother’s passion. Their mother had died from sickness when he was a babe; their father, a hardworking fisherman who had paid a neighbour for their care until Elizabeth herself could look after her younger sibling, had drowned when Richard was still a boy. The two of them had no one apart from the other. Who cared for whom the most? She for him or he for her? The boy urged by his dying father to fight for his life so that he might protect his sister, forced to act older than his years. She knowing his childhood was blighted by the responsibility thrust upon him. Bonded by grief, they were helpless in their feelings for each other. She reached up and laid a hand on his face.

‘Come to church on Sunday. Gabriel Pryor gives a good sermon.’

‘There’s no church for me, Beth. Never will be. What God would take a widowed father from his children?’

‘There’s no answer to that. But we’re still together.’

‘Aye, and we were together before Father drowned. I’ll leave you to do the praying for both of us.’

‘What am I to do with you?’ she said gently. Her smile was as tender as her voice. ‘You’re a good soul, Richard Sheriff, and I could never turn my back on the love I have for you.’

‘And you’re more forgiving than I deserve,’ he said.

She smiled and pointed at his broken arm. ‘But remember, there is always a price to pay for the decisions we make.’

Richard watched as she finished laying the table. She was a plain woman, but the softness of her features and the pale grey-green eyes complementing a fair complexion held a certain allure and she had not lacked for men to court her. However, there was little choice of suitors in Dartmouth. Other than skilled tradesmen, those who pursued her were

mostly local fishermen who wanted a woman to cook and mend and help with the repair of their nets. But being in service at the merchant's house gave Beth independence, a freedom she cherished. She did not want marriage. She had no desire for children. Not yet, at least. And finally, the men had stopped pursuing her. There had been someone once, but he was long gone.

Richard embraced her, remembering once again how he, a terrified boy, had returned home from the cruel sea, angry at his father's death and guilty at first for being the one who had not drowned. Yet he had found resilience in his survival. In that and in the last words his father spoke to his son: *Live boy! Care for Beth! Protect her!*

'I know,' she said, sensing his thoughts, her intuition as sharp as the keen river wind. She patted his shoulder She'd let the matter rest. Her brother's pent-up frustration was understandable, being confined as he was. 'Come and eat and we'll talk no more about it.' She smiled. 'Tonight at least.'

Richard stepped back from the embrace and glanced out of the window again. 'Wait a while. I'll be back later.'

*

The rowing boat nudged the quayside. The ferryman tied off the boat and accepted Richard's hand to help him step ashore. 'All's well then, Richard?'

'Martin, do our friends still have supplies?'

'Aye, stored and hidden heaven knows where, but happy to take your money. As happy as you are to take the soldiers'.' He handed Richard a sack that concealed an earthenware jug.

'The guards have nothing else to spend their pittance on,' Richard said. 'Better in my purse than theirs.' His doublet flapped free in the wind, unfastened because of his bound arm.

The ferryman tossed what remained of the mooring line back into the boat. 'You flap like a lame duck with a broken wing. Here…' He pulled the younger man's tunic so that the lower fastenings allowed his broken arm to peek through and be supported. 'A couple of new fancy buttons, I see.'

'I lost them in the scuffle in Totnes. Beth made them.'

‘Well, the sooner you get that damned thing off your arm the better. Then there’ll be no need to linger here with the dregs in that fort. You watch yourself with them. Drunken soldiers are worse than bad-tempered fishermen with empty nets.’

The ferryman turned back to his boat.

‘I take care, Martin, but they’re as bored as I am. We make agreeable companions. My sister has hot stew on the stove. You’d be welcome.’

‘Thank you, lad, but I’m off to my lodgings now.’ He hauled a sack of provisions from the boat and faced the open sea. ‘Wind’s turning. It’ll bring cold rain come dark. Aye, time to get in front of a warm fire. I’ll bid you good day.’

As they parted ways, a boat hove into view from upriver. It was small enough to be poled across shallow water but was aided by a sail. Despite the headwind coming in from the sea, its helmsman manoeuvred it with apparent ease across the breadth of the river. The boat appeared to be empty except for the man at the tiller.

‘Do you know him?’ said Richard, not recognizing the boatman.

Martin stared into the late day’s gloom. ‘Aye, I’ve seen him across the other side. He usually brings goods from the market at Totnes. There’s a stall over there he supplies. Don’t look as though he’s carrying anything, though. Boat’s high in the water. Who knows? He’s tacking to come this way.’ Martin sniffed and spat downwind. ‘Haven’t hired him to go back up and have another crack at them constables, have you?’ The older man grinned. ‘Well, it’s no concern of mine. I’ve Widow Harris waiting and she’ll give me what for if I’m not back at the lodging before dark.’

Richard lingered a moment longer, watching the helmsman trim his sail and use the current to bring him closer to the shore. The old ferryman was right: it was none of his business. Yet it soon became clear that it was. As he reached the fort, he saw the half-dozen men he drank and gambled with hauling their kit through the narrow door, then the last man slammed it closed and turned the heavy key, locking it.

‘What’s this then?’ Richard said.

‘There’s the man himself. I see you’ve brought fresh supplies,’ said the soldier. The others groaned.

One of them hefted his kit across his shoulder. ‘Damned if we wouldn’t have enjoyed that. Not now though. Be flogged if we took that jug of

brandy with us. More's the pity.'

There was general agreement among the soldiers: regret and complaint equally strong.

'Rider came down yesterday from the Totnes garrison. We're to go up before dark.'

'For what reason?' Richard asked. Soldiers were usually billeted in Townstal at the top of the hill when they rotated their duty at the fort.

'Vice Admiral runs this command and he's ordered us back, other than the lads in the castle, that is.'

'Musket training on Longcause is what the rider said,' another moaned.

'Aye, but he knows as much as we do. Damned nuisance, lad,' said the man who'd locked the door. 'There'll be officers and sergeants on our necks. Better to be left to usselves. I'll wager we'll be back in a week, humping all our kit again, so don't you go finishing off that brandy without us.'

They bid him farewell and trudged past him to where the newly arrived boatman waited.

Richard cursed to himself. He'd be out of pocket until the men returned and he could sell them the brandy. He watched them clamber aboard and shove off, the wind cracking the stout canvas, pushing the sturdy craft upriver, then walked towards home, back to the place he had known these past years. He wished he were leaving with them.

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CHAPTER 4

John Challenor was returning home to England. The thirty-four-year-old cast his seasoned eye on the veering wind as his men scrambled to haul in topsails. The south coast of Devon could be a treacherous place for ships. The helmsman followed Challenor's orders to ease the vessel towards the dark shape of the castle, fleetingly visible when the buffeting clouds parted, an ominous shape when they did not. The mouth of the River Dart was more of a gaping jaw to Challenor's mind, and he hoped the gunners in the castle had been warned not to fire on him. When his ship had rounded the point past Salcombe, the smell of the land reached him. It reminded him of moist pastures and sawn timber from the fields beyond: a scent that always told him he was near home. England. It had been eight years since he and forty other fishermen had been seized from Cawsand village some twenty-five miles as the crow flies west from Dartmouth. And he wondered what his life would have been like if he had not been visiting there when the night raiders came. He and his fellow fishermen were experienced men of the sea who willingly ventured out onto turbulent waters but they were unprepared for the sudden violence as they slept. The cry had gone up. *Barbarians! Turks!* The term Englishmen commonly used to describe those corsairs who swept in from the sea, mixed crews of violent men, Europeans some of them, Englishmen too, and their Janissaries, fearsome-looking descendants of men bred from a century of Ottoman Christian slaves who wielded curved scimitars.

He grunted at the memory of being attacked that night. Challenor shook free the thoughts of the fear it had struck into him, turning his attention to the mouth of the Dart. He ordered more sail taken in. The wind and current

would be enough to smooth their passage. Within the hour, he would see the woman he desired.

*

A candle flame flickered from the draught around the ill-fitting wooden window. The room never felt warm enough for Richard, more used to the forge and the heat from its firepit seeping into the stone walls. His back always warm; no need for anything more than a blanket. Here the cottage walls were damp, the river's chill ever seeking bone and muscle, forcing a man into a cramped sleep, curled around what warmth he had in the clothing he still wore. An indistinct sound penetrated Richard's slumber. His mind conjured images of metal scraping stone. Confused, he raised himself up onto one elbow, and listened. It was not the sound of metal against stone but the rasp of boats being pulled ashore and then the scuff of boots on cobbles. The fishing fleet was gone and not due back for many months. He swung his feet from the cot and pulled on his shoes. If a boatman had run into difficulties, he might have sought shelter and need help.

Richard eased aside the curtain. The dull glass was covered in a film of sea salt on the outside and there was little to see. And then a light caught his eye. Flames from torches held high flickered in the wind. His heart beat faster. He strode across to where Elizabeth slept, pulling aside the privacy curtain.

'Beth!' he hissed.

She stirred. He stepped into her room and shook her leg. Gasping, she suddenly awoke.

'Get dressed. Hurry! There are men in the town.'

He didn't wait to explain any further, but pulled on his doublet, fumbling with his good hand to fasten it. His thoughts danced back and forth: who might the torchbearers be? Perhaps the soldiers had returned to the gun fort or traders had come downriver from Totnes. Unlikely. There would be no need for them to travel at night.

As he turned to the cooking fire to snatch its poker as a weapon, there was a knock on the door. Elizabeth appeared dressed from her room, tugging her shawl around her shoulders, her face creased with concern.

Richard pulled free the poker.

‘Who is it?’ he asked.

‘John Challenor,’ came the reply, with no sense of threat or urgency.

Richard looked as quizzical as his sister. Challenor? Here? After all these years?

Elizabeth felt a chasm had opened and swallowed eight years of her life. Eight years of not knowing. Heart thudding, she blinked in the half-light. It was not a dream. The only man she had grown fond enough of to marry had returned.

‘What should I do?’ Richard whispered to her.

She was uncertain. Controlling her sense of unease she called out: ‘John? Is that really you?’

‘It is, Beth. Don’t be afraid.’

Afraid of what? Richard wondered. John Challenor must have brought men with him. How else would he have arrived in Dartmouth if not by ship? Did they pose a threat? Elizabeth looked distraught. He stared at her. She nodded to him. He slid the bolt on the door and opened it. Facing him was a stocky, barrel-chested man dressed in a leather jerkin with a sword and knife secured in a broad belt. He held a lantern so that they could clearly see his features beneath his tricorn hat. He lifted it free. His jawline squatted on a muscled neck, but it was not an unkindly face.

‘Beth, I never thought I would see you again,’ he said with a tenderness that betrayed his rough appearance.

Elizabeth had not moved. She was no longer that young woman Challenor had wooed. She had learnt to put those feelings behind her after two years living in hope that he would return to her. Challenor and many others had been seized by slavers. Dead or enslaved? Whatever their fate, everyone knew they would never return. And after waiting she’d come to know there was no point in mourning the unknown. She had closed her heart. And yet now, seeing him in her home, she felt a confused sense of relief that he was alive. Back from the dead. A haunting.

He smiled at her and glanced at the taller man, who stood ready to defend her. Challenor quickly took in the situation in the room. The single cot, the bedroom beyond. The tall man with the broken arm was no husband. ‘And you would be Richard. Now a grown man. There’s no need for that,’ he said, nodding towards the poker held in Richard’s hand.

Richard kept his grip on the fire iron.

Elizabeth did not approach any closer, remaining where she stood at the entrance to her bedroom. ‘I thought you dead,’ she whispered.

Challenor shrugged and smiled. ‘The grim reaper tried a few times. I’m fleet of foot.’ His gentle countenance took the edge off their uncertainty. ‘Beth, only I can save you.’

His benign warning was suddenly shattered as screams pierced the night.

She recoiled. Richard raised the poker, but he was too slow, and Challenor had a knife at his throat. ‘You would be foolish to strike me, Richard. I am here with others to take prisoners. Let it go.’

Richard dropped the poker.

‘Beth, gather what you can and come with me. No harm will come to you,’ said Challenor, keeping his eyes on the younger man.

Through her panic and the increasing shouts of alarm from outside, the vision of her brother with a knife against his throat made her control her fear. The moment could not be contested. ‘Don’t harm my brother, and I’ll do as you say.’

Richard felt the trickle of blood from the knife point. ‘You must run. No matter what,’ he told her.

She shook her head. ‘It’s too late.’

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CHAPTER 5

They Were Ushered into the night. It soon became obvious there would be no escape. Fifty or sixty men, some of them dressed in loose colourful tunics, heads swathed in bound cloth, and bearing curved swords and muskets, held burning torches and lanterns aloft. They were clean-shaven except for thick black drooping moustaches. They shouted commands in a tongue Richard had never heard before.

Other men, as rough-hewn as Challenor, wore clothing more familiar for seamen: short jerkins and breeches and Monmouth caps. Unshaven, lank greasy hair, unkempt sailors uncaring about their appearance. They carried an assortment of weapons: pistols, knives and swords; a few wore breastplates. They were more aggressive than their foreign companions and cursed the townspeople in English as they were herded in a line down to the quayside. Like Elizabeth, all carried little more than a small bundle of clothes.

The ferryman, Martin, was with Widow Harris with whom he lodged, each clinging to the other. He saw Richard and nodded towards the foreigners. ‘Turks, lad. Janissaries. Stay clear of them.’

Two of the sailors grabbed a young woman, who screamed as one thrust his hand up her clothing while his companion ripped her dress, exposing her breast.

Richard lunged forward but was stopped by one of the ferocious-looking Janissaries, the palm of his hand grasping his tunic. The impact caught Richard’s broken arm. He winced.

‘In God’s name,’ said Elizabeth. ‘Stop this, John,’ she said, appealing to Challenor.

‘I regret it, but these lads take their pleasures when they can,’ he answered. ‘This isn’t a King’s ship, Elizabeth. Corsairs mutiny if they are hard pushed against their will.’

Neither Richard nor Elizabeth understood the foreign language that Challenor used to command the Janissary who had barred Richard. He turned and barked an order. Two other Janissaries grabbed the sailors and threw them aside, then threatened the belligerent sailors in the same unusual tongue. Another threw a fallen shawl at the woman so she could cover herself. The fearsome-looking Janissary in front of Richard said something to Challenor which sounded like a rebuke. Challenor shrugged.

As the townspeople were herded past in the glow of torchlight, a few turned to face Richard where he was held. One of the men, Thomas Carey, hurled abuse.

‘You are a Jonah to this town, Richard Sheriff! Always have been. You bring misfortune to us all.’

A sailor shoved Richard’s accuser back in line.

One elder townsman, rake-thin, a fastidious man dressed in black, embraced his wife and shepherded his young daughter, who was flushed with fear. Gabriel Pryor, a devout Puritan, challenged Richard’s accuser. ‘Condemn not a man because of your own fear, Thomas. Believe in the Lord’s grace and not the Devil’s superstitions.’

A sailor shoved him hard. He stumbled, recovered with the help of his family and shuffled down the line towards the quay.

John Challenor turned to Richard. ‘We have no place aboard for a Jonah. Suspicion seeps through a crew like the pestilence.’

It looked for a moment as though Challenor would either kill or abandon Richard at the quayside. His hand was already resting on the knife handle at his belt.

‘Suspicion is not fact, John,’ Elizabeth said. ‘Winter storms have wrecked ships and killed sailors since men first took their boats to sea.’

Challenor appeared to consider her intervention. He turned and shouted a command. ‘Into the boats. We sail before daybreak.’

*

Richard and his sister were kept to one side and nudged towards a skiff where Challenor beckoned his own sailors to take up the oars. Elsewhere, the Janissaries forced the townsmen to row their fellow prisoners across to the waiting ship, a three-masted black shape at anchor with a lantern fore and aft. It was only a hundred yards from the shore, yet barely distinguishable in the darkness. As they clambered aboard the ship, Richard saw that there was another group of sailors, who had already pillaged the quayside of coils of rope, sailcloth and artisans' tool chests. It looked as though the Turkish fighters did not demean themselves with manual labour, which was left to the common seaman.

Challenor held Elizabeth to one side. 'She stays with me in my cabin.'

Elizabeth pulled free of his grip and Challenor did not hold on to her. 'I won't force you to do anything against your will. I offer you comfort, warmth and food. Your brother goes below with the others.'

This was not the time for Richard to threaten Challenor. She shook her head, warning him not to do anything foolish. It would be a useless gesture. Richard was hustled along the deck by one of the Janissaries, passed man to man as the prisoners were shuffled towards the hold.

'If I have free will, I will go with the others,' Elizabeth said.

Challenor looked aggrieved. 'You're my guest, Elizabeth, but one with limited freedom. Being held below decks will be a hardship for those not used to a long sea journey. I always believed you had a kindness for me.'

'I may have accepted your advances once, but that was years ago. Do you now think that this barbaric act will bring me closer to you? How can you inflict terror on your own people?'

'I want to share your company,' he said without sarcasm. 'My feelings for you have never gone away. In time I will draw your affection back to me.' His tone of voice was genuine: a suitor wishing to impress. He shrugged and smiled. 'And these people are my cargo. They are worth a great deal of money in the slave markets.'

She struck him so quickly Challenor could not avoid the blow. A sailor wrapped his arms around her, firmly enough to stop her from struggling. Challenor tasted blood but did not retaliate.

'Take her to my cabin,' he told the sailor. 'Guard the door. Do not harm her.'

*

Richard felt his old fear of the sea as he and the other captives descended into the depths of the ship. If he was bad luck, as many of the townspeople thought, then he was Jonah going down into the belly of the whale. The lower deck's gloom added to the uncertainty of their fate. The place they descended into stank. Foul odours seeped through the decking above and below. Men, women and children settled down as best they could as infants cried for their mothers' comfort. There were more women than men, because their husbands had left for the Newfoundland fishing grounds. Men who would return to a ghost town and never know the fate of their loved ones.

Richard squeezed past the distraught victims and found a place next to the ferryman and Widow Harris.

The older man nodded in greeting. 'Not one hammock slung. They mean us to lie in filth.' He saw Richard's grimace, even in the near darkness. 'You get used to it. The bilges seep water. It's fouled by men's vomit and dead rats.'

'No one can live in this stench.'

'Living is better than death. There could have been blood in the street after they came ashore. Now we know why the soldiers at Bears Cove were taken upriver,' he said.

'You think it was deliberate?' said Richard.

'Aye, what else? Too damned convenient. The Vice Admiral will have his palm outstretched, I'll wager.'

'Then what about the castle's gunners at the river mouth?'

'They'll have been told there's a merchantman coming through the heads, but the Admiral wouldn't risk having even half a dozen armed soldiers here at Bears Cove. They would not have stood by and watch all of us being taken. No, it was him. As corrupt as a bent penny. No different than ship's captains listing men on board who weren't there, claiming payment for them while forcing every sailor to do the work of three.'

'That was done? How could they get away with it?'

'You list a hundred men on board, but there's only seventy mustered. Them thirty ghosts that ain't there are worth seventeen and six a month for

victuals. Aye, they all took a cut, the officers did. Purser, victualler and anyone else in on it.'

The information that the man responsible for their coastal defence had sold his own people into the hands of a privateer silenced Richard. He had come across corruption among some merchants and the authorities in Totnes, but what had taken place these past hours was a betrayal of decent men and women.

'Martin, how did you know about these people? What language are they speaking?'

'It's the language that pirates use. Like a pidgin English of sorts. Crews on ships like this are mixed – Portuguese, French, Genoese and some Tuscans from the mainland, and Englishmen mostly – so they need to understand one another. It's lingua franca. They all use it if the Turks are involved, which they usually are.'

'If you know it then you must teach me. The more I can understand, the better it'll be for me and Beth. Can you do that?'

'Aye, it's not that difficult.'

'How do you know all this?'

'Twenty-odd years on a fighting ship since I were a lad.'

'You served the Queen?'

Martin nodded, but the memory brought no show of pleasure. 'Aye. I was a waterman at Chatham, nothing more than an orphan boy, when the press-master came with his warrant. Scooped up man and boy across Kent. Not just men like me. Tailors, shoemakers, farmers.' He made a slight gesture at his fellow captives. 'No different than those taken here. Damned hardest years of any man's life. Ten shillings a month, poor victuals, death and disease was our pay. Larders emptied, water fouled, men died. Not uncommon was that. Lucky if they fed you Poor John during bad times.'

Poor John was salted hake. A meagre source of nourishment on long sea voyages.

Martin fell silent for a moment. 'Is it any wonder Jacks abscond from their ships and join men like these?'

'Then you know what these privateers will do with us.'

'Privateers? They don't work for the Crown. No skirmishing and plundering for these bastards. They're pirates and your flesh is worth money to them. I've seen these heathen scum before. Years back we were

sailing along the Portuguese coast. A merchantman was carrying spices and wine back home when they struck. Laid low in the night, sails furled, then when the ship appeared on the horizon they came at them like a ravening wolf. What they didn't know was we were hunting for them and the merchantman was the bait.'

'Then you beat the pirates?'

'Beat them? Slaughtered 'em. Chain shot ripped their top deck and sails apart. Killed most. Captured twenty of them. They were a mixed bunch. Ottoman Turks, them fellas with the curved swords, they fought to the end. Our lads beat them hard.'

'Did they kill them? The pirates? There and then?'

The ferryman eased his bones on the wooden planking. Widow Harris, coughing and wheezing from the damp, curled away from him, shivering with fear and perhaps fever, clutching a shawl over her for what warmth could be had. Martin's gnarled hand rested on her hip to comfort her. 'We got back to port and joined the crowds in Wapping, who were baying for their blood. You know how cold the Dart gets? Well, it was a damned sight more cold that day at Execution Dock in London. It was a sight you'd not forget. The tide was out. I can still remember the stink of the mud when they led those pirates to the gallows. I'll say this much, they were brave bastards. No snivelling or begging for forgiveness or mercy. No, they died like men. Some confessed the vileness of their actions, others just said they were off to join the angels. They were all Englishmen bar two Janissaries.'

They heard an increase in activity above them, then the creaking sound of the anchor being brought up. Commands were shouted as the ship got under way. Helplessness engulfed Richard, fearing as he did for his sister and the prospect of being cast upon the sea again. His head sunk to his chest in despair. 'God help us, Martin. We're lost now, and my sister is beyond my reach.'

Martin sighed. 'Don't fear for Elizabeth. She's a strong woman and John Challenor came to Dartmouth because of her. He courted her before he was taken. Did you know that? Maybe not – you were up at the forge.'

'I did not,' said Richard. 'Was he genuine? She never mentioned his intentions to me.'

The older man nodded. 'As serious as a man could be who wanted a wife. There was enough gossip in the town about whether she would accept

him. Truth is, with her at his side John Challenor might have stayed honest. He's an accomplished seaman, no doubt about that. And I dare say he'd have given her a good life.' Martin shrugged. 'Who's to say what goes through a woman's mind when a man asks for her hand? She was ready to become his wife back then.'

The planking creaked as the ship cleared the entrance to the River Dart and forged into the open sea.

'If he leads pirates, then he must be more than an accomplished seaman. He'd need the respect of these men, and he's obviously turned his back on morality. Such a man will be ruthless – and brutal.'

Martin nodded. 'Such is the way of command,' he said.

The vessel shuddered.

Richard's fear of the past and of his uncertain future almost overwhelmed him. The waves slapped the side of the ship. How soon before their malevolent intent erupted?

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CHAPTER 6

Two Days Passed slowly. Cramped and frightened, the captives huddled in the chill darkness below decks. The latrine buckets were already full by the time a seaman and one of the Janissaries opened a hatch and climbed down with buckets of water and a sack of biscuits barely enough for thirty captives yet alone the hundred and more. The rush of fresh air and shaft of daylight from the gun deck above refreshed the captives' spirits, although they knew the water from the ship's barrels would be stagnant, and drinking it risked diarrhoea, fever and death. Yet they were desperate. A boy darted forward to slake his thirst, but the sailor pushed him away.

'Wait your turn!'

Gabriel Pryor, who was squatting further along the line from Richard, stood, ignoring his wife's entreatments to stay silent.

'I beg you, cause the child no harm,' said Pryor.

The sailor grabbed him by the throat, shoving him hard against the planking. Cries of alarm rose from the nearest captives, who shied away from the sudden violence.

Richard stood up, ignoring Martin's tug on his sleeve. 'Leave it be,' his friend said, but Richard had already taken a step away from the bulkhead.

'Master Pryor speaks only to defend a helpless child. He means no offence. Let the boy drink,' he called. 'He's no mother or father to care for him. The lad's thirsty.'

Pryor was pushed aside. He sank down, grateful that the threat had been temporarily removed. The sailor stepped into the half-light, the low shadows contorting his snarling face. He pointed at Richard, who stood

halfway along the row of captives. ‘You keep your mouth shut. You cause trouble, and you’ll be gutted like a fish and thrown overboard.’

‘And how would you explain that to Captain Challenor?’ said Richard.

‘Explain nothing! Your lives belong to us now.’

‘Then you would deprive him of a slave to sell. I’ll wager he would take more than your share if you killed one of those he’ll profit from.’

The sailor pulled a knife from his belt and took a step in Richard’s direction, but the Janissary grabbed his arm and said something that stopped him. Richard heard him mutter, and the antagonist nodded. He snapped at Richard: ‘You want to speak out for these people? You can empty their shit buckets. Bring them topside.’

The old ferryman looked up at Richard and said quietly, ‘Be careful, lad. Challenor might not know how many souls he has taken in the raid and sticking a knife in your back would be no hardship for the likes of them.’

‘At least I might get a chance to ask Challenor about Elizabeth. I must try, Martin.’

Richard stepped across the prostrated prisoners, balancing himself against the bulkhead as the ship rolled. He stood in front of the belligerent sailor, who nodded towards the latrine buckets. As Richard stepped around him, he struck him above his broken arm. Richard bent double. His temper flared, as did the pain. He straightened as a voice called out sharply in warning.

‘Richard!’

The old ferryman had got to his feet, knowing the young blacksmith’s reputation. His cry stopped Richard from striking back. Martin made his way forward, calling out to the sailor. ‘He’s only got one good arm. He’ll slop shit over the steps and you’ll get your boots covered in our slime, and our stench in your nostrils.’

‘Then you take two buckets, old man,’ said the English renegade sailor. He pointed to another man, Peter Hoskins, one of the shipwrights from the Dartmouth quay, and then stabbed a finger at four more men, including Gabriel Pryor. ‘Buckets. You and the others.’

Martin edged around the men and grabbed the rope handle of one of the latrine buckets. ‘Take this, lad, I’ll bring the next two. Peter, you and the others follow on.’

The bucket was heavy with waste and for a moment Richard wondered if the older man would manage to haul two up the steps, across the gun deck and then topside. But Martin nodded his assurance. The two sailors clambered up the ladder ahead of them. Richard followed as best he could, trying to balance the weight of the bucket without the use of his left arm to steady himself on the ladder.

Martin's voice followed him. 'Don't you slip, lad. I've had enough shit in my life without being covered in it now.'

*

The men sucked in fresh salt air. Billowing canvas creaked, straining from the wind, held taut by complaining masts and lines. The ship was making good speed and the latrine detail followed the sailor's instructions to go forward and downwind to where they could empty the buckets. They steered clear of the Janissaries, who sat together playing cards while Challenor's men went about their duties.

'Them kind stick to themselves,' said Martin. 'You won't find them working with the common seamen.' The older man pointed forward to where the bow pushed through the waves. 'The wind's abaft the beam. Empty them there.'

Richard's gaze shifted to the sea swells. They lived in his memory, challenging him to defy their infinite power. He gripped the rail as the men passed their buckets to Martin, who tipped each one over the side. Richard could not tear his eyes away from where the horizon met the sea and the indistinct, wavering line that enticed his imagination to think about the unthinkable. The grey waves held no warmth of colour. Every white-tipped splash against the ship's side erupted from a grave-cold swell. His chest tightened. The boat heeled; he held on, knuckles strained white.

'Breathe, lad! Breathe!' said Martin, pressing himself close to the gunwale and the man rigid with fear. 'Richard? Listen, lad. We've all known terror one way or the other.' He gripped Richard's arm. Fingers biting into muscle. 'Face it. Swallow hard and spit in its face.'

Richard dragged his gaze away from the swells, understanding the old man's concerns. 'I will.'

‘Good man.’ He looked at the grey sky, the dim glow of the sun. ‘Did you hear the ship’s bell?’

Richard nodded, but the shrill clanging had meant nothing to him.

‘Coming to the end of the forenoon watch soon, I reckon. Darkness will hold back another few hours yet. We’re heading south-west. Challenor’s taking a risk and pushing the ship for the best wind he can get. He’s heading far out, sailing six points off the wind. There are patrols off France and Portugal. Or he knows he’s being hunted. And if an English warship ever bears down on him, then like as not we’ll be tossed overboard. Be forewarned, lad, there’ll be worse to come, you see if there isn’t. So steel your heart and your stomach because it’s us and them now.’

‘And the sea.’

The ferryman nodded with a knowing smile. He pressed a reassuring hand on Richard’s shoulder, and the men made their way back along the pitching deck. Richard looked to where the helmsman leant against the rudder helm and John Challenor stood braced against the ship’s motion.

The two men edged towards the hatch. Martin was close to Richard’s shoulder. ‘He’s got a poor crew, has Challenor, and not enough of them. I’ll wager they’ve been without fresh food for longer than they’d like. What they took from us was the best they’ve had in weeks. Their water barrels are stale and if there was a dog aboard there’s sport to be had rat baiting. The ship’s crawling with them.’

‘Then we’ll get as sick as them.’

‘Aye. We need to get better food than biscuit and foul water. These men will have better rations and clean water enough to dilute their ale. We need the same as them if we’re to walk off this ship.’

The seaman who had threatened Richard stood at the hatchway. Richard looked past him. Challenor’s gaze had dropped to watch him from the quarterdeck. Richard knew that going back down would mean they would not see daylight again until the following day. If he was to see his sister, this was the best opportunity.

He called out, ignoring the sailor. ‘John, may I speak with you?’

The sailor slapped him hard. He staggered into Martin, who saved him from falling.

‘Captain Challenor to scum like you. You speak to no one unless you’re told. Get below.’

John Challenor bellowed at the seaman. ‘Leave him be! Bring him here.’

The belligerent sailor looked at his captain, who affirmed his command with a tilt of his head. The sailor grabbed a handful of Richard’s shirt and pushed him towards the aft deck. And then turned his attention to Martin. ‘Get below.’

The last glimpse the ferryman saw of Richard was him grabbing whatever hand support he could get with his good arm along the deck as the ship wallowed through the waves and the sailor prodded him in his back. Martin looked up at the sails and saw the wind had freshened. When the foul weather eventually reached them, their lives would depend on John Challenor’s seamanship.

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CHAPTER 7

Challenor's Cabin was luxurious compared to the dank hold where Richard and the other captives were held. The rear window cast light over a small writing bureau against one bulkhead, a chart table and a rolled mattress wedged below it. There was a curtained single bunk bed on the opposite bulkhead, where Elizabeth sat on a cushion with her back against it. She wore the same clothes as when she had been captured but she was stitching a red silk dress that was clearly of fine quality.

As Richard stepped into the cabin she flinched, and then relaxed when she saw who it was. She quickly got to her feet and embraced her brother.

'Has he harmed you?' Richard asked.

She held him at arm's length and shook her head. 'He has not come near me. I sleep in the bunk and I have privacy. He sleeps over there,' she said, nodding towards the rolled mattress beneath the chart table.

Richard eased towards the bunk bed and sat her down. 'Has he told you anything of what is to become of us?'

'He wishes to marry me.' She lifted the red dress. 'In this.'

'But you haven't agreed, surely?'

'I have not. Yet he still insists. He doesn't threaten me, he doesn't approach too close to me. Despite everything he's done I believe he is genuine in his affection for me. But I don't know how long his patience and courtesy will last.' She picked up a pair of tailor's cutters. 'I'm trusted. He has no fear of me. And he's right. If I attack him, how would I survive? Even if I killed him in his sleep, we would all die.'

Richard looked around the cabin and saw the remains of a meal. 'He feeds you the same food as himself?'

She nodded, and with a nervous glance at the door offered what little she had left of the meal to Richard. ‘Salted beef, cheese and wine. I asked for ale and he gave it gladly. There are fresh biscuits for him and his officers. Haven’t they fed you and the others?’

He shook his head, swallowing the half-biscuit that remained on her plate. ‘I feel he wants us weakened. Stale biscuits and water and not enough to be shared among us.’

‘I heard him tell one of his men to put vinegar in the water to stop any sickness.’ She pressed the beaker into his hands.

Richard drained what was left of the ale. ‘There’s only a small crew: perhaps he fears we would try to overpower them. That’s hardly a thought any of us have had looking at those fearsome Turks. They would slaughter us.’

‘I also heard him say that he’s worried his men are sickening.’

‘Wherever he’s taking us, there will be those among us who will die. Martin said that whatever lies ahead, we must be ready.’ He extended his splinted arm. ‘Cut this free.’

This time, she didn’t question him about removing the splints but snipped the bindings free. ‘He argued with one of the other men. They want to use the women, but he’s warned them to leave them alone. He said the captives would fight back and everyone he’s taken is worth money when we get to Tunis.’

‘Tunis?’

She stripped away the last of the dressing on his arm and stood back as he stretched and tested the limb. ‘He’s afraid people will try to stop him before we get there.’

‘He must mean our ships.’

Richard was reluctant to share what Martin had told him. She saw the look on his face and it was not an expression of hope.

‘Surely that’s what will save us?’

He shook his head. ‘Martin thinks that if one of the King’s ships caught up with us, he could throw us all overboard. He won’t outrun a fast vessel. And if there is no evidence of captives, they can’t charge him with anything serious.’

She thought for a moment and then shook her head. ‘I don’t think it was our fleet he was talking about. Something else. He owes someone a debt.’

‘Whatever troubles he has, we might get caught in the middle. But we can do nothing while we are held here. Our only hope is to survive until we reach land and then try to escape.’

‘In a foreign land, where we cannot speak the language? How would we survive?’ She fell silent and for the first time he could remember, he saw her spirits were falling into the well of despondency. Before, it had always been Elizabeth who had faith in the future. He reached out and held her.

‘As long as we breathe, we have hope. And as long as we care for each other, we can survive. Never forget that. Don’t give in to despair, and never surrender to Challenor’s demands. The longer you resist, the more chance you have with him. If his feelings are as genuine as they appear to be, then he will live in expectation that he can win you back. Don’t antagonize him, but neither must you make him false promises.’

She touched his face. ‘Let us place our fate in the hands of the Lord.’

Richard kissed the top of her head. He remained silent, not wishing to dismiss her belief, but knowing that the responsibility for their survival lay in their own hands.

*

When he left the cabin, John Challenor turned and looked him up and down. Richard felt as though the man was sizing him up as would a bareknuckle prize fighter gauging the likelihood of beating his opponent. The seaman who had stood guard at the door pushed Richard forward to the top of the steps leading down from the quarterdeck. Richard turned to John Challenor.

‘I offer my thanks for her wellbeing.’

Challenor showed no sign of acknowledgement. He gave no hint that Richard’s gratitude meant anything to him. He turned his eyes back to the horizon.

‘Captain. You give a hundred men, women and children a sack of biscuits and fouled water. There is barely enough to feed a third of us. They’ll struggle to survive and will fight among themselves for the crumbs you offer. Sickness will follow. If we are a cargo to be sold or bartered, then you will have damaged goods. More food and ale instead of fouled water is what we need. Like your crew.’

The stocky man’s eyes bore into him. The request was not unreasonable. He nodded.

Richard went down the steps, his balance compensating for the pitching ship. He glanced back at Challenor and saw that the man was gazing forward of the buffeting sails. Richard gripped the side, felt it lurch, and his stomach tighten. A wisp of black cloud on the horizon was torn by lightning. The sea state had changed. The wind was blowing more strongly. Now the much feared malevolence clawed its way over the ship’s figurehead. How long before the storm reached them? How long before he had to face the terror again? And why was the ship heading directly for it?

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CHAPTER 8

John Challenor had never forgotten Elizabeth Sheriff. Nine years ago he had tied up at the Dartmouth quay and seen her for the first time, when she was little more than a child. He had reached his twenty-fifth birthday and thereafter, every time he brought his boat into the estuary, he had searched for her. He learnt that she had gone into service in a merchant's house and that she cared for her younger brother; he had even spoken occasionally to the lad until he, too, left Dartmouth. His skills as a deep-sea fisherman outclassed his ability to render his feelings into words. He was the kind of man who would wager that he could sail the forty-day journey to Newfoundland with his eyes closed, using only the wind on his face to direct him, but to find his way into Elizabeth's heart was beyond him. He had made himself known to her, engineering when he could step across the cobbled street and help lift her basket of laundry. Thereafter his stumbling attempts to court her were met with a gentle benevolence that was nothing more than a dismissal. She had saved his pride, such was her kindness.

She was not a woman of great beauty, but it was the very plainness of her looks that appealed to him. She lacked the flushed cheeks of an English rose like a country girl; her face was more sculptured, with high cheekbones and grey-green eyes that every sailor saw in a sea change when weather and sky competed for dominance. Not unlike her forthrightness when her mind and heart clashed, and she spoke with a sharpness that cut deeply. Never had he heard her do this with unkindness but more often in defence of her brother, who others thought had brought a curse on the local fishermen that fateful day.

Her hair tucked under a clean linen coif would peek out tantalizingly at the nape, and on more than one occasion, he had resisted the temptation to reach forward and tuck it under. As time passed, he grew bolder, more confident in his approach. He had accompanied her to the town's celebrations when an abundant catch was brought ashore and fisherwomen sang as they cut and salted fish for winter. Flute, drum and fiddle came onto the streets, the townspeople danced, but he had stood back as she danced only with other women. Men drank ale until they fell slumped in doorways, their womenfolk long retired to bed. And still he had not found the courage to ask for her hand in marriage. Still he lived in vain hope for any sign from her that she found his company more than simply agreeable, for there was no one else who had drawn him in so, who promised to be a safe harbour in the storm-tossed sea that had been his life so far.

Eventually, however, he found the resolve to ask for her hand in marriage. His patience paid off. It was now more than kindness that caused her to smile when in his company. She had mellowed. She had given it much thought, she told him. Although she was not yet ready to give her acceptance to his proposal, she was beginning to look more kindly at the prospect. He took her hand and pressed his lips against it. And she did not recoil. Nor did she show any embarrassment that others in the street had witnessed his love for her.

It was a cruel twist of fate that tore him from her. She accepted him only days before the pirates struck at Cawsand. Their offer was a simple one. A crew was needed and the Devon fishermen's skills were second to none. Join the pirates or be throat-cut and left in the rock pools as crab food. Since that day he had sailed and raided and seen sights of brutality he had never witnessed before in an age when violence was commonplace. When children hurled cats for sport, parents thrashed children and men beat their wives. And when, in contrast, Elizabeth Sheriff bore no ill will to anyone. And it was that which held fast in the mysterious place at his core, the place he never understood, and likely would never understand. So he had convinced himself that her agreement to his proposal still held, and the time lost was akin to a ship becalmed awaiting a fair wind and a change in course, so that he could return and rekindle the love he believed she once felt for him.

Challenor pulled his coat tighter. The wind was veering. The storm would strike before the following dawn. He turned and let his gaze follow the ship's wake towards the grey horizon. The distant ship had gained on them. The masthead lookout had called its bearing hours before and he knew it could be none other than an English warship, all sails set, racing to capture him. A simple and, he admitted to himself, not unexpected betrayal by Devon's vice admiral, Sir Richard Hawkins. Months before, they had struck a bargain. Challenor had wished to be granted a pardon, promising in return to deliver intelligence about the defences at Algiers, a city the size of London and the impregnable base of Barbary pirates who plied their trade across the Mediterranean. These men were now abandoning oared galleys and building ships like the Europeans, a tactic that would extend the distances they could sail and raid.

One night Challenor had lain off Teignmouth and rowed across the bar to meet Hawkins. Knowing he was a man who desired wealth as much as Challenor desired Elizabeth, Challenor had brought a cargo of wine and spices that would finance Hawkins's Devon estate. The cargo was hidden in caves. And the bargain was struck: intelligence for a pardon.

Challenor's hand unconsciously touched his cloak where a folded document nestled in his tunic's pocket. Weeks later, instead of an Act of Grace, Hawkins handed him the King's condemnation. Hawkins's regret had appeared genuine. Challenor had sat night after night reading the condemnation. The threat of capture and hanging.

> *The King's Majesty, having been informed through the manifold complaints made to his Highness by his own subjects as others, of the many depredations and piracy committed by lewd and ill-disposed persons habituated to spoil and rapine, insensible and desperate of the peril they draw upon themselves, and the imputation they cast upon the honour of their Sovereign so precious to him, he is inforced to reiterate his loathing and detestation of the crimes. If any shall be found culpable or contemptuous, his Majesty is resolved and hereby declares that such punishment shall be inflicted on them so that others may be*

forewarned from committing so odious acts and be deterred from aiding, comforting or abetting such malefactors. These accessories shall be enquired of, tried, heard, determined, and adjudged and shall suffer such pains of death…

And so it was John Challenor had been condemned to pursue his life as best he could or be captured and hanged. There could be no turning back.

Challenor had extracted a final promise from Hawkins that he would pull back the men from the Bears Cove gun fort and give him a night to take what he could. There'd been a risk that Sir Richard Hawkins would betray him that night at Dartmouth, but Challenor had thought it unlikely because there would be no guarantee Challenor would be killed. If he was arrested he could have told of the deal that had been made and blow Hawkins's reputation out of the water. The moment Challenor had sailed into the Narrow Seas from Dartmouth Hawkins would have moved his ill-gotten cargo to places of safety. Once any evidence was hidden, then it would have benefited him to name the renegade Englishman who had attacked Dartmouth and seized prisoners to be sold as slaves.

Hawkins's orders would be simple. Hunt him down. Kill him on sight.

The sails on the horizon were closer.

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CHAPTER 9

The Captives were in a pitiful state. Some had tried to reason with others about sharing the food, but like any animal fighting for survival, it was the most determined and aggressive who took the prize. Widow Harris had snatched two biscuits from the sack. It had been a fight, but despite her weakened state she had held her own and had given one to the ferryman when he returned. The biscuits were poor quality.

‘Tunis?’ said Martin.

‘Beth said that’s what he was planning.’

‘Damned if I know why. I’d have thought Algiers would be his plan. The Pasha there buys captives.’ He broke his biscuit in half against the bulkhead. ‘Wherever he’s going we’ve a long voyage ahead.’

Martin gave a piece to Richard. The young blacksmith looked uncertain – it was very generous given how hungry they all were.

Martin nodded for him to take it. ‘I made good money smuggling brandy for you. Besides, that’s little more than horse biscuit. Even a beast would spit it out. But it’s better than nothing.’ He grinned and teased out a weevil. ‘Worm factory. You get used to it.’

Richard chewed the coarse biscuit, but it clung to the roof of his mouth. ‘Is there any water?’

Martin scooped a ladle of water from the near-exhausted bucket closest to them. ‘Let the biscuit sit a while.’ He smiled. ‘Makes your stomach think you’ve eaten.’

Richard shook his head. He wanted the stale taste gone.

The ship rolled. The planks creaked.

‘He’s changing course,’ said the ferryman.

‘Is he?’ The thump of the waves and the creaking timbers sounded and felt no different to Richard. ‘As I made my way back, I saw we were heading for a storm on the horizon. Why would he do that?’

Martin shrugged. ‘There’ll be a reason. Men like him know the sea. I’ll not make any comparison, but there are men like Drake and Hawkins’s father, John, who are born to it. Not pressed like most of us. Challenor might have salt water in his veins.’

‘Drake and Hawkins?’

‘Aye. I served in ’58.’

‘Against the Spanish? I knew of merchants who raised money to finance ships for the fleet.’

‘Like as not they had an eye on trade. Better for them if the English won. There were fine seamen went to war that day. But Drake was the best of them, as hard a taskmaster as he was, he had courage and a cool head – that’s what drove him. People forget he took the fleet out to attack the Spanish at anchor the month before. Storms turned us back. The Spanish thought we had retreated in fear.’ He shook his head. ‘It were the sou’westerlys that were against us, not the sight of them great galleons, and the same winds favoured the Spaniards when they came for us. Drake knew that. Course he did. High tide was an hour an’ a half afore midnight the previous night. We were bottled up at Cattewater and the Sound. When the Spaniards were sighted, the tide was still coming in. Now, who could launch a fleet against an incoming tide? He was a commander who knew his business. He waited several hours more so he could take the fleet out on a powerful outgoing tide. That’s a man who used his noggin.’ He raised his thumb. ‘And I’ll wager John Challenor is going to use that storm to good purpose.’

‘And risk being wrecked?’

Martin shook his head. ‘If it’s that big a risk, he’ll have weighed the odds. You can hide in a storm. A black night, torrential rain. If he’s being chased, he’ll either run through it or lie in wait for whoever’s after his blood.’ He grinned, pointing to the gun deck above their heads. ‘The guns up there, they’re bronze cannon, short-barrelled pieces. The King’s ships like culverins – long-range guns. No good on a pitching ship. Distance throws the shot off. What’s he’s got are nice demi-culverins, hurl shot far beyond five hundred yards, but better at three. Close-quarter, Richard.

Point-blank. If he's spoiling for trouble, then I'll wager we'll be in a shit pit of a fight.'

'And we'll be trapped down here.'

'Mebbe, mebbe not. He's too few men to handle the sails and the guns. Any fighting man will put his men to work the guns, so who's he going to put up on the mastheads? Eh? The Turks won't do it.' His eyebrows raised, questioning, then he bent his head to look down the row of captured Dartmouth men. 'The likes of you and me is who.'

'He wouldn't risk his ship using us,' said Richard.

'Aye, there's a chance you're right. But if you are, then we'll be cast into the sea.'

*

Challenor knew he could not outrun an English race-built galleon. His sailors were sickening, too few to man sails and guns. His intended plan had to work. Two thousand yards now. Bearing down fast. The black storm was closer still. He needed to spill the wind from his sails, to slow the *Falcon*. Let the King's ship gain on him. As to the outcome, it would be a matter of who was the more skilful ship's captain, and he was a West Country sailor born and bred. His ship might not match the galleon in speed or armament, but he could use wave and wind to cripple her. Challenor knew how the English warships chased down corsairs. At a thousand yards, the ship would open fire with its long cannons. The shot would fall a hundred yards short, it would be a warning, the intention clear. They intended to board him. And if they engaged and brought down his masts, then he was as good as hanged even if his twenty Janissaries fought to the death.

Challenor called to his bosun. 'Mr Chesney! Furl the mains'l.'

The experienced officer, who had once served on one of the Queen's ships and found more satisfactory conditions and profit aboard a pirate ship, called out the orders through his hailing trumpet. Bodies scurried upwards. Orders were passed along; sheets were eased. The main luffed and lost the wind. Challenor had waited as long as he dared before stepping inside his cabin. He would soon run out of time to warn Elizabeth. He pulled the door closed behind him against a wind that would have taken it from its hinges.

Elizabeth pressed herself back as he hauled the rolled mattress from beneath the small chart table and bundled it onto the bunk.

‘There will be gunfire. Stay on the floor.’

‘Please, John, tell me where my brother is.’

‘You mustn’t worry.’ He stepped towards her; she recoiled.

‘Beth, lie down on the floor with your back against the bunk.’

The ship rolled, she stumbled, he caught her. She couldn’t pull herself free as he pushed her down. Their faces were close. For a moment she thought he was going to kiss her. But if that had been the temptation the man showed admirable restraint.

‘We might all die this night. Do as I say. There’s a chance – a slim one – that we’ll come through. And we must have no lights showing.’ He opened the lantern’s door and blew out the candle. They were plunged into near total darkness except for what light glimmered off the sea through the aft cabin’s windows.

Leaving her on the floor, he stepped back into the storm. He bellowed to the bosun’s mate: ‘Mr Pewsey! Bring up the prisoners. No women with infants. Do it now!’

Seamen lifted the hatches. Challenor felt the first stinging tips of cold rain. They would soon be in the squall. The rising seas washed across the bulwarks, seething over the foredeck.

Men moved to their stations. Challenor needed to act quickly. There was still too much canvas pushing them through the heavy swells. Two men were at the helm. Three would have been better to steer through the corkscrewing waves that lay ahead at the fringe of the storm, but he had chosen the strongest of his crew. He dared not allow a confused sea to take him astern and push the ship into a deep trough. Such an error of judgement would lose the ship. No, what he wanted was for the fast-sailing galleon to see him bring down all sails and slow his speed even more, as if fearful of what a violent sea could do to the smaller of the two vessels. And for them to follow his wallowing ship into the blackness.

A dozen crew with ague or scurvy lay helpless below while the topside men stood at the ready. One hundred and seven crew to work the ship and man the guns was already stretching their capabilities. A running fight with a King’s vessel would test them sorely. The twenty-two Turks would cover the small bow gun and offer musket fire. Orders had been passed to the

officers. Men on deck gripped their assigned halyard ready to haul up the main topsail. Canvas would need securing but they were too few to go aloft and give him the turn he needed when tacking through the darkness. Forty men below on the gun deck manned the ten guns on the larboard side. There would be only one chance to engage their pursuers, and the men knew their survival was down to his skill and their ability to follow his orders. Renegades they may be, defiled men, pirates of low character, killers who would squander others' lives without a second thought, but they were men who had the measure of their captain.

The pugilistic-looking bosun's mate and a half-dozen men forced the cowed prisoners onto the deck. A hundred men, women and children crouched from the sudden impact of the wind and rain, huddling together, bedraggled and fearful. Richard squinted through the spray. The approaching squall's roar was unmistakable. He looked up at the square sail high on the mast as it strained from the wind. The prow plunged into a rolling wave, throwing the spuming sea into the triangular sails at the bows that looked ready to be ripped from their restraints. He gripped the nearest handhold. Martin was at his back.

'See it for what is, lad. It's us or the storm. Don't be afeared.'

Richard turned as Challenor's voice bellowed on the following wind. 'Mr Pewsey. The hatches. We're already awash.' As the sailors battened canvas over the slatted hatch covers, Richard saw that the Turks had gathered forward. Each man unwrapped four muskets from a canvas bag. Before having the prisoners brought on deck Challenor must have briefed his crew. It seemed to Richard's untrained eye that every man was where he was supposed to be.

Challenor addressed his captives, who clung to whatever support could be found now that the ship pitched and rolled in the heavier seas. Spray plumed over the sides; rain lashed down. 'Men, women and those children old enough will take their place with my lads on each brace. You will haul when you are told. We must steer the ship into that,' he said, pointing at the swirling mass bearing down on them. 'You will follow the orders given by those in command.' He squinted against the increasing bite of the rain. Richard and Martin were in the forefront of the prisoners, as were ten other men. 'You men there! The main topsail yard.' He nodded to Pewsey. 'Get to it!'

Pewsey grabbed a handful of the nearest man's shirt and hustled Richard and the others amidships. 'Main topsail is hauled on the bosun's whistle. You men furl and secure. Any man here served?'

'Aye,' said Martin, knowing it was better to be thought as being of use.

'Two of my lads and these three with you. Once done, you wait for my signal and cast off the gaskets. Understood?'

Martin nodded and pushed Richard onto the nearest ratlines. The blacksmith craned his neck. 'It's eighty feet, lad. Don't look down. Don't look up. You see the clouds scudding over your head and you fall back watching them. Just look at your hands. Focus on your grip. I'll be with you.' Then Martin commanded the three men who were to be with him on the top yard: 'Shoes off if you have 'em. Barefoot's better to balance on the rope.'

Richard kicked free his shoes without a second thought. The ship heeled, shuddering. Why worry about shoes now? Grasping the taut, ladder-like shrouds, he hauled himself up. Fear turned his knuckles white. Spray stung his eyes. His hair caught his face. He dared to let go one hand and pull it free, half turning into the wind. As he did, he saw Challenor turn back to the helmsmen who were fighting the whipstaff. There was no time to stop. Men clambered upwards either side of him. Wind whistled through the shrouds. Martin was already ahead of him on the parallel rigging. His grip tightened. If he could keep his eyes on the older man who had befriended him he would not look down. He would not fall into the tormented sea.

Challenor gave the helmsmen a nod. 'Wait for my command, lads.' The rudder had limited manoeuvrability, barely fifteen degrees when he wanted to tack. He would combine current and wind and the men's strength to make the ship do his bidding. A dozen water spouts erupted 150 yards away, followed by the rumbling boom of cannon fire. John Challenor knew he had to enter the storm's swirling darkness, furl his sails, and let the pursuing galleon go downwind. Then he would sheer up, gain the weather gage and, once he had the windward position, bring his guns to bear. Everything depended on the topmen's ability and strength, and then the speed of his gunners.

The predator was closing.

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CHAPTER 10

The Shrouds Narrowed the higher they went until they reached the main topsail yard. Richard swayed as the ship lurched. Fear gave him life-saving strength. Despite its gift his arms ached, unused as they were to the demands being made on them, bearing much of his weight as he inched along the slippery foothold, his curled toes gripping the rope as hard with salt as forged iron. Voices carried faintly from the deck far below. The masts swayed, making the ship and his stomach lurch.

A strange sense overcame him, offering clarity and vision, a heightened awareness of the heavenly world around him. Above him the topgallant had been furled earlier. Beyond it a sudden tear in the clouds threw lightning across the ship, the masts, sails and the white water. It cracked open the sky. He was so high above the sea an irrational thought beckoned him to release his grip and extend his arms. He would fly free on the gale and be blown back to where he belonged.

A piercing whistle penetrated the irrational thought, bringing him back to reality. Richard and the other men straddled the yard, readying to furl and lash the canvas. It billowed. Challenor had turned the *Falcon*, helping to spill wind out of the sail. Richard was second man from the edge of the yardarm where a fellow captive, Thomas Carey, clung desperately to the leech of the sail, trying to haul it in towards the spar.

Richard could see he was not doing enough to control the flapping canvas. And he was closer to him than he had been a minute earlier. Carey had let go of the sail; he was edging nearer, using one arm to cling to the yard; in the other he brandished a knife. Richard realized he must have hidden it from their captors The stinging rain made Richard question the

man’s purpose. Was he trying to cut free the sail? Why? But then Carey yelled and his voice carried.

‘Jonah! You curse us! Like you cursed your own father and mine! Both dead with the others that night. You came back and evil came with you!’

He suddenly slashed out with his knife arm. Richard recoiled, twisting his back against the spar. He flailed, lost his footing, scrabbled to regain it, his weakened arm taking his weight. Fire speared through his muscle into his shoulder. His feet found the foot rope, giving him balance, allowing him to push himself against Carey’s lunge. An arm used to hammering iron gripped his assailant’s wrist. But Carey was a shipwright and had his own strength; he pressed the attack home despite the pitch and roll of the ship. Richard knew his weakened arm would not support him for long. Carey snarled, squinted against the pebble-hard rain and tossed his head to clear the hair from his face. A billowing edge of heavy canvas struck him across the face. He raised a hand and lost his grip on the knife. His feet went from beneath him. Richard snatched at his arm, caught it and held the man who had tried to kill him dangling in space. Carey, terrified, open-mouthed, tried to reach up his other hand to grasp Richard’s wrist and haul himself back, but the very act caused him to twist Richard’s grip from his own.

He fell away, his scream swallowed by the banshee howling through the rigging. Richard’s heart near stopped. The shock of seeing the man plucked away so suddenly stunned him for a moment but as the threatening canvas snapped and cracked he stretched over the yard and gathered it in, eventually tying it, the dull fire in his arm muscles subsiding. Oblivious to the rain that passed over the mastheads and left only the cold wind, he clung to the only thing that might save him from falling.

Martin was several feet away to his left, shouting something. He could not hear but when the older man pointed to the end of the spar it was obvious he wanted Richard to go to the yardarm and take Carey’s place and secure the flapping canvas. If the gale’s strength got beneath it the force might tear free the gaskets that secured the canvas. He edged along the foot rope, clinging to what was mostly a furled topsail. The belligerent canvas slapped back at his grasping hands. The ship heeled. Richard slipped, losing balance. Desperation gave him added strength as he regained his footing and snatched at the flapping canvas. He secured the sail and clung on,

looking back to Martin, who had watched his efforts and, with a nod of his head, smiled in encouragement.

Waves erupted from the splash of cannonballs, then came the thundering boom of the not-too-distant galleon's guns. The *Falcon* slowed and seemed in an instant to go astern from the force of the waves. Richard had no idea what was happening, but no sooner had he begun to wonder than the ship was smothered in near complete darkness. The clouds loured overhead. The wind churned sea and sky. The mast felt as though it was bending. He and the others clung on. There were no lights from the deck below, or from the bow or stern of the ship. They were part of the blackness. Richard had no sense of how long they held on to the swaying spar, hands aching from cold as they gripped the furled canvas. Nor could he judge the distance of the puffs of flame that bellowed from the pursuing ship's cannon away to one side. Then he heard the high-pitched whistle and Martin yelling for him to release the gaskets holding the canvas. He fumbled with the ties, desperately concentrating, trying to make his fingers work. He looked along to where the other men grasped the loosened canvas and suddenly he too was trying to hold on to its weight. Another blast of whistle and he saw Martin release. The canvas surged away. The wind was now behind them. Richard saw the lights of the other ship. And for a moment it felt as though the deck below swung violently, taken by the wind, leaping like an agile beast onto its prey.

*

Challenor's gamble might still fail if he did not bring his guns to bear quickly enough. And close enough to the enemy ship. The violent sea made it impossible to measure a ball's trajectory. He needed to be within a hundred yards. Point-blank.

The main and topsail had been brought to bear as he went below leaving his bosun to follow his instructions and make the final manoeuvre. He bent low beneath the beams of the larboard-side gun deck; his master gunner crouched over number-one gun, the furthest from the hatch. Only four men per gun but it would have to suffice. The men would double up in their duties. The nine-foot-long cannons had been charged; the gun ports were still closed. Ten gun crews stared in his direction. Challenor had never

failed them in the years they had plundered with him. And being hanged from a yardarm would be their fate if he made the wrong decision now.

‘Mr Willoughby! Ready?’

The master gunner raised his hand.

‘Run out the guns!’ Challenor ordered.

The gun ports slapped open. Forty men heaved ropes; their wheeled cannons rolled forward. Challenor leant across the length of the nearest cannon and peered into the night. He had the weather gage and now the ship that had borne down on him was no more than 120 yards downwind. Lights still blazed from its aft cabin and deck lanterns, and now his ship was cutting directly across its stern. The gunners waited for his command, one man in every gun crew ready with the linstock, the short staff with a grip that held the slow match ready to ignite the cannon’s touch-hole.

Challenor waited for the ship to steady, letting it ride a swell. The moment he issued the order for number-one gun to fire, the remaining nine guns would fire one after the other, which would give Challenor the spread of shot he needed. He dropped his raised arm. The roar deafened him. The cannon recoiled, the crew reloading as the second fired. And then the third. This was where skill and speed were needed. The barrels swabbed, fresh powder rammed home, then the ball. Challenor could not see whether he had hit the opposing ship through the smoke and darkness, but the sound of splintering wood reached them and then as the *Falcon*’s speed cleared the smoke he saw the devastation of the enemy’s aft cabin and rudder. The raucous gun crews cheered with curses. Ropes were hauled, cannons nosed back out, muzzles ready to rake the galleon’s waterline.

No sooner had the final cannon fired than the ship veered as he had ordered. They were running fast now. The hull carving through the waves, a wolf of the sea racing through the cover of darkness, upwind, the weather gage completely to his advantage, bringing them parallel to the English ship, which was not responding with any speed. Whose sails flapped, losing way. His plan had worked. The rudder had been shot away. The Turks had laid down steady musket fire on the galleon’s quarterdeck where the officers were likely to be. At least their captain. No matter how accomplished he might be – if he still lived – sails alone could not give them the manoeuvrability they needed now. Their starboard gun ports were still closed, expecting as they would have been to bear down on Challenor’s

ship from port. Their captain had been wrong-footed. If he dared open them now in a sea like this with wind-driven waves breaking against the hull and without a rudder, then he could flood his gun deck.

Challenor looked across to soot-blackened Willoughby, who stared back through the clinging smoke, the three-foot-long burning taper ready to light the touch-hole. Challenor gave the signal. Cannon fire raked the English ship's starboard side as they stormed past. It might not cause her to be holed but they would be troubled by injured men and damaged gun ports. By the time the *Falcon* had slid along the length of the galleon, Challenor turned for the hatch.

'Pox-ridden whoresons you may be, but you can outshoot the King's gunners from now until we fall off the edge of the world! You've saved our necks tonight! An extra ration of grog for you all. Well done, lads.'

Their cheers followed him as he emerged into the wild night, glad of the cold buffeting air and the whip of rain. He strode past his bosun, clapped him on the shoulder, and saw the galleon wallowing in the swells behind them.

'Well done, Mr Chesney. Have the lamps lit and get Pewsey to bring down those wretches from the yards.'

'We lost two captives we sent topside,' said his bosun.

'Who?' The question was involuntary. If Richard Sheriff had plunged to his death, it would make his attempt to bring Elizabeth around an even more Herculean task.

'How would I know?'

'No, of course you wouldn't. Who of us would? A foolish question. Carry on.'

He watched the bodies clambering down, gathering amidships and being pushed towards the uncovered hatch. A figure stood head and shoulders above most others. Richard Sheriff was alive. Another gamble had paid off.

*

Below decks, the soaking wet captives shivered. Their encounter with the squall and heavy seas had taken their toll. Richard noticed Martin appeared less troubled by the experience; he stripped down and wrung out his shirt, impervious to the chilled air. He glanced at Richard.

‘Not many lubbers could do what you did tonight, lad.’ He flicked his head towards the other Dartmouth men down the line. ‘Them an’ all. I’ve seen foremast Jacks balk at going up to the top yards in wild weather. Earned ’em a thrashing, mind. English captains don’t hold with quivering hearts.’

Richard shook his head and faltered as he sought to express himself. ‘There were moments I was frozen in fear. I nearly choked on my own heartbeat. Being so high, clinging to the canvas on the spar. It was beyond my wildest imaginings that I could be higher than a seabird in a storm. And then to see the guns billowing flame in the darkness… I swear the storm blew their heat across me.’ He shook his head and fell silent. ‘My God, Martin, I felt like a creature from another world.’ He put a hand to his face, realizing quite how extraordinary the experience had been.

‘The sea won’t cause you grief no more. You turned your back on fear tonight.’

Richard held his gaze and then nodded. The experienced seaman knew it, as did Richard himself. He had faced his terror and conquered it.

‘I saw someone below us on the mainsail yard go into the sea,’ said Richard.

Martin nodded, pulled on his wet shirt and settled himself back against the hull’s planking. ‘Remember the tanner who came down from Plymouth a few years back? Burghley, William Burghley. Married that seamstress Alice. It were him. When the ship rolled, he lost his footing. There’s another widow who’ll be grieving. She’ll end up in a whorehouse wherever Challenor is heading for. They had three children. All dead of the fever. So at least that’s a small mercy.’

They fell silent. Exhaustion claimed everyone who had been called to exert themselves. Richard was uncertain whether his companion had seen the attempt on his life. If he had, it might be used against him. A bargaining chip for favours. What might the older man have witnessed?

‘Martin…’

Richard hesitated. The older man was settling down next to Widow Harris, covering her trembling body with the shawl she had left below when called to the deck with the others. It was the only warmth the ailing woman had.

‘Aye?’ said the ferryman.

‘Thomas Carey was lost on our yard,’ he said.

Martin stared at him. Of course he had seen the attack, Richard realized. How could he not?

‘Men die when up top. And men who bear grudges have their thoughts in the wrong place. It’s not something you should concern yourself with.’

Richard was grateful. Nothing more would be said of it.

Martin curled in on himself, arms wrapped around his body for warmth. ‘So you see, lad, it’s like the Good Book says: you were baptized as a child in water for repentance, and tonight you had a baptism of fire. Perhaps the Almighty has a plan for you, after all.’

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CHAPTER 11

Richard's Plea for better food had been ignored until the following day when the hatches were thrown open and the captives ordered on deck. The pirates slapped and pushed the cold and hungry prisoners along the deck and the freshening wind. Blue sky and scudding clouds welcomed them. No waves breached the gunwales – the storm was long behind them. The ship ploughed steadily onwards through a calmer sea. They squinted in the bright light, and although the sun was hidden behind passing clouds it blessed them with its warmth.

They clustered along the walkway. The Turks were on the opposite side, watching as sailors went about their business. Richard and the others were huddled below the quarterdeck where two men waited: one, the bosun, Chesney; the other, the bosun's mate, Pewsey. Neither looked kindly.

Challenor came out of his cabin with Elizabeth. The two men stepped aside. Elizabeth held back, but Challenor took her arm and pulled her with him. She gripped the rail, saw Richard, raised her hand momentarily to greet him. He looked as wretched as the others. But Richard nodded and smiled. He was all right. Challenor stared down at the misery that stood below him. A child cried, shushed and comforted by its mother.

'You were taken like sheep. Townsmen who did not defend their families. Herded aboard because of your cowardice, your fear of death. You are cargo. Fit for nothing except to be sold to the highest bidder. That is your fate. It is not necessarily an unpleasant one. Men work their trade; women serve households. Your lack of courage will in fact serve you well. Defiance would not bring an easy death where you are going. So look to yourselves and find the strength that will attract a master who values hard

work.’ He looked at their pitiful faces. He was giving them a chance to prepare themselves for what lay ahead. He had not lied. There were wealthy households willing to pay good money. And others, of course, who molested the women, and those who enjoyed the pleasures of young men with or without their consent. That outcome was beyond his control. ‘You will be fed salted fish and pork and drink the same ale as my crew. You will not succumb to sickness on this voyage. Every day from now, you will spend two hours on deck, thirty at a time. The night we came, you cursed a man, saying he brought you bad luck. Yet he spoke up, asking you to be fed more than biscuits and water. You have him to thank.’

Challenor nodded to his bosun. ‘Get them fed, Mr Chesney, and keep their stench downwind.’

Chesney shouted to his men to herd the captives forward. They were turned and jostled. Richard turned back.

‘Captain Challenor, I beg you. Release my sister so she may be with me.’

Martin dug a finger in his ribs and hissed a warning. ‘Don’t press your luck.’

Another voice behind him, one of the other captives, muttered loud enough for Richard to hear, ‘He’s rutting her. She’s already his whore.’

Richard twisted, saw the man’s pudgy, jowled face. His nose spurted blood from Richard’s punch. The man went down, the prisoners sidestepping out of the way. Martin restrained Richard from following up the attack.

Pewsey, the bosun’s mate, pushed into the throng and struck Richard with his cosh. The blow threw him onto the deck as Pewsey kicked Richard’s victim to his feet. He pointed at a groggy Richard, hand nursing the back of his head. ‘You stain my deck with blood, you scrub it. They eat now. Not you.’

Challenor called down from the quarterdeck as Martin helped Richard to his feet. ‘You’re quick to temper, Richard Sheriff. What did that man say to you?’

Richard shook his head. ‘It was a provocation, is all.’

‘About what?’

Richard fell mute.

Challenor gestured to the bosun's mate. 'Secure him for five days once he's done your bidding, Mr Pewsey. No food or water for three of those days.' He pointed at the bloodied man. 'That man there. Come forward.'

The injured captive, hand to his face, checked the blood on his palm and wiped it away on his sleeve. He stepped nervously towards Challenor.

'What did you say to provoke this man? The man whose courage has resulted in your fellow captives being given victuals and drink?'

'I dunno, sir. Words just came off my tongue. I meant nothing by 'em. I swear.'

'You do not know what you said? Or you know what words passed your lips but do not wish to disclose them? It cannot be both. Which is it?'

The man, named Christopher Dilwyn, looked about him, as if searching for support from the others. He shook his head. 'I would prefer not to say, sir. I will apologize.'

'For what?'

'My ill-thought words, sir.'

'I am waiting,' said Challenor.

Elizabeth had a good enough idea of what might have been said. She touched Challenor's arm and whispered, 'John, he meant no harm, I am sure. You know Richard has a temper.'

Challenor showed no sign of displeasure at her interference. 'There is only one matter that would make your brother strike out.' His questioning look told her he knew exactly what might have been inferred. He lowered his voice. 'Do you think me deaf?'

Richard realized that the man's life might hang in the balance. 'Captain Challenor, it was a reference to me. An insult is all.'

'And you, Master Sheriff, are an honourable man, but a poor liar.' He pointed at the stricken-looking man. 'The woman at my side is under my protection. Nothing more. You understand?'

Dilwyn nodded.

'So you made a crude reference to her, did you not?'

Dilywn nodded again.

Challenor stared at him. There was a hint of regret as he condemned the man: 'And that I will not tolerate.'

Dilywn realized his carelessness might now cost him his life. He fell to his knees. 'Captain, sir, I beg you. I will make whatever recompense is

necessary. I swear by the good Lord who is my witness.'

'Then you can converse with the Lord while you wait to die.' He nodded to the bosun. 'Put him in the net.'

Chesney beckoned the nearest Janissaries, who snatched the man to his feet and dragged him protesting towards the front of the ship.

'Holy Christ,' whispered Martin.

'What will they do to him?' said Richard.

'Sling him in a net below the bowsprit. No food or drink. The salt water will keep him soaked, cold and starving. Thirst will be the worse torture.'

'For how long?'

'Until he can bear it no longer and cuts himself free with the knife they give him. Drowning is better than what he'll endure.'

The bosun's mate turned his attention to Richard. 'On your knees.' Richard obeyed. Pewsey pressed his boot into his shoulder. 'Stay there.'

A seaman pushed a wooden pail forward, dropping the scrubbing block into it, splashing Richard's face. 'I'll tell you when to stop,' said Pewsey. With that, he whipped the captives forward to where they would be fed.

Richard stayed on his knees, took the block of stone, stretched forward and pressed the stone back and forth across the blood-speckled deck. He raised his face to Challenor, who stared down at him. The scrubbing block was called a holystone. It placed a man on his knees, laid low, as if genuflecting before a superior. In this case Captain John Challenor.

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CHAPTER 12

The Cage was barely big enough to accommodate Richard bent double, legs stretched as best he could. The darkness was almost absolute. Bilge water sloshed around him. The thump of waves against the hull and the sound of scurrying rats were all that could be heard. Without knowledge or sense of time he was left unsure whether it was day or night. He didn't know how long he had been caged when he heard a voice calling his name. Rousing from his stupor, he saw the dim light of a lantern approaching.

It was Martin, hunched over, the flickering lantern held before him with one hand and a wooden bowl in the other. The effort of crawling through the dark and confined space made him wheeze with effort. 'I thought I'd find you here.' He grinned. 'Would have been a damn sight easier if they'd tied you to the topmast.' He pressed his face against the bars and hooked the lantern as close as he could so that both men could see each other. Martin cupped the bowl. 'Many gave a spoon of their own food so you could eat. They know that if it weren't for you speaking out, they'd starve.' He edged a spoonful through the bars, allowing Richard to swallow what it offered, and then spoon-fed him until the bowl was empty. 'I'll try and bring you more tomorrow.'

Richard nodded his thanks. 'It's hard to know what time of day or night it is. I don't even hear the watch bells down here.'

'It's the second night,' said Martin. He peered at the cramped conditions. 'You'll be hard-pressed to walk after being cooped up in here for another three days, but walk you must. Don't show weakness or beg for anything. Especially mercy.' He lifted and dropped the heavy padlock. 'And there's

no hope of stealing the key. The bosun keeps it on his belt as best as I can see.'

'I forged enough of them to know it's a simple lock, Martin. Find me a ship's nail or something I can bend and I could open it to let me stretch out more. Somewhere back there must be tools. Every ship needs a carpenter. Find a nail, bend it square at the bottom. Do that and I can free myself. Have you seen a carpenter's bench anywhere?'

Martin thought about the way he had come. 'The main hold is stacked with barrels, roped and secure, and bales of wool covered in sackcloth, but I saw no sign of tools. Likely as not a carpenter's place will be tucked away in a corner at the end of the gun deck. I won't be able to get up there. But I'll see what I can find. Now, I'd best be getting back.'

Richard reached through the bars; the two men clasped hands. 'Thank those who gave me food.'

'I will.'

'Any news?'

'Challenor buried ten men dead of scurvy. He'll be shorthanded now. He'll have us all back on those yards and halyards, damned if he won't. Them Turks won't sail a ship like this. I'll find what I can to get you out of this rat trap. God bless you, lad.'

'And you, my friend,' said Richard. 'Don't take risks for me. They'll kill you for it.'

'They'll have to catch me first.'

Martin turned away with the lantern, its light diminishing until there was only darkness.

Richard felt despondency creep over him. He would survive, he believed that, but seeing Martin leave and take the warmth of light and friendship with him made him realize how utterly alone he was. Alone and helpless. But he shook off the self-pity. He had every reason to live. Elizabeth needed him.

*

The rhythm of the ship became familiar to his ears. He sensed when the ship changed course as his body tilted gently despite the confines of his cage. The grinding of wood and metal as direction was altered and the

sudden thump of wave after wave, either left or right from where he was entombed, brought conflicting emotions of anxiety and hope. If the ship was attacked or fell foul of an unknown danger, a reef or a rogue wave, he would drown in darkness. He dismissed the fear, berating himself, vowing never to succumb to it again, while knowing it was beyond the laws of nature never to have to face it again. The sooner he could reach the deck again better the chance he'd have to see his sister.

He fell into a semi-conscious state, not knowing whether he was asleep and dreaming or awake and his mind playing tricks in the dark, yet he knew that madness could take him if he did not purge the gnawing doubts about what might befall them all when the ship docked at Tunis. His stomach knotted, realizing he had not tasted food for what felt a long time. The food that one of the sailors had brought had been little more than watery gruel that reeked of fish, and that felt as if it had been a long time ago.

He was roused by a pirate cursing at him as he reached forward with the iron-toothed key, turned it in the lock and yanked open the cage door.

'Move your arse unless you want to stay here for another five days.'

Richard fell forward as the hunched man scurried away. So he had been imprisoned for five days and had not seen Martin since the second day. Richard hoped he had not caused harm to his friend. He forced his legs to move. Pain shot through his muscles. He dragged himself a few yards, an involuntary cry escaping as he felt the agony crease his body. The pirate turned, waited, searching the darkness beyond for his prisoner.

'Up, damn you! Up!'

A torrent of abuse spewed from the pirate as he made his way back to where Richard was trying to stand in the low confines of whichever deck he had been imprisoned. He felt the man's fist grab his shirt collar and haul him to his knees. 'Up, you bastard.'

He offered no explanation why he was helping the young Englishman to where this lower deck, for that is what it seemed to be, ended and the ship's voluminous hold appeared. The hefty curved ribs of the ship and broad planking of the hull made him think of being inside Jonah's mythical whale. He saw the roped barrels and stacked bales of wool that Martin had spoken of, which meant that John Challenor had been raiding before he seized the men and women of Dartmouth.

The pirate threw him into the open space. 'Now stand!'

Richard pressed the palms of his hand into his thighs and levered himself upright. Light seeped from above. And with it muffled shouts and curses and the low rumble of wheels against wood.

He crawled up to the gun deck. The cannons had been rolled back from the gun ports, which were shut. The crews were ramming home cloth-covered powder charges, chain shot in every other barrel, and a ball from the rack that lay beside each gun in the rest. The *Falcon* was ready for action, but with the ports closed, showed no sign of aggression to any other vessel beyond the ship.

The gun crews squatted at their posts. One sailor, the nearest to Richard, pointed at him.

‘On deck! Now!’ He grinned. ‘Unless you want to miss the hanging.’

*

Richard stumbled upward, shielding his eyes from the brilliance of the light. He emerged into a gaggle of prisoners facing the bow. Richard’s exit from below meant he was facing the quarterdeck where Elizabeth stood next to Challenor, her hands covering her face. Richard’s vision was blurred, his confusion added to by the sudden wailing around him. Grabbing a handhold, he twisted around and saw more of the captives crammed together on deck guarded by pirates and Janissaries. A wail of grief surged up as he glimpsed pirates pulling a halyard, hauling aloft a man, hands tied behind his back, the rope around his neck. Women screamed. The man kicked vigorously, choking to death as they hoisted him high below the yardarm.

Richard’s throat was parched from his imprisonment, but his mind screamed his friend’s name: *Martin!* He fell back against the ship’s side, but then forced himself to stand and watch the swaying body. The pirates tied off the rope and let the man’s body hang at the end of the spar above the sea. His bowels loosened in a final act of degradation.

Challenor demanded their attention. ‘Those who raise a hand against any man who serves on my ship will suffer the same fate. Be thankful for my mercy. It is within the Janissaries’ right to behead those who challenge them. You learn your lessons the hard way!’

Richard’s gaze held the swaying body. Had there been food in his stomach, he would have vomited. Convinced that he was responsible for Martin’s death, he swallowed his anger-fuelled gorge and wiped away his tears. His eyes started to become accustomed to the light. The body twisting in the wind was Gabriel Pryor.

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CHAPTER 13

The Gentle Pitch and roll of the ship made Richard stumble. He reached back and grabbed the rail of the ship, pressing his back into it, shaking free the dizziness and hunger of his confinement. By the time he turned to look back up at the quarterdeck, Elizabeth was no longer in sight.

The captives were herded amidships and forward, split into groups, roughly handled by the crew who remained on deck. He pulled himself up again, looking across the weary faces of his fellow prisoners. The shuffling men and women seemed to be less reluctant to do the pirates' bidding now; having already learnt to heave the topsail halyards, they were less alarmed at being shoved into position again. And, just as he had once been ordered to clamber up the ratlines, he saw half a dozen men climbing up to the main topsail yard. Determined to find his companion, he clutched the side of the ship and adjusted his gait to the ship's motion.

Martin saw him making his unsteady way forward, left his position at the base of the mainmast and helped him to sit down with his back against a gunwale. They were low enough not to be seen by the sailors busy organizing work gangs of prisoners. Richard gripped his arms and whispered hoarsely, 'Thank God. I thought they had executed you because you smuggled food to me.'

Martin reached down between the mast and a hatch cover where a wooden tankard covered in a rag had been wedged. 'Drink,' he said, pressing it into Richard's hands, keeping a wary eye open for the sailors.

Richard gulped a mouthful of watered-down ale and let his friend ease it from his grasp.

'Not too much. Your stomach will vomit it back.'

Richard nodded and leant back against the timbers.

Martin took a crust of stale bread from his pocket, dipped it into the ale and pressed it into Richard's mouth. 'You collapse now and they'll throw you overboard even if your sister is under Challenor's protection. If it comes to a choice between you and her…' He shrugged. The answer was obvious. He replaced the cloth over the tankard and wedged it back firmly. 'I couldn't get to you again. I'm sorry, lad. It was too dangerous.'

Richard placed a hand on his friend's arm by way of comfort. He let the soaked crust stay in his mouth until it disintegrated. He swallowed. Never did he think he would relish such a poor offering. It was already revitalizing him. 'No matter. Why did they execute Master Pryor?'

'We must all learn that our ways are not those of others. Do you remember when they first brought us food and water and the Janissary stopped the sailor with the knife?'

Richard nodded.

'And the boy?' said Martin.

'They caused him harm?'

'The Turk came for him. They take their pleasures without conscience. I've seen it before with them. An older man takes a boy and lies with him. It's not a crime in their culture. Man or woman, either is acceptable. Don't fool yourself, lad, breech-loading is common enough everywhere.'

'And Master Pryor tried to stop it,' said Richard, knowing what must have happened.

Martin nodded. 'Aye. Brought the wrath of God down onto him. Railed against his religion. Called him a heathen sodomite, a servant of Satan, and struck out at him.'

Richard shook his head at the man's bravery. Even though it was ultimately a foolish act, he had tried to save an innocent. 'Where's the boy?'

Martin shrugged. 'Where else? He was a small price to pay for Challenor to keep the soldiers agreeable.'

'He doesn't command them? He has men enough to stand their ground.'

Martin shook his head. 'His sailors might outnumber them but every one of the Janissaries is worth at least three of them. But he's heading for Tunis right enough.'

'How can you be certain?'

‘I sailed these waters many a time. Look there,’ he said, helping Richard to his feet and pointing at a land mass on the horizon. Richard had not seen it when he had first reached the deck.

‘We passed through the Straits of Gibraltar when you first went below. We’re heading east. Those peaks are the end of the Khroumirie Mountains. You look hard enough, and you can see the forests of cork oak. They reach damned near all the way down to the shoreline. He’s running past Algiers for another port. Aye, Tunis sounds right. I hope to God we get a stiffer wind than what we have now, otherwise we’ll not outrun those who are chasing us.’

Richard’s hunger was forgotten. He didn’t understand what his friend was telling him. He looked up at more sails being unfurled as the bosun shouted his commands. Martin pulled him up. ‘C’mon, grab the end of this halyard. When they tell us to haul, that’s what we do. You won’t have no strength, but you just hang on to the end of the rope. Challenor needs more speed. He has to use whatever wind there is to fill that canvas.’

Richard did as he was bid but still did not understand what was happening, his mind and senses dulled from his confinement. Hauling the mainsail yard made Gabriel Pryor’s body swing back and forth like a macabre, flimsy rag.

A voice behind him carried high onto the spars above. ‘Cut him free!’

Richard saw that it was Challenor who had issued the command. As the yard was secured and men clambered to release the sail, one of his own men edged along the yardarm and cut free Pryor’s body. It plummeted into the sea. A scream followed. Wails of pain from Pryor’s wife and daughter, who clung to each other in grief and were then roughly forced apart by seamen shoving them to where they were needed.

The bosun’s urgency fuelled obedience. Even Challenor joined the men and women on the other halyards, putting his weight and strength into hauling the yard and its sail. Clarity broke through Richard’s lack of understanding.

‘Has the English ship found us again?’ he asked Martin.

‘Worse than that, lad. An Algerian galley. Damned near a couple of hundred men rowing. Three or four to an oar. Faster than any sailing ship with a fair wind and a generous sea. Damned greyhounds of the water they

are. He won’t make Tunis, not even with every soul on this ship hauling on these lines.’

Richard stared over his shoulder. There was no ship in sight. ‘Merciful Christ, I have never known such violence being inflicted on men and women. Is Challenor hunted by every country under the sun?’

‘Men like him make their alliances. A bond is given, or a mistake is made. What causes men to wish harm to others? There’re only two things. Profit and hatred. Aye, John Challenor has pissed off powerful men, and we might pay the price.’

The ship shuddered. The sails luffed. He saw Challenor turn back from the rigging and peer over the side. He raised a hand. Chesney the bosun boomed out a command, followed by Pewsey using a flail on the captives to brace the yards, hauling the spars to shift sails and alter course.

Martin took a lash across his back, pushed Richard to the next station, passed him the rope.

‘What’s happening?’ said Richard, the blood pounding in his head as he fought dizziness from his lack of food.

‘You just hang on, lad. This ain’t right. Far from it. Something’s badly wrong. He’s lost the wind.’

Sailors carrying boxes hampered the effort of the labouring captives, elbowing and pushing their way through. The sailors cursed and bellowed over the bosun’s threats towards those on the halyards. As the sails were set Richard thought he saw Janissaries on the small platforms high up the masts. There was no time to think about it. The order came to belay the lines.

Men and women pushed each other here and there, increasing the feverish activity. They stowed ropes and pulleys out of the deck’s walkway.

‘Martin?’

The old ferryman shook his head. ‘I dunno, lad. First he makes a run for it. Now he’s lowered the tops’l. That’s a sign of surrender.’

Richard and his friend were momentarily ignored as Challenor strode across between both sides of the deck.

‘Mehmet!’ he bellowed.

The Janissary who had stood in front of Richard on the Dartmouth quayside turned to face Challenor.

‘How many Janissaries on that galley?’

‘A hundred. Or more.’

Challenor pointed at him. ‘You have a choice,’ he said. ‘Turn on me now and Uthmân Dey will hear of it!’

The Janissary leader returned Challenor’s gaze. ‘Janissaries choose whom they serve. Those in Algiers chose badly.’

Challenor grinned. ‘Then, if they seize the ship, they will take pleasure in stringing you up and peeling your skin while you still live.’

Richard had watched the exchange. The Janissary spat his contempt. Was it for the Englishman who captained the ship or for the suggestion an enemy might take him alive?

‘Did you understand enough of that?’ said Martin.

Richard nodded. He gripped Martin’s arm. ‘He’s not surrendering, Martin. He’s going to fight. I saw them loading the cannons with chain shot and ball.’

Martin shook his head. ‘Then he’s lured them in. A vain attempt to escape and then failure. Or so it will look to them. We had best learn to fear God more than the heathen because they will have to board us for him to win this fight.’

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CHAPTER 14

Challenor Pushed His way through the crew and prisoners until he reached Richard and Martin. ‘Your name?’

‘Martin Waterman, Captain.’

‘You were the ferryman at Dartmouth. I remember now,’ said Challenor. ‘You said you served.’

Martin nodded. ‘Thirty-three years on a Queen’s ship.’

‘Then you know how a boarding party conducts itself.’

‘I do, sir.’

Challenor appraised both men for a moment, then nodded. ‘Serve me well and if we survive, then life will not be as hard for you when we reach our destination and you are sold. You have my word. You will both be armed with pistol and sword.’

‘I have never used blade or gun against any man. I have never killed,’ said Richard.

‘Then now is the time you learn,’ said Challenor. ‘Protect Elizabeth. I shall be engaged elsewhere. Any other man would run from the conflict. You won’t because you value her life as much as I do. You’ll find weapons in a chest on the quarterdeck kept there for speedy access. There are four loaded flintlocks ready to be used.’ He smiled briefly. ‘Taken from a nobleman on his way from France. He will have no further need of them but they are fine weapons. Use them well.’

Challenor turned his back and shouted orders for the male captives to remain on deck and for the women to return below.

*

As Richard followed Martin towards the quarterdeck Challenor hauled himself by a shroud onto the rail of the ship and addressed the Dartmouth men.

‘Turks will soon be upon us. We fly no flag so they don’t know who we are. They’ll think us a merchant ship carrying cargo.’ His arm swept across their upturned gaze. ‘Which we are. They will board us and take those who survive back to Algiers. Women will be sold as whores. Men will become galley slaves. You will row twenty hours a day and when you faint from exhaustion, flogging and hunger, you will be thrown over the side. You will sit in your own waste. The stench from a galley can be smelled a mile downwind, and you will soon retch at their foulness. I have given you no hope of release, but where I take you next, you will at least stand a better chance of survival. Do as my men say. Fight for whatever you hold dear.’ With that, he jumped back down and organized his men. For once, Richard felt a sense of relief that the fearsome Janissaries and Challenor’s killers were between him and the fast-approaching threat.

The ship had slowed, drifting on the swell. Richard stumbled on the steps to the quarterdeck and captain’s cabin.

Martin chastised him. ‘Get on your feet, dammit. We’ve been given leave to keep off the main deck and avoid the bastards who’re coming for us – it’s God’s gift. Look there!’

Richard reached the top of the steps. A single-masted triangular-rigged galley hove into view. Rows of oars dipped rapidly into the water, pulling the war vessel closer.

A centrally mounted gun was flanked by a pair of smaller cannons at the bow with what looked to be small swivel-mounted breech-loaders on the stern deck.

Martin crouched. ‘Pray to God they don’t ram us because then we’ll be held fast and Challenor won’t get to use his guns. It’s unlikely – if they want to take this ship back to port they won’t ram, they’ll shoot first with their forward guns then rake us from the rear when they draw level.’

The galley was edging forward. Richard understood what Martin meant. The galley’s prow protruded; easy to see it could be used as a ram to pierce and hold a stricken vessel.

‘They’ll ship their oars once they think we’ve no guns or aren’t ready to use them. Soon as the starboard oars are clear they’ll be alongside and then

the grappling irons will do their work. They carry no cannons for a broadside. It's musket and blade with them.'

The galley was now close enough for Richard to see dozens of armed Janissaries readying themselves for the boarding. There were too many. There had to be more than a hundred men lining the deck. No matter what Challenor planned, it would not stop those warriors boarding the ship.

'Down!' Martin yelled.

Richard threw himself onto the deck. He had been transfixed by the speed of the war galley and the power of the slaves pulling it through the water. Had the warning come a moment later the raking shot that tore along the length of the ship would have ripped him to pieces. Wood splintered. Men screamed further along the deck. Realization dawned on him that Challenor must have thrown the dice and, like Martin, hoped the Turks wanted the ship and would not ram them. Now it was clear they wished to inflict terror. No shots were fired at the masts to cripple the ship. The prize needed to be kept intact and sailed back to Algiers.

'Hold fast!' he heard Challenor shout to everyone on deck. 'Stay down! Let them come!'

Martin was at the chest containing the weapons; crouching, he handed a cutlass and two pistols to Richard, waited a moment, tucked his own pistols into his belt, then dared to peek over the gunwale, checking it was clear to move, and ran for the cabin door with Richard on his heels. The thought flashed through Richard's mind that the man he always thought as being too old for more than rowing back and forth across the Dart had an instinct for fighting.

It was a comfort. His survival might depend on it.

*

Martin pulled open the cabin door and quickly yelled a warning: 'No!' and threw himself back, instinctively thrusting out his arm to stop Richard barging inside.

Richard ducked as he saw Elizabeth holding a raised pistol with trembling hands. She gasped when she saw who it was and lowered the weapon. As far as Martin could see, despite her fear, she was determined to

fight for her life. He pulled the door closed as Richard strode past him and embraced his sister.

‘It would have been a bitter end to be shot by my sister,’ he said.

His presence with Martin calmed her. The old ferryman looked at the torn rags scattered over the floor.

‘There will be a need for bandages,’ she said.

Martin nodded. ‘Miss Elizabeth, if you have a mind to kill a man it’s best if you pull back the hammer on that pistol.’

For a moment she looked confused, but then nodded. ‘Challenor said I should kill myself rather than be taken.’

Richard kissed her forehead. ‘He sent us to protect you. Thankfully Martin is at our side.’

Their companion had returned to the door, easing it open slightly so he could see how close the galley was to the ship.

‘The men are hidden below the gunwale. Boarding nets are up. The galley is close. Any moment now.’ He faced them. ‘Miss Elizabeth, back yourself into that corner. Richard, arm her pistol and stand to one side. If they come through here I’ll step back and kill the first man. Employ your pistols first and then the blade. Understood?’

Richard and his sister nodded their understanding despite their unease. He eased her into the corner in the hope it would give her the best chance of survival.

Martin slammed closed the door and ducked. Wooden splinters punctured the ceiling. Yells and shouts pierced the air as the sound of iron hooks biting wood thudded onto the ship’s side. Then came the unmistakable sound of one vessel grinding against the other.

The sudden roar of cannon fire rocked the ship. Howling screams were followed by a more blood-curdling sound. Enemy Janissaries had survived in sufficient numbers to storm aboard, voices raised in a battle cry of sheer hatred. Then came a volley of musket fire, single-shot pistol discharges and the clash of steel against steel, mingling with men’s fear and desperation as they bellowed with rage, feeding strength into their arms and hearts to kill and not be killed.

Richard felt his body crouch, animal-like, ready to strike, taut with fear. All three waited, barely daring to breathe as the sound of fighting roared

outside. An unseen battle searing their thoughts with screams and howls of slaughter.

Heavy footfalls thudded up the quarterdeck steps. Martin took a step back from the door but he was too slow to avoid the crashing power of a Turk who stormed inside. Others crowded behind him.

Richard's eyes widened. The man's fearsome bulk filled the doorframe. His scimitar's curved blade slashed the air, narrowly missing Martin, who stumbled backwards. Richard fired. And missed. The Turk ignored the older man who had tumbled away and went for Richard, who threw aside his pistol and snatched the other from his belt.

The Janissary's head spurted blood from Martin's shot. Richard fired blindly and wounded the second man, who stumbled and fell, raising a protective arm, only to be killed by Martin's sword-thrust to the throat. The two dead men helped block the passage of those who followed. Martin killed one with his remaining shot but was struck by the fourth attacker who, unable to swing his sword, twisted in the doorway and clubbed the ferryman with his fist. Then he was inside, stepping over his fallen comrades towards the woman he saw, her back pressed against the bulkhead.

Elizabeth screamed. Richard stepped between them, slashing wildly with his sword. Their blades clashed. The man's weight forced Richard back a pace, but strength forged from years of striking hammer blows against heated steel surged through him. He pushed back, trying to unlock his cutlass from the curved blade, but was no match for the fighting skills of the Turk, who twisted, shouldering him hard in the chest. Richard's legs went from under him as the Janissary swung the scimitar for a killing blow.

His gaping mouth churned with flesh and blood, the force from Elizabeth's pistol shot throwing him back across his fallen comrades. Richard's ears rang from the gunshot. Elizabeth remained where she stood, still holding the discharged pistol, her hands wavering, eyes staring uncomprehending at her actions. Richard gripped the cutlass.

'All right?' he said, his voice strident, his hearing dampened by the din of the weapons discharged in the small cabin.

She nodded, a grim, determined look on her face.

Martin was on his feet. Lip cut, a slight head wound, cutlass in hand.

'Stay there!' he ordered as he went to the door and peered out.

Richard eased his sister away from the direct line of the door in case of another imminent assault. The foul stench from the dead made her gag. He pressed her close to the rear window, forced the latch and let the sea air sweep in through the cabin. Elizabeth leant against the bulkhead and breathed deeply. Her drawn pallor remained, but she pressed a hand to that place below the chest bone that holds the knot of fear in a person's stomach, then pulled free her cap, the act of releasing her hair a comfort. She nodded. Wiped a hand across her mouth and turned to look at the carnage behind her. The red silk dress lay on the floor beneath one of the dead men, its sheen a darker hue from his blood.

Martin stood in the doorway. Smoke billowed outside. The fighting had ended except for an occasional single gunshot.

And the pitiful howls of men begging for help.

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CHAPTER 15

The Fight was Won. The savage hand-to-hand contest had lasted as long as it took for the beast within one man to slay another. Rivulets of blood meandered past the fallen. Torn flesh clung seaweed-like to the lower rigging and gunwale.

Richard stood with Martin on the scarred quarterdeck, gazing down at the aftermath. Bodies lay strewn along the length of the ship. There appeared to be as many living as there were bodies and those who survived were stripping the dead and heaving their corpses over the side. The wounded were laid to one side. Any Turk who had boarded the ship and still lived was put to death by their own kind. The galley was still held by grappling irons and he saw the bosun with four of his men hacking the lines with their axes. And then Richard realized unless they released the burning galley from alongside it would only take a shift of wind for flames to leap across onto them. He also realized Challenor had not exaggerated the foul stench of human waste from the galley.

And the harrowing plight of those screaming became obvious. The galley slaves who had survived the fusillade of chain shot and ball were still held chained to their rowing benches.

Challenor climbed up the steps, saw Elizabeth in the doorway, who turned away when she saw him. He ignored Richard and Martin, looked inside, understood what had occurred, and returned to the two men.

‘You’ll surrender your swords. Now.’

Both men appeared to have forgotten that they still clutched their weapons. They tossed them aside.

Challenor nodded. ‘You did well. I can see that.’

Richard noticed that soot caked Challenor's face. A trickle of blood crept down his ear and caught in the hairline of his beard. He was hatless and still held his sword, but it was clear he had been in the thick of the action. Something stirred deep inside Richard as he tried to comprehend the scale of the killing. As the smoke from the burning galley shifted, the trapped men's screams became more desperate. Richard knew the terrifying picture of men drowning would never be erased from his mind. Gaping mouths, eyes wide with terror, hands scrabbling for anything to stay afloat. The chaotic sea throwing men from one wave to another like a cat with a mouse. His own father's unrelenting gaze and outstretched arms as the waves parted and then closed over him, taking him into their maw.

It was the memory of his father's plight that finally broke through his seized wonderment.

He muttered as if to himself. 'You cannot let them drown.'

Challenor stared at him.

Richard ignored his own vision of hell. 'You're cutting the galley free and letting those men drown,' he said.

'Damned right. We have to be free of her – and quickly,' said Challenor.

'The men who rowed the galley were not your enemy. They're slaves. Condemned to a life of misery and now a death that no man should endure.'

Challenor seemed bemused by Richard's concern. 'And what would you have me do with them?'

Richard gazed at the galley, creaking from its broken timbers. There were two more ropes remaining to cut it free. 'Save them,' he said.

Challenor seemed amused at the thought. 'And why would I do that?'

'You've lost men of your own, but you have also lost some of those you took at Dartmouth. Any man aboard that galley who can be saved can be sold with the rest of us. You will make up your loss.'

Challenor looked from Richard to the galley, which was swinging away at the bow, now held by only a single taut rope and its grappling iron on the stern.

'Those men are locked to their benches. There is no key to release them. Whichever Janissary held the key is dead along with the hundred and more others who sought to take us. They can't be saved.'

'You have a carpenter aboard and he has tools. I know how to break the locks. Give me a hammer and a marlinspike. I'll free as many as I can.'

Challenor called down to the bosun who had struck the first blow against the remaining rope.

‘Belay that, Mr Chesney!’

The bosun looked up, startled at the command.

‘How long before the wind shifts?’ Challenor called to the bosun.

‘Sooner than we’d like, Captain.’

Challenor turned to Richard. ‘Then you had best hurry.’ He called out again to the bosun. ‘Put a boat over the side. Give this man what he needs.’

Richard took the steps to the main deck two at a time.

‘And if the flames reach for us, cut him and the galley free.’

*

Richard steeled himself as he clambered aboard the listing vessel. The smoke swirled, churned by a capricious breeze. The deck covering the slaves below was as bloody as that of the *Falcon*. Broadside chain shot and ball had ripped through deck, mast and men. Richard remembered Martin’s warning moments before he clambered down into the skiff to be ferried across to the galley.

‘Those flames reach the front of the galley, you get yourself off. That’s where they store the gunpowder and if Challenor sees it, you’ll be cut free, anyway.’ He had tugged Richard’s sleeve and made a final plea for him to stay. ‘They’re slaves, lad. You’re risking your life for thieves, cutthroats and murderers.’

‘And innocents, Martin, captured same as the likes of us. Taken against their will. Men shouldn’t die like rats drowned in a barrel,’ had been his answer.

The seamen had not waited. They had turned back for the ship, giving him scant chance to jump onto the steps that led to the oarsmen who were chained below the main deck.

Smoke and flames seemed to be concentrated in the rear of the galley and he was grateful for the acrid smell that subdued the stench of human waste. As he stepped down onto the deck, finding a handhold against the listing vessel, some seventy haggard men who had survived the battle turned their gaunt faces away from trying to pull free the chains that

shackled them to their benches. Twenty rows on each side of the gap that ran between them. Four naked men to a bench.

Gaping holes on the port side of the galley shipped water. Most of the men, what was left of them, lay across splintered oars. More than half the oarsmen on that side were dead or beyond saving. The water was rising rapidly. It churned. Richard grasped a bench for support. The old enemy returned. Surging from his belly, it put its claws into his chest. He froze. The sea was coming for him.

Piercing screams brought him back to his task. He would be lucky to save a dozen men, and if he ventured too far along the rows on either side, they would snatch at him in their desperation and he would go down with them. Men were already extending their arms, crying out in different languages for release.

Richard knew he could only strike the manacles of the nearest rowers. The first four benches bore little more than body parts. Wood splinters and metal had whirled through the underdeck from the *Falcon*'s broadside. He reached beneath the water and lifted the chain that ran the galley's length and linked every man's position at his rowing station into a metal ring on their ankle. If he could release the main chain then he'd have a chance to strike free the manacle that remained on each man's wrist, holding him to his place on the bench. Despair gripped him the moment he hefted the links into his hands, for the desperate men saw what he was doing and yanked it, thinking they could wrench it free themselves, making it impossible for him to free the lock.

He stood upright, gazed at the doomed men, and bellowed for them to release the chain. It was to no avail. He dropped to his knees, drawing sufficient chain to drape over the edge of a rowing bench to act as a stay against the rowers' efforts. Ignoring the smeared blood and flesh on the bench, he steadied the marlinspike ready to strike down and break the lock's hold on the chain.

The galley lurched. Timbers creaked. A whoosh of flame scorched across the deck head above. Wild-eyed men, knowing death was close, lost control of their senses. Their flesh tore as they attempted to do the impossible and drag their wrists free of the manacle that held them. The water crept higher. Richard struck the lock's lever. It snapped open. Now the chain ran free. Men hauled it through the holding bars that locked every

oarsman in place. Now all Richard had to do was to strike the manacle on every man's right wrist. Calloused hands, used to gripping the oars, grabbed at him. His shirt tore. He smashed one clawing hand away with the hammer, grabbed the next man's arm, showing him he needed to grasp the oar to enable a stable place for the marlinspike and hammer to do its work. They quickly learnt the lesson. Richard pushed the spike into the pin holding the manacle together. He struck. It came free. The released man pushed past him, knocking him sideways and under water. Richard nearly lost the spike, gagged on salt water and pressed on. Four men on the next rowing station were released. He kept out of their way as they fought each other to reach the steps that would let them reach the sea and, if not freedom, life.

The beckoning men quietened their demands as they saw how skilfully he moved quickly to each bench, stepping over the dead, hammering the manacles and releasing the rowers. Eight more men broke for freedom. Bench by bench, he struck free the men. Then twelve. The next row of men were dead. Those behind howled with rage as he changed direction to release two survivors on the left side of the galley. The water was at his waist. The smoke thickened. He coughed and spat out its acrid taste. Excrement washed from the rowing stations was swirled along by the current. The galley was going down quicker than he realized.

There was little time now. If he left it too late, the surging water would trap him. She was going down bow first. She lurched again. Now the water pressed hard against him. Men at the far end went under, arms flailing as the water sucked them down. Those nearest, terrified and screaming, reached out like the beggars they were.

Richard focused on the next bench. He pulled himself along against the rising force of the water. The first man on the bench was dead, his chest pierced by a wooden splinter from the bombardment. The next man slumped over the oar with no sign of life. Only one was alive. With two dead companions between him and Richard and the fourth between him and the bulkhead, this lone bearded figure stared at Richard. He didn't beg. His eyes said it all. The hollow rings below them showed a man who had not slept in days and yet had still been expected to row hard and fast. Whip marks fingered across his shoulder. His ribs pushed against pale skin. He glared defiantly at Richard. Daring him to abandon him. Flames raced and

quivered across the roof, reflecting in his eyes, pools of amber, as if the devil himself stared back at him.

And then he smiled. A rueful acceptance that he was going to die.

Richard never knew why he clambered across the dead to save him, but he did. The manacle fell free. Richard turned back to make good his own escape. The man was too weak to follow; despite being free of the chains, the water was going to suck him down. An image of his own father lifting him onto the wreckage the night laid bare the horror. Richard's fear flashed before his eyes. He reached out, grabbed the man and hauled him along to the steps that offered a tantalizing glimpse of sky and the buffeting waves. The next thing he knew, they were free of the sinking vessel, floundering in the choppy sea. The skiff was between the two ships. Hands reached down and hauled them aboard.

Richard and the man he'd saved fell into the well of the boat, lungs heaving, eyes wide at the sky. A command from Challenor on the quarterdeck urged them to make more haste. Timbers were cracking. Screams subsiding. Richard and the man saw Challenor turn to a distraught Elizabeth, holding her hands to comfort her.

The rescued galley slave squinted into the shard of glaring light that cut between the mainmast and the quarterdeck. His stare locked on the man comforting the woman. For a moment he thought it was an apparition, that his mind was taunting him. But then there was no doubt. The man commanding the ship was the same pirate captain whose actions had condemned him to a life on the galleys. And what had kept him alive for all those years was a determination to survive so that he might wreak vengeance on the man who was also responsible for the death of his wife and child: Captain John Challenor.

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CHAPTER 16

Elizabeth Sheriff Closed the cabin door behind her, shuddering with relief. The violence was over. Richard had survived. No matter how strong Richard had grown, the sense of her own duty towards him had never left her, even when it was obvious that the man he'd become was as much her guardian as she was his. Yet when she'd seen him risk his life to save those trapped oarsmen she had choked with fear. Her curled fists gripped the handrail. Without thinking, she allowed Challenor to take her hands in his own. Only when Richard and the men he had saved were herded amidships did she realize he was still holding her. It was not the comfort she desired, and yet she had allowed it. Had it been because for once she felt so helpless? It perplexed her. Knowing that her brother lived, she eased free of Challenor's embrace and returned to the cabin, not wishing to see the death throes of the galley as it began its plunge to the bottom of the sea, strangling the cries of those who remained chained.

Her life before being captured had been lived on her own terms. Her plain-speaking manner had served her well in the company of others less straightforward, who used words that teased, chastised, cajoled or enticed. This manner, together with a similar plainness of dress, had kept most suitors at bay. And Challenor had always kept a respectful distance whenever he visited Dartmouth, while still making his feelings known.

Elizabeth's desire to protect her younger brother had never faltered and she allowed no one to come between them. Had she permitted her heart to soften and allow a man to enter her life, there was a risk that brother and sister would be parted, for her responsibility would then be to her husband. It had been Challenor's understanding and acceptance of her love for

Richard that allowed her to agree to his proposal, before Challenor went missing.

She embraced the lessons learnt from her early life. Peasant children like Elizabeth would often be traded into a marriage for the benefit of their family. But when her mother died after Richard's birth, although he was wet-nursed by a woman in the town, he soon became Elizabeth's responsibility. She not only looked after him, but also their father when he was not at sea. The care she gave the infant never wavered. In her mind the affection she bore for him was that of a mother's love from beyond the grave. Despite the grief of her mother's death, her brother's birth was Elizabeth's salvation.

She had reined in her sharp tongue when entering service in the merchant Thomas Henning's household, a man who had grown wealthy from importing port and brandy from the continent. The house was rich in silverware from his part-ownership of the north Devon silver mine at Combe Martin. No one of her class would be foolish enough to raise their eyes let alone their voice at any member of that house. She knew her place, but soon understood her value. Diligent house servants were not as common as the wealthy would wish, particularly away from the towns and cities. Dartmouth and its environs, as grand as the merchant's house was, had few women to draw on. Shipbuilding and fishing ports made demands on fishermen's and artisan's wives.

In time her diligence was brought to the attention of Mrs Henning, who sought help with her own daughter, Anne. Scullery maids, a cook and village girls who swept floors and attended to the hearths were unsuitable. Elizabeth was taught to brush the girl's hair, help her dress, stitch, sew and launder her clothes.

For years, it had been a thankless task. Man and wife argued long and hard, but the nature of the conflict only became apparent when the girls working in the house began to leave more frequently. Elizabeth learnt to keep well clear of Henning. No chance meeting on an empty staircase or a room with a door easily locked.

Elizabeth was the only servant permitted above stairs at night, to ensure Anne Henning was properly attired for bed. One night, having seen to her charge, she curled into her usual place on a lower landing where she would sleep, shawl wrapped tightly for what warmth it offered. The mistress of the

house was visiting relatives in Exeter when Henning's thirteen-year-old daughter, by then two years younger than Elizabeth, staggered silently from a room whose door was ajar. The child whimpered, eyes staring blankly. Hearing gentle sobs, Elizabeth climbed the stairs and through the door saw Henning sitting on a chair attempting, and failing, to pull up his breeches, which had snagged around his ankles. Drunk, he staggered and fell.

Elizabeth embraced the shivering girl, guiding her to her bedchamber, then bathed her and settled her into bed. She curled next to her to ease her shivering, but when she tried to slip away, the child begged her to stay. Before the candle burnt down, the mistreated girl was asleep and her father was dead from what the physician later deemed to be acute inhalation of his own vomit.

Only Elizabeth knew the truth about Henning's death. He had yelled for her help as he lay enfeebled on the floor, breeches still caught below his knees. With Anne asleep, Elizabeth went to attend to her master's demands. He was gurgling; vomit already clung to his chin and stained the floor. He beckoned her, grunting. She stood over him. He was nodding, saying something unintelligible, raising a hand for her to pull him upright. His blubber-rich belly sagged over his privates.

Elizabeth opened another bottle of brandy and tipped its neck into his mouth. He writhed, choking. She kept pouring the flaming liquid down his gullet. He spasmed. Lurched half upward. She stepped back as he gagged and drowned in the brandy he could not expel from his lungs. Elizabeth closed the door and returned to the sleeping child. In the morning, she sent word to her mistress that her husband was dead.

Thereafter, her position at the Hennings' house was assured. The child told her mother that Elizabeth had stayed and comforted her. When questioned, Elizabeth remained silent about what had happened to the girl. Did Mrs Henning ever suspect that the servant girl knew? Elizabeth wasn't sure, but Mrs Henning appointed her Anne's companion and arranged for her to be taught to read and write. Mrs Henning also gifted her a plain, narrow silver ring, telling her it was so no man could ever entice her into marriage with the promise of buying her one. Tread warily, she was told. A man might offer silver but give her copper; a man's apparently sincere affection could disappear on the marriage night. Elizabeth was grateful, and knew she was trusted.

And now she knew that if there was to be any chance of gaining her freedom, she needed to earn the same trust of the man who had captured her.

The memory of her past was interrupted by Challenor opening the cabin door. ‘Elizabeth, are you all right?’

She nodded.

‘Then I need your help. One of the women told me you can both read and write.’

‘I can, yes.’

‘Then you will sit on the quarterdeck with a writing block, quill and parchment. Every day, my men will bring your neighbours and those we took from the galley to you. You will write down their name, their age and their occupation. And whether they be married or not. That document will determine their future in Tunis.’

‘And the price they are to be bought for!’ she snapped.

‘Exactly.’

‘Then my name shall go on top of that list.’

He smiled. ‘I suspect I have yet to pay the price that your affection will demand.’

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CHAPTER 17

Richard was Pushed along the deck alongside the men he had saved. Bewildered still from the violence and urgency of his actions, he looked down the line of men and realized he had saved twenty-seven of them. Now that he looked more clearly at them in daylight, away from the panic-driven time aboard the galley, he saw how taut the men's muscles were despite their poor physical appearance. He and the others stood with their backs against the side of the ship, all except one old man who was being fussed over by the Janissaries on the opposite deck. Another he had saved.

Challenor and the bosun's mate, accompanied by a Janissary, went down the line and looked at each man. One oarsman, more bent and skeletal than others, nursed a broken arm. Challenor didn't even glance at the man as Pewsey and the Turk threw him overboard. Richard stepped out of line to challenge the cold-blooded act, but Challenor's glance told him more clearly than any verbal threat that he should remain silent. The last man Richard had saved kept his eyes averted as Challenor reached him, studied him and then moved on. Finally, Challenor reached where Richard stood at the end of the line.

'You did well, Richard. I can sell these men on.' He nodded towards the other Janissaries. 'And you saved one of their own. But expect no more comfort in your condition here, or favour from me because of it.' He turned to the bosun. 'Mr Chesney, have all these men given ale and bread and see that they are then fed with the others. We must keep up their strength if we are to get a half-decent price when we get to Tunis.'

With that, he strode past him and returned to the quarterdeck where the Turk Mehmet stood watching Richard. To Richard's eyes it appeared that

the senior Janissary held a position on the ship equal in rank to Challenor.

*

Richard led the way below decks to where Martin and the others huddled. The naked men followed him down, guarded by two of Challenor's sailors. The Dartmouth captives stared in disbelief as more prisoners were herded among them and squatted along the opposite bulkhead. Women averted their eyes from the unclothed oarsmen. Challenor's men went along the line of the new arrivals. One man carried a loaf of stale bread, while the second man held a firkin that slopped with ale as each man feverishly dipped his torn piece of bread into it. The sailors were not taking their time moving along the line of men and more than once kicked or slapped a poor wretch for being too eager for the meagre sustenance. The sailors then went to the bottom of the steps, ready to go topside, when Richard dared to stand and called to them.

'Captain Challenor said we were all to be given bread and ale. Those of us who got off the galley. I am one of those men.'

His challenge momentarily halted the men. One of them sneered: 'I'm not a fucking papist priest giving communion. You speak to me again and I'll make sure you get half the ration that everyone else gets when they are fed.'

Richard did not cower, as might have been expected. 'I saved more than twenty men for Captain Challenor, and those men are worth money to him and to you when you get your share. My payment is a crust of bread soaked in ale.'

His quietly stated defiance once again made the men falter. Then the second of them grinned.

'It does no harm, Finn,' he said. 'The lad has balls, and the captain said they could all have their share. Give him his bread.'

The more surly of the two tore a piece and shoved it towards Richard. Then his benefactor offered the firkin and Richard dipped the stale piece and sucked hungrily on it.

The more generous of the two sailors laughed as they clambered back up the steps. 'I don't hold out much hope for you, lad. You brought the captain others for sale, so losing you overboard won't bother him none. I'd watch

that mouth of yours.' He shook his head at Richard's daring to speak out, and then the hatch was closed.

As Richard squatted down next to Martin, he closed his eyes for a moment and shook his own head. 'Dear God, Martin, I hope I never live to see anything like that again. Men died beseeching me for my help and I could do nothing for them.'

The old ferryman looked across to where the rescued men slumped, exhausted, happy to sleep. 'You must have an angel on your shoulder, lad. Either that or the devil had his pitchfork up your arse.'

Richard grinned. 'If I ever get back onto dry land, I swear I will never set foot on a ship ever again.'

'Be thankful you are still aboard. I thought I would never see you again.'

'I'm grateful to be here with you. And I cannot imagine what might lie ahead for us, but if I were a religious man I'd pray to the Almighty we do not get sold as galley slaves.' He nodded towards the sleeping men. 'How any of them survived is beyond my understanding.'

'Each man carries his own determination to survive,' said Martin. 'Be it love or be it hate, that is the force within which drives you on beyond your limits of endurance when times are desperate. One thing I can tell you, these Janissaries are hardened bastards. They will rape and kill and torture. They will kill children without a second thought, tear wives from their menfolk and rape them while they watch. And Challenor's men are no different. But when you went aboard that galley, I could see the Turks respected your courage. They discussed it among themselves and gave you credit for what you did. Such bravery bodes well, especially when what you did saved one of theirs.'

Richard placed his hand on his friend's arm. 'I am under no illusion about these men. I know how close we are to death. I might have gained their respect, but that would not stop them from gutting me like a fish if they had a mind to.'

Martin sighed. 'You might be right, but I think that if any of Challenor's men tried to cause you harm, the Turks would stop them. They have no respect for them, but in you they see a better man.'

His friend's praise did not ease Richard's sense of foreboding. The future was bleak. He offered a silent prayer that Elizabeth would not be sold on the slave market and that Challenor would continue to shield her. At last,

he acknowledged it seemed inevitable that she must yield to him if she was to survive. For himself, his only desire was never to be chained to a war-galley bench.

He looked to where the survivors slept. Only one man was awake. The last man he had saved. His eyes stared ahead. Arms wrapped around his knees as if holding on to whatever had kept him alive for so long on the galley. Richard wondered what it had been. Love or hate?

And then exhaustion claimed him. With a final image of dragging the man to safety filling his mind, Richard fell into a deep sleep.

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CHAPTER 18

Elizabeth's Status had changed from when Challenor had raided Dartmouth. As some had blamed Richard for bringing bad luck, they now saw Elizabeth as the reason Challenor had inflicted terror on them.

The pirate crew brought twenty prisoners a day to stand before her where she sat, her back against the cabin's bulkhead as the wind-filled sails urged the *Falcon* towards Tunis.

Elizabeth would raise her eyes briefly, see the person before her, and dip the quill into the inkpot. She knew most of the Dartmouth men and women by sight, but who among these hundred knew each other's names? She didn't. Men might work side by side, as did fishermen's wives, scaling and gutting the catch, but that did not mean either would socialize with the other.

The lesson of Gabriel Pryor's hanging and that of Christopher Dilwyn's cruel punishment – which had ended in his death, just as Martin had predicted – kept any word of contempt for her behind gritted teeth. They spoke only to give their names, age and occupation to the woman who now recorded their details for those who would soon own them. Anyone who considered risking expressing their disdain quickly bit their lip, fearful of the pirate standing behind Elizabeth. Challenor's orders to strike man or woman who disrespected Elizabeth Sheriff would be executed without hesitation.

The list of names grew longer.

Names with faces she remembered. Past acts of kindness or belligerence flitting through her mind. And the stab of despair for them.

John Cuddy, 54 years old, widower, sawyer at the boatyard.

Anne Dulcie, 50 years old, widow, lacemaker.

Gentle Anne gave us food when Father died. Always with her head bent over her hands, bobbins criss-crossing, linen threads weaving their intricate patterns.

Thomas Gilchrist, 48 years old, married, shipwright.

Steadfast, slow to temper, who spent longer hours at the yard than other workers. Regretted marrying the simpleton Zelina. Views her pregnancy and their marriage as God's judgement on him for sinful behaviour with a young girl. All those years ago and still he shields her.

Zelina Gilchrist, 37 years old, married, farmworker.

An innocent. Seduced when she was fourteen years old, by Thomas, whom she thought to be a kind soul. Five children lost to the flux or scarlatina. Without his protection, she would not survive.

Francis Tett, 30 years old, bachelor, fisherman.

Whose father died along with ours when the Dove *went down. Who turned his back on us, thinking Richard to be a Jonah. Still believes him to be so.*

Goldwin Hughes, 60 years old, widower, tailor.

Cut cloth and stitched clothes for Totnes merchants. Eyesight fading, shoulders bent double from peering at stitching by candlelight late into the night, afraid to lose the merchants' patronage should he fail to deliver their shirts in time. The journey has weakened him further.

The old man was wheezing. The damp conditions in the hold were having a detrimental effect on him. He coughed, wiped the phlegm across his sleeve. She reached out her hand to the old man, gave his bony fingers a gentle squeeze. He smiled, nodding, as if to say: 'I know. I will not survive long.' And he alone showed no sign of resentment towards her.

Elaine Ross, 22 years old, orphan, fish seller.

No stranger to men in side alleys. She'll find a place in a brothel and likely make more money for its owner than any with actual skills like…

Eveleen May, 39 years old, widow, glover.

Her drunken husband fell off the quay and drowned ten years ago. His death a blessing. Her income from her work bought food and warmth rather than his nights in the tavern swilling gin.

Ancilla May, 16 years old, apprentice glover.

What chance for this sweet child? Holds on to her mother's skirts. Afraid of shadows. Near struck dumb by the violence she has now witnessed. Too pretty to remain unharmed.

*

As each day passed, her own anguish increased. It became a persistent argument back and forth in her mind. Was escape possible? She berated herself. That was an impossible thought, at least until they landed. And then? She would need to stay in touch with her brother. How to do so? If she were obliged to marry Challenor, would a marriage be arranged quickly? Would there be time to risk an escape? So many unknown obstacles lay ahead. Her survival instincts, honed over years of service, were her only comfort. That Challenor had not forced himself on her was a blessing and she hoped his behaviour was a sign that he would not do so. Not yet. Not unless her own belligerence towards him remained. In truth, she was no stranger to sharing her bed with a man. In another time, long after Challenor had been seized by Barbary corsairs, she had had a brief affair with a carpenter. A year of passion. She had accompanied her employer, Mrs Henning, to a master carpenter in Kingswear across the river from Dartmouth. With Mistress Henning's husband gone, there were tasks to tend to around the house. She had hired the carpenter to make and fit new oak windows and doors: a welcome source of income for a local craftsman whose apprentice was the same age as Elizabeth. The merchant's widow was a demanding client and the weekly visits to the workshop gave her and the young man time to speak privately. It took several visits before she agreed to meet him one night. Her own passionate demands soon replaced her innocence. What surprised her during that time was the knowledge that it was not her heart which yearned for him.

The loss, when it came, numbed her. She had not loved him, and her mistress's fury at losing the payment already made for the ongoing work swept away her own sense of hurt. People in Dartmouth later told her the flames from the workshop soared higher than the hills over Kingswear. How it started, no one knew, but they recovered the carpenter and his apprentice's remains. And also that of a local girl found in the same room as

the apprentice. Overcome by smoke, they had lain entwined in each other's embrace before the flames reached them.

Elizabeth was glad she had not lost her heart to a man who slept with others while sharing her passion. That would have been unbearable.

*

Prisoners still went aloft or hauled halyards. No one died, no one succumbed to their fear and abandoned hope by going over the side. The weather was changeable, and on the days when she wasn't seated on the quarterdeck recording the names of the captives, she would rewrite any spoiled page in the cabin. The pitch and roll of the ship, even on a calm day, made it easy to spill ink or inscribe a name badly. She had no wish to be accused of sloppiness.

Challenor's order to the crew was to be ready to sight landfall by the end of the tenth day; the last day Elizabeth would have to complete the names of the prisoners. Among the final fifteen captives to have their details recorded were Richard and Martin, who stood at the end of the line, at the bottom of the steps behind the remaining galley slaves. Challenor had made sure that only two men at a time went onto the quarterdeck. Despite the risk of extreme punishment someone might be foolish enough to attack Elizabeth or try to overwhelm her guard.

The rescued galley slaves gave their names. She struggled to understand them until the pirate translated. The captives included a Circassian and a Tartar. As each man came forward, the pirate questioned them in lingua franca and gave Elizabeth the answers she required. Then came the final two, the first of whom declared that he was Venetian.

Andrea Cassola, 43 years old, widower, silk merchant.

Once she repeated the information to the pirate, confirming the details, the man stepped aside to return to his duties. The last galley slave ignored the pirate and stared at her. She lifted her eyes and met his penetrating gaze. His face was barely visible behind the matted beard and long hair. He spoke with a low, measured resonance in his voice.

'I am Massimo Marasini. I am thirty-two years old. I am Venetian too. I am not married. My wife and child are dead. I am a galley slave.'

Shock at hearing him speak in English added to the unease prompted by his dark eyes staring at her. Elizabeth's head bobbed from the tall, gaunt man in front of her down to the page. 'You speak English,' she stammered as she wrote.

'I am an educated man,' he replied as quietly and forcefully as when he had first spoken.

'Then shut your mouth and get back to your duties,' said the pirate.

The Venetian did not flinch. His gaze remained locked on Elizabeth.

She felt the blood flush her cheeks from the intensity of his gaze. Before the pirate took a step forward to push him out of line, he turned away. Elizabeth could not help but feel he had done so on his own terms. Moments before, it had felt as if a beast had stepped out of the darkness, its eyes intent on seeking out its prey.

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CHAPTER 19

As Each Day Passed and the prisoners were brought on deck, they became stronger from their work manning halyards and sails. The sun and the extra rations had fed them more than simple sustenance. It had nourished them with hope. Whether that would be sustained was soon to be tested. On the morning of the twenty-ninth day after leaving Dartmouth, they rounded a headland. Challenor altered course south, picking up a freshening wind.

Richard and Martin shared the same post at the mainsail halyard, and once the line had been set to the bosun's satisfaction, they remained there until the next order was given. The oarsmen Richard had rescued from the galley worked on the opposite side of the ship. They had been given clothing, seized by sailors from what few possessions the Dartmouth men had brought aboard. Richard had made no approach to the men he had saved, and they had offered no sign of gratitude towards him.

'They're a mixed bunch,' said Martin. 'I heard a couple of them talking. They sounded Tuscan or Venetian. Trouble with them is they've all got different dialects, so it's hard to tell.' He thought on it a moment. 'Aye, I think that last man you brought off the galley and another one, they're Venetian.'

'You know the language?'

Martin shrugged. 'Lingua franca has it mixed in.' He shrugged. 'Makes no difference who they are, they're going to end up like the rest of us. But you can see that the Turks keep them under close watch. Men who served on a war galley can be used again. Much good it would be, but who'd blame them if they tried to escape when we docked at Tunis? Going back to a slave galley could break any man.'

Richard nodded. ‘It would break me.’ Knowing they were so close to their destination, and the fate that awaited them, he felt his stomach squirm. ‘What do you know of where we land? Can we find a way to escape?’

Martin studied him. ‘I’ve been there once. The sea on one side; mountains or desert on the other. You go inland, you’ll die. If you are prepared to risk your and Elizabeth’s life and bribe another ship’s captain to take you away there’s a chance – unless he just sells you back again.’

He showed no sign of enthusiasm, and Richard was uncertain whether the ferryman was taunting him. ‘Could it be done? With the promise of payment? I’ve heard of churchmen and merchants raising funds to buy back Christians from the heathen. My master at the forge would raise the money from the merchants in Totnes. And if you know the city, then we could travel together.’

‘You snatch at the wind. There’s many a pirate ship anchored there. Always have been. But you would be hard-pressed to even reach another ship. Scrub that idea from your head as you did the blood from the deck with that holystone.’

Richard pressed him, feeling the glimmer of a chance despite his words: ‘If we could get out of the city—’

Martin stopped him. ‘You won’t get taken to the city. Tunis has no harbour. The city is five miles from el-Bahira, which is where we’ll anchor in a shallow salt-water lagoon. There’s no escape to be had from there. The lagoon curves, gripped by the land like a hand across your throat. The anchorage is protected at La Goulette and the town has a damned great fortress guarding the approach. We’ll be taken to the slave cells there. The narrow alleys teem with every scum pirate who drops anchor. No, lad. There is no escape to be had. Brace yourself and control your thoughts about Elizabeth. Good woman that she is, she will either be sold or John Challenor will convince her to save herself and be with him.’

Richard could only bow to the older man’s knowledge. His warning of the desperate fate that awaited them all was brought home when he saw the Turk in charge of the Janissaries throw aside a man who had not seen his approach and who blocked his path. ‘Before the fight, Challenor said something to him,’ he said, nodding towards the man known as Mehmet. ‘It sounded as though Challenor has someone important on his side. Who is Uthmân Dey?’

Martin saw the bosun walking along the deck, checking sailors and captives had secured their lines correctly. He and Richard fussed with a halyard until he had passed.

‘Uthmân Dey rules Tunis. Years ago, these heathen bastards took up arms and put one of their own in charge. He is the one they swear loyalty to. Likely as not Challenor takes all his trade into Tunis because him and Uthmân Dey are thick as thieves. But he needed to know that these Turks would not side with their brethren on the galley when it attacked us. Remember, lad, they are damned heathens, but to them we are infidels. Pirate captains like Challenor walk a fine line when they trade with them.’

Richard kept a sharp eye on the men on the opposite side of the deck in case the huddled conversation drew the Janissary’s attention. ‘How is it you know so much about these people?’

Martin shrugged. ‘Like I told you, I spent years at sea. You learn who is out to kill you. You learn the lessons the hard way by keeping your eye on the horizon and a hand on your knife.’ He spat over the side.

The command came to trim the mainsail. Two men readied themselves with the others in their group to put their backs into hauling the mainsheet.

‘I’ve done my share of killing. And done things I take no pride in. If that English ship had taken us, I’d have ended up like poor old Gabriel Pryor and strung up from this very yardarm. Aye, I spent thirty-odd years at sea all right, but not just with the other pressed men and Jacks in the English fleet. I served on a ship like this with a captain worse than Challenor. That’s how I know so much about such matters. I was a pirate.’

Richard looked at the man he’d only known as the ferryman at Dartmouth.

‘You?’

Martin nodded. ‘But when we fought an English ship off the coast of France, I went over the side and swam for my life. I knew what we had done to the likes of me when I served the Queen and I had no desire to suffer the same fate I had inflicted on others. I swore to the Almighty that if I made it home, I would take the good book to heart and change my ways. Took me eight months to get to Devon and hide myself away where no one was likely to know me or what I’d done.’ He shrugged. ‘Now you know the company you’ve been keeping.’

Richard’s voice failed him. His jaw swallowed the words he struggled to find. Images of foul deeds filled his head. He squeezed his eyes tight. He had trusted this man with his life. But then reality appeared before him. Crystal clear. He damned his foolishness for even thinking of his friend as a killer. That was what he had done before he’d got to know him. A time before Richard’s own shallow innocence had accepted him as a simple man who had befriended him.

Martin stared out to sea, ignoring the younger man’s inner turmoil.

‘Martin, that is the past. What happened then doesn’t change anything. You could have raised your voice and made yourself known to Challenor. He’d have welcomed another crewman from his own kind. That you did not speaks well of you. And that is where we will leave this matter.’ He studied Martin’s leather-tough face, creased from years of wind and sun. ‘If you agree?’

Martin nodded. ‘Gladly.’

The bosun’s mate’s bellowing wrenched each from their thoughts. ‘Haul taut! Sheet home to weather! Hoist away the tops’l!’

The *Falcon* lurched into the wallowing sea.

The slave market at Tunis was less than a day away.

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PART TWO

DEATH IN TUNIS

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CHAPTER 20

Four Ships Already lay in the lagoon at La Goulette. Challenor recognized the other corsair vessels he knew to be manned and captained by Dutch, French, Spanish and Portuguese pirates.

As the *Falcon* anchored, crowds gathered. Local fishermen, tradesmen, artisans and veiled women clustered along the quayside and the shoreline. Merchants shouldered each other to glimpse what the ship's cargo might be. Silks and spices could be sold on; slaves were kept in the city and dispersed among various households. A human cargo's value lay not only in their physical appearance – labourer or house worker – but also in the skills each might possess. Servants needed for a house had to be younger and stronger than an older woman used in kitchens. And any man with a skill, such as carpentry or ironwork: they would fetch a premium. So it was important for the merchants to know whom they could sell the slaves to. A profit could be made or goodwill harvested by giving advance information to a buyer and placing the appropriate slave with their specific needs.

The first ship's boat to reach the edge of the lagoon was that of John Challenor and the Janissary, Mehmet. The *Falcon*'s sailors shipped their oars and let their captain be the first to step ashore. It was customary for new arrivals to present themselves to the customs officials before being allowed to enter Tunis. The official language for government officials was Turkish, more to acknowledge their presence in Tunis as a link to the Ottoman Sultan, but once the formality had been addressed, everyone involved slipped seamlessly into lingua franca.

As soon as the officials were satisfied with the cargo he had brought for Uthmân Dey, the merchants called out to Challenor, asking what treasures

he had available. These merchants who traded in stolen cargoes and human misery were of mixed nationalities, not unlike the corsairs. Among them were Genoese, Albanians, Jews and Arabs, all living in rich men's houses at La Goulette.

It was a short journey from the ship and as they took the captives down into the boats and began to ferry them ashore, the merchants' interest became more animated. Challenor stood next to the customs officials and addressed them.

'We have a mixed cargo and barrels of Portuguese wine. And the men, women and children are every one of them strong and healthy. We seized most of them in England; others were taken from a war galley. Gentlemen, you are spoilt for choice, and my bosun and crew will display them for you, but the sale of these slaves will only proceed with Uthmân Dey's permission once we have declared ourselves and wished Allah's blessing upon him. Until then, you may feast your eyes on them but approach no further than my Janissaries allow.'

The boats, manned by Challenor's seamen, left the ship, each one with a Janissary at the stern, his presence alone enough to dissuade any frightened captive who might consider escaping into the alluring temptation of shallow blue water. When the captives had finally been brought ashore and separated from the crowd by the Janissaries, they were lined up in front of the gaggle of merchants who vied to see the newly captured Europeans. Better to catch a glimpse of the cargo and judge its possible value before it was paraded in the marketplace and the real bidding began.

John Challenor had instructed his bosun to escort Elizabeth ashore. He watched as she sat huddled in the boat, her back to him, her gaze on the ship that had carried her brother and the other unfortunates, a small act of defiance to the chattering and inquisitive crowd. When the boat docked, she stood and turned to face the scrutinizing, eager looks of those gathered to see the first boatload of women to be bartered, bidding dictated by their physical attributes and age.

Elizabeth accepted Challenor's hand to help her step ashore. Her first instinct was to ignore it, but small gestures such as this allowed him to feel she was complying. She looked desperately for her brother, but saw no sign of him. The crowds obscured her view. Challenor ushered her through the onlookers to where a small barge was moored in a shallow canal built many

years before so that flat-bottomed galleys and barges could take supplies from the lagoon to the city. He unbuttoned his tunic and pulled out a folded silk length of material. He unwound it and leant forward to wrap it around Elizabeth's neck. She recoiled.

'Elizabeth, this is important. Drape this over your head and neck. It is a sign of respect.'

She took the length of silk and did as he asked. He nodded his satisfaction.

'Mr Pewsey, you will accompany us. Mehmet and I will meet with Uthmân Dey and you will stay with Mistress Elizabeth once we have been received.'

The bosun's mate nodded his understanding and made sure he stepped aboard the barge before the Turk. He was a man who cared little for anyone else's rank other than John Challenor's. As far as Pewsey was concerned, it was the seamen who sailed the ship, taking them through dangerous seas while the Turks huddled and played cards and threw dice. He respected their fighting skills, but they were still parasitic heathens.

The Tunisian oarsmen leant into their work.

'Gaze in wonderment at this place, Elizabeth,' said Challenor, eager to share his knowledge and enthusiasm. 'They have every trade you can think of: apothecaries, butchers, weavers, tailors, artisans to build and shape houses for rich and poor. Every need is met.'

'If they have everything, then I would like to pray in a Christian church.'

Her sharp rebuke soured the moment.

'What use would they have for a church? For centuries there has been a magnificent mosque that serves their beliefs.'

She turned to look at him. 'Then you have brought me to the land of the heathen.'

'Put aside your despair, Elizabeth. We stay here for three days and take on supplies before we end our voyage a little more than ten days' sailing from here.'

'We're not staying here?' She could not disguise the relief in her voice.

He smiled and shook his head. 'No, we are not. I am taking you to the most beautiful city in the world where I have a house and servants and you will be treated like a queen. It is a jewel that lies in a glistening sea. A place of such elegance and serenity you will never regret me taking you there.'

She waited for him to tell her where such a place might be.
‘Venice,’ he said.

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CHAPTER 21

Richard and Martin shuffled along the quayside from the boats. The pirates' punches and Janissaries' whips barely distracted them from their uncertainty as to what would happen once they were paraded in front of the crowd. For days at sea the abducted men and women had seen no one but each other and those who manned the ship. Now, suddenly, they were faced with this jostling throng who stood shoulder to shoulder, eyes wide, bearded faces mouthing words that merged into an unrecognizable chatter. Images of church gargoyles flashed into Richard's mind.

'Challenor took Elizabeth,' he said to Martin, who walked at his side, helping the ailing Widow Harris.

He nodded. 'She's safer with him wherever he's going than being here with us.'

It made sense that the man who coveted his sister, and who had authority, would not allow her to come to harm. But, he reasoned to himself, they were not aboard a ship where Challenor commanded a crew he could control. This was a desperate place where violence could be easily inflicted.

Challenor had left his bosun, Chesney, and the crew to follow the prisoners and their escort. The town's Janissaries forced a corridor through the throng and led Richard and the others into the narrow street. Richard and Martin were in the middle of the captives, men and women still held together. In front of him a woman, whose name Richard could not recall, was stumbling along the paved street. Richard reached out to stop her from falling.

‘All right,’ he urged her, ‘it will be all right. Stay strong.’ He stepped between her and the woman who walked at her side and wrapped his arm around the ailing woman. She had no weight to her. The ship’s meagre diet, even though it had been improved after Richard spoke out, had not been enough to sustain her.

The woman’s companion turned to him. ‘She’s dying,’ she said. ‘Look at her.’

Richard tilted the woman’s face towards him. Her grey pallor and blue-tinged lips confirmed the companion’s words. ‘It’s all right,’ he said again, his arm tightening around her.

She peered up at him and smiled, tears welling. She nodded. ‘It will be all right soon,’ she told him.

*

As the captives were taken along the narrow streets, it became obvious their passage was not an uncommon one. Labourers hauled their laden carts aside with barely a glance in their direction. Shopkeepers moved baskets of food further back into doorways, their scowls disguised by downward glances. The Janissary escort was not to be challenged because of any inconvenience they caused. Despite his circumstances, and the woman he was helping, the intoxicating sights, smells and sounds of La Goulette’s crowded streets flooded Richard’s senses.

Shadows cut across their narrow passageway. Half sun, half shade, figures appearing and disappearing as they shouldered their way through the crowd. Cool air on one side of the street, piercing light and heat on the other. A maze of alleyways, fingers of a hand, speared away in different directions and they too thronged with vibrant colours. Richard and the others were herded into another narrow street. A doorway on one side: a dark interior illuminated by a shaft of light revealed a carpet maker at her loom, the steady clack-clack of her work almost drowned out by raised voices from fruit and vegetable sellers calling out to sell their waves – not to the huddled creatures being driven past them, but to those passing by, carrying their own burdens of basket and sack. Veiled women had young, unveiled female servants behind them bearing goods already purchased.

Richard's mouth was dry, but the scent from the luscious fruit made his stomach complain. The Janissary leading the procession shouted out to someone ahead. Richard peered between the weary captives and saw a man raising a hefty water skin from a street well and filling large clay pots strapped to the sides of a small donkey. The water seller quickly heaved the donkey clear, allowing what remained of his last skin of drawn water to splash down. It took a long time before its weight reached the end of its rope. A desperate fleeting image of plunging into cold, dark water was a torment to the thirsty Richard. The woman he was supporting sagged. Richard's eyes pleaded with the water seller, raising fingers to his mouth. The Arab turned away with no sign that he had even seen the slow-moving shadows pass.

Beyond the low roofs, a slender white tower loomed, capped by a balcony and roof.

'The heathens are called to prayer from there,' said Martin behind him when he saw Richard staring. 'Five times a day they'll drag this lot to their mosque and have them on bended knees.'

Richard looked back at him. 'Then perhaps that is when we should plan an escape.'

Martin shook his head. 'And go where?'

*

Once through the winding streets, the Janissary escort led them into a square. Richard saw that Chesney and the ship's crew had turned back. Maybe someone had instructed them to check if Challenor's cargo had been delivered to the intended location. The square the captives entered was surrounded by low-rise buildings. Blue painted architraves framed each doorway. It was not the brightly painted doors and windows, however, that held the prisoners' attention. A wooden frame in the middle of the square supported what appeared to be a stretched animal skin drying in the sun.

'You still thinking of escape?' said Martin when it became clear that it was a spreadeagled naked man whose back they had lashed so many times his body looked like raw meat. Flies clustered over him.

The prisoners had barely uttered a word since leaving the ship, but now a fearful sigh whispered through them. An iron gate swung open. The

leading Janissary led them into a cool stone interior and what looked to be a row of cages beneath a barrel-vaulted ceiling. At some time in the past, iron bars had been built on the stone walls separating each one of the enclosures, creating a boxed cage. A single cage door opened into each cell; its floor was littered with straw and a latrine bucket stood in the corner.

‘Used to be stables at one time,’ said Martin. ‘I’ve seen men rot in here for years if they’re not sold. Castrated, flogged and treated worse than any beast.’

The Janissaries pulled half a dozen people into each small enclosure. They shoved the man with the forbidding eyes Richard had rescued into a cell with his countryman. He spat what sounded like a curse.

‘He’s Venetian,’ said Martin. ‘Did you understand any of it?’

Richard nodded. ‘Something about being born a free man.’

‘Once you get an understanding of lingua franca, the languages like Venetian or Tuscan fall into place. You keep your mouth shut, mind, don’t go thinking you can have a damned conversation with these heathens.’

They kept the women separate, and the Turk, who dragged the ailing woman from Richard’s arms, pushed him to one side where another shoved him into a single cell. An Arab jailer turned the lock and pushed a meagre piece of folded flat bread and a small clay water flask through the bars. Richard was the only man in the cell.

Martin peered back. ‘They’ve had orders from Mehmet, by the looks of it. That’s your reward for saving the heathen.’

And then the guards pushed Martin and others into their own cramped cells. Richard pressed his face against the bars, trying to see where his friend had been imprisoned. It was three cells along on the opposite side. Richard felt isolated. Being separated from the others was a privilege, but it wrenched him away from his friendship with Martin, and also meant he could be viewed with suspicion by the others because he had been given special treatment.

Once the Janissaries had left and heavy wooden doors had closed off the old stables, all that could be heard was the pitiful whimpering of the frightened women.

He took some comfort from the thought that his sister was with Challenor. She would be safe. The devil protected his own.

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CHAPTER 22

The Barge Carrying Elizabeth, Challenor, Pewsey and the Janissary commander, Mehmet, eased alongside the narrow quayside. A small group of officials waited. Word had reached the city that the *Falcon* had docked and Captain John Challenor had brought a handsome cargo to be sold in the slave market at La Goulette.

The officials expressed their welcome with the deference due to a man favoured by Uthmân Dey. They spared a glance at the woman, who stood with an unkempt infidel behind the tall Janissary, and then led the way through the city gates into the sudden hustle of the crowded square where stall holders were selling various wares, from cloth to items of silver and tin. They turned away from the sun-baked square into an arched alley that seemed to have no end.

Elizabeth was struck again by a beauty she had never witnessed before. The passage had so many arched columns it would have been impossible for the heat to penetrate. She smiled. All she could think of that was similar were the scallops the Dartmouth fishermen brought ashore. This seemingly unending row of arches was leading her into deep shadows. Nervously she, with the rest of Challenor's party, followed the officials through a portal into a courtyard. A rill stretched from one end to the other, stepped so that the water cascaded gently along its course. The courtyard walls were covered with ornamental mosaics and tiles of blue and green, drawing her eye from floor to ceiling, which was inscribed with letters that flowed in curved loops. Perhaps, she thought, the wavy writing and swirling letters were to remind whoever lived here of birds in flight.

Another portal revealed a sight that brought her to a halt. This opulent courtyard floor was covered with woven rugs. The officials strode across, followed by Challenor and Mehmet. The bosun's mate grabbed her arm, firmly enough to stop her following without hurting her. He shook his head. His voice lowered.

'No further.'

They waited beneath the arched columns as Challenor reached the far side. Elizabeth's eyes adjusted to the different light where shards of sunshine failed to penetrate the cool shadows but which highlighted more colour on the walls. She watched as Challenor approached the figure opposite, who raised himself from his ornate chair, and then she saw there were other men who sat or stood, like her, in the half-light behind him. The man was taller than Challenor, as broad-chested, with a combed and trimmed beard. He wore cotton and silk robes, his head swathed in a winding turban. Opening his arms wide, he greeted Challenor. Challenor bowed respectfully before being embraced. His booming voice reflected his evident joy at seeing the corsair captain again.

Pewsey noticed Elizabeth's surprise at hearing English spoken. 'Heathen bastard speaks different languages,' he muttered to her. 'He's a sly one. A right snake-charmer. But he's fond of the captain, and that's good enough for me.'

Uthmân Dey gestured for Challenor to join him. The ship's captain took the proffered broad cushion next to Uthmân Dey's chair. Mehmet stood on the other side of his leader.

'Now, Captain John,' Elizabeth heard Uthmân Dey say, 'I must hear of what you have brought for our merchants to sell and what tribute I will earn.'

Pewsey sighed. 'This will take the rest of the day and we have to stand here without a sup of drink or a morsel of food.' Glancing around the shadows to see if any of Uthmân Dey's men were in sight, he squatted down, leaning his back against a pillar. They were far enough away from Uthmân Dey and his entourage not to be noticed.

After a while, Pewsey's head rested on his chest, his deep breathing that of a man asleep. Elizabeth knew it made no sense to attempt an escape. Despite the relative coolness of the shadows, she felt as drowsy as Pewsey. Determined not to be lulled by the effects of the terrifying journey and the

energy-sapping heat which now had penetrated the ground where she stood, she picked up a shard of stone and squeezed it in her hand. She held back from squeezing until her skin split, but its bite was sufficient to stop her eyelids from drooping.

The conversation Challenor was having with Uthmân Dey was interspersed with servants bringing food and drink on silver trays. Elizabeth pressed her back against the pillar. She had not eaten for hours. That, she could cope with, but her thirst dried her throat and would soon torment her mind. A shuffling rustle of cloth and the scuff of flat shoes across the stone floor behind her made her turn quickly. A young woman, her face free of any veil, stood watching her. The stranger nodded and beckoned her.

She realized the woman had been sent to fetch her. The woman didn't speak but extended her hand, not to hold Elizabeth's, but as a small gesture, as if saying, *If you please?* It was an invitation to follow her. Then she turned back into the shadows.

Uncertainty held Elizabeth back. Was she being taken to be sold to any of those men who sat with Challenor? They had looked her way. Were their smiles ones of anticipation of having her paraded before them? And then to be chosen by one of them? Had Challenor broken his promise that no harm would come to her? Had he lied all along?

The young woman waited in the shadows. She nodded again. And smiled.

Elizabeth followed her, ignoring the temptation to kick Pewsey's ankle. There would be pleasure enough knowing he would experience a moment of sudden panic when he awoke and saw she was no longer in his care.

*

The young woman led her into a room where two other women were waiting. It was cooler than the colonnade, light filtering through shuttered windows. They nodded their greeting, whispered something to each other, and then, smiling, beckoned her forward. They gestured to a panelled screen. Stepping behind it she saw a stand bearing a broad copper bowl filled with water. A sponge heavy with water lay at the bottom of the bowl. A bolt of cloth lay draped over a stool, presumably for her to dry herself after washing. She turned to the women, but they pulled the surrounding

screen, giving her privacy. The opportunity to wash away the grime and sea salt was irresistible. She stepped out of her clothes and undergarments and stood naked for a moment, looking down at her reflection, before taking the pleasure of sponging her body.

She was uncertain whether to get dressed again in her dirty linen undergarments and heavy clothing. Draping the bolt of cloth around her, she stepped around the screen. Each woman held a piece of clothing: a flowing robe, a length of silk and brown leather slippers.

Whatever the reason for the kindness shown to her, she feared she was being dressed to be sold as a more appealingly attired slave.

She felt that her fate was about to be decided. If given the choice between slavery and marriage to John Challenor, she would choose the lesser of the two evils.

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CHAPTER 23

Richard Quickly Overcame his sense of guilt at being given food and water. It was a quick decision. There was not enough to share. He chewed and swallowed the small piece of flat bread, and washed it down with a mouthful of cool water. He considered thrusting the flask through the bars above the side of the stall but chances were it would break. He decided that if he was to keep any strength, he needed it more than the men in the next cage. It might be the key to his survival.

Widow Harris had finally succumbed to the harshness of the journey. The jailer removed her body. Occasionally, a cry would echo from the caged women. A brief shriek of anguish, as if from a bad dream. The women's distress had quietened as the day slowly passed. Richard remembered when they were first captured and the man he now knew to be Mehmet had stopped Challenor's men from molesting one of the captives. Despite their uncertain future at least it looked as though the women would remain safe from assault. The day's heat subsided and the cool balm of the night air comforted him. It was dark when the heavy wooden doors swung open and the Arab jailer's lantern lit the way for four Janissaries who followed him. They stood outside his cell and said something to the jailer, who raised his lantern so that Richard's crouched figure in the corner could be seen. Satisfied they had the right man, one of the Turks nodded and instructed the jailer to open the cell door.

Richard stood with his back pressed against the wall. His heart thudded as he glared at the intruders. His fists curled, ready to defend himself, but the curved sword tip at his throat kept him at bay. The second man stepped

aside and gestured him to follow him. Richard looked at the swordsman, who nodded. He was to go with them. To what fate he dared not imagine.

*

When he stepped back into the square where the flayed man had been tortured, the frame was empty. The moonlight cast shadows, obscuring his memory of the route he'd travelled when taken to the cells. His moment of uncertainty earned him a push from the swordsman as his companion led the way, skirting the square for a hundred yards and then turning into a dark alley. Richard's heart beat faster. Two more Janissaries were in the passage, both carrying lanterns. When their comrades arrived they led the small party, with Richard in their midst, along the alley, took another turn into a wider street, a further turn and then in the darkness they opened a door which allowed light to spill into the passage. Richard was pushed inside.

At first glance it looked as though there were a dozen Janissaries inside. They were dressed more casually than his escort. Their long-sleeved blouses were free of any sash around the waist, their tall hats discarded, their long hair plaited or loose on their shoulders. Some wore a turban. Oil lamps spluttered. A charcoal fire in what looked like an urn cut in half supported a griddle. The smoke curled up, drawn by the hole in the roof. A Janissary was stirring grain into the water. He glanced at Richard, then concentrated again on the task at hand. The others stood around, watching the man they'd brought into their room. Richard steeled himself. Janissaries had taken the boy on the ship; if he was to be raped by these men, then he would fight until he could fight no longer.

Four more men emerged from the shadows at the back of the room, which was large enough to accommodate twenty or thirty men, he guessed. A low table bore earthenware bowls of food that the men reached out for and ate with their fingers. The smell of cooked meat made him salivate. He swallowed his spittle and tried to choke back his fear.

Some men drank dark wine from glass goblets; others sipped a yellow, thicker drink. They stood or sat cross-legged. There was only one bench Richard could see; otherwise large silk cushions lay scattered around the room. The Janissaries gathered around an old man propped up on a low cot with an upholstered mattress. A woven covering draped across him from his

waist down. He stopped eating to look at the visitor and then wiped his fingers on a linen cloth. Richard stared. His face was familiar. It was the old man he had rescued from the galley.

The men at the back of the room stepped aside as Mehmet, their leader, ushered in an old Arab who carried a satchel. As Richard watched, still with no idea of what might befall him, Mehmet directed the Arab towards a stool and a low table. Lanterns were brought closer to him. The Arab eased out a thin box from his satchel, but Richard could not see what the box held. Mehmet said something to the old man on the cot. The cadence of his voice made it sound as if Mehmet was asking a question. The two men appeared to reach a decision. They looked at Richard, who took an involuntary step back but was stopped by his escort. Richard stared as Mehmet pulled his knife from its scabbard. It was a long blade: eight or ten inches of tapered, curved, double-edged, honed steel. Its metal hilt added another five inches. There was no cross guard. Where the top of the knife had sat in the scabbard, it now nestled at the base of Mehmet's palm. The pommel was a tongue of shaped metal that would aid a killer's grip when pulling it free after plunging it into an enemy. Richard's eye for detail saw it was shaped like a horse's head. At the base of the blade where it joined the hilt, a finger guard would stop the killer's hand from sliding forward onto the blade.

The ornate gold and silver inlay on the blade, inscribed with a floral motif, held Richard's gaze. It was a master knife maker's creation. It defined the man who carried it. Mehmet saw his interest. Nothing was said as he turned the blade onto his palm and offered the hilt to Richard. He hesitated. Was this a ploy? Would they kill him and say he had seized a knife? Is that how his death – and the loss of tribute paid for the sale of a slave – would be explained to Uthmân Dey? Richard's urge to throw himself at his enemy would be a futile and fatal gesture. He braced himself. He would not bend, he would not break, he decided. His fists curled, ready to fight for his life. The Janissary saw Richard's response. He smiled, and turned to one of his men. He rattled off sentences. The man listened, smiled in his turn and spoke slowly in English, translating what had been said.

'Mehmet says you stand coiled like a snake in a den full of lions. There is an old story of a wise lion telling a serpent that was ready to strike to calm his fear. If there is no threat, there is no need to attack.'

Richard looked at the smiling Janissaries. ‘The fable I have heard is that the lion thought the snake was so puny that it was harmless and toyed with it. He soon learnt a serpent can kill a lion before a lion snaps closed its jaws.’

The Janissary translated. The men considered it for a moment and laughed, appreciating the young Englishman’s bravado.

Richard decided they could have killed him at any time since he stepped into the room if that was their plan. He took the knife. His attention was drawn by the craftmanship. Without realizing, he smiled from the pleasure of caressing such a beautiful weapon.

The man on the cot said something too rapid for Richard to understand. The men laughed. It snapped back his attention. Mehmet nodded and opened his palm. Richard turned the knife and handed it back, hilt first. Mehmet slid it back into its scabbard and then pulled up his sleeve. There was a tattoo of a knife with a curved blade and an animal head similar to Mehmet’s knife.

Mehmet said something to Richard, who once again did not understand.

‘Al-washm,’ said Mehmet.

‘Al-washm?’ Richard asked.

Mehmet nodded and pointed to the old Arab, who had laid out a palm-size block of wood and long needles. He told one of his men to pull up their sleeve. It exposed a small tattoo of a curved knife. Then another showed his arm to Richard.

The man on the cot pointed at Richard and then tapped his own forearm. Now Richard understood. He was being rewarded for saving this man’s life. Richard nodded. It was going to be a less painful fate than expected. He pulled up his sleeve and squatted next to the old Arab. The block of wood was a mould, and he saw its face was cut in the knife’s shape. The Arab mixed ink and charcoal dust and a few drops of what looked like blood from a finger-sized phial and pressed the mould into the tincture. Without speaking, the Arab straightened Richard’s arm and pressed the block against it. The imprint stained his skin. Then the old man chose a needle and dipped its point into the same blue mix and then began pricking the outline. Richard didn’t flinch, despite the sharpness and depth of the puncture being made on his arm.

The tattooist finished, wiped away the surplus from the wound with a clean wad of linen. He took another strip of linen from his satchel and bound his work. He showed three fingers to Richard.

‘Three days,’ said the translator.

Richard understood. He was to keep the dressing on for three days.

Mehmet spoke rapidly to the interpreter.

The man nodded and addressed Richard. ‘You save his life,’ he said as he pointed at the old man beneath the blanket. The interpreter put his hand across his heart. ‘A great man to Janissaries.’ The interpreter and Mehmet exchanged words. The translator nodded again and stumbled through his leader’s message. He pointed at Richard’s tattoo. ‘This will let you enter where others are refused. No Turk or Arab will turn you away. And give help for what you have done.’ He placed a hand across his heart. Mehmet and the others did the same.

‘*Selamün aleyküm*,’ said Mehmet.

The Arab packed up his box and satchel, took the coins offered by the man on the cot and left the way he came in. No sooner had the old man been escorted out than the stoney-faced Mehmet nodded for Richard’s escort to take him back to his cell.

*

Once Richard was back in his cell and the doors had been closed by the jailer, Martin called out, asking why he had been taken. Their low voices carried easily across the stone-built prison.

‘What does it mean?’ Richard asked after explaining what had happened. ‘They said I had saved someone important.’

‘I’ve never heard of such a thing. They didn’t try to convert you to their ways, did they? Make you an apostate? A Christian crosses that line and becomes a Muslim, then he’s looked after and treated well here.’

‘No. Nothing like that. But they had the same tattoo.’

‘Then it’s a symbol of their fighters. The unit they serve. I reckon whoever it was you saved on that galley was more than just an important man. Maybe he was a relative or some such thing, and he’s repaid the debt by marking you as one of them.’

‘But I’m not.’

‘I know, but when we are sold, whoever buys you will see that mark and treat you well. Aye, I reckon that’s why they did it. No slave owner would mistreat anyone favoured by the Janissaries.’ He grunted. ‘Damned if they haven’t bought you a better chance to live through what’s coming.’

They fell silent. Richard lay in the straw, his back against the wall. The tattoo stung. He knew himself to be no fighting man, or part of any warrior class, but such men had honoured him for his actions. He also knew that his journey so far had allowed him to find courage to carry on when he thought he might fail.

He knew that courage to be a priceless gift.

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CHAPTER 24

Elizabeth was Taken by the same women who had attended her to an upstairs room in a building close to where Challenor and the Turk were discussing business.

The room was spacious; shuttered windows looked onto another small courtyard. Its whitewashed walls made it feel cool, and the scattered woven rugs provided comfort. But once the door had been closed and the lock turned, she knew she was a prisoner.

Challenor had visited the room after his meeting and told her he was going to discuss the sale of the Dartmouth men and women with the merchants in La Goulette. It was important, he told her, that he also made sure his sailors did not cause trouble in the town when coming ashore.

He had looked at the room where her sleeping cot was shielded by muslin nets.

She glanced nervously between him and the bed. If lust tormented him, he might abandon any pretext of love and succumb to his passion.

A shadow of regret crossed his face, followed by a rueful smile that confirmed his desire. Challenor left the room, and the lock was turned again.

*

She remained in the room for three days, attended to by servants, and occasionally escorted into the enclosed courtyard for exercise. The sounds of the city and the sweet trilling of a caged canary somewhere nearby were her only companionship. On the fourth morning, raised voices echoed from the courtyard below. It was two hours or more since the muezzin had made his call to prayer across the city’s rooftops. She saw Janissaries striding

towards the entrance of her building. No sooner had she stepped back from the window than she heard them pounding up the stairs.

She could retreat no further than the wall as the door was unlocked and two Janissaries entered. Without a word one of them threw a bundle of her own clothes down. Gestured that she should get dressed. He pointed at the bedchamber.

Elizabeth gathered the clothes. They smelled of stale sweat and remained stiff from the salt-laden sea air from the voyage. She retreated behind the wall of the bedroom and rid herself of the cool, delicate clothing she had grown to enjoy. Going back to her old clothing made her skin crawl. She returned to the room where the Janissary barely glanced at her but took her arm to escort her downstairs. Elizabeth immediately pulled free from the man's grip and for some reason he did not strike her but glowered and pointed to where she must go. The other Janissary led the way. The frustration of not being able to ask what was happening in any language they might understand did not deter her from using her voice to berate her escort. They ignored her.

A barge was waiting at the quayside and the moment she was seated, the oarsmen pulled away. The two Janissaries stood on either side of her. Why was she being taken from the city towards La Goulette? If Challenor had already sold his captives, was she being taken back to the ship so they could sail to Venice? Where was Richard? Would he be waiting for her? Panic tinged her confusion.

When Challenor had anchored in the lagoon, there had been four more corsair ships there. As the barge got closer to La Goulette, she saw that only the *Falcon* and one other ship remained. The near empty lagoon added to her sense of abandonment and foreboding.

The quayside bustled with onlookers but Janissaries held them back. She realized their curiosity had nothing to do with her arrival but that of an elaborately decorated barge which was already tied up at the quay. Uthmân Dey had left the city. She reasoned that if the man who ruled Tunis and the Janissary fighters had travelled to the fortified port, then something more important than the selling of slaves had occurred. If John Challenor had sold his captives, then he would be ready to sail. Was she being taken to him? Is that why she had been obliged to change into her old clothing? More pressing was the thought of how she might get to her brother.

She looked at the clustered housing that crept towards the harbour. If she could escape, would she find anyone to shelter her? Who among them would dare? Such thoughts were brushed aside by reality. Escape was impossible. She would not survive it.

The barge eased alongside the quay. The men clambered ashore. One of the Janissaries reached down and extended his hand. She refused his offer of help. Squaring her shoulders, determined not to appear cowed in front of the quizzical onlookers, she fixed her eyes on the back of the man who led her through the streets.

They emerged into a square where the captives were lined up, along with a group of men she took to be merchants, held back by Janissaries. She moved closer and saw that Uthmân Dey was seated with his back to the prisoners. She sought out her brother and saw him in the middle of the line of men and women. Martin was at his side. Her entrance into the square caught his attention, and she saw the look of concern on his face. As the crowd was pushed aside by her escort a more frightening sight was revealed. In front of Uthmân Dey three men were on their knees, their hands bound behind their backs. One of them was Challenor. The other two men were his bosun Chesney and the bosun's mate Pewsey. Behind them stood Mehmet with a long curved sword.

Her escort took her to one side of where Uthmân Dey sat. He appeared to take no notice of her. John Challenor raised his head. He looked at her but said nothing. The murmuring of the crowd quietened when one of Uthmân Dey's officials lifted his hand for silence.

'Captain John,' said Uthmân Dey. 'We have been friends and shared business interests for years and my affection for you is genuine. You have brought me profit. You have brought me friendship. But now I must act in my own best interest.'

'I have always served your interests,' said Challenor. 'And I will always do so. I do not understand what has come between us.'

'A small matter of trust and a payment to be made. I had left you bales of English wool and a generous amount of silk and spices so that you might trade in Venice. Now I must relieve you of these.'

Challenor kept his eyes on Uthmân Dey. He showed no sign of deference to this man who funded corsair ships in return for tributes and profits. 'You know I must trade with the Venetians when I leave Tunis. It is

where I discover information about what cargo travels where. When I seize those cargoes, it benefits the great Uthmân Dey.'

'I have never been greedy in our dealings, Captain John. I have taken only what is my due. Silk and spices allow me to build mosques. Houses for my people. Pay government officials. I need money to build my new palace. But now I must sacrifice my own share of your cargo and all of yours and send it as a gesture to Redwan, the Pasha of Algiers, who has sent a chief official to demand recompense for the sinking of his galley.'

'You're no friend of Redwan's. Your Janissaries serve you as their master; Redwan's choose him. We saved men from that galley.' Challenor searched the surrounding faces. 'One was a Janissary. A man of importance to your own people.'

'For which I and my Janissary brothers are grateful, but gratitude and the life of one man who is precious to my brothers is not enough. The Pasha's lookouts saw your ship when you passed Algiers, Captain John. That is why they went in pursuit. You stole from Redwan. Five years ago you took his money. That was foolish.'

Challenor knew he had been caught out. He shrugged. 'It was not his money,' he said.

'Whose else would it be?' said Uthmân Dey, leaning forward, driving home his point to Challenor. 'The last time you traded prisoners with him, Christians paid ransom for them. You took the ransom but did not release the prisoners.'

'Then he has no quarrel with me. He kept the prisoners as slaves. If there is ill will towards me, then it comes from those who paid their ransom.'

'Then be thankful the Christians have not asked for your head. That you have only one to give.'

The sword slashed down so suddenly the crowd gasped and recoiled. Blood gushed from the severed neck. The corpse shuddered in its death throes. The head tumbled between Elizabeth and Uthmân Dey. Horrified, she saw the eyes stare at her and blink twice before closing.

The bosun's mate would never whip another man again.

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CHAPTER 25

After the Execution, Uthmân Dey left the square with his entourage. Challenor and his bosun were freed from their bonds and pushed into line with the Dartmouth men and women and galley slaves. Now they too were prisoners and escorted to the cells.

As they reached the prison, Elizabeth got close to Richard.

‘I thought they were going to kill more of us,’ she said, still shocked at the sight of the beheading.

‘Uthmân Dey wanted to punish Challenor. He’s still alive because, I reckon, Challenor still has value for him. For all we know, he might be traded with his cargo to Algiers. Whatever happens, Challenor has lost his ship. He’s one of us now.’

The Janissaries hustled the prisoners, shoving them back into any available cell. Elizabeth was pushed in with some of the other women. They ignored her. She stood at the front of the cell and turned her back to the bars. It was time to face those who had turned against her.

‘I never had any choice in this matter. I have always been as much a prisoner as all of you.’

‘In comfort and with better food, I’ll wager,’ said one woman. It was young Ancilla May, the apprentice glove maker.

The women murmured in agreement. Ancilla’s mother gripped her daughter’s shoulder. ‘Be quiet, child. Criticize her and you condemn yourself.’

Elizabeth looked at them. ‘And you think I’d denounce you for speaking ill of me? I understand your grievance. A man who had once shown affection for me took me. He did not give me a choice. I’m grateful he has

not assaulted me. And that none of you have suffered at the hands of his men – and that is because he gave the order.'

'Until we are given over to the heathens,' said Alice Burghley, the seamstress.

'I believe the skills each of you have will offer you some protection. They give you value.' She took a breath, staring at the women who had once been no different to her in their hometown. 'I cannot help anyone. Not even myself.'

'He came for you,' Alice said. 'You are the cause of our misfortune.'

Elizabeth had no answer to that. Tears stung her eyes. Challenor had torn her away from the friendships she had known.

Elaine Ross, the young fish seller, shouldered her way forward through the crowded cell. 'You turn on Beth because a man came for her? You blame a woman who said never a bad word about anyone? She never spoke ill about me. Unlike you, Annie Dulcie, whispering about the men I gave favours to, taking twopence to buy another loaf of bread. Or you, Grace Pryor, who said you would pray for my soul. My soul didn't put food on the table. Your prayers have done nothing for any of us. And didn't help poor old Gabriel, did they? He stood up for them that're put upon.' She reached for Elizabeth's hand. Her lilting West Country accent offered comfort to the beleaguered woman. 'You come and sit with me, my lovely. Ignore these people who used to be your friend. Shame on them. We are in this together. Think hard about who you cast stones at, is what I say.'

Elizabeth allowed Elaine to lead her through the women. She met their stares. Some of them lowered their eyes. The lowest among the captives had caused them to examine their hearts.

*

Richard was returned to his own solitary cage. He watched as Challenor and the bosun were pushed into the same cell as Martin and three other Dartmouth men. Doors clanged shut, and the Janissaries tested them to make sure the Arab jailer had locked every cell. Once they left, some men called out, taunting Challenor, cursing him for what he was. There was little doubt that if the men in the same cell as Challenor and the bosun were to turn on them, they might be overwhelmed and killed.

Challenor shouted back through the bars. ‘I am here now as punishment. You have all been taken by Uthmân Dey. But there is still a chance that I can save us all.’

The jeers did not subside. Challenor and Chesney retreated to the back of the cell until those shouting grew tired of hurling insults. No one had much energy, having witnessed Pewsey’s horrific execution. Uthmân Dey’s power and authority had been exerted and now, instead of being sold by merchants, they belonged to him.

There was nothing more they could do except comfort themselves with sleep.

*

Challenor had sunk into thought as he squatted in the corner of Martin’s cell. He and Chesney had whispered urgently for a while but then fallen silent. No food or water had been brought for the prisoners, which added to their misery and also kept them quiet.

Martin studied the corsair captain. He did not look like a defeated man.

‘I told you I had served,’ said Martin.

Challenor raised his eyes. ‘So what?’

‘I’ve seen English warship captains fight and outmanoeuvre an enemy. They were more than mere men of the sea. They had skill. You were a fisherman. How did you learn to fool an English galleon and then an Algerian galley? No Devon fishermen have those skills.’

For a moment, it looked as though Challenor was going to ignore Martin’s questions. Then he shrugged. ‘I was a pilot known for my navigational skills. When I was taken, it was by the Turks and an Englishman who commanded them. He had served the Queen, but he had a habit of taking what should have been handed to the Crown. When they came to arrest him, he was already gone. He became a corsair captain.’

‘Then it was he who taught you how to fight at sea,’ said Martin. ‘Who was he?’

‘William Stevenson.’

Martin sighed and smiled. ‘King Billy himself. What a bastard. Aye, I can see where you learnt to outmanoeuvre one of the King’s ships. He could

turn a ship on a coin and use his guns before an enemy even knew he was there. So, he was the master of the *Falcon* before you.'

'He was. He valued my piloting skills, and I learnt quickly. Disease killed him within the year. I was the only man who could take the *Falcon* where she needed to go. And I knew there was an opportunity to be had here with Uthmân Dey.' He shrugged. 'If he takes my cargo and sends Pewsey's head to Algiers, the matter might be closed. And he will want the *Falcon* back at sea.'

'Or he will turn his back on you and give the *Falcon* to one of the other captains when they return.'

'Perhaps.'

'If we could escape from here, could we get to the ship?'

Challenor shook his head. 'The Janissaries will have the *Falcon* surrounded. My crew will be held on board. I'll wager he hasn't yet decided what to do with the ship or the crew.'

'Or you,' said Martin.

Challenor's icy stare was the signal for Martin to stop questioning the man who had, until recently, held control over his fate.

'I am not yet dead. And I am still captain of my ship and crew. If I can find my way out of here, there is still a chance that I'll sail for Venice.' Challenor stared into the distance. 'I know a merchant who can help if I could get to him.' He went to the cage door and looked left and right, searching for any clue as to how he could escape.

'These bars are solid and the jailer won't risk taking a bribe. Not from a man who sails downwind of Uthmân Dey,' said Martin. He paused for a moment. If the idea was worth pursuing, then he needed more information from Challenor. 'If you could get out of here, what would you do if you can't reach your ship?'

'I would do a deal that would make Uthmân Dey release me.'

'Just you?'

'Everyone. They would have a choice. Sail with me to Venice and be sold there, or stay here and face what he'll do with them.'

Martin looked across at Richard's cell. 'There's one man among us who can open locks.'

*

Richard lay in the straw as the light was fading from the barred gap that ran across the top of the walls. A breeze picked up and cooled the prison's fetid heat. He studied the wound on his arm. The scab was healing. He was distracted by someone hissing. He peered through the bars and saw Martin, arm extended, as if reaching through the bars would help gain his attention.

'What?' said Richard quietly.

Martin's voice drifted across the space between them. 'Could you open these locks?'

The question took him by surprise. The only reason it would be asked was if Challenor had a plan to escape. He looked at the lock. It was old but effective. 'I think so. I need a length of thin metal I can bend.'

The thought of freedom lifted his spirits. Turning back into his cell, he kicked aside the straw, searching for what he didn't know. Running his hands along the wall and the wooden divide, his fingers snagged on a splinter. The tip of a nail protruded from the old dried wood where the boards had been joined. His fingertips couldn't get a grip on the T-shaped head. He needed something to lever it out.

Richard pulled his belt free and hooked the buckle over the nail head. As he gently eased the buckle back and forth, the wood began to release its hold on the nail. He patiently worked it until four inches protruded. Tearing a piece of his shirt, he wrapped it around the nail and wriggled it free. The iron nail was several inches long, tapering from its head to its point. Gripping its point with his piece of cloth, he wedged the head into the bars, bending two inches from the T-shape head into what looked like a double-sided hook. It was crude, but so was the lock. He had made enough locks to know how the key needed to turn back the locking lever. There was no keyhole on his side of the lock. Reaching through the bars, he eased the bent nail into the keyhole. Closing his eyes, he let his fingers feel the lock's inner workings. He couldn't get the inner lever to catch. Turning his wrist, he tried a better angle. He caught his breath as he felt a movement in the lock. With a deft twist, he turned the nail and felt the lever give. The cell door was open. For a moment he held it closed, fearful the sound of the lock opening might have been heard. All he saw was Martin's smiling face pressed through the bars in the opposite cell.

Richard eased the door open. Its iron hinges creaked. Every sound was exaggerated. And if anyone heard the scrape of metal, they must surely hear

his heart thudding. Closing it behind him, he strode across to Martin's cell.

His friend whispered, 'Challenor has a plan to speak to someone and make a deal.'

Richard looked past Martin towards Challenor, who stared at him.

'You think I'm going to trust him? No, I'll open every cell and we'll take our chances outside.'

Challenor eased Martin aside. 'There is no escape without my help,' he murmured. 'You'll all be caught before daybreak. They'll flay you alive.'

Martin nodded. 'He's right, lad. We have to trust him on this. Bastard might run but it's the best chance we've got.'

Even their whispers seemed too loud to Richard's ears. He was nervous. 'And where will you go if I open this door?'

'There's a merchant I do business with. I know where he lives. You come with me.'

Richard hesitated, glancing across to the other cells. Everyone was asleep. It was obvious that he couldn't release so many and hope to evade being captured again. And then the punishment would be severe.

Richard looked from Challenor to Martin, who shrugged. What choice was there? They had to trust the corsair.

Richard turned the makeshift key in the lock.

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CHAPTER 26

Richard did not know how large La Goulette might be, but there was no time to question the *Falcon*'s captain as he strode away. Richard followed, shoulders hunched, eyes staring into the night. In the distance, a dog barked, answered by another, then fell silent. The houses were mostly in rows, terraced like Elizabeth's cottage in Dartmouth. The single-storey dwellings had only one or two small windows, which would keep the interiors cool in summer and warm in winter. The openings were above head height, so there seemed little chance of anyone seeing the two men edge along their walls.

It was obvious that Challenor was familiar with the town. He stopped at every corner, checked it was clear, and then moved on confidently.

Richard lost track of time. They moved as fast as they could through the narrow streets, slowing down cautiously whenever they heard a voice or a door slamming. Two more streets along and both men were startled when a wooden gate opened and a woman carrying a bucket stepped into the alley. Her back was to them as she tipped water into a narrow gutter, the bucket's contents slithering snake-like beneath their feet. If she turned to her right, she would come face to face with them. Startled, she might scream and that would alert everyone. Turn left and her back would remain to them.

Richard saw Challenor's hand go to his belt, where his knife would have been. He was prepared to kill the woman. In that moment, Richard realized that Captain John Challenor was a ruthless killer, regardless of how gently he had treated Richard's sister. Neither he nor Challenor drew breath. The woman upended the bucket to drain its last drops. And turned left, back into her house.

Challenor wasted no time and set off again, turning this way and that into arterial alleyways and narrow passageways. By now, they were in a labyrinth. Another broader street and Challenor picked up the pace. Richard sensed they were close to their destination.

The *Falcon*'s captain reached a corner, pressed his back against the wall and cursed quietly. Richard heard voices approaching from the next street.

'Janissaries,' whispered Challenor, wiping the sweat from his face.

Richard's heart thudded. 'We go back?' he said.

Challenor shook his head. 'We don't know which way they'll turn once they get here. Even if they walk ahead, they'll see us. There's nowhere to hide down the street,' he said, looking back to where they had just travelled. He looked at Richard's clothes, his face and hands grubby from the lack of washing. 'You look as dishevelled as any of my men,' he said. 'And I'm no better. Sailors use the brothels so there's good enough reason to be out at night. We don't look out of place. We bluff our way past them.'

Richard's eyes widened. The thought of walking into Janissaries made him freeze. Challenor smiled. 'You've done more dangerous things than this. Don't let your courage fail you now.' And with that the captain stepped around the corner into plain sight, looking back as if his companion was a straggler attempting to keep up. 'Come on, why are you so slow?'

Richard's legs seemed to take him into the street without permission. He kept his eyes on Challenor, who reached up and put an arm on his shoulder. Thirty paces further on, the Janissaries had slowed, their voices momentarily uncertain.

Challenor said something and laughed. Richard was deaf. Blood pounded in his ears. He nodded automatically and smiled, his hand now gripping Challenor's shoulder to steady himself. And then they were stepping aside, closer to the wall, so that both lots of men could pass. The Janissaries stared at them. They appeared to have been drinking but were not intoxicated. Bare-armed, tattoos visible in the moonlight, they swaggered, some with one hand resting naturally on their sword hilts. Their casual demeanour was unlike the physical threat Janissaries usually exhibited. Challenor raised a hand in greeting as they passed by. Richard felt the tension ease. The band of steel across his chest loosened. They were through.

And then one of the Janissaries called back.

Challenor and Richard stopped. Challenor pressed his arm against Richard, fearful he might run at what sounded like a challenge. They looked back; the half-dozen men were staring at them. Challenor showed no sign of fear. He answered casually in the common lingua franca. Richard heard him say: '*Black Bear.*'

The men said something and then turned away, ignoring the two Europeans. Challenor exhaled.

'What was it they asked?'

'What ship we were from,' said Challenor. 'I know the *Bear* is anchored in the lagoon.' He smiled again. 'A close brush with danger makes your blood surge and your heart race. It makes you feel alive.'

Richard stared at the man who had just saved them from potential death. 'I'm not a man like you who relishes danger.'

Challenor shrugged. 'And I'm not a man who would risk his life for galley slaves. Now, let's be about our business.'

*

Once they turned into the street Challenor sought, he stopped outside a whitewashed wall, its top a smooth, rendered curve. Challenor put his eye against a wooden studded gate. Light showed through planks' narrow gaps.

He sighed with satisfaction. 'The bastard is at home.'

The size of the house, if the walls were anything to go by, was far grander than anything Richard had so far seen. It clearly belonged to a man of wealth. Two slender passageways ran either side of the wall, and beyond this house, Richard saw similarly large properties scattered along the road ahead. 'Merchants?' he asked.

Challenor glanced up and down the street. He nodded. 'This is the district where the merchants live. His name is Margos Azarian. He's Armenian. But he'll speak in English when we do business. So what you hear you forget. Understood?'

Richard nodded. Challenor still seemed to have influence and Elizabeth's fate might still rest in his hands.

'We've done business many times. And I always made sure he was in my debt, not me in his.'

'Why don't we knock on the door?'

‘Because we’re uninvited and there’ll be a watchman somewhere in his grounds. If he raises the alarm before we find our man, then our adventure will come to an unsatisfactory end.’

‘Then how are we going to get in? Is there another lock you want me to pick?’

‘No, these gates are bolted securely. Stirrup your hands so that I can get on top of the wall and then I’ll reach down and pull you up.’

Richard didn’t move. His vulnerability was obvious. ‘I help you onto the top of the wall and then you can simply drop down on the other side and leave me here. The next lot of Janissaries I see might be my last.’

Challenor looked aggrieved. ‘In Christ’s name, did I bring you all this way to leave you in the street?’

‘Did you bring me because you knew the gate to be barred and the wall too high to scale?’

For a moment it appeared to be a stalemate, then Challenor relented. ‘Then I’ll have to put my trust in you,’ he said, bending to cup his hands together.

Richard squared the sole of his foot in Challenor’s hands, reached up, grasped the top of the wall, spreading his palms across its curved top, and then effortlessly hauled himself up. He peered over the edge. The night breeze wafted the smell of scented candles towards him. A dozen oil lamps were placed strategically in the plant-filled garden. Water gurgled from a rill into a small pond. A path led from the gate in the wall, curving snake-like towards a broad verandah where an ornately decorated divan bore a sprawled figure. A wine carafe and the remains of a food platter lay next to him on a side table. The man snored contentedly. Behind him see-through curtains stirred in the breeze, exposing the softly lit interior of a room the breadth of the verandah. There was no sign of anyone else. No dogs barked.

‘Anything?’ hissed Challenor.

Richard looked down into the gloomy street and Challenor’s upturned face.

‘A man sleeping.’

Challenor raised his arm. Richard lay across the wall, reached down, and grasped Challenor’s wrist. He heaved, letting the stocky man use the blacksmith’s strength to gain his footing and then clamber up in front of him.

Challenor took in the scene that lay below him. ‘That looks like him.’

The man on the bed broke wind.

Challenor grinned. ‘Sounds like him.’ He nodded. ‘I’ll lower you down, then I can stand on your shoulders. We must be quiet.’

‘And if he wakes, then I’m exposed to danger as much as I would be in the street while you’re free to escape. No, Challenor, I lower you down and I stand on *your* shoulders.’

Challenor scanned the ground below and checked the shadows falling around the house. He nodded, grasped Richard’s arm again and lowered himself down the wall, boots seeking purchase on the smooth surface. His feet touched the ground. He looked up, and beckoned Richard to clamber down, turning his gaze back to the gardens, seeking out where the night watchman might be.

Richard’s weight pressed into his shoulders and then the young blacksmith eased himself breathlessly onto the ground next to him. Challenor moved cautiously along the path towards the sleeping man, ducking low behind any tall bushes to check the way ahead was clear. Several cut stone steps led to the verandah thirty yards from where they were concealed. Richard grabbed Challenor’s arm and pointed. There was no moonlight, but the dark edges around the house revealed an armed man stepping into the garden. They were downwind and heard the sound of his sandal-clad feet scuffing the ground. He looked half asleep, stretching, looking up at the sky, watching the clouds shifting. Then he sat on the far edge of the steps, one elbow resting on his knee, his palm cradling his face. Boredom and the night watch went hand in hand.

Challenor sat down and tugged off his boots, gesturing for Richard to do the same with his shoes. Bare feet would make no sound. Challenor put his face close to Richard’s.

‘You must strike him down. Render him helpless.’

‘Me?’

Challenor nodded. ‘I have to get to Azarian. You deal with the guard.’

Richard saw Challenor smile in the darkness.

‘That is why I brought you. I can’t do both.’

‘I can’t kill him,’ Richard insisted.

‘No need. You watch me. When I am up the steps and close to Azarian then you strike him.’

Richard did not look convinced, but he nodded. They separated. Richard crouched and edged around the garden's foliage. He squatted ten yards from the watchman. The lantern light glistened on dull metal at his belt, revealing a curved sword and knife. Richard assessed the man. He did not look like a Janissary. He was slight of build; his pantaloons and broad belt made him appear even less frightening. The breeze brushed Richard's face. He was still downwind, so any sound he made in his approach might be muted. He looked to where Challenor crouched as he crept up the steps, head turned towards the guard whose back was to them both.

Richard moved quickly. He was five strides from the man, ready to hurl himself forward. Heart racing, he saw Challenor was no more than three yards from the sleeping man, ready to smother his mouth and stop him from crying out. Richard's gaze darted between Challenor and the watchman.

And then the sleeping man rolled over, a wayward arm striking the side table, knocking its contents to the ground. The guard turned, his hand snatching at his knife. Richard hurled himself forward at the startled man, who at once saw Challenor stifle the merchant's cry at the looming white man attacking him. The guard pivoted, knife at the ready, both men now within arm's reach of the other. Eyes wide. Grimacing. The watchman's face spurted blood. He fell back across the verandah and lay still.

Richard stood over him, not knowing what had happened. And then realized he still gripped the smooth river stone he had unconsciously picked up from the edge of the rill. It had blood on it. He'd used it to cudgel the guard.

'Is he dead?' Challenor hissed.

Richard looked from the fallen man to where the slave merchant sat upright as Challenor held a muscled arm around his chest and his hand across the wide-eyed man's mouth. Richard bent and laid his hand on the man's chest.

'He's alive.'

'Good. Take his knife. Bind and gag him.'

He said something into the merchant's ear. The man nodded. Challenor released his hand.

'You are here to cause me harm?' said the Armenian.

'I'm here to do a deal, Azarian.'

The merchant looked at the tall man who, having secured the guard, turned to face him. He was holding a knife. ‘And who is he?’

‘He’s here to make sure you listen,’ said Challenor.

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CHAPTER 27

The Merchant Swung his legs free of the cot. He appeared to be calm about the incursion into his home. A deal with Challenor usually made him money, which had obviously soothed his concerns. He called for an unseen servant inside the house to bring food and drink as Richard and Challenor retrieved their boots and shoes. A slender girl soon appeared with a platter and a carafe.

As the food was set on the side table and Challenor made himself comfortable on a large floor cushion, Azarian kept glancing Richard's way where he stood near the fallen watchman.

'Your man looks threatening, Challenor. I would feel more comfortable if he lowered the knife.'

Richard realized he was still gripping the guard's knife and, when Challenor nodded, he slipped it into his boot. With any chance of immediate violence removed the Armenian began to select morsels of food. Richard's stomach growled, but he had not been invited to join the two slave traders. He had no desire to share their company, but he would have been happy to eat their food. He squatted with his back against the wall, his body half concealed by shadow, reasoning that if he was not in the Armenian's line of sight, then the two men would speak more freely and he might learn more of Challenor's plans.

Margos Azarian leant forward to retrieve a piece of cooked meat. He looked straight into Challenor's eyes. 'You cannot escape, you know this. So I don't see how I can help you. Or what benefit your presence here offers me.'

'I have no desire to escape.'

The shrewd merchant took his time to answer. ‘No matter what debt I owe you for past business deals, you are a prisoner. My hands are tied.’

‘If I reveal that you cheated Uthmân Dey by not paying his tributes due from our cargo on more than one occasion, then your life and the pleasures you enjoy will be forfeit.’

Azarian shrugged. ‘I am in favour with him. I could answer for myself if I’m challenged.’ He chewed the meat, wiping his fingers on a silk hand cloth. ‘Could you? You and I shared the profits of our private arrangement. But hours ago, you were a stroke away from losing your head. And if you threaten to expose me, you expose yourself in the same breath. Next time Mehmet’s blade will take your head. I could send my servants now to call the town’s night watch and have you taken. You have no proof, Challenor. It is my word against yours.’

Challenor showed no sign of concern. ‘When we both made a profit in the past, I did not take my share. I added those payments to your account.’

Azarian faltered. If Challenor proved him to be the sole cheater of Uthmân Dey, the consequences could be deadly.

‘You do not play a good bluff,’ he said.

‘I have the paperwork, Margos. It shows every shortfall that passed through your hands.’

His revelation halted Azarian’s hand as it reached for more food. He chose instead to drink.

‘The thought of Uthmân Dey’s anger dries the throat, doesn’t it?’ said Challenor.

The Armenian wiped his hands once more and tossed the silk aside. ‘Then you have me at a disadvantage.’

‘Which is why I came to you.’

‘You said there was a deal to be done. What is it you want?’

‘I want my cargo back.’

‘Uthmân Dey has seized your silk and spices. They are already in his warehouses. Your captives are of no use to you. I fail to see where I fit into all of this.’

‘I want my captives so I can sell them in Venice.’

Azarian scoffed. ‘There is no slave market in Venice. Its prohibition has been enshrined in their law longer than you and I have lived. Those people are worthless to you.’

‘There’s always a way around a problem. Christians captured by Turks at sea can be sold in an Aegean or Black Sea port and registered with Venetian authorities there. As long as the taxes are paid the authorities turn a blind eye.’

‘And you will sail to these ports?’

‘No.’ Challenor poured himself more wine. He smiled. ‘I bribe the port officials in Venice. I have a ready market there. They don’t have a slave market, but they have slaves. They need them. There is a labour shortage. Who else will soil their hands labouring, who will wash their clothes, clean their shit pits, care for their children, cook, clean, sew, make, build?’ He grinned. ‘Slaves.’

The merchant did not argue. Challenor knew the Venetian law well enough. He shrugged.

‘I have a contact in Venice who knows who needs what servant where,’ said Challenor. ‘There are skilled men in Uthmân Dey’s cells, and those who have no skills worth selling can go to the Venetian mines on their mainland or to their galleys. I have women for domestic servants; others can go to the brothels.’ He sipped his drink. ‘I can make money out of this. What will Uthmân Dey do with them? Put them all to work as labourers? Sell them back to the Crown? When was the last time the English paid ransom for captives? More years than you have lived a life of luxury.’

‘There are women?’

‘Of course. Old, young. Fat. Thin. Wide hips and breasts full of milk.’

‘You have infants?’

‘Some.’

‘Challenor, I can provide wet nurses with regular work. I can sell their newborn or infants. That’s good money. Sell them and have them raised in the Muslim faith.’

‘No. These people are my cargo.’

Margos Azarian seemed to be less resistant to the idea of becoming involved again with the *Falcon*’s captain even though the full extent of Challenor’s plan for his involvement had not been revealed. All in good time. Deal-making demanded patience. ‘You know he permits a Spanish friar to live here and attend to the spiritual needs of those foreigners captured and held in Tunis? He might use him to bargain with the English.’

‘No, he won’t. My captives don’t follow the Roman Church. Why do you think I can sell them in Venice? No one who follows the Roman rite can be enslaved. And no one gives a damn about the people I have. They are cargo.’

Azarian plucked more food from the platter. His appetite had obviously returned. ‘If you could get them back from Uthmân Dey, you would be wise to take them to Livorno.’ He sensed an opportunity. ‘*That’s* where you have options. Traders there might arrange their ransom back to the English. Redemption can be lucrative. Or they can sell them to Florence. I know traders in Livorno. They sell Tartars, Greeks, anyone from anywhere. They even sell them back to the Muslims who captured them in the first place. *That’s* the market.’

‘No. Too risky. We can lose money there. I know those traders. They sail too close to the wind. Their margins are questionable and too many go bankrupt. Then we lose everything: cargo and money.’

The slave trader studied Challenor. ‘You are not in a strong position to bargain, even if you say you did not profit from our past dealings.’

‘My profit comes now. Why do you think I’ve been so generous in the past? It’s because I knew the day would come when I would need to call in my debt.’ He paused, showed no sign of gloating about his hold over the merchant. ‘I have the written evidence against you. Every sale made. Every bill of lading. Every amount that denied Uthmân Dey his tribute. I’m certain you would prefer it to be in your possession.’

Azarian fussed over the food on the platter. ‘So, here we are. We trade again. You want me to buy your captives from Uthmân Dey. Then convince him to let you sail for Venice and sell them. He will want his cut of those sales over and above what I pay him. Uthmân Dey will want ten per cent of the profit from the sale.’ He paused and studied Challenor. ‘I want more.’

‘How much more?’

‘Merchants in Livorno can make a profit of a hundred and fifty per cent trading or redeeming captives. I’m guessing those rich Venetians will pay a handsome price. I want double what I pay to get their release. Paid in letters of credit at one of the Venetian banks.’ He looked at Challenor over the rim of his glass. ‘That leaves you a poorer man than when you arrived in Tunis but I give you back your life. A bargain, I would say.’

The offer of taking all of Challenor's profit was brazen but the corsair captain considered it for a moment. He did not appear unduly concerned. 'Venice is not Livorno. It's a more… discreet place to do such business. I have expenses. I have a crew to pay. A house in Venice to run. So, here's how it will work. You will purchase my captives from Uthmân Dey. I will guarantee him twenty-five per cent of the sale price I make in Venice. That will dispel any uncertainty of loss for him. On the morning we sail, I will hand you the evidence I have against you. That's a good deal, Margos. You make no profit this time, only a loss, but think of it as an investment in staying alive. And we both live to do business for another day.'

Azarian looked aggrieved. 'You said there was money in it for me. You kick a man when he lies in the dirt.'

'You made your profit before this arrangement. You get to keep that money. See it for what it is.'

'It is robbery.'

'It's lifting your purse without you being harmed.'

'At least ten per cent!'

'No, I have no need to give you anything. Why should I?'

'Because you know we will do business again.'

Challenor considered it. He shrugged. 'All right. I'll throw in a couple of men I took from the galley so that your loss is reduced.'

'Give me six at least. Some women as well.'

'No.'

'Challenor!' Azarian pleaded.

'All right. Three men. A Greek and two Venetians. Take the deal or leave it.'

Azarian glared at him. 'You are a bastard of the worst kind.' He sucked his teeth. 'But at least we can work together for your next voyage and then I will make up my loss. I will hold you to that.' He looked at Richard. 'I could use another guard. He's young. Leave him here. Make him part of the deal.'

Richard stood, pressing his back against the wall. He reached down for the knife. He would not be held by the slave trader here in Tunis. Better to take his chances and run. Where didn't matter at that moment.

Challenor got to his feet. 'Regretfully, I need him. I'm going to marry his sister.' He stared at Richard as Azarian looked his way. 'Whether he

likes it or not.’

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CHAPTER 28

Two Days Later, as dawn tinged the buildings orange at La Goulette, Challenor stood with Elizabeth on the quayside as the ship's crew readied the *Falcon* for sailing. The captives shuffled in a column from the town's prison. They were silent except for the scuffing of their feet. There were only a few Janissaries present. Escape attempts by the captives were unlikely. Challenor had offered them hope. In their minds, no destination could be worse than Tunis.

The early-morning chill wind off the sea made Elizabeth tug her shawl tighter. The waves beyond the lagoon in the open sea had white tips.

'Do you still intend to sail for Venice?' she asked.

Challenor kept his eyes on the column of men and women. 'Venice is where you and I will be married. You will have every comfort you desire.'

'And yet you have never proposed. You have only commanded. I am not one of your sailors.'

He faced her. 'Will you marry me? I have never lost my love for you.'

She remained calm. Her face expressionless. The flicker of emotion she had once felt for him taunted her. She had already decided a life with him was better than being enslaved. But she wouldn't yield so easily. 'You have separated me from my people and my brother. And you ask me to turn my back on them further so that I might gain a soft bed and good food while they are sold as slaves. Am I to be sold like them if I don't agree?'

Challenor hid his irritation and watched as the captives waded into the shallow lagoon and then clambered into boats to return them to the *Falcon*. 'You test my affection almost beyond its limits. I would never see you sold.

There, that threat has been removed. So, I will give you ten days to agree. By the time we reach Venice, I will want your agreement.'

'And if I still do not wish to marry you? What then?'

'Then I must draw you to me another way. Your brother will not be placed where his skills are best suited. He'll be sent to serve in a Venetian galley.' He stared at her. 'You'll never see him again,' he said matter-of-factly.

Finally, she realized, finally he had given her an ultimatum. She disguised her horror at the thought of her brother being sent to a galley. Richard and Martin were among the first of the prisoners to reach the quay. She gave him a brave smile, but one that she knew expressed her regret they were still to be kept apart.

'Mr Chesney!' said Challenor, pointing at Richard as the sailors herded him towards the boat. The bosun blocked Richard's path, indicating where Challenor stood.

Richard turned, glancing at Challenor, then sent a concerned look towards his sister, who stood behind the man intent on marrying her.

Challenor held out the palm of his hand.

Richard tugged free Azarian's night watchman's knife from his boot. He placed it hilt first in Challenor's hand. Challenor smiled. 'We ran hard and fast. In the need for haste, I forgot you still had it.'

'A pity I hadn't the courage to use it on you in the alleyway.'

'That would have been foolish. Killing me would have condemned you all.'

Richard's eyes met his sister's.

He turned away.

'Besides,' said Challenor. 'You're no killer.' Then, ignoring Richard, he turned to his bosun. 'Mr Chesney, we still have our English wool stowed. Uthmân Dey knows we need to bribe our way into Venice so he can make his profit. When the captives are aboard, put them back at their stations on the yards and halyards until we have sufficient wind in our sails. Then have them sent below.' He pointed to two men who between them supported a third who looked close to death. They stood waiting for the Armenian slave trader. 'These men remain.'

Chesney raised a hand in acknowledgement and clambered into one of the boats.

‘Elizabeth, we were all destined for harsh servitude in this place. I have given you and your brother, and every man, woman and child captive, a chance for a better life. It’s time you showed some gratitude. My good humour in this matter is running dry.’

She saw the Armenian merchant approach the quayside. ‘He was in the slave market when we arrived. Have you betrayed us again?’

‘I have sold something far more valuable than a hundred slaves. I made a deal with him so that Uthmân Dey will let us go.’ He pulled free a wad of folded documents from his tunic. ‘That is the extent of my feelings for you. That I would cast aside much of the hold I had on him.’

‘Then you save not only us, but yourself.’

‘Without freedom, we cannot marry.’ He gestured to one of the boats carrying the women. ‘Now return to the ship. I have business to conclude.’ He turned his back and went to greet the Armenian.

*

Margos Azarian examined the three men Challenor had gifted him as part of their deal. He lifted the sick man’s head. There was no sign of life. Azarian spat a curse at Challenor.

‘You bastard. This man is dead!’

Challenor shrugged. ‘Then you have two who are not. You’re still ahead.’

Azarian thrust out his hand. ‘The documents.’

Challenor handed them over.

Azarian studied the incriminating papers. His eyes narrowed. He stared at the evidence against him. ‘You son of a whore, Challenor.’

‘Now, Margos, calm your anger. I kept back only one bill of lading that implicates you.’ He looked over the slave trader’s shoulder. ‘I see the wind favours me. I’ll do business again with you one day.’

He heard the bosun bellow orders for the readying of the ship. Captives pushed to their ratlines were already scurrying aloft to the yards, sharing the work with pirates. Other prisoners took their positions on the capstan to raise the anchor.

Challenor stepped down into the last boat taking the remaining prisoners to his ship. Azarian pulled his robes around him against the freshening

wind.

Azarian called out, ‘One day, Challenor, your betrayals will turn on you. I wish you a painful death when that time comes.’

Challenor smiled. ‘And when we meet in hell, I shall watch you being sodomized by the devil.’ He turned his back on the slave trader.

Massimo Marasini watched the angry slave trader shake a fist and spit at the receding boat. After a moment he said, ‘Master Azarian.’

The slave trader turned to face the two galley slaves, looking from one to the other to see who had spoken. ‘You dare to address me without permission?’ he spat.

‘I beg you not to beat me,’ said Marasini respectfully. ‘Challenor is a man I too would like to see dead.’

‘You’re a galley slave. He released you from that misery. And you wish him dead?’

‘I do, master. I wish it with all my heart.’

Azarian looked at Marasini, eyes scrutinizing the skeletal man. ‘To wish a man dead is not the same as committing the act. Were you a paid assassin before being chained to the bench?’

‘I traded goods from Venice. Five years ago he killed my wife and child when his ship stormed our merchantman. Challenor took me and this man next to me to the slave market at Algiers. The Christian Church and our families paid for our release but Challenor stole the ransom and condemned us to a life in the galleys. I can give you what you wish. Feed and clothe us. Give us back our strength. My friend and I will take everything that is precious to Captain Challenor. I will recover the document he holds against you. And I will inflict such pain on him he will die screaming.’

Azarian stared into Marasini’s haunted eyes and saw the truth.

‘Then you shall have whatever you need.’

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PART THREE

CITY OF GHOSTS

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CHAPTER 29

Nine Days After leaving Tunis, the masthead lookout sighted land. The weather had been kind and the wind favourable. Richard and Martin were still part of the main topsail crew. Richard had overcome his fear of the height and the expanse of the sea below. And when they instructed him to go to the edge of the yardarm, he did so with new-found confidence. The only fear he had now was what would happen to Elizabeth when they reached Venice.

Challenor's behaviour continued to confuse him. The man did not lack courage, and he had an instinct for survival that had saved him from death at the hands of the Turks. And yet he showed no compassion for his victims. Had Challenor had a knife that night in the alley, he would have killed an innocent woman had she seen him. And even without a knife, Richard believed he would have bludgeoned her to death had she tried to raise the alarm. Richard knew without doubt that, had it profited him, he would have separated mothers from their infants. And yet he had not violated Elizabeth. He was protective of her to the point of having a man killed for insulting her. Perhaps Captain John Challenor was as unfathomable as the sea.

Their time topside over, they scrambled down the ratlines. The deck was crowded. The captives had been split into groups fore and aft; midships was the least congested as the next group of prisoners had yet to be rotated with those already on deck.

Martin cursed. 'Thieving bastards have stolen my shoes.'

Richard searched for his own shoes. 'And mine.'

'They'll have the shirts off our backs,' said Martin. 'I reckon we're close to wherever we're supposed to be and the thieving scabs will sell whatever

they've taken from us.' He grimaced. 'There's a part of me that's thankful Widow Harris did not survive. I doubt there was any future for her where we're going.'

Challenor had allowed his captives to spend more time in the open. Fresh air and victuals strengthened them and there were none among them who preferred suicide to captivity now that they had escaped the terror of the Tunis slave market. Those who spent time on bended knee when held below deck praying to the Almighty now murmured encouragement to the others that God had delivered them from the heathen and into the hands of Christians.

Richard and Martin followed Chesney's command to tie off some halyards onto the belaying pins. Martin sneered at their innocence.

'You cannot blame them,' said Richard. 'Challenor will make his money and we all face an uncertain future, but at least it won't be at the hands of the Turks. Good Christians will not inflict hardship.'

'Don't you believe it. Who among these poor wretches follows the Roman rite? Not one of them. We are as close to being heathens and heretics as the Turks are in the eyes of the Catholic Church. God forbid anyone who speaks out to declare their own belief better than the Pope's. You'll see. If Gabriel Pryor was still alive and spouting his condemnation, the Inquisition would have him tortured. And would a man like Gabriel Pryor renounce his faith? Of course he wouldn't. So then they would kill him. Don't be under any illusion, lad. These people need to learn silence. Obedience is what will keep them alive. And us.'

Challenor had the mainsails furled. All lines were made fast. Then he gave the command to set a backed mizzen and the fore staysail to keep the *Falcon*'s progress slow and steady. Breeze and current nudged the ship through the gap between two land masses.

'Where are we?' Richard asked Martin.

'Dunno, lad. I've not sailed these waters before. At a guess, we must be close to where he wants us to be.' The seasoned sailor looked over the side, gauged the waves and looked to the land. 'Once we're in the lee of the land, he'll reset the sails again. I reckon we're in shallow water here.'

They heard a cry from a sailor at the front of the ship who leant over the side, lowering a rope into the water. 'By the deep!'

'Aye, right enough,' said Martin. 'He'll need to take soundings now.'

They looked back to where Challenor stood on the quarterdeck. Richard saw the captain's concentration intent on sail and wind.

'And a half-five!' called the man, taking the sounding.

Challenor ordered adjustments to rudder and sail.

'We're in five and a half fathoms,' Martin told Richard. 'We've not much sea beneath us. The *Falcon*'s draught'll be about twelve foot – that only leaves him twenty below at best. And if it gets more shallow, then he's going to need a pilot to get him through before we run aground.'

The bosun overheard him and gave Martin a shove. 'Captain Challenor needs no pilot for these waters. He knows the channels even with the shifting sandbanks. Get about your work. Clean out the shit buckets before we anchor. There'll be people coming aboard to check the ship for sickness.'

'Mr Chesney, sir,' said Martin respectfully, making sure to acknowledge the importance of the man's rank. 'Captain Challenor knows I served, that's why I was sent topside. Can an old sailor ask another where we are at present? Looks to be shallow water is all I said to the lad here.'

'You people have too much idle time on your hands. If Pewsey was here, you'd have a lash across your back. To know where we are serves you no purpose.' Chesney turned his attention from the two men, bellowed a command to the crew, and then looked back at them. He relented. 'We're dropping anchor there,' he said, pointing to a small island that looked to be three miles from the opposite landmass. 'Poveglia. So's they can check we're not plague carriers.' The bosun gave a grunt of satisfaction. 'Venice is ahead,' he said, nodding towards the horizon. 'And then we rid ourselves of you. Now get to it.'

*

When Challenor dropped anchor, a sailor escorted Elizabeth from his cabin and made her stand with the other captives who were lined up on one side of the deck. Richard and Martin made certain she stood between them. The *Falcon*'s crew stood on the opposite side of the ship.

'Someone'll be coming aboard to see if there's any sickness. If any of us or them bastards look to have a fever, they'll quarantine the ship for forty days.'

‘I’d rather take my chances ashore,’ said Richard. ‘If there is sickness and we stay here, then more of us could die.’

‘Challenor won’t want that. He’s got a cargo to sell. Us.’

Elizabeth looked along the line of captives. An infant cried; younger children clung to their mothers’ skirts. ‘I don’t see Goldwin Hughes,’ she said.

‘The old tailor?’ said Martin.

‘Was he in the hold last night?’ she asked.

‘I don’t remember,’ said Richard. ‘Martin, did you see him?’

Martin shook his head. ‘I remember he ate with the rest of us on deck before dark.’

The two men scanned the crowd. Richard nudged the woman next to him. ‘Have you seen Goldwin Hughes?’

She looked concerned and told him she had not.

‘Ask along the line,’ said Richard. He turned to Martin. ‘You too. If he’s not yet been brought up from the hold – if that’s where he is – then he might be too weak to walk. We must help him.’

The grapevine yielded worrying news. Word came back that the old man was seen being escorted by two of Challenor’s men towards the ship’s galley after the previous night’s meal. It was thought he had been given cleaning duties with the cook.

‘He wasn’t looking well,’ said Elizabeth. ‘When I was recording the names for Challenor, he was trembling. His lungs were bad.’

It took only a moment for Martin and Richard to realize what must have happened. The look between them needed no explanation.

‘Oh God,’ she whispered.

Richard put his arm around her shoulder to comfort her, but it was not comfort she needed. Anger choked her. ‘He has murdered an old man so we can be put ashore.’

‘A farmer culls a sick beast,’ said Martin. ‘And that is how Challenor sees the world. The old man was of no further use to him and would cost him dearly if found to be carrying any sickness. It’s business. Nothing more, nothing less. And you must put such anger and ill-feeling out of your mind.’

Richard took her hand. ‘Martin’s right.’

‘You don’t understand. I have until tomorrow to agree to his marriage proposal.’

‘Tomorrow?’

‘He gave me ten days.’

‘And if you don’t agree?’

She shook her head, not prepared to tell her brother of Challenor’s threat to have Richard put in the galleys. Elizabeth looked at the two men whose friendship had become stronger through hardship. She gripped her brother’s arm.

‘We do what we must to survive. And if we are separated when we reach Venice, then we will seek each other out.’

*

Richard embraced the sister he had promised to protect, knowing he could no longer do so.

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CHAPTER 30

Abroad-Beamed Barge Carrying seven men came from the island. Once secured alongside, the two oarsmen stayed at their station. The other five climbed aboard. Two of the men had the air of officialdom about them. Their long dark coats and banded hats suggested authority. Each man carried a leather document case and was welcomed by Challenor and his first officer, the bosun, Chesney. It was clear to Richard that this was less of an official visit because of the friendliness of the visitors towards the pirate captain. Martin nudged Richard and nodded towards the man who followed them.

‘Last time I saw a black man aboard ship he wasn’t dressed like that, I can tell you. He’s got money. Or works for someone who has.’

‘Is he not an official?’ said Richard.

Martin shook his head. The black man had stayed behind the two officials, letting his gaze sweep across the crowded prisoners, idly looking at the ship, as if he had never been on board such a vessel before. His tailored doublet was of dark silk with crimson embroidery and buttons. The quality of his boots and stiff ruffed collar above his coat’s neckline accentuated his refined manner. He tugged free his one glove and shook Challenor’s hand.

Richard noticed that, as the two officials were being escorted to Challenor’s cabin, the black man and the ship’s captain beamed with pleasure at their meeting. Their handshake was longer than that given to the officials. Challenor bent his head and whispered something in the man’s ear. Whatever he said pleased the well-dressed visitor. And then the two men followed the others towards the cabin.

The remaining two men were dressed as any commoner: tunic and breeches, a sheathed knife in a broad belt. They separated. They were the officials' health inspectors. One strode across to where the captives were held, the other to where Challenor's men waited. He and the crew greeted each other and soon began to share jokes. It was obvious that he knew Challenor's men. Even so he stopped and looked at every man. These two inspectors were the guardians against sickness coming into a crowded city.

The man who walked along the captives' ranks showed no sign of friendliness or good humour. He pulled aside any shawl wrapped around infants, putting a rough hand on its body to feel for any fever. It was a slow and thorough process. After the crew and captives had been inspected, the two men went below and scoured the ship to check that no one was hiding. Once the inspection was over, they went to Challenor's cabin and knocked respectfully on the door. They waited and, when summoned, went inside.

The crew on the opposite side of the ship were in high spirits as Chesney ordered them to open the hold's hatches. The men evidently knew there would be no delay sailing to Venice. No sickness had been found among them. The captives watched as they set a winch up and men clambered down into the hold.

Challenor escorted the visitors onto the deck, bade them farewell and saw them down into the waiting skiff. The black man was the last to leave.

Elizabeth saw he was clutching the lists she had written. 'He's the man who will sell us into captivity,' she said.

'He has the list?' said Richard.

She nodded.

As a bale of wool was being hauled up from below and swung out over the side of the ship, Martin said, 'I can see a lighter coming from the shore. That wool will be the bribe for the port officials, I'll wager, so that the documents he holds will show they've paid the taxes on us.'

As the boat pulled away and the lighter came alongside, Challenor called out to his crew: 'We sail to the basin a mile from the city for the night. We'll anchor there. Tomorrow, lads, there'll be whores and sweet wine for you all.'

The men cheered and shouted raucous and crude comments about what their time ashore promised.

Once the bale of wool had been put aboard the lighter, Challenor ordered sails to be set, then beckoned Elizabeth to him. Richard gripped her arm.

‘What is the worst he can do to any of us if you don’t go to him? Let’s take our chances.’

‘Richard, there is no choice. You must accept it. He’s gentle with me but cold-hearted to everyone else.’ She hesitated, not wanting him to sense her sacrifice for him. ‘He could inflict pain and suffering on everyone here and we must remember the women and their children. If I can have any influence on their wellbeing, then I must take that opportunity.’ She smiled. ‘We are not yet sold. We are still together for one more night. I shall ask him to let us share it.’

She stepped away from him and went to where Challenor waited on the quarterdeck.

‘We’ll not be going far,’ said Martin. The ship had little canvas set and moved gently with the wind and tide. ‘If that’s the city ahead, and he’s anchoring a mile offshore for the night, then we’ve little more than that to travel.’

*

By nightfall, the *Falcon* lay at anchor in the lagoon’s gentle swell. The anchorage known as Bacino di San Marco was where merchant ships would wait to unload the cargo onto smaller vessels and lighters. Five other ships were also in the basin, far enough apart to be almost indistinguishable in the darkness, little more than shifting shadows. Ghostly bells chimed the watch changes. Martin had been correct when he said the *Falcon* would sail little more than a mile from where the corrupt officials had boarded and checked the ship. Challenor had secured his place in the lagoon where he would offload his cargo. The warm breeze carried sounds from the city; lights twinkled along the foreshore and in taller buildings. The city offered a life of warmth, and a joyful welcome. Or such was the illusion.

The crew had fed the captives in their usual groups of twenty or thirty at a time on deck. The sailors remained in good humour, their language towards their human cargo less corrosive than usual. By this time the following night, they would have indulged their pleasures. Now they

clustered in small pockets, threw dice and played cards by lantern light. A few stood up on the ratlines gazing across to the enticing city of Venice.

*

By the early hours of the morning, the decks were empty except for the ship's watch. Richard and Martin had scrubbed and cleared away the last pots and plates used by crew and captives. Most of the city lights had dimmed; the sounds across the water had been silenced. Venice's citizens slept. The night sky had clouded over, as dark as the lagoon.

A pirate hustled them down to the hold. As Richard reached the steps, Challenor's voice called out from where he stood on the quarterdeck with Elizabeth.

'Not him.' He beckoned to the sailor. 'Over here.'

Martin looked over his shoulder. 'Watch yourself, lad. He takes a turn for the worse and there'll be no witnesses.'

Richard acknowledged the ferryman's warning. The hatch was closed, and he was ushered to Challenor and his sister. Richard stared up at them in the warm glow of the aft lantern. His sister's high cheekbones, as if sculpted by the soft light, made her look handsome despite her plainness. A face of strength and quiet dignity. Richard felt a surge of affection for her. What man could not fall in love with her?

Challenor led Elizabeth down the steps. 'Come with me,' he told Richard.

They walked with him along the deck until he stopped and leant against ship's rail. He said nothing, then he pointed into the bible-black darkness. Beyond the prow a few lights still glimmered from the city.

His calm voice was as gentle as the water lapping against the side of the boat. 'It is a harsh world I have chosen. I did not ask for it but it was thrust upon me and I embraced it. A man is fortunate if he can fulfil two simple desires in his life: to have a place to call home and to love a special woman. Both depend on beauty.'

Neither Richard nor Elizabeth said anything. Best not to interrupt Challenor's reflective mood.

'La Serenissima is the only place I truly love,' he said. 'It is the Gate of Heaven. It craves wealth and beauty. It honours both. It is like no other

place I have known. When the mist settles they say the dead rise up and sit at their loved one's fireside. It becomes a city of ghosts. And I am a ghost of the sea. Venice is where I call home.'

He fell silent. Insight into Challenor's thoughts was not something Richard had experienced before. The man held the power of life or death over them yet was now revealing his feelings. Elizabeth clung to her brother, needing to feel his strength and to draw from it.

Some small, warm, glowing lights appeared, wavering in the distant night. Richard counted twenty of them.

'Fireflies,' he said.

Challenor looked at what Richard had seen. 'No, they're not.' He faced them. 'They're small boats with a lantern to guide them seeking the deepest part of the lagoon where the currents run out to the sea. In them are condemned men and women. They clear the prisons of the guilty at night. Learn the lesson well. In every boat out there is a heretic or common prisoner with weights about their legs. The inquisitors bring them out in the dark and drown them.' Challenor smiled. 'You mustn't voice criticism of the state or be seen as a heretic against the Catholic Church. They won't like it. You'll find yourself being questioned by people who have their own particular brand of unpleasantness.'

He leant on the ship's side, watching the flickering lanterns. 'The merchants and noblemen of Venice have little time for the Pope or his edicts. You'll find Greeks and Germans with their own churches; no one objects to how you pray. But the Venetians are good businessmen. For the sake of trade and profit they're happy to live with the Pope's priests in the city, so the authorities don't stand in the way when the Roman Church condemns heresy. And by the state's hand common criminals disappear in the night. It's an agreeable resolution for those who keep law and order.'

Richard felt Elizabeth flinch.

Challenor stepped away from them to make his way back to his cabin. 'Your sister has asked a favour and I've a mind to grant it. You'll be allowed an hour here together, but there will be no attempt to go over the side in a death pact. If you did, I would inflict such harsh punishment on those who remain that you would carry their pain with you into the afterworld.'

'We wouldn't sacrifice our lives to despair,' said Richard.

‘A good thing,’ said Challenor. ‘I have already secured a place of work for you. You will fetch me a handsome price.’

Richard looked from Challenor to his sister. He could not determine if her smile of encouragement might also be one of regret.

‘It’s past midnight,’ she said. ‘It is ten days since we left Tunis. I have agreed to marry John Challenor.’

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CHAPTER 31

The Venetian Pilot came aboard soon after dawn. After offloading the remaining bales of wool onto the broad-beamed barges, they would take the human cargo of men, women and children onto lighters and ferry them into the city. The *Falcon* would be handed over to Chesney and the ship and crew would then sail around the north of the island to the Arsenale district. It was here in the vast docks and yards that Venetian ships were built and foreign craft were repaired. Parts of the *Falcon* needed to be recaulked; the sails and rigging had to be checked and her hull scraped. Chesney would ensure that they replaced any inferior lines, discarding any English rope, which was of poor quality compared to the Russian hemp favoured by the Venetians for their own vessels.

Richard watched the oarsmen on a long barge propel the boat through the small waves towards the city. The oarsmen faced forward. One stood at the front, the other at the rear, leaning into their long oars, expertly guiding the boat, which must have been at least thirty-five feet long with a broad beam. He and Martin were in the third boat: two ahead, another behind. All loaded with the captives. Challenor and Elizabeth were in a smaller craft at the rear. After spending their brief time together the previous night, Richard had seen Elizabeth for the last time when they were brought up from the hold. She had raised a hand and a smile. And then the prisoners were herded onto the waiting lighters and she was lost from sight. He had craned his neck to see if Challenor's boat was following in the same direction. He spotted her boat, but she was not visible. Desolation gripped him. Salt spray stung his face. A slap to bring him back to his senses. He'd find her. That would keep him strong.

Early-morning mist veiled the city. Richard saw the beauty that had seduced Challenor. Venice was as enticing and beguiling as any woman opening her arms to greet them. Embrace or smother them? Richard thought. The sun's rays gently disrobed her, exposing alabaster and marble, smooth stone reflecting the sparkling water. Beckoning. He looked at the gaping maw swallowing the lagoon. Down its throat they went. Water traffic increased. Bells rang out from around the city. Left and right. Near and far. The barges forged along the waterway with the running tide. The further they travelled, the more the city revealed itself. Grand houses on both banks, painted in various hues. Green window shutters encased by arched pillars. Ornate decoration proclaiming wealth.

The waterway curved around houses and buildings whose frontages were lapped by the waves. It turned again as the silent, awestruck captives clung to the boat's gunwales, gazing at a city the likes of which they had never seen. Richard looked at Martin. The veteran seaman showed no wide-eyed surprise; he simply gazed ahead. Off to one side a wooden bridge across a narrower canal was busy with foot traffic and carts jostling for position. There was no balustrade to stop anyone tumbling into the water, but the surefooted citizens showed no concern. A few glanced across at the new arrivals, but made no comment and quickly directed their attention back to where they were going.

The captives' journey continued with a mixture of awe and uncertainty. When the boats went below a curved stone bridge, arched high enough for them not to duck, a few people crossing looked down and called to them. The captives did not fully understand the language, but it sounded as though words of comfort were being offered. The lighters turned into a narrow waterway alongside a pillared hall. Willing hands onshore held the paddle end of the boatmen's oars, securing the lighter against the wall. The oarsmen shouted and gestured the captives to scramble ashore. Waiting men manhandled them into line, and when everyone had disembarked, they were hustled into a vast open space already crowded with chattering merchants bargaining over their wares. Different areas held various goods. Bales of wool, bolts of cloth, spices, food and barrels. The men led Richard and the others to one corner that appeared to have been kept clear for their arrival.

Martin nudged Richard. 'There's the fancy black fella who came aboard. Whoever he is, he seems to be running what's going on here.'

The captives were pushed into a long line so that the twenty or so men who stood in front of them could see them clearly. The black man called out to those waiting. None of the captives knew what was being said.

Richard turned to his friend. ‘Can you understand what he said?’

‘It’s not lingua franca,’ said Martin. ‘It’ll be Genoese or Venetian. It sounded as though he was asking them to be ready.’

Richard looked along the line of his fellow captives. Their fear-stricken faces peered here and there at the strange sights and sounds of what was clearly a marketplace. And the men who stood in front of them were walking up and down the line, gazing intently at them. Yet no one touched them. There seemed to be no immediate threat of violence.

Richard noticed the black man had a clerk sitting at a small table with quill and an open ledger a few paces behind him. The black man smiled, clapped his hands and called out a single word. Once again, neither he nor Martin understood, but no sooner had he spoken than men raised a hand, glanced his way, nodded or shook their heads. Indications that a price was being discussed.

The bidding was swift. The black man turned to the clerk to see that the price was recorded. And then he looked at Elizabeth’s list and called out: ‘Hoskins! Peter Hoskins.’ His English sounded perfect.

Hoskins, clutching the pathetically small bundle of what remained of his possessions to him, hesitantly raised his hand.

The black man checked the list again. ‘You’re a shipwright?’

Hoskins nodded.

‘You will go with that man to his yard.’

Hoskins hesitated. Fearful of being separated from his companions.

‘Go now,’ said the black men.

Richard murmured to his friend: ‘He speaks good English.’

Martin nodded and answered quietly, ‘Aye, that’s because I reckon he’s an Englishman.’

Richard looked surprised. Martin nodded and smiled. ‘Who knows how and why he found himself here? But him and Challenor are thick as thieves.’

Peter Hoskins shuffled forward and followed the man back towards the quayside.

The bidding continued. It was soon obvious that the black man was calling out the trades held by each of the captives and then, once sold, he called out their names in English.

Mother and daughter, Eveleen and Ancilla May, appeared to go for a high price, their glove-making skills in demand. The old woman lacemaker Anne Dulcie was trembling with fear when her name was called and tearfully ushered away, looking back with a yearning to stay with the men, women and children she had seen born and grow in Dartmouth. Lives now erased.

Thomas Gilchrist, shipwright, went to another buyer, but they did not want his wife Zelina. She clung to him. It was pitiful. Her howls at their separation echoed around the enclosed market. Richard took a step forward, but Martin grabbed his arm.

‘No, lad. This is a fight you cannot win.’

As they separated the man and his wife, he could only watch helplessly. Zelina fell to the floor, her eyes wide with distress. One of the other merchants from across the market shouted to the black man, who raised a hand to quieten his protest. He approached Gilchrist’s buyer and spoke quietly to him. Richard assumed he had made an offer to the man, who did not look pleased, but then after a few words more he nodded.

They sent Gilchrist to get his wife. She clung to him as a drowning woman would cling to wreckage.

‘Thank you for your act of kindness,’ said Richard as the black man returned.

The man who was running the human auction stared hard at him. And for a moment, Richard thought he might strike him for daring to speak to him. Then he smiled.

‘Once they get to the shipyard, she’ll be put on the streets with the other whores.’

Richard felt Martin’s grip on his arm tighten. Yet again, the old ferryman had sensed Richard’s intolerance for unjust behaviour would cause him more problems than those that might soon face him.

One by one the captives were spoken for. Single, unskilled women were taken to be domestic servants. Richard and Martin were two of the last six who remained.

The black man referred to his list of captives and pointed at Martin. ‘You are a bargeman?’

‘I’m a waterman, aye.’

The black man called out ‘*barcaiolo*’. Two bidders raised their hands. One of them shouted what sounded like a demand. Martin was beckoned forward. The two buyers wanted to see what they were buying. Martin looked back at Richard and smiled.

‘Now we know how I am to be sold and what my skill is called.’

One man outbid the other, and Martin was told to go with him. He stooped to pick up his modest bundle of possessions. ‘God go with you, lad. See this for what it is. Do not be vexed by matters you cannot change and bring punishment down on yourself. You and your sister will be in my prayers and I will keep an eye out for you.’

And with that, the only true friend Richard had known was gone.

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CHAPTER 32

Richard and the young woman, Elaine Ross, the fish seller, were the only two who remained. The black man gathered his cloak and spoke to his clerk. Richard guessed from the clerk's actions that he had been told to ready himself to leave.

Richard and the young woman exchanged glances. What was to become of them?

The black man fastened his cloak. 'Follow me,' he said.

'Are you taking us to another slave market?' Richard dared to ask.

The man studied him. It was unusual for captives to question him. 'Slave market?' he said. 'There is no such thing in Venice. It's not permitted. This is a marketplace where goods are sold. Look about you. It's commerce. Business. Skills are required and those with such skills find work.'

'Slavery is what it is,' said Richard.

The man sighed. 'I am enslaved. Do you see chains restraining me? No.'

The man's remarks caught Richard off-guard. 'If you are enslaved, then the authorities know of it,' he said, uncertain whether the man was lying.

The black man showed Richard no sign of animosity. If anything, his benign behaviour was more unsettling. What, Richard thought, lay behind his calm façade?

'Slavery is like a ship in the fog. You know it's there, but you can't see it. Without chains, we walk in the same obscure mist. Known, but unseen.'

He turned for the quayside, passing through the merchants going about their business, acknowledging their greetings. Even though enslaved – if that were true – whoever he was he had influence, Richard realized. Just as Martin had told him. The clerk followed them, clutching his ledger.

*

A narrow vessel waited for them. Its hull reflected the water from gleaming black paintwork. A single oarsman wearing a tunic and breeches stood at the rear. A central seat was cushioned in red velvet, covered by a small cabin, and the boat was embellished with gold decoration on its upward-curved prow and stern. The black man, ignoring Richard and the girl, stepped down into it, followed by his clerk, who pointed to another boat at the quayside. A boat with no sign of grandeur and an oarsman who looked as base as any pirate.

The boats headed out onto the broad waterway.

‘What’ll be done with us?’ the girl asked.

Richard shook his head. ‘There’s no telling.’

‘If they let me go my own way I can look after myself,’ she said. She glanced at him. ‘If you understand my meaning?’

Richard knew of her reputation and had no doubt that she could look after herself. ‘Then wherever you end up, I’m sure you will be all right.’

She smiled. ‘Nothing to worry about then.’

The two fell silent as the two boats went back in the direction from where they had started. The black man’s gondolier finally pulled alongside a narrow stone jetty and steps. Behind rose a high and broad studded door, from which a cast bronze lion’s head, a half-circular ring in its jaws, stared blindly at the new arrivals. The two men climbed out and the clerk handed the black man his ledger, then went to the second boat. He pointed at Richard, meaning for him to go ashore. Richard clambered out, turned and bade the girl farewell.

‘Good luck, Elaine.’

‘And you.’

The clerk climbed into the second boat and gave instructions to the oarsman, pointing further along the waterway. ‘Take her to the Convento,’ he ordered.

As the boat pushed away, Richard wondered if the word meant how it sounded. If it did, then putting the girl into a convent might be a shock to her and the nuns. Perhaps Elaine Ross had something to worry about after all.

The sudden thud of the heavy doorknocker snapped Richard's attention back from the boat. The door swung open.

'You stink and your feet are filthy. Follow me,' said the black man and stepped into a shadowed entrance. Its length and high arched ceiling led his eyes beyond it to a courtyard, a walled oasis filled with plants, and another gated entrance to what must be a side street or pathway from the waterside. Two guards stood at the courtyard gate. In the centre of the flagged yard was a well.

A workman appeared and bowed to the haughty black man, who gestured for him to attend his duty, which was to draw water.

'Strip and wash,' the black man told Richard.

The workman hauled a bucket of water from the well. Richard stripped naked as the black man gave the workman another instruction that made him scurry away and return moments later with two linen cloths.

The black man stepped forward and grabbed Richard's arm, holding it so he could see the tattoo of the curved knife.

'Where did you get this?'

'Tunis.'

'Who gave it to you?'

'An old Arab.'

'Why?'

'A Janissary ordered him to give it to me.'

'Why would they do that?'

'Because I saved one of their men from a burning galley.'

The black man made no further comment. He dismissed the workman and studied Richard as he sluiced the grime from his body. His wet hair swept back opened up his face. He was strong. Lean-muscled from years working in a forge. Grey-green eyes that women surely noticed. There were speckled blemishes on the back of his hands from spitting embers from the fire pit. Richard Sheriff might, the black man decided, be worth the money Challenor had wanted for him. For now it was time to present him to the woman who had bought him.

Richard used a cloth to rub himself down, relieved to be rid of the crusted salt in his hair and on his body. As he dried himself, the black man said, 'You're lucky. John Challenor told me to ensure you were well placed for your skills. Everyone needs a contact in the city who can prove

valuable. I am that man. My name is Elias Jordan. I am not your friend. You are not my equal. John Challenor and I do business together here in Venice. When he profits I also benefit.'

'Business like slavery,' said Richard as he finished dressing.

'Like slavery,' said Jordan matter-of-factly. 'The woman I serve is a high-ranking patrician's widow. When he died, they returned her dowry to her. She is wealthy. She is influential. She owns many slaves. And she takes a handsome return from the artisans who work for the businesses she owns. From prostitution to shipbuilding. She is powerful. The di Zorzi are one of the oldest and most influential families in the Republic. If you are obliged to speak you will address her as "Nobildonna", and in time you may say "Signora". Understood?'

Richard nodded.

'She must never be spoken of with any ill-thought words. No matter how you might suffer in the days ahead, it will be because of her influence, testing you to see if you are a man she can make use of.'

'For what?'

'That is not for me to say. But curb your tongue. Venice is a city of spies. Neighbours squeal on neighbours. Making money and securing influence is on everyone's mind. There are secret police. This is the world in which you now live. As time passes, you will get to know the city and you will realize there is no escape. There is no need for chains. Swim and you will drown. Seek passage on a ship and you will be betrayed.'

'Where is my sister?'

Elias Jordan calmly pointed a finger at him. 'Do not ask questions that cannot be answered. They will only cause you further grief.'

'You know John Challenor, which means you know where she is.'

'And she has gone from your life.'

'I won't accept that.'

There was a sudden change in the softly spoken Jordan. He took a rapid step forward and struck Richard hard with the flat of his hand. The powerful blow stunned him. His knees gave way. He sagged.

'You will accept everything,' said Jordan. 'Or you will die. That is your first lesson. More will follow. Your sister gives herself to Challenor to save you from the galleys. Now you must prove yourself worthy.'

Richard's ears were ringing. He squeezed his eyes shut, swallowed the surge of violence that threatened to explode. Whatever happened, he knew he must hold close Martin's words of warning. Elizabeth would never escape now even if he could devise a plan. Words from the past echoed in his thoughts. *There is always a price to pay.*

'Now follow me,' said Elias Jordan.

Jordan led Richard through another door from the passage he had first entered. It was a large hall with a broad marble staircase on one side ascending to a brightly lit and decorated stairwell. Jordan seemed in no hurry so Richard adjusted his pace to stay one step behind rather than walk at his side. The lesson was already learnt: he was not this man's equal. Jordan ignored a door on the left of the hallway at the top of the stairs and knocked on one of the tall double doors a few strides further. He waited a moment for it to be opened by a servant.

'Wait here until you're called,' Jordan told Richard, and then stepped into the room. The door closed behind him.

*

Elias Jordan took ten paces into the room, stopped and bowed. The woman who sat near the window was having her hair combed by her personal servant, Lucia. Lucia had served her di Zorzi mistress for forty years since the Nobildonna had married and she had been a twenty-year-old slave bought by the patrician to care for his new wife. She eased a silver comb through the Nobildonna's hair. Neither looked up when Jordan entered the room.

He watched the woman who sat expressionless, eyes closed as the comforting pull of the comb caressed her. Strands of grey threaded her hair; walnut rinses kept them less visible. Her beauty was that of a mature woman. If she turned her dark eyes on him he knew they would be more penetrating than his own. Hers was a gaze that instilled respect and obedience, that of a woman who wielded great power. Her skin was moistened with olive oil, but she did not apply ceruse powder to give her the pale skin desired by so many Venetian women. Was that, he wondered, a note of defiance? That she was her own woman, confident enough to ignore common fashion? Her husband had recognized her value and shared with

her the language of contracts, the secrets of negotiation and the management of ships and cargoes.

Jordan had lived in the di Zorzi household long enough to know she had never compromised her position of power by sleeping with other members of the aristocracy before or after her patrician husband's death. Her desire, when it arose, was taken care of by Jordan himself. When she ordered him to her bed in the barely lit room she never greeted him. Or extended a beckoning hand. Turning her face away as he lay on top of her. Her appetite was intense, fingers curling into the sheets in her rising passion and release. Her demands were infrequent, a situation that suited them both.

Di Zorzi opened her eyes. Touched Lucia's hand with her own: a signal for her to stop combing.

'Well?' she said, facing him.

'He's outside.'

The Nobildonna nodded. 'Lucia, thank you. Send him in.'

The servant dipped her head and left the room, opening the door for the young Englishman who waited nervously.

Richard stepped into the room. The door closed behind him. Everything in the room overwhelmed his senses. Windows overlooked the waterway that threw a shower of glistening reflections up into the ceiling. Silk-covered walls, threaded with gold; richly coloured ornate furniture with velvet cushions and padding. The beams supported glass chandeliers of a shape and colour he had never seen before, hoisted by thin chains on pulleys, their candles as delicate as the crafted glass. Woven carpets covered swathes of the polished floors. The light from the windows brought the room's opulence into sharp relief. Richard knew that if this was a room he was permitted to enter, then the rest of the house must be the owner's private quarters, and this room offered little more than a glimpse of the owner's wealth.

And if the woman sitting at the far side of the room was the owner, then the wealth she wore on her fingers and around her neck was more than Richard had ever witnessed, even among the most prosperous merchants in Totnes. She was perhaps fifty years old, he couldn't tell exactly, yet age had not diminished her beauty. Richard saw no cruelty in her features, no scowl of disdain such as he'd witnessed in men of wealth at home. Here was a woman who had built a small empire. That meant she had intelligence and

fortitude. It also gave her, as Jordan had told him, authority and power. And curiosity, he decided, as she studied him.

Richard bowed. Jordan approached the woman and handed her the ledger. The conversation seemed agreeable to Richard's ears. The woman made a slight gesture and Jordan retreated, standing to one side between the woman and Richard. She spoke softly, her words dancing, undulating like soft music.

Jordan translated for Richard, stopping and starting as the woman dictated to him. 'Wealthy merchants and noble families in Venice do not eat like common men. They require distinctive and refined implements. One of the many investments the Nobildonna has is in an artisan's workshop. The only workshop in Venice that produced knives for those who sought elegance on their dining tables. Her knife maker is old, his fingers bent, his eyesight fading. There is a younger blacksmith who works with him and has sufficient skills to continue with the more mundane tasks. But rich men pay high prices for individual knives to wear for ornament and defence. The old knife maker had passed some of his knowledge to another blacksmith who worked at the forge. That man betrayed the Nobildonna and months ago fled to the hills on the mainland, where he is starting a forge and where he will soon attempt to make such knives.'

The woman stopped speaking, then asked a question, her eyes staring at the young Englishman. Elias Jordan turned to Richard. 'Are you able to make knives rich men desire? John Challenor told me you were a skilled blacksmith. If that is not true or is in any way an exaggeration so that you received special treatment, then now is the time to admit it. Your punishment will be less severe than if such a lie is discovered later.'

From the moment Richard stood before the woman, he had remained square-shouldered, his feet planted firmly so that he presented no sign of weakness. And he had kept his eyes on the woman as she spoke. It had been a silent and daring act of defiance.

Jordan and the woman waited for his response.

Despite his years at the Totnes forge since boyhood, Richard knew he did not have the skills to forge and make the steel-bladed knives they wanted. He had made common goods for farmers and workmen. If he lied about his skills, the deception would be discovered.

‘I’m a blacksmith. I am a knife maker, yes, but I was only beginning to learn the craft, and then only that of forging blades for working men.’ Tension squeezed his chest. He took a slow deep breath and held the woman’s gaze. ‘But I have skill and I have ambition, Nobildonna.’

Richard saw the sudden look of alarm in Jordan’s eyes. If he had brought an impostor to the woman, then he might well suffer punishment.

She stood and approached him. Jordan stepped to one side. She was at arm’s length, her eyes staring at Richard. She was small, coming only up to his chest. And her closeness accentuated her cheekbones and beauty. Her silk dress rustled; fragrance from her perfume triggered a memory of spring blossoms at home. She spoke again, keeping her gaze on him as Jordan translated her words. ‘My lady says that a man who speaks the truth when his life may be threatened has courage.’

For the first time, she spoke slowly in English. ‘What is your name?’

‘Richard Sheriff, Nobildonna.’

She smiled. She rolled his name on her tongue. ‘Riccardo Sceriffo. You will be my knife maker’s apprentice.’

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CHAPTER 33

Richard Followed Elias Jordan out of what he thought must have been a palace. Perhaps this was how kings and queens and the nobility had always lived. And he knew it was unlikely he would ever see such splendour again. They returned to the waiting boat and this time he was permitted to sit forward of the velvet-covered seat in the boat's well. It was also a position subservient to Elias Jordan, who didn't look at him but stared in the direction the oarsman was guiding them. Once ashore, Jordan walked at a pace along paved alleyways. The narrow streets meandered this way and that. Rows of two-storey houses cheek by jowl emitted the sound of children crying, their mother's rebuke echoing across the passageways between the houses. Old women sat on stools cleaning vegetables. Washing hung from windows. Turning a corner into a small square, he saw women gathered in its centre at the head of a well. A small shop selling fruit and vegetables stood on one corner. A cobbler plied his trade on the other. Urchins kicked stones; women breastfed infants. It was mostly women he could see: their menfolk must be employed elsewhere. Cooking smells and raised voices added to the sense of confinement in the small square.

Jordan glanced behind him to see that the barefoot Englishman was keeping up as he turned for a narrow canal with a footbridge in the distance. When Jordan reached it, he had to stand aside to let a man bearing a heavy load on his back, support strap around his forehead, stagger across what looked to be a flimsy crossing. The wooden supports and planks creaked, but the load carrier showed no hesitation. His eyes blinked by way of thanks to Jordan for letting him cross first. Richard caught up the hundred yards to where Jordan waited outside a building where double doors were

open, releasing the smell of heated metal and acrid firepit fumes to catch the back of Richard's throat. Heat pressed his face as he stood looking into the gloom of the entrance that opened out into a workshop. He was staring into the forge.

'This is the *forgia* where you will work,' said Jordan. 'The old man's name is Antonio Vieri. He has two others working for him, a smith and a young bellows boy as well as a dozen other youngsters in his workshop. The local urchins are quite adept at doing intricate work. If you are ever asked who you are, you tell them where you work. Antonio Vieri's name is more important than yours. You say you work at his forge. *Servo il fabbro Antonio Vieri.*'

'How would I know what was being asked of me?'

'They will ask *chi sei.* Do you speak any other language? Challenor told me you come from a market town that dealt in foreign trade.'

'No. I had some words from my master blacksmith, and I learnt some lingua franca. Why would anyone ask me who I am?'

'If a day comes when Master Antonio gives you the freedom to deliver items to his clients, you might be stopped. And if you can understand and speak lingua franca then you'll pick up the language here quickly. Understood?'

Richard nodded. 'Who would stop me?'

'Those who take a dislike to you travelling across their bridge.'

'How will I know what bridge that is?'

'You'll learn. First, you need to show the old man that you are of use to him.'

Richard followed Jordan over the workshop threshold, thinking that this would be the first step in a long journey towards finding his sister. On the brick-laid floor a hefty block of wood supported an anvil. A heavy timbered workbench ran around three sides, covered with tools. Sheets of parchment pushed on nails ran along one wall, drawings and names smudged by dirty hands, something Richard recognized from his own master's forge at home – pinned sheets with designs, quantities of materials and names of customers. The forge's firepit was long enough for two smiths to work. It glowed, heat smothering the boy who heaved on the bellows supported beneath the ceiling, its flue leading into the back of the firepit. A leather-aproned young man twisted a red-hot rod of iron in the coals with a pair of

long-handled tongs, hauled it out and hammered it on the anvil, then pushed it back into the coals with a surly glance at the newcomer.

An old man, fingers clawed with age, stepped into the workshop from an adjoining area. A withered tree of a man, bent from a lifetime of stooping over an anvil. He looked Richard up and down and said something to Jordan, who answered. The surly youth kept hammering as the old man held Richard's hands in his own.

He spoke again.

'He wants to know how long you worked in a forge,' said Jordan.

'Near enough ten years.'

Jordan translated. The old man remained expressionless. He shrugged. Spoke again.

'He says anyone can sweep a floor and carry firewood for ten years. It means nothing. Look on that bench. He wants to know what you think of the hinges.'

A stack of twenty hinges was tied with cord. They were labelled with a name, obviously due to be delivered to a client. Before Richard could respond, the old man cut the binding with a short-bladed knife. He nodded at Richard and gestured for him to examine the hinges. Richard lifted each one, felt its weight, held it to the light of the window, and quickly shuffled through them. He laid four to one side.

'Tell him those will snap in a month, perhaps less.'

Antonio still showed no sign of being impressed by the Englishman. He spoke to Jordan again.

'A hinge maker is not what he needs,' said Elias Jordan.

'Ask him what his smith is making,' said Richard, nodding towards the surly youth.

'A boathook,' Jordan confirmed.

'Tell him his man is striking the iron badly. It's uneven. The hook will be of poor quality.'

Elias Jordan hesitated for a moment. The young Englishman was either taking a chance or knew what he was talking about. He told Antonio what Richard had said. The old man looked at the blacksmith and said something that Richard did not understand. It was obviously an order to stop what he was doing. The surly youth pushed the metal back into the coals, wiped a rag across his grimy face, and left the room.

Antonio gestured for Richard to carry on the smith’s work. He took down a leather apron from a peg, gripped the tongs on the length of iron, twisted the metal in the coals, laid it across the anvil and struck it with a rapid, rhythmic beat.

Richard smiled. He felt at home.

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CHAPTER 34

Challenor Guided Elizabeth along a narrow passage after their boat docked at a small jetty. Following a high wall, they turned into a *campiello*, a small square fronted by a house with an iron gate, which was only a hundred yards from the canal. A sculpture of a lion's head stared down from the portal. Two armed men stood on the other side, one younger and more lithe in stature than his companion, who was taller, more heavily muscled with a thick neck. As soon as they recognized Challenor, they opened the gate. They spoke English as they acknowledged his arrival.

He ushered her across a courtyard. It was plain, but had a wellhead, which meant the house had its own water supply.

'This is your home, John?' she said, peering up at the four floors of honey-coloured bricks. It was a bigger house than the merchant Henning's, where she had worked. This was both taller and wider, with many more windows, but showed no sign of decorative wealth, unlike the impressive mansions Challenor had pointed out as they went along what she now knew to be the Grand Canal.

'A man called William Stevenson was the *Falcon*'s captain before me and when he died, I discovered he owned this house. He'd done a lot of work on the old place. I bargained a chest full of Portuguese silver we'd raided from a merchant ship and bought it from his creditors.' He smiled. 'I put my own servants in here.'

'Is there anything you have bought honestly from the sweat of your brow?'

He grinned again. 'Seizing that damned Portuguese merchant ship was hard work.'

He pushed through a sturdy door into a broad hallway with diamond-shaped flagstones and faded pink walls peeling with age.

She glanced at a heavy wooden and studded door at the end of the hall. It stood proud of two steps going down that swilled with water. ‘Is that not your front door?’

‘It’s a *porta d’acqua* that opens onto a narrow waterway where my house faces. It’s always locked because I have no desire to give unwelcome visitors an easy way in.’

‘Are we in danger here?’ she asked, the threat distracting her from her hidden and purposefully subdued wonderment at her new surroundings.

‘I am respected here, but I believe in being cautious.’

They ascended stone steps to another door and into the house’s reception hall. The terrazzo floor reflected light from the arched windows. The silk covering the walls was old and faded. Four women entered the room from different doorways when they heard the door open and close. The women’s clothes were plain but of quality. Their hair was free, unlike servants in England who would have had it tucked under a coif or a wimple. Two were young, probably no more than seventeen years old, thought Elizabeth. One looked to be ten years older still and the third, the eldest, appeared to be the one in charge. She stepped forward from the others, dipped her knee and greeted Challenor. She spoke with an accented English.

‘Captain Challenor, welcome home, sir. We heard you had come ashore. The house is ready for you.’

‘Leonora, this is Mistress Elizabeth.’

The woman tipped her head respectfully.

‘Elizabeth, Leonora sees to the running of the house.’

Elizabeth looked her over. In Mrs Henning’s house, Elizabeth had been required to assess the suitability of the staff to be employed. Leonora was – what? Fifty? Slightly bent. Ally or enemy? Which would she prove to be? Loyal to Challenor unless there was an unresolved grievance, probably. Leonora’s bony hands were clasped in front of her. Not raw from washing, unlike those of the young girl standing next to her, whose skin was red from hours spent scrubbing.

‘Bettina attends to the laundry.’

Bettina. Young. Plump. Round-faced. Broad hips. Ready smile. Men would like her.

‘Welcome, Mistress Elizabeth,’ said the willing servant.

‘Bettina,’ said Elizabeth, acknowledging the girl. She turned to Challenor. ‘John, I’m surprised that your servants speak English.’

‘I had them taught. All of them. I want to hear my own tongue when I am here. I do business in Tuscan or Venetian, but at home my ear requires English to be spoken. And there’s to be no pidgin franca in this house. Bad enough I use it with the heathen Turks when I have to. Now,’ he said, addressing the third woman, ‘this is Isabella. She is a seamstress and will attend to all your clothing needs.’

Isabella. Closer to Elizabeth’s age. Not as tall as the older woman, slightly built. Her raven hair and dark eyes made a striking image. She was beautiful. She smiled. No sense of resentment that another similarly aged woman had come into the house. Had there been any intimacy with her master? Elizabeth thought not, even though Isabella was the kind of woman men could easily desire or even fall in love with. There was a glint in her eyes. Shrewd. Quick thinking. Independent. Bettina was naïve. Leonora loyal to Challenor. Yes, Isabella could become a friend if encouraged in the right way.

The last woman looked to be the youngest. She had fairer hair than the other women and her eyes were grey-blue.

‘This is Naira. Her father was a German merchant, her mother an Armenian slave who died when Naira was twelve. I bought her five years ago in a deal with her father.’

Elizabeth’s mood of quiet inquisitiveness about her new surroundings flared into indignation. Challenor saw it the moment he had spoken. He raised a hand. ‘To save her from being taken by the Turks. He owed them money. I paid the debt. Naira is to be your personal servant.’

Challenor extended his arms. ‘This house is your home. Whatever you desire, it will be provided.’

Elizabeth swallowed the retort that would have embarrassed Challenor in front of his servants. Her only desire was to return home with her brother. She had a role to play now she was in Venice. She had to take control and use whatever freedom she could glean to seek out her brother. She thought back to how Mrs Henning ran her own house and servants. Elizabeth had to be seen to be the mistress of this house.

‘Naira, you will prepare a bath for me. Isabella, I need new clothes. They must be of quality but plain.’

‘Shall I wash your clothing?’ said Bettina.

‘No, you will burn them. What is through there?’ she asked Leonora, pointing at one of the closed doors.

‘The *piano nobile*, Mistress Elizabeth.’

Elizabeth turned to Challenor. ‘I would like to see it and the rest of the house.’

Challenor extended his elbow for her. ‘My pleasure.’

‘No, I would like Leonora to show me. This house is as much her home as it is to be mine.’

For a barely imperceptible moment, the old housekeeper’s eyes flared. Elizabeth hoped it was because she had shown the old woman respect and not that she had denied Challenor the opportunity to escort her. Had the older woman seen it as an affront to the man who had given her safety and employment? Over time, it would be possible to test her loyalty and that of the other women in the household. It was always a good idea to start early.

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CHAPTER 35

Four Weeks had passed since Richard and Elizabeth were separated and he had been taken to Antonio Vieri's forge. The old man had provided a straw mattress for him in the storage room, where he slept with his back against the shared wall of the firepit. He was fed twice a day; *pranzo* he learnt was his main meal at midday, and he had a lighter meal, *cena*, in the evening. Never having drunk wine at home, he soon became accustomed to the watered wine served with his meals. On that first day when Richard had proven his skills to the old man, Antonio had instructed the other blacksmith, his grandson Domenico, to find the Englishman boots to spare the soles of his feet from standing on dropped nails, metal shards and hot embers that fell to the floor from the firepit. Apart from his freedom, Richard required nothing else to sustain himself daily.

He picked up words and phrases quickly. Antonio had pointed out the tools of Richard's trade; Richard gave the master knife maker their names in English.

'Hammer.'

'*Martello*,' his tutor told him.

'Cutters.'

'*Cesoie*.'

Chisels were *scalpelli*, tongs, *pinze*. Everything Richard needed to know to follow Antonio's instructions was to hand. With painstaking patience, the old man watched Richard making his first blade at his forge. Using a mixture of lingua franca and the local language, Antonio encouraged or admonished either with a smile or a shake of his head and then his bent fingers would put another strip of flat metal on the anvil and show him

where to make the cold cut that would be the top of the blade and the beginning of the handle. Through Antonio's stumbling language and slow hand gestures, Richard began to grasp the skill required of a master blade maker. His natural ability and knowledge from years working in the Totnes forge showed a degree of expertise and promise that gained Antonio's approval.

On the days Richard and Domenico offloaded sacks of coal brought by boat along the narrow canal and the youth was out of earshot, he would ask the boatmen if they knew about his friend who had been sent to work on the boats. The question was always answered with a shake of the head or a derisive *didn't he know how many canals there were in Venice*? *How many boatmen?* But this was an Englishman, he would insist. The boatmen must know or have heard of an Englishman? They hadn't. And so hope of finding his friend remained out of reach.

The storage areas behind the working forge housed the coal, wood, metal and other materials. The coal was shipped from the mainland and gave Antonio the heat he needed to forge and temper steel. The storage area was also a workshop where urchins were paid to pick clean bones purchased from the slaughterhouse. The children thoroughly scraped the bones and saved any morsels of flesh and fat, if not already blackened, for their cooking pot at home. Once the bones were washed and dried, they broke them down ready for the firepit. Richard was no stranger to the working of a forge and knew the mix of bone and charcoal would help balance the heat and longevity of the fire and build the carbon needed to give steel its strength. Antonio's instructions for combining the two were like a cook determining a secret recipe for a special meal. And the old man's secret combination of bone and charcoal was only one part of Antonio's knowledge that the blacksmith who had absconded might have stolen. If he had the skill, then he could start producing quality hardened steel in competition with the long-established Vieri workshop. And that was why Richard had been spared the galleys and placed under the knife maker.

The forge had many clients throughout the city and their needs were varied, so everything from boat hooks to bars for prison windows and delicate fish knives to grace wealthy dinner tables were made. Domenico – an intemperate youth who thought he was more skilled than his ability allowed – was competent enough to deal with day-to-day blacksmithing,

and could even follow Antonio's templates and reproduce dinner table knives. Antonio had taken in his grandson when the pestilence swept away his family together with their whole neighbourhood. He had taught the boy sufficient skills, but Domenico was not a master knife maker, and never would be.

The manufacture of ironwork was hard work, but it provided income and employment for those who lived in the local *campo* in *sestiere* Dorsoduro. A dozen children sat at benches in another workroom. While some of them polished the small dinner-service blades using a whetstone or leather strop, ready for a family crest to be stamped into the shining metal, others' agile fingers manipulated slender implements to inscribe and embellish the handles with semiprecious stones that Richard guessed were provided by the client. Dressing a dinner table was as important as the clothes worn by the merchants and patrician families. Modesty was not an attribute of the Venetian merchant.

And that vanity would soon desire what would be produced in Antonio Vieri's forge. The master knife maker watched the young Englishman wield hammer against steel. Antonio's instinct saw hidden quality emerge as surely as what was once dull metal became hardened steel. Riccardo Sceriffo was the future.

*

The daily work in the forge was constant. As well as unloading and storing the wood and coal, the two blacksmiths worked side by side at the long firepit. Both had specific tasks to complete. Domenico was the senior when Antonio wasn't present and would send Richard into the workshops to check on the urchins scraping animal bones; or to go along the workbenches and check each child's progress on polishing the dinner knives Domenico had made. Richard used the time to listen to the children talking, and he practised their simple language with them. It was a benefit Domenico hadn't considered. Insisting Richard check on the urchins served no purpose other than to delay Richard's work. Antonio Vieri needed blacksmiths who worked long and hard. Falling behind when completing an order meant the forge and Vieri lost business, and Domenico was intent on making Richard fail. To Domenico's reasoning, the more Richard fell

behind in his work, the sooner Vieri would rid himself of the Englishman and leave his grandson to be the sole blacksmith without any competition. Riccardo Sceriffo was a threat to Domenico's place in the small world of the forge.

It was a plan doomed to failure. Richard always completed the tasks demanded of him on time. His skill allowed him to work quickly. No sooner had he finished one allotted job than he picked up the next. Boat hooks, iron window grilles, hinges, a forged gate. And then the extra hours spent under the old man's gaze as he patiently taught his new apprentice how to create a better knife than the one he had made before.

Richard knew that Domenico would never be his friend, that was as certain as base metal was forged into objects of practical use and beauty. The gulf between their skills determined their relationship, as did the belligerence from Domenico whenever his grandfather was away from the forge. Yet Richard came to understand that the jealous youth who despised him had a gentler side. A sharp cry of alarm from the workshop alerted Richard and Domenico. A girl had cut herself with one of the workbench tools. Domenico ran to where the other children huddled around her. Richard heard the callous boy murmur reassurance as he eased away the children and knelt to look at the girl's wound.

'All right, everyone get back to work,' he said. 'It's nothing. Just a small cut.' The child's filthy finger was bleeding. Domenico sucked it without a second thought. 'There,' Richard heard him say tenderly as he lifted the little girl into his arms, keeping her wounded hand above her head. 'Marietta, don't cry, we'll soon have that fixed, you'll see. All right?'

The tearful child nodded and clung to him as he carried her out of the workshop to dress the cut. He darted a glance at Richard.

'Get back to work,' he snapped. 'This is none of your business.'

Richard obeyed but noted that Domenico had a tenderness for the workshop urchins and recognized they sometimes needed a kind word. It was not a side to the resentful youth Richard would have expected. Perhaps, he thought, he and Domenico shared a compassion for those less fortunate. One thing, though, was certain: Domenico's charity did not extend to the slave working at his side.

One morning when Domenico was in the workshop and Richard was urging the bellows boy to make the coals dance, a thickset man came into

the forge. He was a balding man of about fifty, his leather jerkin scuffed from years of grit and dust. His hands were caked dry. Richard took him to be a stonemason. When the stranger greeted the old man, Richard assumed he was a customer. He eyed Richard, said something to Vieri, who nodded. It was obviously a question about the new blacksmith. Vieri poured the man a beaker of wine.

The two men were sipping their drinks, watching him work. Richard ignored them and attended to the white-hot chain links he was rhythmically hammering. Before closing a chain link, he inserted the next piece of heated iron through it. He could make several feet of chain a day. Vieri would send any weak links Domenico forged to Richard, who reheated them, cleaned the joint with sand to remove impurities, and then completed the flawed work. The old man never directed any recrimination towards his grandson while Richard was present. He hoped his master privately reprimanded Domenico because his mistakes added to Richard's workload.

Domenico was called from the workshop. He bowed his head respectfully to the customer, sat on a stool, took pencil and paper, and wrote down the man's order. Once done, Vieri sent him back to the workshop. The master knife maker and his customer shook hands and, with a final glance at the blacksmith, the man left the forge.

Richard looked at Vieri. He was convinced he had been the focus of their attention. Vieri called to him.

'Ready for cooling?'

'Yes, Master Vieri,' said Richard, lifting the chain with the tongs and laying it on the stone floor to cool. Then he went over to Vieri, who handed him the list Domenico had written.

'We have an order for some chisels. Those are the sizes and quantities,' said Antonio. 'Finish the chain. Do this order next. Maestro Stefan is a valued customer doing important work.'

A nod dismissed him. It was late in the day. He was tired but made no complaint. He would work late and think of what lay beyond the forge and the *campo*.

*

Each evening when dusk fell Richard would abandon the heat of the firepit to explore his immediate surroundings. The echoing chimes of the Angelus bell from various churches enveloped the city. Antonio had given him permission to walk outside between the start and end of the evening church bells, which rang three sets of three chimes with a pause between them. From start to finish it was enough time to say three Hail Marys, Domenico had told him, not that the pagan Englishman slave, not being of the true faith, would understand. Domenico laughed at Richard's confinement. Antonio's grandson was not enslaved, he taunted. He enjoyed privileges denied to a person who would only be freed when their owner passed away. And it was not the ageing Antonio who owned Richard, but the pampered Nobildonna Chiara di Zorzi. And when Antonio did succumb to old age, it would be he, Domenico, who would run the forge. The youth's taunts were constant when his grandfather was out of earshot. Richard made no complaint. A sneering youth was nothing compared to what he had endured on board the *Falcon*.

Richard's brief time outside the forge only ever gave him minutes to look around the nearest corner or cross the footbridge and gaze along the narrow canal and over the skyline. He always dismissed the temptation to escape. To run along the narrow, unlit street would prove fruitless. Daylight did not give him any sense of where he was and the darkness would expose him to the so-called Lords of the Night, night magistrates who roamed the streets looking for miscreants and, as Antonio had warned him, deviants embracing in doorways. That last piece of advice he shrugged off. It was not breech-loaders he was cautious of, but being hunted as an escaped slave in an unknown city. Yet knowing which direction to take might one day offer a way out and that was why every evening as the bells rang out he would walk as quickly as he could to the next corner, peering down narrow alleyways as he went. There might come a time when he would have to plunge into the unlit city.

But something else was stopping him from escaping, besides his sense of helplessness. Something he questioned to himself, and to which he always received the same answer. Mehmet's knife in Tunis had been a blade of masterful skill and beauty and he wanted to create such a knife with his own hands. The Nobildonna had lost a valuable source of revenue when Antonio could no longer make special knives for the rich youngbloods of

the male-governed houses of Venice's nobility. A unique knife was a mark of personal prestige, and any man of means would pay a sizeable price to possess one. And creating such a desirable item might one day give Richard a chance of escape. How, he did not yet know, but where there was wealth there was vanity, and it would take only one man who wanted those skills all to himself. He had no idea of the area Elias Jordan had brought him to, but when the bells from different churches made roosting pigeons take flight into the night sky, they fleetingly released him from bondage and the future beckoned. But whenever the tall black man, Elias Jordan, came to the forge Richard's imagined future was shrouded in doubt, smothered as surely as a morning mist obscured the lagoon. He was a slave and slaves could be bought and sold. He banished that fearful thought. He belonged in Vieri's forge, no matter how much abuse Domenico threw at him.

*

On one such eerily mist-laden morning, Elias Jordan stood with Antonio Vieri.

'It's been a month now,' said Jordan to the old man as he watched Richard haul the next delivery of coal and wood from the boat alongside the narrow street. 'How long does it take to make a damned blade?'

'You can't be greedy, Elias. It takes as long as it takes to make sure the lad knows how to create the very best. My reputation still carries the forge.'

'Your reputation will soon be diminished. The man who deserted you is already buying quality iron from Tuscan merchants, and that means he has someone backing him.'

The old man seemed unperturbed. He kept an eye on Richard and Domenico, emptying the sacks into the bunker. They worked bare-chested, sweat sluicing coal dust from their arms, a bandana across their mouths.

'You know he has a tattoo of a knife on his arm?' Antonio asked.

'Janissaries gave it to him in Tunis.'

'And him a Christian?'

Jordan shrugged. 'He saved one of their own.'

The old man sighed. 'He's seen things we have not and I believe it has given him ideas.'

'What does that mean?

‘You’ll see. There’s enough time for him to learn what he must before anyone else makes what I used to make,’ he told Jordan.

Elias Jordan followed the old man into the forge area. At least here the breeze coming from the outside did not carry the coal dust. ‘What time will do, Antonio, is take money from the Nobildonna’s purse into another’s. Your forge is profitable, but she needs what you used to give her. And that’s the gold ducats paid by rich patricians and merchants for what you once made. That is what she needs.’

Antonio was unafraid of the man, even though he stood head and shoulders taller. Jordan would never offer violence because the master knife maker was the key to the patrician’s ongoing acquisition of more money and influence. ‘What she needs, Elias, is what you give her in her bed.’ Antonio’s stare appeared more of a challenge than a taunt. Get the enslaved Elias Jordan to say how much he loathed servicing the woman who owned him and it would be a weapon to use against him.

Jordan knew he was being baited. ‘I serve my lady as I am commanded.’

‘We are both being fucked by the same woman, but you’re getting more pleasure from it than me.’ He sighed, glancing past Jordan to see that neither his grandson nor Richard were likely to enter the forge. ‘Tell the Nobildonna that the man who absconded will never have the skills that Riccardo already has.’

Jordan hesitated before questioning him further. Had the enslaved Englishmen already made a knife? ‘You have something to show me? So that I can give her some assurance?’

Antonio sat on his stool. ‘Riccardo knows fire and steel. He uses his bare hand when he first takes iron from the fire. He feels its heat. It puts him in touch with its core. Like feeling a heartbeat. Yes, he’s made a knife, but it’s fit only for a boatman.’ He nodded towards the wall where the sheets of parchment were pinned. ‘Take one of those down.’

Elias looked at the ragged-edged sheets. ‘Which one?’

‘Any of them will do.’

Jordan’s hand hovered. He chose the sheet in the middle, showing lists of materials required every month. He lifted it free from the nail and studied the list. Raising his eyes to Antonio, he shrugged.

The old man leant on his stick. ‘The other side.’

Jordan turned the sheet. His eyes widened.

‘He works at night and sketches designs of knives. They’re already in his head.’

Elias Jordan turned and snatched down a dozen more sheets of parchment. On the back of every one were ornate drawings with measurements and descriptions of the blade patterns.

‘He doesn’t know that I have seen these drawings,’ said Antonio. ‘Ask the Nobildonna to be patient. As soon as he has the skills, he will become the master knife maker in this forge.’

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CHAPTER 36

About the Same time as Richard's skills were being questioned by Elias Jordan, Elizabeth heard Challenor's footsteps echo down the stairs and then the clang of the iron gate as he left the house. She knew he would walk the hundred yards and take a boat waiting on the Grand Canal. It seemed he never walked alone in the city without a bodyguard, either Lazaro or the taller, stronger man, Rocco, and that day it was Lazaro who remained at the gate for her protection. If Challenor had enemies, which he had hinted at when she was first taken to his house, then the pirate captain was safer on the water. And she was safer having his men at the entrance. And, she admitted to herself, despite her protestations, having Lazaro shadow her and Naira when they ventured into the city. A complaint that was ignored, but one that emphasized her entrapment by the man who loved her.

A broad wooden balcony allowed her to gaze down at the narrow *rio* below where boatmen nudged alongside each other as they made their way to and from the broader expanse of the Canal. The narrow glimpse between the opposite low buildings allowed her to observe Challenor's boat go past. Her gaze swept the rooftops. Narrow waterways, dark passageways, a labyrinth, and she still did not know how far the city stretched. Any hope of finding Richard and sending him a message was lost in the maze of streets and waterways.

She had already established herself as the mistress of Challenor's house, adopting the role of benign authority while daily inspecting every room. It was a needless exercise, but one that reinforced her presence to the servants. The ground floor housed the kitchen and sleeping quarters for the servants: a cook, Maria, and her assistant Caterina, a young waif without

speech, little more than eight years old, who like the cook only ventured onto the upper floors to serve their food. Elizabeth learnt the mute child had been brought into Challenor's house by Elias Jordan. The story as related by Naira was that the wealthy woman he served had not known the girl was working in her kitchens. When she found out, she banished the girl. Like many Venetians, her superstition ran deeply. If a humpback crossed your path, it was a sign of good fortune. A lame person was an omen of bad luck. And if you asked the time as the clock struck the hour, that was your death knell. A mute child might possess mysterious powers. Challenor had his own superstitions, but this was not one of them. He took the girl in and put her to work in the kitchen; an extra few *soldi* calmed the cook's apprehension, proving that a mute girl brought good fortune.

The kitchen held no interest for Elizabeth other than to see the mute child was fed and had a warm place to sleep. It was not something she needed to concern herself with: it was Leonora's responsibility to see the kitchen functioned as it should. Challenor had been blessed in finding a housekeeper like her: a servant seldom seen yet whose presence was felt because the house was so well run. At the appropriate time Elizabeth, choosing her words carefully, had separately interrogated each of the three women who served in the house in an effort to uncover more of her surroundings and information about Challenor's time in Venice.

Leonora was the most reticent of the servants; her discretion, so far, could not be faulted. She had been cleaning the silverware when Elizabeth questioned her.

'Mistress Elizabeth, I have worked for the captain since he bought this house. I know nothing about his business. He is a ship's master and he trades everywhere. It would not be right for me to speak of him at all. He treats us with respect but…'

The slight hesitation was enough for her to lower her eyes as if thinking an impure thought.

'Yes?' said Elizabeth.

The older woman shook her head. 'Forgive me.' She raised her eyes to meet Elizabeth's. 'I was about to say that no woman should ask too much about the man who offers her so much.' Embarrassed, she lowered her eyes again and began polishing the tableware again.

‘That’s all right, Leonora. I was once in a house where I worked for a man. He was cruel and unjust.’

‘That is not Captain Challenor. He is strict, but not that.’

‘Of course. I didn’t think he was,’ she said, knowing full well she had seen Challenor’s justice practised aboard the *Falcon.* She tried to ease the housekeeper’s sense of being interrogated. ‘I am a woman who wishes to—’ She struggled to find the right words, and continued in Venetian ‘—be a good wife,’ she lied.

The old woman’s shock was a good sign. It meant Naira, who had been teaching her, had not spoken of her tuition. A level of trust had been tested and proven worthy.

Leonora nodded as if she understood what it meant to be a good wife.

Elizabeth toyed with an ornate silver knife, then picked up a polishing cloth. ‘Were you married?’

Again, the woman hesitated. Elizabeth thought her question might have triggered an unhappy memory.

‘Of course.’ She shrugged. She studied Elizabeth, and as if to ensure she was understood, she reverted to English. ‘He is dead. Ten years past.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry.’

Leonora shrugged again.

‘Is there anyone in the city who could make us knives? For the table? A forge with skilled blacksmiths?’

‘Mistress, you dislike these fine things?’

‘When I am married, I would like to have things I choose in such a beautiful house… as beautiful as these are.’

The housekeeper diligently kept cleaning the silverware. ‘I suppose. There must be someone who makes knives. I have never had any need. These came with the house.’

‘But there must be somewhere. Do you never talk to other housekeepers about the houses where they work?’

Leonora shook her head. Elizabeth wondered if Challenor had forewarned her not to speak of a forge where her brother might be.

‘There *was* one in *sestiere* Cannaregio. Now? I don’t think it is still there. But they did not make knives, they made brass fittings. I don’t know. I’m sorry, Mistress Elizabeth.’ She indicated the room. ‘We have no need. We have everything.’

Elizabeth couldn't stop the words that sprang from her lips. 'Except our freedom.' She regretted it immediately.

Leonora placed the silverware in the drawer of an ornate cabinet. 'Only death brings freedom.'

Her duty done, she bowed her head and left the room. Her words lodged in Elizabeth's thoughts.

*

Naira knew nothing of Challenor's past, either. She had confirmed Challenor's story. Her father surrendered her to pay his debt, and she was taken to the Fondaco dei Turchi, where the Turks lived and traded beyond the Rialto Bridge. The young girl's eyes had welled with tears when she recounted the memory. Elizabeth instinctively reached out to embrace the girl, but she wiped away the tears, her eyes lowered and stepped back, hands clasped across her waist. The mistress of the house did not embrace a servant.

Elizabeth took her hands in her own. 'Naira, we have both escaped a harsh fate thanks to Captain Challenor and I will keep you by my side as my companion. If that is agreeable to you?'

Naira raised her eyes, a moment of uncertainty, but then she nodded and smiled hesitantly.

There had been little more information to be gained from her, but Elizabeth had learnt that Germans and Turks lived in the Rialto Bridge area on the other side of the Grand Canal and when she asked about Cannaregio she learnt that *ghèto* was the Venetian word for a foundry. Naira confirmed Leonora's comment that it was long closed and remained in word only as a place where Jewish merchants and itinerant travellers now lived. Elizabeth was no closer to finding her brother's whereabouts, but it was another fragment of information that would help her piece together Venice's layout.

*

Naira said Challenor called Bettina *uccellino*, the little bird. The girl was a chatterbox whose constant stories needed to be shaped and curtailed to suit Elizabeth's search for knowledge. But her gossip helped form a picture in

Elizabeth's mind of what was happening within the local area. She painted a picture of who occupied the nearest *campo* and who could obtain any item seen in any shop at a better price. She chattered away all day long when she was out of the sight and hearing of Leonora, voice rising and trailing as she related all she had heard to whoever might be in earshot as she passed through the rooms with clean laundry.

Isabella, on the other hand, was a quiet woman, a skilled seamstress whose lips remained pursed as she concentrated on her stitching while the hard-working laundry girl wittered on. The seamstress had done all that Elizabeth had instructed. She had made comfortable clothing of various dyed hues, far less ostentatious than the bulky rustling silks and embellishments she had seen rich women wear as they were ferried along the Grand Canal, a hundred yards away and observed from the rooftop balcony.

Her clothing had an understated mark of quality. The cut of her tunic over her full-length dress accentuated her figure, something she found appealing, compared to her simple, unfussy attire when she had served in the merchant's house in England. Had Isabella seen how her slim body needed to be given more shape? Being coveted by Challenor had turned Elizabeth's attention to herself. Now, when she stood naked in front of a full-length mirror, she scrutinized her body. Her hard-working life and the physical demands it had made on her meant she had no belly fat and her ribs pressed against taut skin, and were it not for the fullness of her breasts, she could have passed as a slender young man. Isabella's dress accentuated her waist, and the cut of the bodice did the same to her breasts. As modest as the dress was, there would be no doubt in anyone's mind that Elizabeth Sheriff was a desirable woman.

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CHAPTER 37

Over the Last weeks, Challenor's company had become easier to tolerate. Elizabeth admitted to herself that she enjoyed his conversation. His stories of the city and his obvious love for La Serenissima drew her in. Yet he gave little away about the exact location of his house in relation to the rest of the city. She thought it to be a way of stopping her travelling too far. And the servants had yielded little more information. The next square, the nearby church, the Canal, the narrow *rio* alongside the house: beyond that she could not picture the city in her mind's eye. It was too vast, with so many streets, canals and alleyways.

Challenor spent little time in the house and while he was absent she realized she missed him accompanying her as he showed her the sights of her immediate surroundings. He ensured she saw the joy of the city. Jugglers and acrobats vied for coins in the Piazza San Marco. Musicians walked through narrow streets, their music heralding their arrival as it echoed along the *calle.* Stalls sold charms and medicines. Challenor knew who the charlatans were who promised a cure for every ailment and offered love potions to seize a woman's heart. And every time he guided her around, Venice embraced her, even when disguised by the mist that settled across the rooftops and squares. The fog cloaked the city and made it even more mysterious and tantalizing.

She lodged what she could in her memory as he angled her this way and that on their walks. He took her into a maze and always returned her by a different route. Despite her mellowing approach to him, she could never forget that John Challenor was like a half-tamed wolf who would one day eat from your hand and the next bite it off. His past actions appalled her, yet

she wondered if his devotion and respect for her might indicate a ruthless man being brought to his senses and becoming again the simple fisherman he once was.

For his part, Challenor had taken a step back and watched what he took to be her newfound confidence. Over the weeks he had shared his ambition to raid less and trade more in Venice for, with Elizabeth at his side, Challenor believed a new life awaited them.

They sat together one evening as the light faded over the darkening sky.

'Leonora tells me you have been learning to speak Venetian,' said Challenor, pouring wine.

By now she was used to the taste of wine. Elizabeth thought for a moment. So of all the servants, perhaps Leonora was indeed the most loyal to her master. 'Does she spy on me as well?'

He handed her the glass. He smiled. 'Everyone in Venice is a spy. Every house has one. Every ambassador's house has at least two. The secret police have informers in every *campo*.' He sipped his drink. 'Of course she doesn't spy on you. The only one not to trust is the cook.'

'Maria?'

He nodded. 'I pay her well but local informers put a few *soldi* in her hand every month.'

'But she cannot know anything. She spends her time downstairs.'

'Which is why I tolerate it. She knows she cannot pass on anything of value. She knows I know. Only the informers think she may be a source of information about where my next voyage might be going and who I might raid for what cargo. It's a good arrangement. She earns more money and once in a while when I am home I might say something that is harmless but interesting to those who listen at street corners. It's a game well played in Venice. No, Leonora merely made a comment that she was impressed by how quickly you had picked up the dialect.'

Elizabeth showed no sign of irritation. 'I thought it better I learn and understand it. It's only the simplest of words for when I walk with Naira. I don't want her interpreting for me all the time when I ask a stall holder how much an item is,' she said, dismissing the issue lightly and wondering if Leonora had told him that it was more than a few words she had mastered. Then she added: 'Not that I have any money to buy anything. Or to help a beggar feed themselves.'

‘Have you seen any beggars on the streets when we go out?’

She looked blank. The question caught her by surprise, as did her own realization. She had not.

‘No, because beggars have to be registered and the city cares for them. They are housed and cared for in the mendicants’ hospital. Venice is a venal city, Elizabeth, but its conscience is clear when it comes to charitable institutions caring for the sick, for orphans and the indigent. Tell me what other city takes in orphaned children and creates beauty from their misfortune? You’ll hear them one day. They’re taught to sing and their choirs are renowned in this city. They can reduce a hardened boatman to tears.’ He smiled. ‘Besides, beggars make this beautiful city look untidy. So you have no need of money. Everything is provided for you. Look at the beautiful things that surround you in this house. And you want to buy trinkets?’

‘Sometimes an inexpensive gift given to the servants makes them feel valued.’

‘They know how fortunate they are. They need nothing more than what they have. You shouldn’t get too close to servants.’

‘I am little more myself.’

‘No, Elizabeth, you are to be my wife, and if it’s so important to you to have coins in your purse then I shall see to it.’

She decided to let the matter go and sipped her drink.

‘I’d hoped by now you might have drawn closer to me. I’ve done everything I can to shield you from harm and to give you every comfort.’

‘You have, and I am grateful, but it will take time.’

‘But do you believe you might one day return the feelings I have for you?’

Intimate moments like this with Challenor reminded her of when she had agreed to his proposal all those years ago. When she was a young girl. That time had gone. The woman she was now could not forget the hardship and fear inflicted on the innocent during the journey that had brought her to this place. Marriage was unavoidable but the thought of bearing him a child troubled her. As to the reason why… that she couldn’t answer. Perhaps it was too soon to think so far ahead. First she had to find it within herself to embrace his affection. And how to do that? Surrender?

‘I see where my duty lies, and I gave you my word.’ Her voice was free from any note of antagonism. The conflict within her defied logic. Her feelings were certainly softening towards him: an echo of the time when he had declared his love for her. ‘I would not want to share your bed without… some attraction and desire on my part.’ She paused. ‘As I once had.’ She settled her glass on the side table, wiping a finger across an imaginary wet ring on the marble. She looked at him. Another voice in her head contradicted the gesture of reconciliation she had made. ‘But will I ever be able to forgive you?’

Challenor looked at her over the rim of his glass. He wished he could rid himself of the hold she had on him. It was beyond his understanding how he had behaved towards her. Any other woman would have been bedded and forgotten. Not her. She held his heart in the palm of her hand. And crushed it, he told himself. Not that he would admit it to her.

‘You have not told me when this event is to take place,’ she said.

‘An event? Is that how you see it?’

‘Am I not to be paraded before your merchant friends as another acquisition?’

He leant forward from his chair and stretched out his hand. She took it. A small act of mercy, but one he was grateful for. ‘My dearest Elizabeth, I will introduce you to my friends, and they will embrace and welcome you.’

Elizabeth’s desire to meet Challenor’s friends and those who did business with him was all part of her wish to find out what she could about her surroundings and better her understanding of her situation. As comfortably as she was being kept, she was still imprisoned. And talking to outsiders might help establish contacts of her own.

‘I’ll arrange such an occasion. Would you like that?’

The small victory cheered her. ‘Very much. Here? Are we to host a dinner?’

‘No. No one comes here, except those who must. I keep my house as a sanctuary against those who might wish to poke their nose into my private business. And besides, I always have to think of security. The fewer people who come through my door, the better.’

‘Then there *is* danger in Venice?’

‘Men die in these twisted streets. Assassins lurk in the doorways; it’s always been the case. Venice can be a violent city beneath its charm and

beauty. But what I meant was there are valuable items here, Elizabeth. Even the wealthiest of men can be light-fingered. How else do men become rich if not through greed?' He stood and moved to the panelling on the wall. He got his fingers behind one panel and prised it open. 'This used to be an old fireplace.'

Elizabeth saw a concave brick-lined space, its top capped off, the inside roughly plastered.

'My former sea captain, the one who owned the house, had the fire grate removed and this wall panelled so that when he was away at sea, he could hide his most valuable items inside. When I talk of men's greed, this is all I meant. You have to protect what you have. I don't want you being concerned. We'll have a fine life here.' He closed the hidden panel.

She returned his stare without smiling. And that left him in doubt once again. 'Now… our marriage. I intend to arrange a ceremony towards the end of August. It will still be hot but cooler winds might prevail by then. That gives everyone time to prepare and guests to be invited. I trust you will find that suitable.'

'I am bought and sold, John. What choice do I have?' The rebuke tumbled from her lips before the words could be reined in. Regret followed but still she could not help expressing an element of resistance. It was too soon to surrender completely.

'For pity's sake, Elizabeth, I beg you not to say such things. I'm the one who's enslaved to you.'

She toyed with her glass. When she spoke, her tone had lightened, a subtle, mischievous tease rather than a taunt, but without the tell-tale smile that would signal its lack of harshness: 'Yet you spend little time here,' she said. 'Perhaps my presence offends you in some way?' She stared at him.

For a moment, he was uncertain if she was serious or playing with him. He decided it was the latter. 'Mother of Christ!' He laughed. 'Your manner would confuse the Doge himself. He'd have no idea whether you're teasing or accusing. The *Falcon* needs repair and I have to keep my men well provisioned. And I have business to attend to. That's why I'm not at home as much as I would like to be. But you have the freedom to walk out with Naira.'

'And I am chaperoned,' she said, referring to Lazaro, who followed her at a discreet distance whenever she ventured out with her personal maid.

‘Of course. Elizabeth, we have spoken about this a hundred times. There are pickpockets and rough characters who prey on women unaccompanied by men. And the magistrate’s men who look for such miscreants are not in every *calle* or *campo*.’

‘And yet I have no purse to steal.’

‘You have a valuable necklace and rings on your fingers. There are low people who wouldn’t hesitate to slice a ring from your hand.’ He brushed his own hand across his folded leg. His voice was cautious, not wishing to alarm her too much.

She gazed out of the window as if she had let the matter go. She waited until he had refilled his glass. ‘Do you do business with the black man who visits the house?’ she asked, as if it were an idle question of little importance.

‘He’s my contact here. Call him a go-between.’

She paused, edging closer to the question that was never answered. ‘Then he knows where Richard is.’

Challenor expressed no sign of irritation at the often asked query. ‘I’ve told you, he’s working in a forge on the mainland.’ The lie came easily. ‘That’s where I found him employment. As I promised.’

‘Is the black man the one who took him there? Is he your slave trader?’

‘No, he arranges work for everyone that suits their skills. And he arranged the same for Richard, who’s protected by a wealthy patron. It’s better he’s out of the city.’

‘And so this black man knows where that is.’

‘I doubt it. He’s a slave himself. Has been since boyhood.’

‘Then why is he still enslaved? Why has he not escaped if he knows you and the city?’

‘Because he will be free one day when his owner dies and in the meantime, as you’ve witnessed from his visits, he has the trappings of a good life. Clothes, jewellery; he can go wherever he chooses. He’s a *maggiordomo* in a grand house. He’s valued. And we have a business arrangement that suits us and makes us both money.’

‘So he enjoys his rewards, yet you don’t make the same association with the women who work here when I suggest buying them a small token.’

He sighed. She knew she was testing his patience. ‘Never mind these women. It is Richard who will one day be given the same comforts to

enjoy.’

‘And as I ask you every time we discuss this, will he be at our wedding?’

‘He’s a long way from here, Elizabeth. And when he doesn’t work, he’s not making money for his patron. Give it time. One day you’ll see each other again. Be thankful he’s safe.’

Elizabeth knew she could badger him only so far. And it was likely that Challenor was telling the truth about Richard. If he was in the city and they discovered the other’s whereabouts, the temptation for them to meet and run, and damn the consequences, might prove irresistible.

The thought of finding her brother sustained her. What would happen when they were reunited was unknowable. She would be married. Perhaps he would be too. ‘Then when and where will we marry?’ she asked him. ‘I am not of the Roman faith.’

He shrugged as he raised a glass of brandy to his lips. ‘Nor am I, so I have engaged a notary. No church would have us.’ He smiled. ‘It’s to be a civil wedding. I am sorry if that disappoints you. But I promise it will be a splendid affair. Venice will capture your heart as much as you have seized mine.’

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CHAPTER 38

It was a marriage ceremony unlike Elizabeth could ever have dreamed of. The morning sun glinted off the waters of the Grand Canal. What was visible of it. Decorated boats, gondolas, and craft of every description crowded the waterway. She gazed across the entrance of the canal to where the finest damask tapestries hung in celebration from the balconies of the grand houses. Beyond the flotilla of boats were ships anchored in the lagoon, dressed with flags and streamers for the occasion. Ottoman traders with their distinctive curved prows, flat-bottomed Dutch fluyts, even a few English merchantmen.

The excitement had begun well before the ceremony. Challenor's household staff had busied themselves to bring his house into its best light. Leonora was more brusque than usual as she urged everyone to pay particular attention to their duties. Copper pots were scrubbed in the kitchen. The courtyard was swilled with water and swept clean. Flowers arranged. Two lemon trees in urns were placed either side of the entrance so that their fragrance would ease the smells of bubbling pots in the kitchens. Windows gleamed. No one wanted to be outdone by anyone else at such a time. Bettina boiled linens in lavender water. Murano glass chandeliers in the *piano nobile* were wiped down with vinegar-soaked cloths And then, with the food prepared and the house ready to celebrate the event, Challenor gave his household staff free time to enjoy the festival that would follow. Isabella had made Elizabeth's silk dress, deep blue, its square-necked bodice tweaked and adjusted until it was as perfect as any dress could be. A pearl necklace glinted against the silk's dark hue. A small soft velvet cap was pinned in her hair.

The day glittered with colour and reflection from the water. Elizabeth shook her head in wonderment at the sight that glided past. Since arriving in Venice and being accompanied by Challenor or Naira, she had still not grown accustomed to the city's endless canals and the houses that seemed to float on water and this spectacle thrilled her. Without thinking, she gripped Challenor's arm in her excitement. The thunder of rolling drums hit her and then the high, wild calling of wind instruments that Challenor called *piffari*.

'*Bucintoro*!' someone shouted, and the crowd surged forward. Challenor wrapped his arm around her waist to steady her. And then she saw the vessel, which was two decks high, its hull gleaming with gold leaf and crimson paint. The great galley moved with stately grace despite its size. Above its upper deck, a canopy of crimson and gold cloth billowed in the morning breeze.

She turned in Challenor's embrace, gazing at his face as he shared her joy in the moment.

'The Doge's barge. A hundred and sixty-eight oarsmen. See how they row in time? Each man chosen for his skill and loyalty to the Republic. A sight to behold, Beth,' he said, as impressed as she was by the sight. She could hear the sense of wonder in his voice.

At the stern, beneath the great canopy, sat what Elizabeth at first took to be a statue. Then it moved, and she realized she was looking at the Doge himself. Even at this distance, the gold of his robes blazed in the sunlight. He wore a horned hat that Challenor had told her was the *corno ducale*, a symbol of his office. The Doge, Marino Grimani, was the leader of the Republic, renowned for his love of opulent celebrations.

The crowds cheered as the *Bucintoro* passed by. 'Sposalizio del Mare,' Challenor told her, his lips close to her ear so she could hear him above the roaring crowds. 'Today the Doge renewed Venice's marriage vow to the sea. He's come back from the lagoon entrance, where he threw a gold ring into the water and proclaimed Venice wed to the sea and her perpetual dominion over it.'

She looked up at him, nodded her understanding, and without thinking reached for his hand around her waist and raised it to her lips. The moment passed without either of them acknowledging her gesture. Was it the thought of marriage that had finally stirred her? For all Challenor knew it

might have been nothing more than her excitement at watching the spectacle. It was the closest she had come to expressing any physical affection for him since arriving in Venice. He saw her pulse quicken in her neck. Intent on watching the multitude of boats, she strained against his embrace, determined not to miss anything.

Smaller boats passed, bearing men in black robes whom Challenor identified as nobles, others carrying priests in their ceremonial vestments, and still more filled with musicians. The music echoed off the façades of the grand houses, creating a strange harmony with the shouts of the crowd and the slap of water against stone. Elizabeth noticed boats carrying men in bright robes of red, blue and white. She pointed and gave him a quizzical look.

‘The Scuole Grandi,’ Challenor explained. ‘Great confraternities. More powerful than some princes, they say. See their banners? Each has its own saint, its own church, its own duties to the poor. Venice is a world within a world.’

The procession of boats passed them by, but she insisted on waiting until the flotilla turned at the large basin at the top of the canal and returned on their stately and ceremonial journey. She was hoarse from cheering when, hours later, the music faded and he led her back into the narrow streets. Stalls had sprung up from nowhere, selling everything from spices to delicate glass figures. Smelling grilled fish and fresh bread made Elizabeth’s stomach growl.

‘Come on,’ Challenor said, steering them towards a narrow passageway. ‘I know a place where the wine is the best and the company is interesting. Unless you’d prefer to watch the nobles process into their fancy banquet at the Ducal Palace?’

‘I want to see everything,’ she said, happier in that moment than she had been for a long time. And then the surge of joy was restrained by the knowledge that this had been a fleeting moment on her long journey. She was still trying to process everything she’d seen watching Venice in all its ceremonial and religious glory on Ascension Day. A city married to the sea, a gold ring thrown into the waves, ships from the ends of the earth gathered in celebration.

England seemed very far away.

As Challenor pressed through the crowds, her arm in his, she could not know that on the opposite bank of the canal, an old master blade maker had taken his workers to watch the spectacle and that her brother had been as entranced as her. So close, but a world apart.

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Challenor escorted her towards the festivities in Piazza San Marco as the final few boats followed in the waterborne procession's wake, including a gondola bearing two men who had disembarked from a ship anchored in the basin. It was as decorated as those that had gone before it, but the gondolier could raise little enthusiasm from his grim-faced passengers, despite them being fellow Venetians whom he would have expected to share in the joyful spectacle.

The Day of Ascension had brought more than prayers to the city. Margos Azarian had kept his word. Massimo Marasini and his companion Andrea Cassola had been returned to robust health. Their passage had been paid; the men had been given plain clothes confiscated from slaves in Tunis and gold and silver coin so that they could re-establish themselves in their home city. And when their plans were ready they would strike an unsuspecting Challenor and retrieve the document that threatened Azarian's life. How they did so did not concern the slave trader. They could inflict whatever terror they chose on the pirate captain.

As bells rang out celebrating Christ ascending to heaven these men of vengeance crossed the lagoon into Venice to cast Captain John Challenor into hell.

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CHAPTER 39

Marasini and Andrea Cassola disembarked from the gondola down a side canal in the north of the city. Venice was home. They knew the streets, *campi*, canals, noblemen's grand houses, the courtesans' salons and gambling dens. Were it not for the loss they had suffered, it was as if they had never left their beloved Serenissima. They decided to seek accommodation in the Cannaregio *sestiere*. It was a place to be anonymous and to mix with merchants and artisans. It was also close to the working-class dock area of the Castello, where men without conscience willing to commit violent crimes could be found. The two survivors would merge back into the society from which they had been so brutally taken. The city merchants traded far and wide and invested in voyages with sea captains like John Challenor. And, like any city traders, there were those captains who were favoured, and those who were not. Once Marasini and Cassola integrated back into the merchant class, they would soon discover where Challenor lived. It was essential to remain discreet. Marasini knew his thirst for revenge had to be held in check. Planning Challenor's death would take time. Every step needed to be taken with the utmost caution to avoid detection.

The two men strode down a narrow passage where one *rio* joined another and the corner building afforded a view of the waterways in both directions. Steps took them across the water, beneath a portico, and had they continued would have brought them into the main *campo*.

'Here,' said Marasini as he stood at the doorway of the building. 'This will do. Andrea, find the landlady. You'll stay here, and I'll move further along the *rio*.' He caught his companion's brief look of uncertainty. He laid

a hand on his shoulder. ‘It will take weeks for us to prepare what must be done, my friend. Don’t lose heart the moment we’re home.’

Cassola nodded. He had lost his livelihood and his home, but Marasini had not only suffered the same loss but in addition witnessed the death of his family when Challenor had attacked the ship he and his wife and children were aboard. His pain and the insult to his honour was far deeper than anything Cassola could imagine.

‘We’ve survived so far, Massimo. Years aboard a galley, close to death at times. Are we not tempting the Almighty?’

Marasini glanced up at the windows, his instinct not to be overheard now that they were planning murder. Cassola needed to be encouraged and reminded of their wish to see Challenor punished. ‘Is it not the grace of the Almighty that has given us another chance at our lives? Don’t forget what we have endured. Who was it who nursed you back to health in Algiers? Who gave you hope, Andrea? Who took the beatings for you when you couldn’t keep pace rowing on the galley before you found your strength again?’

Cassola nodded. Marasini had given him portions of his food, which had saved his life. It was as if his friend had needed only the bare minimum: hatred for Challenor had kept Marasini alive all those years. ‘I know, my friend. I owe you everything. And your grief is greater than mine. But how do we find Challenor without exposing ourselves?’

‘By not being in haste. We’re *home*. Tomorrow we buy better clothes, we’ll find old friends, have them embrace us back into their fold. Our fraternity awaits us. They’ll see our return for the miracle that it is. We take *time*. Do you understand? We rent modest rooms. Away from the *campo* where no one will notice us coming and going. We tell our story that the Church’s ransom redeemed us. People will be sympathetic and extend the hand of friendship. We have money enough for the time being. Our friends will soon have us back sitting in other noblemen’s houses. Our kind do not forget their own.’ He gripped Cassola’s arm in an attempt to instil courage into his friend. ‘We are noblemen. Never forget it. And soon we will have everything we need to further our plans. Andrea, we mustn’t falter. And when we have done what needs to be done, and we recover the document that Challenor holds over Azarian, then we can trade again as successfully as we did before. Don’t you think Azarian will pay us even more than he

already has to get that back?' He smiled and embraced his friend. 'It's a new beginning. Stay strong. I'm at your side, as always.'

Cassola gripped his friend's hand. He couldn't turn away from him now. 'Thank you, Massimo. Coming back has unnerved me. I can't believe we're here. On this day of days. I want nothing more than to start afresh. I'm with you. Don't worry about me. Once I've attended mass, my inner strength will return. Join me. We'll offer our thanks to God together.'

'God turned his back on me, Andrea. I'll leave you to pray for us both.'

Cassola paused. 'It… pains me to hear you say that, but I shall offer thanks for the two of us. And then we'll do what has to be done. I won't let you down.'

'Good,' said Marasini. 'I never doubted it. Now, find decent rooms, bathe and then meet me this evening. You remember the *osteria* near the Madonna dell'Orto church?'

The memory made Cassola smile. 'The best *baccalà mantecato* in the *sestiere*.' He laughed. 'You bring me home, my friend, and the first thing you do is remind me of a favourite dish. Yes, I'll meet you there for the creamiest poached cod and garlic and if I drink and eat too much, then you'll have to see me home to my bed.' He stepped into the building's entrance and turned. 'Good to be home, Massimo.'

Marasini watched his friend walk further into the dim hallway. He waited until he heard Cassola knock on a door – the landlady's, he assumed – and ask what rooms were available. Satisfied, Marasini made his way towards where he intended to rent. If there was still a God listening he silently prayed for the patience needed to fulfil his plan. And also that his nervous friend would not balk when the time came for them to kill Challenor.

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CHAPTER 40

The City's Celebrations for the Day of Ascension ended after two weeks but those at the busy forge had been given no time to celebrate except for witnessing the Doge's procession along the canal. Neither Richard nor Elizabeth could have known that they stood on opposite sides of the Grand Canal watching the same ceremony. Another month had passed since then, and Venice's summer heat had reached its zenith.

Domenico's face ran with sweat tracking through the grime. He yelled at the boy on the bellows to work harder; he needed the firepit to burn hotter. With Antonio away for the day on business his grandson was in charge. He and Richard were forging chisels for the stonemasons. They argued when Richard told him the steel he was working on was too cold to shape when he took it from the fire. It was glowing yellow as Domenico twisted the rod of metal and hammered the shape he wanted on the anvil. At Richard's insistence, he put the iron rod back in the fire until it was white hot, as hot as their tempers. Richard did not back down even when Domenico threatened to report him to his grandfather for disobedience. The one thing Antonio wanted was the reputation of the forge not to be damaged: Richard knew that. And Domenico was lazy. His work would be acceptable but never of a high standard. Domenico threw down the fire tongs and told him to finish the job.

As the day wore on Richard finished forging the chisels and then ground their cutting edges. When he'd finished he had the workshop urchins pack the six tools into the forge's leather satchel, which bore Antonio's tooled initials 'V' embracing 'A', for Domenico to deliver.

'You take them,' said Domenico.

Richard watched as the youth stood over a bucket and sluiced sweat and grime from his torso.

‘I’m not permitted beyond the forge. You know that,’ Richard told him as Domenico dried himself.

‘I’m tired and I’m damned if I’m carrying that load up to San Polo. Besides, I have work to do. Grandfather won’t be back until tonight. It’s not far.’ He tossed aside the rag. ‘And slaves have nowhere to run so I know you won’t try and escape. And if you do then I’m better off.’

Domenico’s resentment had been building since the first day of Richard’s arrival. Over the weeks his grandfather had tutored the Englishman, who was becoming rapidly proficient at quality knife making, leaving Domenico to do more and more of the day-to-day tasks. At times he wondered who it was that was enslaved.

Richard pulled his leather apron over his head and hung it on a hook. It all seemed innocent enough and Domenico’s attitude would give him a chance to gain a better understanding of the forge’s location.

‘All right. Do I need to take payment?’

‘No. I put it in a ledger. They pay my grandfather.’

‘Then where do I take the chisels?’

‘Aren’t you listening? Are you deaf as well as stupid?’

‘I don’t know how to get to this San Polo.’

Domenico took a swig from a flask and nodded for Richard to follow him to the door. Richard grabbed his doublet and the bag. It was heavy enough, which enforced his belief that the idle youth simply didn’t want to make the effort. They stood at the doorway. A barge plied the narrow *rio*.

‘Am I to go by boat?’

‘And who would pay for that? No, you walk. It’s not far.’ He pointed towards the small church on the opposite side of the water. ‘Stay along the *fondamenta*,’ he said, facing the narrow pavement running alongside the waterway. ‘Cross the footbridge at the end, go left. You find the *campo*. It’s big. You can’t miss it.’ He grinned. ‘You follow your nose. There’s a street beyond it that leads north. Follow that. Yes? Understand? Keep the sun behind you. Do you have sun where you come from, Englishman?’

‘I’ve seen it once or twice,’ Richard answered, keen to be rid of the sniping youth. ‘How far do I go along that street?’ he asked, pointing in his intended direction.

‘Until you can go no more. Follow the next street.’ Domenico was describing the route with his hands. Then he pivoted. As if following his own directions. ‘Keep going, cross over a bridge.’

Richard listened. He would never remember such a circuitous route. ‘What is San Polo? A building? A church? Who do I deliver these to?’

Domenico pressed a finger to his nostril and cleared it of blackened snot. ‘That’s the area where the church is that the men are working on. You find Maestro Stefan at the Frari Basilica. All right? He is the master stonemason in charge. He’s German. The one who came to the forge that day. Christ on the Cross, just ask. Everyone knows where the basilica is.’ Domenico pointed his finger. ‘You go across the Ca’ Foscari bridge. Got that? The Foscari bridge.’

Richard remembered what he could. There were only two key places to think of when he got lost, which he certainly would: the bridge and the basilica. He asked no more questions, but hefted the bag’s strap over his shoulder.

With the sun on his back, he set off with an undeniable sense of freedom.

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Richard was in no hurry. The bag was heavy and he was sweating from the heat reflecting off the street’s baked dirt, but the chance to go further away from the forge than had previously been permitted was a pleasure he was determined to make the most of. Once he’d crossed the footbridge, he found welcome relief from the direct sunlight as he stepped into the shade of the narrow passageway. He hid his bewilderment at the number of people jostling back and forth as load-carrying men stooped below the weight on their backs and others with narrow handcarts forced pedestrians aside into doorways as they shouted out their warnings. He was sure everyone he passed was looking at him, wondering why an enslaved man was walking the streets freely. At least, that’s what his imagination told him. Most people barely glanced at him. The buildings were of different styles and heights, with peeling plaster, exposed brickwork; here and there washing hung from a small iron balcony or was strung across a narrow *calle* between buildings. At each corner, he looked up to see the name of the street chiselled in stone,

telling him where he was. The names were meaningless, but they would become his route home. So far, he had memorized his journey so that he could return to the forge. Now he understood what the sly Domenico had meant when he told Richard to follow his nose. Once the narrow passage spilled out onto a large square, a stench wafted from a side street where waste was stored. It abated the further he walked uncertainly around the edge of the square. It was bigger than anything he'd seen either at home or in Tunis when he and the other captives had been marched through those narrow alleyways to where a man had been tortured to death. However, it was not that memory which delayed him from walking out into the vastness of what lay before him, but the noise and activity that was going on there. Steeling himself, he took a few faltering steps into the open. Despite the weight on his shoulder, he took his time gazing at the surroundings. Goods were displayed outside small shops; women shouted out their prices from their stalls; urchins ran begging, palm out to those who paused long enough to watch jugglers and musicians, some of whom stayed in one place while others danced this way and that through the crowds. Different fragrances wafted in the air. It seemed everyone he passed wore perfume, both men and women.

All manner of food was sold. Bread, fish and meat stalls, all the sellers vying for customers. Bread two *soldi* a loaf; fish seven, meat ten *soldi* a pound. Cloth and wine all had their price and potential buyers who studied the wares looked to be more prosperous than those selling.

Without realizing it Richard found he was in the middle of the square where a line of people waited for fresh water to be drawn from a cistern. These underground cavities captured and filtered rainwater. Some better-dressed citizens nudged ahead of others at the well head and purchased a beaker of water from whoever had hauled up their bucket on the pulley. Richard was thirsty, but he had no money. He had heard that some cisterns offered free water in the smaller *campi* where communities lived together. It seemed, though, that this public square demanded some kind of payment. He saw a child carrying a jug from the well towards a woman stall holder selling fruit. He followed the young girl as she placed the jug on the floor next to the woman who he thought to be her mother. He stammered out a sentence in lingua franca and then added what he realized was the Venetian

he’d picked up at the forge. He hoped that telling her he was thirsty in her own language might soften the hard stare she gave him.

She looked him over suspiciously. She answered rapidly, too quickly for him to understand, pointing back to the well, obviously meaning for him to return there. He shook his head, his palm outstretched in a futile gesture, indicating he had nothing. He pointed to the jug. She looked quizzical and shook her head. The small girl tugged her mother’s skirt, said something and pointed at Richard. The woman looked from her daughter to the dry-lipped man in front of her. She reached forward and touched one of his tunic buttons. He looked down. ‘This?’ he said in English. He remembered Elizabeth sewing the ornate buttons onto his tunic what felt like a lifetime ago. He twisted it free and handed it to the woman, who looked at it and gave it to the child, whose small fingers turned it as if it were the only thing of beauty she had in her life. Which, he thought, it probably was.

The woman handed him the clay jug. Quenching his thirst, he drank only what he needed and, nodding his thanks, handed it back to the woman. He pointed across the square, not knowing which of the streets running off it might take him to his destination. ‘Frari Basilica?’

She nodded.

‘Rio Ca’ Foscari?’ he asked, hoping the bridge was not much farther.

She pointed and then, ignoring him, called out to others in the square to buy her fruit.

With a last glance at the small child who was squatting gazing at the button, he set off.

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CHAPTER 41

The bridge Over the Rio di Ca' Foscari wasn't too busy but the satchel's weight made him cautious, so he was careful not to be jostled by those crossing in the opposite direction and lose his balance. A dark stain streaked the water below, swirling from a passing boat as it headed for the Grand Canal. The stained water reminded him of Totnes where waste from the trades upriver sluiced into the River Dart. Images of home flooded his mind in sharp relief. There was no point yearning for his past life. Venice held him and his sister and unless La Serenissima suddenly became a benevolent mistress, then this is where they would stay.

The traffic thinned even more on the other side of the *rio* as he strode ahead into a smaller *campo*. Here there was a choice to be made. The *rio* flowed around a bend but continued in the direction he thought he should take, but the narrow bridge to cross it on the left side of the square looked as if was a private entrance into a house. To the right was a narrow alleyway that appeared to be going in the right direction. He was tempted to ask for directions. There were four rough-looking men loitering in conversation at the bridge, a man and a woman pushing a small handcart loaded with vegetables towards the crossing, and on the other side washerwomen with children and old men sitting in the cool shade of a building.

A group of men were unloading stone and clay bricks from a barge onto the square. Twenty men or more were busy constructing a building. Was this the basilica? It couldn't be. Not if it was already in existence. Who could he ask and expose his ignorance? To identify himself as a stranger might be asking for trouble. He wished he had asked for better directions

when he was in the open space of the stall holder and her child. Now he felt wary of being so far away from the forge.

The stonemasons here would know. He approached two of the men cutting stone. He gathered his thoughts and conjured the words he needed, asking the men where the basilica was. One of them squinted at him, shielding his eyes from the sun with a muscled arm that held his hammer. He didn't answer, but nodded towards the narrow alleyway Richard had first identified and then returned to his work.

The *calle* narrowed into shadows, and as thankful as he was for the shade, he couldn't dismiss the sense of being totally lost. Even the shadows from the buildings were no help, since the rooftops on either side were so close only a narrow strip of daylight fell onto the street, so he couldn't use the sun for his direction.

He was concentrating on looking ahead, seeking the end of the narrow *calle*, and failed to notice that the four men he had seen loitering at the end of the bridge were now following him. The *calle* ended in a cross street. Left or right? Which way? He looked to the right. A *sotoportego*, a portal to his left, would lead him through buildings and looked to be in the correct direction. A few hundred yards away, three men in bloodied aprons were walking towards him. They were eating and drinking. The sight of them made him hesitate. One of them had a side of a butchered sheep across his shoulder; another carried something wrapped in cloth. They walked without haste. Perhaps they were making their way home, he thought. He was about to turn into the *sotoportego* when a woman passing by recoiled as she stared past him. Richard spun around. The four men he had seen at the bridge lunged at him, wielding clubs. The weight of the bag pulled him off balance. The first blow caught him across his shoulder. He fell, left arm curled over his head to protect himself from the flurry of boots and clubs raining down on him. His right hand scrabbled inside the leather satchel, his fist grasping the longest chisel. He twisted and swung with all his strength and both felt and heard the tool connect with bone. The man screamed and fell back, giving Richard a chance to scramble to his feet, holding a chisel in each hand. He jabbed at one attacker, keeping him at bay, as he swung hard again with the longer seventeen-inch chisel at the nearest man, who reared back and almost lost his footing as the third man came in fast and hard and brought his club down onto Richard's left arm. It numbed him and

he dropped the shorter chisel. They crowded him, forcing him back across the street. Richard felt pins and needles in his left hand from the blow on the upper part of his arm, but he had sufficient strength to snatch hold of one of the cudgels and smash it down onto the man's forearm. It cracked. The man screamed and, snatching at his broken arm, ran from the attack, ignoring the pleas of the man on the ground who was crawling away with a broken leg.

The two remaining men, wary of the swinging length of iron, danced around Richard as he swiped left and right to keep them at bay. He pulled free the satchel with his left hand and, using its straps, swung it wide at one man as the other tried to dart in. The attacker, as well as the short club in his right hand, now held a knife in his left. Richard twisted away and threw himself wildly at the first man. The leather satchel was heavy enough to catch the man's head and he fell back, stunned. Now only the knifeman remained as a threat. Richard crouched, pulling the satchel close to his chest and stomach, and readied the chisel like a medieval knight going into battle. The man jabbed. Richard sidestepped. The knife plunged into the leather satchel and for a brief moment held the blade long enough for Richard to swipe down with the chisel. It caught the man's neck. He dropped like a stone.

Drenched with sweat and heaving for breath, he leant back against the wall, still clutching the satchel to him as if it were the most precious thing in the world. It had saved his life. He caught movement to one side as the men he thought to be butchers slowed their run towards him. He turned to face them, ready for another attack. The men stopped, showing him their open hands, meaning they were not there to harm him. Their voices tried to calm him. Richard was keyed up and ready for a fight, but the men kept their distance. One of them edged around and checked the stunned man. And then the knifeman.

'*Morto,*' he said. '*Borsarolo.*' And then spat on the dead man's body.

Richard swallowed what moisture there was in his mouth. He had killed a man. After everything he had endured, he had killed a man in the back streets of Venice.

The butchers seemed unconcerned. One of them looked at the blood trickling down Richard's face and then glanced at the satchel.

'Who are you?'

Richard understood the clipped question but stayed alert, his eyes going from one butcher to the other. They had belts with holsters holding knives. If they rushed him, he would be dead in seconds. And yet they had made no aggressive move towards him. There was no need for him to fall back on lingua franca. He replied, mentioning Antonio's forge, hoping that the old man's reputation might help.

The man then said something too rapid for Richard to follow, but the man had pointed to the satchel and he heard Antonio's name mentioned. The man who had spoken pulled free a broad-bladed knife. Richard backed away. The other two men laughed.

The butcher tapped a knuckle against the blade. It gave a sweet-sounding vibration. He smiled. 'Maestro Vieri,' he said.

One of his companions dragged the unconscious attacker out of the narrow street into a doorway. He called to Richard, asking if he was a knife maker.

No, he told them; he was the knife maker's apprentice.

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CHAPTER 42

The Hefty Man who had drawn one of Antonio's blades stripped off his bloodied apron and handed it and his knife belt to one of his friends. It was easy enough to establish where Richard wanted to go and the man offered to guide him, telling his friends he would catch up with them later.

He and Richard made their way back a few yards along the street where the attack had spilled out from the narrow *calle*. Richard still felt the burden of killing the man. It had not been intentional, and that offered some comfort. The scene played over and over in his mind's eye. He realized he was now in a place where violence might jump out of the shadows, and when he asked himself if he would do it again, the voice in his head offered no argument.

He dutifully followed his guide, who spoke constantly, explaining where they were as he pointed out the names of the labyrinthine streets he took Richard through. Most of what the man said Richard understood; other times he shrugged and the butcher grunted. There wasn't much he could do if Antonio's apprentice wasn't yet versed enough in the language to grasp the rapid chatter. He had pointed to his chest: his name was Gasparo. Richard responded, telling him he was Riccardo. That made the man smile and offer his hand. At one point Gasparo stopped, pointed back to the way they had come and said: 'Dorsoduro.' He pointed to his feet and ahead and said: 'San Polo.'

Richard understood they had crossed from one *sestiere* into another. Not that he knew where he was, so it was of little help in trying to keep an image of how the city might be partitioned in his mind's eye. They set off, turning left again, up some steps, down into a small *campo*, and then out

through the other side. Gasparo continued to talk non-stop and Richard gleaned that he was pleased Richard had killed his attacker. His gestures and change of tone stressed his dislike for *borsaroli*; Richard still didn't know what the term meant exactly but given it referred to the thugs who attacked him, the gist was clear. The mostly one-way conversation ended when Gasparo led him to where the Basilica Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari appeared in all its grandeur. The butcher stopped and pointed to the far end of the building where there was wooden scaffolding and workbenches with a stonemason cutting stone.

From what Richard could see the vast basilica seemed perfectly built, but there was obviously remedial work being done. He strode along the building's length and turned to face the front of the church. A mason raised his head from the delicate chiselling work he was doing. Seeing the satchel Richard carried, he smiled and called out to one of the half-dozen masons high on the scaffold who were shaping part of a narrow white column that bracketed the basilica's solid doors.

Gasparo guided him to where an awning was spread along a wall, below which the masons rested, ate and kept their personal items. The slaughterman lifted a hand in greeting and called up: 'Stefan! Antonio's man is here!'

One of the workers was attending to a copper pot simmering over the low coals of a brazier. The slaughterman unwrapped the cloth he carried and offered a pale coil of honeycombed tripe to the stonemason. It solicited calls of approval from the man responsible for cooking and the tripe was quickly cut and put into the simmering pot. From what Richard could understand the slow-cooking meal was for the end of the working day.

Richard saw the same man who had visited the forge and given Vieri his order for chisels clamber down from the scaffolding in front of the church. He strode towards the workbench and the man who had beckoned him, keeping his gaze on Richard. He shook hands with Gasparo, who rattled off an explanation, which Richard thought might be about the attack. Stefan nodded. Gasparo then bade farewell to the masons. He clapped Richard on the shoulder, shook his hand with another bone-crushing grip, and turned back the way he came.

Stefan gestured impatiently for what the satchel held. Richard obliged and took the chisels out, placing the first into his hand and the others onto

the bench where the men's tools were laid out. Stefan pressed a finger against the stab mark in the leather satchel. He glanced quizzically at Richard.

Richard stumbled, trying to remember the word Gasparo had used and without thinking spoke in English. 'I was attacked.' Then he remembered: '*Borsaroli.*'

Stefan said, 'You're the Englishman.'

Richard felt a surge of relief as the mason questioned him in English. 'I am, yes. I was told you're German.'

Stefan examined the chisels, ignoring him. 'Where's the whining turd who usually delivers our tools?'

'Domenico? Busy,' said Richard.

'These are better than usual.' He gave Richard a questioning look.

Richard allowed a brief smile of pride. 'I made them.'

Stefan turned the seventeen-inch chisel in his hand. 'There's blood on here,' he said without concern.

'Yes,' said Richard.

Stefan looked at him. 'You can kill a man using this.'

Richard's expression was noncommittal. 'Yes, you can.'

The older man clearly knew what Richard had done from Gasparo's explanation. He grunted and laid the chisel alongside the others. 'Good for you, boy. Murderous bastards deserve all they get. Have you eaten?'

Stefan whistled and beckoned the men still working on the scaffold.

He cut bread and ham and gave it to Richard. 'You haven't been in Venice long, have you?'

Richard shook his head and ate hungrily.

'Then you're a slave?'

'I am.'

'That means you have skills that whoever owns you needs.'

'I have. I'm Antonio's apprentice. But he doesn't own me. A rich woman bought me. She used to profit from the knives Antonio made.'

The other masons milled around, getting the food and drink. Stefan squatted on a low bench facing him. 'Then you must be a knife maker?'

Richard's mouth was full. He shook his head, took a swig of wine from the flask next to him. 'Not yet.'

‘Everyone in Venice knows Antonio was the master until his hands became claws. And if they have chosen you instead of his donkey-thick grandson, then you have a future.’

‘I would rather it wasn’t here. My sister and I were seized in England with a hundred others when the Barbary pirates raided. Some men went to a place called the Arsenale. They were carpenters and shipwrights. I don’t know about the women. Most of them went into domestic service, I suppose.’

‘Then theirs won’t be a good life. Venetian wives buy women as domestic help to stop their husbands from raping them. Taking another woman into the house buys the wives their own kind of freedom.’

Stefan saw Richard’s bleak look. ‘Your sister? Was she sold as a domestic?’

Richard shook his head. ‘No. She agreed to marry the ship’s captain.’ He looked helplessly at Stefan. ‘In order to save me. I don’t know where she is.’

‘You at least have a chance. Whoever paid for you owns you until they die. You make money for this woman, then you’ll become known. You become known, you get to meet people. Meet people and you might find your sister.’

The mason sitting next to Richard nudged him for the wine jug. Richard wiped his sleeve across his mouth and passed it to him. ‘How is it you speak English?’ he asked Stefan.

‘I was taken twenty years ago by an English corsair when I was on a merchant ship going to work on a cathedral in Spain. He had a house here, and I helped repair it for him. Then he sold me to a Venetian merchant.’

Richard’s chest tightened. Surely it could not have been Challenor raiding all that time ago. He’d have been too young. ‘Was his name Challenor?’ he asked with the faint hope, no matter how unlikely it was, that it could have been him.

‘Never heard of him. Is he the one who took you?’

‘Yes.’

‘So many of these bastards raid. Profits are huge. You smell that?’

Richard turned his face to the slight breeze coming off the nearby *rio*. ‘Smells like shit.’

Stefan took a drink and shook his head. ‘That’s the stench of corruption. Venice takes what others steal and then they make a bigger profit than the thieves who took it in the first place.’

‘*Borsaroli*,’ said Richard.

‘Damned right, boy. Venice needs skilled men all the time. Best is to get on with it. After the first few years, you realize it’s not so bad. You’ll find your own kind to give you comfort. We have plenty of Germans and others here. There’ll be Englishmen scattered around.’

‘Then you never thought of escape?’

‘I’m a free man now. Have been for ten years. Pestilence came through, not as bad as in the past, but it killed enough. Finished off the man who owned me.’ He shrugged. ‘I have work, a place to live, a wife and children. Why leave?’

Richard looked at the heavy doors leading into the basilica. ‘Does the Church give sanctuary?’

‘Are you of the faith?’

‘No.’

‘Me neither. Best to stay away from priests and their churches. Give the black crows half a chance and they’ll peck you to death with their Inquisition.’

Richard fell silent. The other men sat with their backs against the wall as they ate, listening without understanding to the exchange between the two men. The mason Richard had first seen asked Stefan a question. He spoke German. Stefan answered. Richard thought it was about him as he heard Antonio’s name mentioned.

Stefan turned to Richard. ‘If you’re a knife maker, can you make him a knife? A real knife, not like this. It’s only fit for cutting bindings,’ he said as the mason slid his knife from a modest scabbard.

Richard took it from him and examined the short blade. Everyone’s eyes were on him. Stefan looked nonchalant. Richard handed it back, hilt first.

‘Unless you want precious stones and silver or gold inlay, you won’t find a better blade than that. Whoever made it was a master blade maker. You’ve put it to poor use if you only use it for rope cutting. That knife could be sold.’

The mason looked at Stefan, who smiled at Richard.

‘It’s a blade made in northern Germany.’

‘Then why tell me it was of poor quality?’

Stefan nodded at the mason. ‘Marco took it off a man who was sent to work with us, and who after a while… had no further use for it.’ The implication was clear. ‘He was spying for the Doge who had gifted it to him. Church authorities thought we were stealing materials and overcharging for our work. We’re suspicious of strangers. It was a test. To see you were who you said you were. Don’t be insulted.’

‘I’m not. You know I killed a man getting here. You could have turned me in.’

‘Every man here has a secret worth keeping. Now we know yours. You’ll always be welcome here.’

‘Then I’m at a disadvantage, Stefan. I don’t know your secret.’

‘I told you. They sent a man to see if we were thieving and selling materials from these rich bastards.’ He leant forward and offered the wine flask. ‘Riccardo, we are all *borsaroli* in Venice.’

Richard had fallen in with men who knew the twists and turns of Venice life. How to survive. Men who stole from the Church and those who butchered animals without compassion. He felt safe in such men’s company.

Stefan picked a piece of meat from his teeth. ‘Tell me, why would a common thief steal a satchel of chisels? Any fool would see the weight you carried. And why would there be four of them?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘There’s no sense to it. So, you have to ask a simple question. Who would benefit if you were injured or killed?’ said the stonemason.

Richard hesitated as he brought the food to his mouth. He blinked. Rapid thoughts giving only one answer. He stared at Stefan.

Who shrugged. ‘A man’s status gets threatened, he does something about it,’ he said, raising a bottle of wine to his lips. ‘I watched you work. I see the quality in those chisels. Now I know why Antonio has you in his forge. You’re a damned good blacksmith, young Riccardo Sceriffo. You’re the threat.’ He let his words sink in. ‘Domenico is a donkey’s arse. Denounce him. Make something up. Say he molests the kids in the workshop. Put a note into the *bocche di leone*.’ He saw Richard’s lack of understanding. ‘Keep your eyes open when they let you out of the forge. There are letter boxes around the city; they’re shaped like lion’s mouths: *bocche di leone*.’

Stefan’s tone was matter-of-fact. ‘You have a grudge against somebody. A cheat, a corrupt official taking bribes, anyone who causes harm to others, you put a note in there then at least the magistrates will investigate him. It’ll scare him enough to shift the shit from his brains.’

‘I can’t do that, Stefan. I believe he’s not all bad.’

Stefan’s eyebrows raised. ‘Riccardo, he put those men on you. You know that. Write the note.’

Richard stood and slipped the satchel’s strap over his shoulder. ‘No. I’ll deal with this my own way.’

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CHAPTER 43

If a Blacksmith worked with poor quality iron, it required extra work to remove the inherent impurities in the metal. This he did by heating the iron and vigorously hammering it on his anvil.

Richard Sheriff adopted the same technique with Domenico.

Antonio's grandson raised his eyes from his work as Richard's shadow fell across the open doorway. The silhouette strode rapidly towards him; it was too late for him to run. Slack-jawed, eyes wide, he crossed himself. A dead man had returned from the grave. Sparks from the firepit forewarned him of the hell that awaited his soul. How had one man beaten four? He ran for the workshop, but Richard gripped his shoulder painfully and slapped him, sending him sprawling. Jacopo, the bellows boy, abandoned the firepit and ran to where the urchins huddled in the workshop as far away as they could from the sudden outburst of violence. Domenico slithered towards them, spitting blood, desperate to escape.

Richard leant down and grabbed him by the scruff of his neck. Hauling him to his feet, he dragged him back into the forge.

'How many others did you send? Are there more?' he spat, glad that his grasp of the language was strong enough now. 'Do I have to look over my shoulder every day? You want me dead? My body dragged from the lagoon?'

Domenico squirmed. His head shook violently, hands begging. 'No, no, Riccardo. No, I swear. You made me look worthless in my grandfather's eyes. He sees everything in you that I am not. I didn't wish you dead, I swear. I wanted you hurt so that you were of no use here. I wanted you gone from the forge. He favours you.'

Domenico was helpless in Richard's grip. His feet barely kept up as Richard strode towards the firepit. Slamming Domenico against the wall with one hand, Richard grabbed a pair of tongs and pulled a white hot iron from the coals. Richard's fist tightened and strangled Domenico's scream. Shaking violently, he begged forgiveness.

'I'm not in a forgiving mood,' Richard said. 'Face or balls? Which do you want to lose to the white heat? I fancy both. A scar-faced eunuch would make a fine beggar.'

Domenico desperately whispered his tearful penance. Richard cast aside the iron and threw him onto the floor and stood over him.

'I killed one of the men you sent. Two others are crippled. A fourth I left unconscious in the street. You will teach me about the city. Of how and where I can travel in search of my sister. I am not your slave. You are mine.'

Domenico pressed his back against the wall, edging his way upright, his eyes locked on the man who had somehow defeated the four men paid to ambush him. 'Forgive me, Riccardo. Forgive me, I beg you. I'll do whatever you ask. Anything.'

'Get back to work,' Richard called to the workshop urchins. He threw Domenico against the workbench.

He pointed at the youth. 'Finish what you started. I have a knife to make.'

*

When Antonio returned, he saw his grandson's split lip and bruised cheekbone. The lad kept his head down, concentrating on his anvil work. Domenico's sheepish expression needed no explanation. Jacopo averted his gaze and kept the charcoal glowing.

Antonio was no fool. He knew how his grandson had been provoking the young Englishman. It was bound to come to a head sooner or later and if Domenico had been silenced then he must have done something more serious than merely taunting Riccardo. Antonio walked into the workshop where the urchins were busy with their various chores. Two of them were making the scabbard for the blade young Riccardo was making: one shaping and fitting the locket that sat on top of the scabbard, another

polishing the chape at its base. Once Riccardo showed them his design, other nimble-fingered urchins would take care of any inlaid decoration required.

The old man hobbled across to where his apprentice was bent over his workbench, carefully putting the finishing touches to a knife. Antonio looked over his shoulder. Riccardo had already attached the hilt and would soon polish the blade to reveal the contrast between the area that was etched and that which was not. It was a well-made knife, not yet a master knife maker's weapon, but once the young blade maker had completed the filigree on the hilt and the desired pommel, then Antonio knew it would be his first offering to the Nobildonna.

'My grandson must have slipped on an iron bar,' he said.

Richard concentrated on the delicate task at hand. 'Or walked into a door,' he said calmly, with no hint of sarcasm. 'A forge is a dangerous place, *maestro*.'

'Did anyone see what happened?' Antonio said in what sounded like a casual enquiry as he looked down at the filigree.

'I don't know, *maestro*.'

'I suppose everyone was too busy,' Antonio commented, apparently unconcerned.

Richard did not reply. Antonio placed a crooked finger down towards the knife. 'Be careful when you wrap the filigree around the tang. Remember how I explained it? There must be nothing to catch a man's fingers when it's used.'

He placed a hand on his apprentice's shoulder. 'My grandson's an orphan, like many others. Like you, Riccardo,' Antonio said in broken English.

Richard stared up at the old man, who nodded knowingly. 'I learnt your language more slowly than you learn Venetian. I wanted to know what Elias Jordan was saying when he brought foreigners here to see my work.' He nodded at Richard's surprise. 'Yes, English people, they visit Venice. They have money.' The old man sighed and fell into mixing Venetian and English. 'He also knows everything about the slaves he sells. Domenico can never have your skill, and that makes him envious, but perhaps given time you will see he has a kind heart. A man recognizes weakness in another and

he either exploits it, or helps make the lesser soul rise to the challenge his life demands.'

He shuffled back to the forge. Richard glanced at the urchins, who quickly averted their eyes.

'Bring me the scabbard and I will show you what is required,' he said gently, wishing to calm any fear they might now have of him.

*

Antonio returned to his usual chair in the corner of the forge. Jacopo ran to pour wine into his beaker. His master had been gone all day and would require nourishment.

'Your food is waiting for you upstairs,' said the boy.

Antonio nodded.

The boy's mother, Giustina, had prepared his food and delivered it over the years as first one son and then the other took his place at the bellows. Once grown, they went onto other work and a sibling would take his place. The widow had been grateful. Times past, she had shared her bed with Antonio. Now his age had stolen that pleasure and left little need for communication between them. At least he was kind and paid her son for his work and her for her cooking. Beyond that, only the ghost of the past was their shared companion.

Antonio climbed the stairs. Domenico would close up the forge. Food and a soft bed awaited.

Old men need little sleep. Their bodies are no longer taxed by hard labour or carousing nights. They lie awake remembering such things. And that was why tonight, like most nights, Antonio stared into the darkness and recalled the skill he once had as a master blade maker. And lover. He longed for the quickening heartbeat when fire and steel and a man's skill created a thing of beauty, but all he could do now was listen to the repetitive tapping from the workshop below as Riccardo worked late into the night, creating such objects of desire.

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CHAPTER 44

Challenor and Elizabeth travelled by gondola along a narrow *rio*, and then once ashore they were led by two men carrying lanterns through the streets to where a throng of men and women gathered in a well-lit *campiello* as they made their way into a playhouse.

‘How am I to know what’s going on in a play? I’m not fluent enough yet to catch every word,’ said Elizabeth, her uncertainty masking her sense of excitement, never having been to anything more entertaining than visiting jugglers and acrobats in Dartmouth on one of the festival days.

‘It’s a comedy.’

‘About what?’

‘They parody the rich and those who see themselves as superior to the rest of us. You might find it amusing.’

The cooling breeze across the lagoon had made little difference to the heat in the auditorium, and like a flock of doves rising, the fluttering of women’s fans rippled the air.

Challenor had been acknowledged and greeted by a dozen people by the time they settled in their seats. Elizabeth tried not to appear like any of the European visitors who came to the city, two of whom were a couple a row along. They spoke to each other quietly in what she thought was German, pointing at the ornate plasterwork and painted ceiling. Elizabeth’s fan obscured her own inquisitiveness. Glancing this way and that she saw a gallery where a dozen women sat, their faces fully veiled. Their embroidered dresses must have been heavier than blankets, she thought.

The audience chattered but the women in the gallery appeared to remain silent.

‘Who are they?’ she asked Challenor.

‘Courtesans.’

He saw her think the worst.

‘No, they are not common whores; they are permitted in society. Many of them have generous benefactors and most, I would say, are women who appreciate the arts and are versed in a breadth of subjects. And they pay their taxes that keep several Venetian war galleys afloat.’ He placed a hand on her arm. ‘Venice is a Janus mask. Harsh one way, forgiving the other. Especially where money is concerned. And afterwards I have arranged a private party. There you will see wealth, envy and downright rude inquisitiveness. You, my dear Beth, are their curiosity.’

She was saved from answering by the appearance on stage of a Harlequin with a black eye mask, who gave an exaggerated bow and was then quickly followed by a well-dressed man with a shaped beard, who was clearly meant to be a Venetian merchant. He immediately started lecturing the audience as the Harlequin made fun of him behind his back. As the audience laughed the merchant spun this way and that trying to see what the Harlequin was doing. More characters appeared: a beggar, a doctor and a young couple who appeared to be innocents.

The audience were as entranced as Elizabeth but she caught a barely noticeable movement in the gallery. One of the veiled courtesans was not watching the stage. She was looking at Elizabeth and Challenor.

*

After the performance, as they waited for their gondola, Challenor was pulled into a conversation by two merchants, who made their apologies to Elizabeth. She demurred respectfully and pressed her back against a pillar. A strong scent of jasmine wafted close by. She turned to see the veiled courtesan standing next to her, as an older wealthy-looking man beckoned the woman to him as his gondola arrived.

The courtesan never looked at Elizabeth as she spoke softly. ‘Go carefully, Signora. Captain Challenor is not liked by everyone.’

And then she was gone in a rustle of silk to be settled into the older man’s gondola just a moment before Challenor rejoined her and made another apology. Elizabeth decided not to mention the woman. It had been a

brief, friendly warning. It could be nothing more than a woman who knew Challenor; someone who held a grudge – or not. Her reason for the warning was unimportant. It had been given and Elizabeth decided to bear it in mind – privately.

*

The gathering in the grand house of Grimani di San Luca after the play was a splendid occasion. Elizabeth felt momentarily overwhelmed by the enormous, ornate entrance, and after ascending the great staircase and entering the vast, crowded room, she and Challenor faltered. The doorway was packed with a throng of guests shuffling their way inside. How many of Challenor's friends were in the room? Fifty? More than that, surely? Closer to a hundred. No, even more. Liveried manservants held long candlelighters aloft to put a flame to the last of the candles needing to be lit in the multicoloured glass chandeliers. The room glittered, light dancing on mirrors and glassware and across walls painted as outdoor meadows and trees. Elizabeth's dress of layered silk, embellished with pearls, was modest by comparison with other men's wives, whose finery was laden with shimmering jewellery, silk dresses puffing them out like billowing sails. Leather-soled shoes scuffed along marble floors as the women took delicate steps, reminding Elizabeth of puffed-up swans scratching their way across ice. And the men were as lavishly dressed as the women. Silk stockings, gold- and silver-buckled shoes, precious rings, ornate jewellery. Satin, silk and velvet vied for prominence.

The room was a kaleidoscope of extravagance. Weaving their way through the crowded room, twinkling glasses of wine floated as if on an invisible current as liveried dwarf servants held the trays above their heads.

It was ridiculous.

Elizabeth pressed a palm across her mouth to stop the shriek of laughter that threatened to escape.

'Beth? Are you all right?' said Challenor.

Elizabeth recovered quickly enough to lie. 'You'll forgive me. It is… not what I expected. Remember, John, I worked in a Devon merchant's house. Matters there were… dowdy by comparison.'

‘There are sumptuary laws here like elsewhere but when it comes to a party, then the Venetians are inclined to ignore such rulings. How differently we live here,’ he said. ‘Some of the wealthiest and most influential people in Venice are gathered here to meet you.’ He smiled. ‘Word spread. They’re as curious as cats.’

‘And will they all be at our wedding? Will it be as extravagant as the Sposalizio del Mare? I hope the Doge will be there in his big shiny boat.’ She smiled.

‘All right, you can tease me as much as you like. I deserve no less. I know these people are no more than peacocks who need to preen and fan their tail feathers. No, our ceremony will be a quiet and private affair. A handful of guests only.’ He smiled as she pouted. ‘Enough, Beth. These people are of use to me. They benefit hugely from my endeavours.’

‘Then they are slave owners,’ she said.

‘Every one of them. They all make a profit from me.’

‘Then they are not the friends you share your time with.’

‘They are here as well. The genuine friends I have are not patricians or wealthy merchants. You will have enough clamour around us for our wedding, I promise you.’

‘And is the woman who bought my brother among these people?’

‘No.’

‘Nor the black man, Elias Jordan.’

‘Of course not. A *maggiordomo*’s status does not warrant his presence.’

‘And what of a courtesan?’ she asked, thinking of the veiled woman who had stood briefly by her side.

‘No, they have their own salons. Such kept women would not be welcome when men have their wives in attendance.’

‘Then surely my status is no higher than theirs?’

‘I am your status, Elizabeth. No one would dare question your presence here.’

‘Then am I the same as every woman in this room and dependent on a man’s goodwill in order to live my life?’

Challenor kept his annoyance well hidden. The teasing had become more pointed.

‘You bring up this old argument again? Here? When I know everyone in this room is pleased to know that I am to marry?’

‘Why would they be pleased? If you marry and settle in Venice as you intend, then they will lose the benefit of your piracy.’

‘There are more ways to make money and trade goods than having to raid and kill.’

She smiled sweetly at him. ‘But you do it with such proficiency, John.’

Challenor had no choice but to swallow the barbed comment. Elizabeth had stepped into the fray and introduced herself to those nearest.

‘Good evening, I am Elisabetta Sceriffo, soon to be the pirate’s wife,’ she said in Venetian.

Their stunned expressions quickly gave way to laughter, as they believed her introduction to be a witty jest. She was quickly absorbed into the throng. Eyes behind fans assessed her. Heads dipped from introductions. A miasma of perfume clung to the air. Men’s lips caressed her extended hand. Her mind spun with names: Corsini, Gallieri, Bibbiona, Minnerbetti. Congratulations on her betrothment eventually petered out as Challenor eased her towards the table of food where guests chose delicacies and nibbled on them. Plates, knives and goblets, more silver and gold. She studied the goblet in her hand. ‘Is everything gold and silver? Does anyone eat off a simple plate or drink from a plain glass?’

‘No one here,’ he said, letting his eyes cover the room. ‘Those two noblemen over there, standing next to the door. They’re the Masters of the Mint. One for the gold, the other for the silver. We take money seriously.’

Musicians played on the far side of the room as Challenor guided Elizabeth towards tall windows where cool air seeped into the room from the Grand Canal. She picked at a few morsels of food that Challenor had insisted she try. They faced the crowd, some of whom glanced their way.

‘Not everyone’s smile is genuine, John. It’s obvious some see me as a common woman. Which I am,’ she said, unperturbed.

‘They try to make themselves less common by flaunting their wealth. You have no need to do so,’ he said with unmistakable pride. ‘And once we are married, then their doors will begin to open even wider. They will want to draw you into their world.’

‘And why would they wish to do so?’

‘Because Venice is a city of secrets and they want to discover mine. They will believe that you know more than you do; they will get close to you and try to extract information from you for their husbands. And I will

tell you how to feed them. Crumbs of bread become nuggets of gold. Information is a commodity. Marriage is a commercial enterprise for them. Dowries are given; investments are made. Ships are commissioned and cargo sold at a profit. I have been a provider of good fortune for many of these merchants. As well as those of the patriciate, who in turn see these people as necessary investors. Money flows upwards.'

Elizabeth knew she was to be enslaved as much by the wealth around her as by Challenor's obsession with her. If this was the world she had to contend with, then it was a necessary evil to be endured. To be drawn in might prove beneficial to her. If women gossiped and were used by their husbands, then she too could learn that game and draw from wives what their husbands let slip: that which they would prefer to be kept unknown. Knowledge would be more valuable to Elizabeth than any glittering diamond brooch.

Challenor offered his arm. 'Let's dance. Tonight will be the last you will see of me for a while and I want to spend every moment I can with you until I leave.'

She stared at him. 'You're leaving?'

The *Falcon* had been provisioned. The crew were rounded up, a new bosun's mate found, repairs made, and the charts laid for John Challenor's latest raid. 'I'll be back before our wedding in August. There's a saint's day I must be here for.'

'You've taken to religion?' she said with an obvious edge of sarcasm.

'It's a day when the merchants get together and deals are struck. Contracts are signed. It's the end of the summer trading season. You'll enjoy it. The Venetians revere their saints. They'll have a parade with his relic and then they celebrate. There's plenty of food and music. Saint Bartholomew is good for business.' He glanced at the crowded room. 'Their greed needs feeding.'

Elizabeth took his arm. The thought of being alone in the house for a few weeks lightened her step and her mood. His absence would give her time to explore and better her chances of seeking out her brother. As they pressed into the crowd, that moment of hope was dashed. Her heart raced as he squeezed her arm. 'And when I return, it will soon be time for us to be married.'

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CHAPTER 45

Challenor's Energy, his constant coming and going, boots clattering up the stone staircase, doors slamming, his calls for Elizabeth, were missing, leaving the house silent except for Bettina's *uccello*-like chirping. And it was the girl's gossip that gave Elizabeth the opportunity to slip away from the house without being shadowed by Lazaro.

On her way to speak to Isabella about the design of her wedding dress she heard the normally placid seamstress raise her voice. She crept closer to Isabella's workroom in time to hear Isabella warn the girl to lower her voice in case Leonora or their mistress heard them. The heated confrontation was quickly lowered in tone to an urgent whisper in which Isabella confronted Bettina, warning her that if she spread such lies about her, then the laundry girl's own affairs would be made known. If it was a whispering war she wanted, then Isabella would make sure that the housekeeper and Mistress Elizabeth would hear of it.

The girl's response was a sharp intake of breath. Her voice tinged with hurt, she protested her innocence before retreating, explaining that she was merely trying to protect the dressmaker. That the time Isabella spent with Lazaro when the master was absent attending to business might soon be noticed by others.

A sharp slap and the girl's stunned cry was followed by a hissed threat from Isabella that any attempt at blackmail would be punished. Silence was followed by urgent footsteps. By the time the girl left the room, Elizabeth was already on the floor below.

*

For the next few days, Elizabeth watched the two men guarding the house. Lazaro and Rocco alternated their time. She soon understood their routine and by watching when Lazaro went off duty and when Isabella was not at work, Elizabeth worked out when she could venture into the city unaccompanied by a watchdog.

Elizabeth decided it was time to test Naira's loyalty.

'We cannot go without an escort,' the girl insisted.

'And why not? You know the streets around here as well as anyone. You would not place me in danger. I must see more, Naira. I have been here for months and I barely know the surrounding streets.'

The servant shook her head. 'If I am discovered helping you, I will be cast out. What becomes of me then?'

'No one will ever know.'

'That is a promise you cannot keep, mistress. Eyes watch everywhere. No, I cannot. Forgive me. Anything but that.'

'Then I will go alone without you and if anything should befall me, Captain Challenor will ask why you did not follow me.'

Elizabeth knew it to be a cruel trick. She eased its harshness by placing a hand on the girl's shoulder. 'It is simple, Naira. You will distract Rocco, and I will slip through the gate. Then you will catch me up. Around the corner. In the next *campo* where the church is.'

The girl's reticence remained unpersuaded. 'A hundred *calli*, dead-end passageways, a wrong turn and you are lost.'

'Not if you are with me.' Elizabeth paused to strengthen her appeal. 'Naira, I am to be married when Captain Challenor returns. How long must I remain a prisoner?' A breath. Then a whisper: 'Help me.'

The girl's eyes welled. Elizabeth wiped her tear away, resting her palm on the girl's face. 'And I would never allow you to be blamed for my actions. Never.'

Naira sniffed, wiped a sleeve across her nose, and nodded. 'What about Lazaro?'

'He'll be busy elsewhere.'

*

It was a simple distraction. Naira approached Rocco who leant against the wall outside the house so that he might have a clear line of sight up and down the *calle*, particularly towards the Grand Canal where boats passed and some turned for the *rio* behind the house. With his back towards the gate as she engaged him, Elizabeth, wearing a hooded cape, slipped out and reached the corner. Her quickening pace took her a few yards to the low humpback bridge over the *rio*. Turning down a narrow gap between houses, she emerged into a small square. The *campiello* boasted only a few people walking towards the Canal. Cutting diagonally across the square, she headed for the confines of a gloomy passageway. Her heels clattered, echoing in the narrow confines. She felt sure that at the end was the turning that would take her to the small church. With disbelief, she reached out her hand against the wall that faced her. It was a dead end.

Uncertainty gripped her. She turned back and saw an even narrower passage, hesitated and then plunged along its length. The sky was almost obscured by the roofs. Her cloak brushed the crumbling brickwork and the uneven surface underfoot caused her to stumble. Suddenly, as she turned a corner, she emerged into a broader thoroughfare. It was empty. Settling her breathing, she calmed her thudding heart, closed her eyes and listened for any sound that might guide her. Silence. She looked left and right. A scrape of boots behind her. She whirled and saw a shadow pass across the mouth of the *calle* where she'd come from. She chastised herself for her foolishness, for not agreeing to meet Naira closer to the house, but she had been fearful of Rocco being suspicious and following Naira and catching them. But now the fear was that of being hopelessly lost and vulnerable, and the courtesan's warning, forgotten since that night, stoked her anxiety. Instinct took her left. An arched portico with an ageing nameplate, cracked and half-fallen, added to her frustration. And still no sign of anyone. But there were echoes. Soft footfalls. And then gone. She listened. She heard water lapping, its sound carrying along the tunnels of streets. She followed the sound. A turn revealed a narrow path alongside an oozing, slimy waterway. Where was the glistening sea and overarching sky she had seen on her arrival? Where had the opulent houses gone? These blank, windowless walls were little more than tunnels through caves. Some malevolent monster that lurked in these backwaters had seized and hidden the splendour of Venice. Its humid miasma filled her nostrils.

A rat scurried along the embankment. Pressing herself back, she lifted her skirts to let it pass and then kicked it hard into the murky water that was little more than a sewer. Every *rio* led somewhere, she decided. City or sea: she would be grateful for either. She had turned away from the Grand Canal when she had left the house, but the twists and turns she had made had disorientated her. She stayed in the same direction she was facing. The waterway joined another at a junction blocked with bobbing detritus trapped by the swell beneath a low, tarred-wooden footbridge. She ignored the crossing and kept to the narrow embankment. In the distance, a bell tower reached into the sliver of sky above the surrounding buildings' silhouettes. She increased her pace; the waterway ended against a high wall and turned at a right angle away from her, but she stayed on the footpath, ignoring the opportunity to cross another bridge leading into what looked like a gloomier place. The twisting route no longer pressed panic into her chest.

The church bell rang. Beckoning. Guiding her. She hurried towards it.

The shadow followed.

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CHAPTER 46

Arippling Wave of human voices swelled along the broadening *calle*. Stall holders crammed into the street shouted for her custom. Ignoring them, she emerged into a vast square teeming with people. She realized she must have taken many a wrong turn from the house, a route that had brought her at least in a half-circle, looping through the back streets. The bell tower had been her beacon, and she tried to set its location in her mind for the future. Arcades on either side of the Piazza – for that was what the sign told her: Piazza San Marco – bustled with shops. Jugglers and acrobats performed in the square; strolling musicians played different instruments, a discord of conflicting tunes. Food and fruit sellers had no shortage of customers as they plied their wares under awnings and large canvas umbrellas. Window shades flapped over some of the open windows on the buildings, bracketing the square, startling one of the two horses being ridden by men dressed in silk brocade coats and high boots. The rider expertly brought his mount under control. Every sense of what was happening in the square fell away as she gazed at the glistening edifice that seemed to fill the end of the Piazza. Voluptuous domes and sturdy arches, glistening mosaics and ornate carvings enthralled her. Statues of winged lions gazed down from the top of columns, contemptuous at being the constant object of human attention. A shrieking seagull swooped and snatched a morsel of food. It took her eye to the water beyond the square. Barges passed left and right, and ships not unlike the *Falcon* put to sea, their sails billowing in the lagoon's breeze. She thought of the man she was to marry. Standing in what she thought must be the beating heart of Venice, she felt the sudden crush of sadness.

She was a lost soul far from home and those she knew from Dartmouth were dead or enslaved, scattered from their homeland.

Would there ever be a way home one day with her brother? Irritated with herself, she dismissed the thought. It wouldn't do to let the despair overwhelm her. Life was still bearable, better than that of the overladen donkey being thrashed by the man hauling wood across the square. For now, she needed to find the place that Challenor declared to be her home. She turned towards the sea. If she could follow the Grand Canal, then she might find the way back to the house. As she approached the water and turned upstream, there were fewer people in sight. Quickening her step, she saw a gondola glide into the canal from a side channel of water ahead of her. She sensed there would be no access if she carried on and turned back towards the square. On the corner of the square, where the arcade ended, she noticed a man dressed in ordinary clothes – black frock coat, dark hose and hat – watching her. She was uncertain whether it was obvious she was lost and her haste had drawn his attention. Whatever the reason, she felt a tinge of anxiety. Avoiding the route along the arcade, she kept in the open, heading west across the square, glancing back every once in a while to see if she was being followed. It was impossible to tell as people crossed in and out of the square into the arcade, small knots of people faltering as others held up the flow of human traffic while they stood at a shop window. Being lost had shaken her confidence. She needed somewhere to stop and watch the crowds before finding her way home. A church at the far end of the square offered the best chance of sanctuary.

Someone grabbed her arm. She whirled, pulling back.

'Naira!' The young girl's harrowed look needed no explanation. 'I'm sorry, Naira. I got so lost. How did you find me?'

'I don't know. I went to where we were supposed to meet and then thought of which *calli* you might have gone down. I hoped that you might have followed one of the *rii* that came close to here.'

'I did. Thank you for finding me.' She glanced past the girl's shoulder. 'There was a man watching me. A common man dressed in black.'

'Where?'

'At the corner by the canal. I thought I might have been able to follow it home.'

The girl shook her head. ‘There’s no route past it unless you took a gondola.’

‘And ask the boatman to take me where? We live on an unnamed *campiello*. I am as trapped there as I would be in a prison.’

Naira took her arm, keen to move her out of the busy square. ‘Mistress, never say such things about prisons here. They are places of death.’ She turned her mistress away from the building on the lagoon next to the Doge’s palace.

‘Naira?’ she protested.

Naira shook her head. ‘It’s bad luck to even look at those walls.’

‘What?’

‘That building is a prison. There are cells, the *pozzi*, the wells. They are notorious. It would be better to die suddenly than be put there.’

Elizabeth saw her servant’s distress. Superstition, she had learnt, was rife in Venice. ‘All right, Naira,’ she said, comforting her fear.

Naira smiled, grateful her mistress believed her. ‘I will do as you have asked me and show you the way to and from the house. There is no name on the *campiello* because it is lost in time. I think that is why Captain Challenor bought the house there.’

The girl’s words made sense. Challenor chose to be hidden. An unnamed enclave was as safe a haven as he could hope for. No matter what he had told her, a man who seized cargo, who raided and killed, would have enemies. And being with him had taken her a step closer to that threat of danger. Even if she had to go through with the marriage, she vowed to herself she would never relinquish the hope of being reunited with Richard even if it meant staying in Venice. She admitted to herself that the city was having an effect on her feelings. Perhaps it was the light and the water. The bustling extravagance. She was beginning to think that she might carve a life for herself here. To be mistress of a house and ensure those who served her continued to be well treated. Challenor had kept his word and done nothing more than try and draw her affections towards him. Perhaps it was working. She banished the thought that beyond the lagoon lay home. At what point would her life here destroy any thought of England? It didn’t matter. She had to find Richard. No matter how long it took.

‘Naira, we must stop and see if I am being followed.’

The girl looked nervously past Elizabeth. She nodded and increased her pace, weaving through the scattered pockets of people coming into the square. The San Geminiano Church faced the basilica on the far side of the square. They pressed into the church's entrance and looked out towards the colonnade.

'Can you see the man?' asked Naira.

Elizabeth looked back the way they had walked. She couldn't see anyone moving quickly against the incoming crowds. She shook her head. They waited a moment longer and then Naira took her hand and pulled her back into the square, turning right to lead her through a portico away from the square and along a broad *calle*, past another church with a glimpse of the canal to one side. And then over a step-free bridge, its planked wood surface allowing a man with a laden donkey to cross with the least effort. She focused. Every church was a landmark, every bridge a route taking her across another waterway into an as yet unknown area. Another turn, narrower, bustling, more commonly dressed people bartering on smaller stalls. As they crossed another bridge, she saw a peasant woman below, standing at the rear of her boat, pushing its vegetable-laden load through the water. A gaggle of people stopped and called down to her, asking where she was unloading. She called back, pointing further down the *rio*. As Naira faltered, edging her way through the stalled crowd, Elizabeth's eye followed the woman on the barge. Other boats were approaching from behind her. A lone oarsman stood guiding his barge around the bend towards the bridge. He stooped, his feet planted, one foot positioned a little behind the other, his shoulders working the oar as it balanced on the *fórcola*, deftly manoeuvring its length in what was to her eye a raised wooden oarlock. For a moment, as Naira reached back to take her arm, she watched idly. Venetians oared forward so they could see where they were going through the narrow waterways. It had never occurred to her before. The boatman raised his face to see where the vegetable seller was going to moor.

A rush of joy made her pull free from Naira's grasp. She leant against the wooden balustrade.

'Martin!'

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CHAPTER 47

Elizabeth Saw Her fellow captive's shocked expression as he craned his neck to see who had called his name. And then she realized his furtive look around him was one of uncertainty. He caught her eye. Shook his head and made a quick gesture to further along the *rio*.

She grabbed Naira's arm. 'He wants us to go down there.'

Naira seemed as concerned at the boatman. People had stopped and stared when she had shouted. She wasted no time in hurrying Elizabeth across the bridge and along the street and then turned down a very narrow gap between the buildings. The back of these houses had no doorways, so it was unlikely anyone else would need to be there. Elizabeth followed her, nervous at having brought attention to herself. Glancing back from where they'd come, she was relieved to see no one stared after or followed them.

Naira stopped, held out her hand. There was another turn, equally narrow, but now pungent with the dank smell of the *rio*. Naira's route had brought them back onto the narrow waterway. At the end of the passage, three steps lapped with water as Martin brought his boat alongside. He glanced behind him and then, satisfied there were no boats following, stepped into the gap.

Naira held back. 'Mistress, go. I'll stay here and watch no one comes.'

Martin faced her. 'My God, Elizabeth.'

She embraced him, ignoring the smell of his stale sweat, happier than she had been for months. 'Martin, it's a miracle.'

He grinned. 'It is that.' He looked at her. 'You're unharmed, praise God.' He was still nervous. 'I can't stay here long. I've work to do, but we must talk.'

‘Yes. Where is my brother? Do you know?’

He shook his head. ‘We were taken with the others to a market. I know it now to be at the Rialto. That’s where I last saw him. I have asked after him with the blacksmiths in San Marco, but no one knows anything. There’s another forge across the Canal in Dorsoduro. I went across. I found John Cuddy.’

‘The sawyer? In a forge?’

‘No. In a workshop. I took a wrong turn. The man he works for has his tools made at the Vieri forge – the one I was searching for. But Richard wasn’t there. I don’t know what’s happened to him. I’m sorry.’

Another hope had been dashed. She put on a brave face. ‘I’ll never stop searching for him.’

‘Of course not.’ He squeezed her hands. ‘Where are you living?’

‘With Challenor.’

‘You’re free to travel alone in the city with just a servant girl?’

‘He’s away. He took the *Falcon* south. I got past his guards. I have another eight, perhaps nine days before he returns and then… we are to be married.’

‘You’re going through with it?’

‘Is there a choice?’

He looked past her to where Naira stood at the corner, keeping watch. ‘Can you trust her?’

‘Yes.’

‘All right. We must find a place to meet. How close is Challenor’s house?’

She was uncertain, unable to picture where she was in the labyrinth. ‘I don’t know,’ she said helplessly. She turned. ‘Naira, are we far from the house?’

The girl shook her head. ‘Fifteen minutes.’

Elizabeth enfolded Martin’s hands. ‘There’s a *rio* at the back of the house.’

He shook his head. ‘Too risky. You are finely dressed and I am nothing more than a common *barcaiolo*. It would be improper for us to be seen together in public.’

‘Then I shall wear servant’s clothes and find a place where we’ll be less noticed.’

‘No, if we were noticed in daylight, you might be thought of as a whore touting for business. And their presence isn’t tolerated anywhere near here.’ He thought quickly. ‘Call her.’

Elizabeth beckoned Naira. The girl stood nervously in front of Martin. ‘The next *rio* up the Canal has only one way in and out. It’s where I tie up for the night. I sleep aboard. I get my food and then bed down. Do you know where I mean?’ he asked Naira.

She nodded.

‘Can you get out before dark?’

The girl looked at Elizabeth. ‘We’ll try,’ Elizabeth said.

‘All right.’ He tugged the ragged scarf he wore around his neck. ‘I’ll have this tied on the back of my barge if there’s anyone else moored close to me. If you come through Campo San Maurizio my boat will be the first one. I’m not allowed to be any closer to the Canal entrance. There’s no path along the *rio.* Find the bridge. There’s a narrow passage no wider than this one. There are steps down. I’ll watch out for you.’

He gave them a questioning look. They nodded.

‘Wear the plainest clothes you can, and a cloak. The lagoon still chills the night air.’

Elizabeth pressed his grimy hands to her lips. Tears welled. ‘I embrace you, Martin.’

‘And I you.’ He turned on his heel and clambered aboard his barge.

*

Despite Naira’s determined pace back to Challenor’s house, Elizabeth looked at every landmark she could identify. Street names, the shape of a building, wheel marks in the dirt that showed her route was used by carts. She was determined to use her freedom wisely. By the time they reached the narrow bridge across the waterway at the back of the house, she was perspiring from the effort and sense of fear and exhilaration. They pressed their backs against the wall as Naira peered around the corner to see if Rocco was at the gate.

He and Lazaro were fifty yards beyond the house along the path towards the Grand Canal where Challenor had first brought her ashore. Naira

nodded and turned the corner, ushering Elizabeth through the gate. It creaked. The men turned. Elizabeth was out of sight just inside the entrance.

‘Naira?’ Rocco called. ‘Where are you going?’ They turned back towards her.

Elizabeth held her breath. She mustn’t be discovered now. She thought quickly. ‘Tell them I sent you to fetch Lazaro.’ Then she ran across the yard into the house.

*

By the time Lazaro had reached the house and climbed the stairs, Elizabeth had shed her cloak and primped her dress and hair. There was a polite knock on the door. She settled her breathing.

‘Come.’

Lazaro entered, hands clasped, gripping his cap. His youthful frame hunched, head down. ‘Mistress Elizabeth?’

‘Where is Isabella?’ she asked, staring directly at him.

The direct question caught him flatfooted. It sounded more than a straightforward enquiry. There was a tone in her voice that ignited alarm into his chest. If he and Isabella were discovered as being lovers, their employment in Challenor’s house would end. He knew he was not quick-witted enough to talk his way out of it. ‘I… I… She is likely to be upstairs… sewing, mistress. I… haven’t seen her today.’ He kept his eyes averted.

Elizabeth felt a tinge of pity for him. A simple man in love with a beautiful woman. She was going to use what she knew against them both. She looked past him to where Naira stood. ‘Naira, go and find Isabella.’

She let Lazaro stand and suffer. He shifted his weight, a pained expression on his face. Elizabeth ignored him. How to meet Martin without Challenor’s men stopping her had been a challenge, but now she knew how to achieve it while maintaining the secrecy. It took only a few minutes for the clatter of shoes to be heard descending from the attic room where Isabella worked. Seeing Lazaro standing forlornly in front of her mistress, she could barely hide the same sense of panic she knew he must be feeling.

Elizabeth glanced at them and then addressed Naira. ‘That will be all. Close the door.’

The door’s sullen thud must have felt like a prison cell shutting on them, Elizabeth thought as she played the role of the mistress of the house. Stern-faced, hard-gazed.

‘I want the truth. Understand?’

They looked at each other and then nodded, not yet knowing what truth had to be admitted.

‘Are you lovers?’

To confess that they were meant immediate dismissal. Those were Challenor’s rules. There would be no room for negotiation and it would be hard to find work together in another house once it was known why they were homeless. They would have nowhere to go. And Elizabeth knew this. She waited. Lazaro was inarticulate, that was obvious. His skills did not extend beyond being a watchman and bodyguard. It was Isabella who reached out and grasped his hand to ensure he did not try to spill half-truths and lies. If the mistress was asking the question then she already knew the answer. Better to brazen it out and hope for a reprieve.

‘We have been in love for two years. Captain Challenor’s absence brought us together. We had thought our feelings for each other to be discreet. Mistress Elizabeth, forgive us. We had planned to throw ourselves on the captain’s mercy once you and he were married and ask that Lazaro and I might also be wed and continue to stay and work here. We are good servants.’

Lazaro’s honour had been dented by having the woman he loved speak on his behalf. ‘I am the one who must take the blame. I pursued her for many months before she agreed to even speak with me alone.’

Elizabeth let them remain uncomfortable in front of her for a while longer. ‘And who else in the house knows? Leonora? Rocco? Maria? Caterina? The child is the only one who wouldn’t be able to speak of it. Bettina? Naira? Do you think an affair confined in these walls would not go unnoticed? Do they know? Do you suspect they know? If they do, then they are as complicit in the deceit. Captain Challenor will purge the house of his servants.’

Isabella pressed the palm of her hand against her lips. The repercussions of their relationship were now exposed and everyone would suffer.

Elizabeth sighed, suggesting she was torn in her decision making. ‘A complete household swept clean because you were careless.’

The two lovers clasped hands, awaiting their fate.

‘I would not wish to see that happen,’ said Elizabeth.

Isabella wiped her palm across the tears on her cheek.

‘You will be more than discreet from now on, and when Captain Challenor returns… then… then I will make a case for your marriage,’ she said, remaining stern-faced. ‘And do not mention this conversation to anyone in the house. Understood? This is now a private matter between the three of us and you would shame me should you confide in anyone else.’

The look of relief and gratitude on the young lovers’ faces eased the guilt Elizabeth felt for putting them through the ordeal. She would also use whatever leverage she might have on Challenor to grant them their wish.

She nodded. ‘Go back to your duties, Lazaro. Isabella, wait here.’

A quick glance between them and Lazaro bowed to Elizabeth and left. Isabella waited.

Elizabeth knew she had to secure the girl’s involvement in her own subterfuge.

‘I am mistress of the house, but I am not permitted the freedom I need to explore the city to which I now belong.’

Elizabeth walked to the window, paused in thought and then stepped closer to the uncertain-looking girl. ‘I am not afraid to walk the streets and I have Naira as my servant who knows her way as well as anyone. I trust Naira. Can I trust you?’

‘With anything,’ said Isabella, only too pleased to be considered trustworthy and to show her gratitude.

Now Elizabeth had everything she needed to meet Martin. Lazaro would turn a blind eye when needed and Isabella would help her disguise herself.

‘Bring me Lazaro’s spare clothes. Make them fit me. I go as a man.’

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CHAPTER 48

Had Elizabeth Continued on her route further along the lagoon's edge she would have witnessed one of the long slim boats berth at the basin's quayside and, as the *traghettatore* steadied his boat, she might have noticed an old man clamber ashore and make his way towards the Piazza. It was a journey Antonio Vieri had thought he would never make again to share the joy of an exquisitely made knife since he had lost the use of his hands as a master blacksmith and blade maker. And, like most days when he allowed his memories to comfort him, today was no different.

In the early years, when he was establishing his reputation, the neighbourhood around his forge was the place of glassblowers. One day a furnace overheated and it was only the quick reaction of the adjoining workshops that stopped a devastating fire from ripping through the roof's timbers. The fire would have swept through the *sestiere* Dorsoduro, fanned by the onshore wind from the lagoon. The authorities removed the workshops and sent the glassmakers with their furnaces and glass-blowing secrets to the island of Murano far enough away from the city. Two of the glassblowers had refused and left Venice for the mainland beyond the Republic. It was a foolish mistake. The unique skills and secrets of their trade were jealously guarded, and the state sent their assassins after them. Antonio wished the smith who had absconded from his forge had gone beyond the Republic's borders and then he too would have suffered a similar fate, but now it didn't matter. There was no one who could better his apprentice's work.

Back then, at the time when the glassblowers went to Murano, the ambitious knife maker Vieri had seized his opportunity. He'd gathered

individual craftsmen from the various guilds, goldsmiths and silversmiths and engravers, bringing them into the abandoned workshops. Every one of these artisans contributed to the unique decoration of Antonio's knives and so began his rise to fame. And then, twenty-nine years ago, disaster had struck. There had been outbreaks of the plague since then, but nothing like the pestilence which arrived that year, threatening the destruction of Venice more completely than its rising waters. It was the wealth and greed of the patriciate that saved the city and the Nobildonna was quick to capitalize on the death of her husband. Wealth created wealth. Slaves were bought and sold, workshops financed, high interest rates demanded, percentage of profit taken. Antonio Vieri had survived and made money for his so-called benefactor. Yet what had been important to him was creating beauty and the desire for it, and he had achieved that beyond the day-to-day business of working with iron and steel.

Antonio walked briskly across the Piazza towards a short tunnel in the arcade on the far side. He was old, but he possessed the impatient energy of a man who had found the answer to a long-held prayer that would now be his salvation. The good Lord and the Nobildonna Chiara di Zorzi had sent him a young man of rare skill, an apprentice who would soon outdo Antonio's own reputation as a master knife maker. It brought no sense of loss but a rejuvenation of his spirit, his forge and the Vieri name. The longer he had spent with Riccardo, the more he had learnt of his early days at a forge in England. The boy had been well taught by his master blacksmith in England. Making decorative bridle bosses with copper alloy had given him the ability to work with small and intricate decoration. Scrolling and fluting and forging leaf designs for gates and ornate windows had further enhanced his ability to bend iron to his will. And after barely a few weeks in Antonio's forge, he had been ready to be taught the embossing of metal surfaces with areas of bluing and silvering to add a lavish appearance to his already imaginative designs for his blades.

For the past months the knife maker's apprentice had absorbed Antonio's tutoring like an artist's paint soaks into canvas. It was as if everything was second nature to him and what Riccardo saw in his mind's eye translated quickly through his hands. Antonio had shared his expertise in using amalgam to gild a blade. It required specific skills and took time and patience mixing alloy of mercury with gold or silver. One part gold to

eight parts mercury ground together in a mortar and pestle created a paste. Slowly heating the mixture and stirring with iron wire until the gold or silver was melted and then cooled in cold water made it ready to be poured into a chamois bag and the excess mercury squeezed out. When Antonio had shown his apprentice how immaculately clean a steel surface had to be before applying it, Riccardo spent hours removing every blemish. The old man knew there would never be a time when his grandson could be that meticulous. Perhaps, Antonio thought as he edged along the narrow street, one hand firmly gripping the knife wrapped inside his cloak against thieving pickpockets, the pain he had endured from aching limbs going on bended knee in the Frari had been repaid. He had raised his slow-witted grandson, wishing that there had been in Domenico's blood the same lust for beauty that possessed him. It was not to be. But then the Englishman had arrived.

He had watched Riccardo like a hawk. Monitored every step. Guided every moment of finesse. The Englishman had learnt quickly and without complaint, despite the long hours required for him to achieve the finest of weapons. Once the lad had quickened the blade with a coating of mercury and the amalgam applied, then the blade was heated again to drive off the mercury, leaving the gold bonded. All that was left was for the blade to be burnished.

Antonio crossed the narrow bridge over the *rio*. Another few minutes and he would address his fellow metalworkers and guild members in the Calle dei Fabbri. There was business to be done. Knife making had returned to the Vieri workshop and that meant some of the day-to-day work had to be relinquished. He would share out some of his ironwork commissions to the other guild members and they would make more money while his own forge continued with existing clients. There was enough to go around. Distributing his work in this way would allow Riccardo to concentrate full time on knife making. The boy could not remain an apprentice for much longer. The mentorship of Antonio Vieri would leave a mark in the history of Venice, not just as a master knife maker but also as the teacher of another. Antonio's status would be recognized and recorded as surely as his own mark was punched onto his blades.

Beneath his cloak he carried one of Riccardo's ornate daggers to place before the guild officers. The Arte dei Fabbri would not allow just anyone

to become a member of the fraternity. The knife he would show them, with its seven-inch heat-blued blade, gold-edged, with curved guard intricately woven with further gold thread and a lion's head pommel counter-balancing the blade, glaring open-mouthed above the ivory grip, would leave no one in doubt that the Vieri forge housed a skilled and talented blacksmith who would in a very short time enhance the guild's reputation.

Antonio smiled to himself. This knife he carried was a statement of a God-given gift, the result of which would soon be desired by the wealthy noblemen of Venice and beyond. Only the devil himself could now stop Antonio's own reputation from being boosted further, and he was busy elsewhere in the city's brothels and casinos.

Damn the devil to hell. God was with Antonio.

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CHAPTER 49

After Richard had been attacked and had returned to the forge unscathed, the threat made against Domenico had yielded a map, simple lines on paper showing the way through the *calli* that led from the forge. Richard's journey to the Frari and the stonemasons had given him a route into the San Polo *sestiere*; beyond that, the crude sketch offered a way north-west to *sestiere* San Croce. The biggest challenge would be to one day get across the Grand Canal that lay to the east. Every time he ventured out and reached the waterway the rooftops opposite suggested an even more bewildering complexity of narrow streets and huddled buildings. Slipping away at dusk, he would follow the map Domenico had drawn, but the Canal was a barrier he could not yet cross unless he found his way to the Rialto and over the only bridge across the Grand Canal. It was too distant for him to reach in the time he had available. He could only work his way along as far as his time away from the forge permitted. The day would come when he would find the means to pay for a *traghetto* that berthed closer to the forge and then he would cross to the other side.

For now, he satisfied himself with expanding his search on his side of the Canal and familiarizing himself with the surrounding area. The dark passageways often reeked of cooking and rang with the sound of muted voices, but as the night settled, a heavy silence descended, broken only by the lapping of water. When moonlight shone the fingers of water on the narrow *rii* led him this way and that. Other than his own gentle footfall, the only movement was from rats.

Richard's knife-making skills had brought him a step closer to receiving better treatment. Antonio had taken him through the workshop where he

slept on a mattress on the floor and unlocked a connecting door to another room. There was a bed, a wooden table and a bowl and a water jug for washing. A candle squatted in its spilt wax in a holder. Next to it was a tinderbox to light the wick. The door to the outside path next to the *rio* was not barred. The key remained on the inside of the lock. Antonio cast an eye over it.

'You need a decent place to sleep, Riccardo. You work half the night as it is.' He glanced at the door. 'What you do the rest of it is your business.'

Richard realized the old man knew exactly what he did when he crept out to explore. He was being rewarded because of his ability and hard work, and, he reasoned, because he had not tried to escape, as useless as he knew such an attempt would be. Still, now Antonio had offered him his trust.

'Thank you, *maestro*.'

The old man had glanced once more around the room, nodded with satisfaction that everything he had instructed to be done had been completed, and left Richard to fetch his meagre possessions.

*

As the knives he made took form and the designs became more intricate, he could ask for any embellishment he needed. Antonio would consider his request and send for the semi-precious stones he'd requested to decorate a hilt, the ivory for an inlay, the gold and silver threads to be pressed into the etched steel. And as he worked at pace and his confidence grew alongside his skill, his grievance at the resentful youth who had tried to have him killed eased. Better that Domenico be less of an enemy who might turn against him again.

'When your ironwork is finished for the day, I can show you things. With the knives,' Richard offered. 'If you watch and learn, then perhaps one day your grandfather will let you work alongside me.'

Domenico looked uncertainly at the Englishman and for a moment was tempted by the thought of learning such intricate skills. By the hope of being more than he was. But then his smile faded. Reality was a cold taskmaster. He shook his head.

'Riccardo, I cannot. I know what I am. What I can do. I bend metal, I forge boat hooks, hinges and window guards. I cut out dinner knives from

my grandfather's patterns. I don't have what you have. I know I was wrong to try and have you harmed. I was jealous. That's all. My life is what it is. Yours will soon be very different. That is your reward for having God's gift…'

Domenico paused, reticent. As if he wanted to say more.

'I have already learnt from you, Riccardo. I've watched you over the months on the anvil.' He shrugged. 'How was I to know you wouldn't continue to beat me?'

Richard suspected a guilty secret was about to be confessed. 'What have you done?'

Another shrug. Domenico's tongue nervously wet his lips. 'You won't strike me?'

More than anything in that moment, Richard wanted to shake the truth from him. 'I will not. You have my word.'

Domenico nodded and found his courage. 'Weeks ago, a man came and asked if there was a young English blacksmith here. Said he'd asked everywhere. Those in the Calle dei Fabbri knew nothing, but said my grandfather's place was the only other forge where you might be. You were with Antonio in one of the workshops when he came.'

'And you told him I wasn't here.'

'I did.'

Richard knew it would not have been Challenor asking about him. One of the other captives perhaps, but not likely. There was only one man. And if there was a prayer to be said to bring him back together with his old friend he would have said it. 'Tell me about him.'

'A *barcaiolo*. He brought his barge across from San Marco. He spoke my language but not that well. I think he was another Englishman.'

'Did he leave a name?'

Domenico shook his head. 'Is he your friend?'

'If it's the man I think it is, yes.'

'Then I will find him for you. I'll speak to the boatmen I know. I promise you I'll find him and bring you together. If I do that will you forgive me?' Domenico looked imploringly at Richard.

Richard stepped closer. The blacksmith flinched. Richard extended his hand. 'Find him and there is nothing to forgive.'

The youth grinned. ‘Riccardo. There is more to tell you. Close to the time when the *barcaiolo* came to the forge, I was to deliver some hinges to the workshop of one of my grandfather’s customers. A *remèr.*’ He paused uncertain if Richard understood. ‘He makes oars for the boatmen, and *fórcole*.’ He made a shape with his bent arm. ‘*Fórcole.*’ He mimed a boatman’s stance as he rowed, but Richard had no time for theatrics.

‘Tell me what you know. What’s so important?’

Domenico smiled. ‘I came across another Englishman.’

*

Richard followed the eager Domenico along the *rio* that led to the waterfront facing the island where the domed church of the Holy Redeemer glistened in the sunlight after the recent rain. Single-masted ships were docked along the length of the quayside. Men unloaded salt into one of the warehouses.

‘He’s here?’ said Richard.

‘No, further on.’ He pointed to where the sky met the lagoon in the distance.

‘What’s his name?’ he asked as they strode on.

The youth shrugged. ‘I didn’t ask. Why would I? I’m only telling you now because things have changed between us.’

Richard pushed aside his irritation. He didn’t intend to jeopardize his chance for any information now. He had promised to forgive the youth, and he would.

Half an hour later Domenico turned along the Ca’ Bala, a path alongside a *rio*. He became more animated the closer they got to wherever he was taking Richard. He stopped. Raised his palms to caution Richard.

‘It’s here.’ He pointed along the path.

Richard looked past him. A rack with long gondola oars took up space on the path.

‘I must speak to the owner. He’s not a man who likes to have people visit. He doesn’t like talking. He makes the oars and rowlocks for gondolas and barges. It’s the wood he talks to.’ He grinned and then shrugged. ‘He whispers to the wood as he shapes it.’

‘Then beckon me when I can join you.’

Richard waited as Domenico stepped into the workshop. It didn't take long before he came out and raised a hand. The entrance to the workshop was narrow; the interior broadened to a much larger space than the door suggested. On two walls were racks of finely shaped oars. Inside was a grey-haired man wearing an apron, with a linen cap keeping unruly hair under control and slivers of wood shavings clinging to his bearded chin. He was bent over an angled piece of wood like a misshapen hip bone, using a slender blade so thin it could peel the finest of layers away. Richard recognized the carving as one of the distinctive rowlocks used on gondolas and barges. Exactly what Domenico had tried to mime.

The craftsman didn't raise his eyes. 'Two minutes,' he said.

Richard looked into the back of the workshop. A man came forward. As soon as he stepped closer Richard saw who it was.

'John!'

John Cuddy, the sawyer from Dartmouth, gasped with surprise and threw his arms open, embracing Richard. The two men moved away from the entrance.

'Another lost soul found,' said Cuddy. The older man's eyes glistened. 'I am overcome. I never thought I would ever see yet another of my countrymen again.'

'Another?'

'Did Martin not find you?'

Richard looked stricken.

'He came here weeks ago. He's a bargeman. Someone told him about Vieri's forge. He came looking for you. He came down the wrong *rio.* I sent him on. He didn't find you?'

'No.' Richard glanced at Domenico, who averted his gaze.

'He said he would keep looking for you. I pray you find each other. You were good companions.'

Richard felt his loss keenly, but finding one of the other captives was a blessing. 'And you, John. You're well treated?'

'I cut the wood. I'm sufficiently skilled to keep those who purchased me content. I make nothing requiring any skill. My life is simple.' He nodded towards the workshop. 'He's a fine craftsman. I'm fortunate, as far as fortune goes. And you? A blacksmith still?'

'And more. A knife maker.'

‘Then you’ll make a name for yourself.’

‘That is the hope.’

‘But you haven’t come across any of the others who were taken?’

‘No.’

Cuddy searched Richard’s face. ‘And Elizabeth?’

Richard shook his head.

‘Do not lose heart,’ he said gently. ‘We are all held in the same place. Martin found me by good fortune and now we have found each other. One day, Richard, you’ll find her. Martin is across in San Marco.’ He paused to think. ‘He moors his barge in a *rio*.’ Cuddy tried to remember more but failed. ‘My old head cannot take in all these places. I’m a simple man who is content to cut wood. I can’t remember but he said there was only one way in and out of the *rio*.’

A voice called from inside the workshop.

‘I am comforted to have seen you again, Richard.’

‘And I you, John.’

With a last grasp of Richard’s hand, John Cuddy wished God’s blessings on the young knife maker and returned to his work. The fleeting moment connecting Richard to his sister had passed, but the tenuous link might still hold if he could find Martin.

‘Domenico. Find my bargeman.’

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CHAPTER 50

Across the Grand Canal, less than a mile from where Richard stood, an elderly priest waited patiently in his parish church. Information was going to be bartered. And what would be gleaned from the informer would find its way to the woman who owned the knife maker's apprentice. The priest, Don Marco Barozzi, had been born into a failing noble family whose fortunes had crumbled into irrelevance. He was the last of a dwindling line – too minor to marry well, too poor to carve out a career in trade, and too unremarkable for military service. The Barozzi name, once respected though never in the upper echelon of Venice's nobility, seemed destined to fade into obscurity. But the young man's quick mind and careful manner caught the attention of the patriarch of the di Zorzi, a family that had risen through generations of careful alliances and patient ambition. They saw potential in young Marco and, more importantly, in his desperate need for patronage. They guided his education and eased him into the priesthood, where he quickly proved his worth – not as a theologian but as an observer, a confidant and, when necessary, a broker of secrets. They sponsored his education, first with private tutors, then at the University of Padua where he studied canon law. The investment was calculated. A priest from a noble family, however minor, could move freely through all levels of Venetian society. More importantly, he would owe everything to his benefactors.

His first appointment as a parish priest coincided with an outbreak of the plague, where he proved his worth by maintaining careful records of the dead and, more importantly, of survivors' inheritances. By the time he became parish priest at the Church of the Archangel Michael in Campo Sant'Anzolo, he had already learnt that confessionals were not merely

places of penance, but reservoirs of information. He became indispensable to his patrons, feeding them knowledge gleaned from whispered admissions of sin, from dying men unburdening their guilt, and from those who mistook the cloth for innocence. Don Marco was always careful never to break the sacred seal of the confessional by directly attributing any intelligence. Instead, he pieced together fragments from multiple sources that meant he could never be identified as the originator of the information.

Decades passed. He outlived the nobleman who once mentored him, but his loyalty remained to the family. It was to his benefactor's widow, the Nobildonna Chiara di Zorzi, that he now answered, ensuring that she and her business remained protected. He was her invaluable presence in the world of secrets, as much a family retainer as any servant or advisor. His connections stretched across Venice: the clerks who copied government records; the secretaries who heard what the Doge's ministers whispered behind closed doors; and the officers of the shadowy Council of Three, whose condemnations were rarely questioned. The Pope, Rome, and even the wider Catholic Church held no sway over his heart. Venice had long defied the Vatican's meddling, and he shared the Republic's distrust of foreign influence. His loyalty was first to the noble di Zorzi house that had raised him from nothing and then to the Republic. The Church's teaching followed at a discreet distance.

Don Marco sat next to the courtesan. Her fragrant perfume mingled with decades of dried incense. It was peculiar to her, a mixture of rose, musk and ambergris bought from the Jewish merchants who specialized in exotic fragrances. Had Don Marco Barozzi been a blind old priest, he would have known that the woman known as La Ninetta had entered his church and eased into the confessional. He heard the confessions of criminals, noblemen, servants and even government officials, but one of the most reliable sources of information came from the courtesans whose salons entertained senators and merchants. It was time to do business.

He waited as she eased off her cloak. She was a fine-boned woman who still lived up to her chosen name: La Ninetta, suggesting youthful charm, despite being past her fortieth year.

'You have what I asked for, Don Marco?'

He slipped a folded document beneath the grill between them. The courtesan had asked for a false birth certificate so that one of her protégées

could marry into a wealthy merchant's family. Such a marriage would benefit La Ninetta in the future when the grateful girl would pass on information about her husband's family business.

'I secured a new birth certificate for her,' said the priest. 'Now she's the daughter of a respectable merchant who died without issue.'

He heard La Ninetta sigh with relief.

'Wonderful. Bless you, Don Marco.'

'Now, child, what do you have for me?'

The courtesan related information about different guests at her salon. She named a young nobleman who drank too much and bragged about his family, bypassing the customs duty on silk. A corrupt ship's captain selling cargo to a nobleman's house; the heir to a fortune selling secrets of his family's trade to another merchant's house. Over several minutes, there were fragments that Don Marco could use as bargaining chips to garner further information from guilty parties. La Ninetta fell silent. A hesitation, nothing more. Then, deciding she might as well tell the priest, she said, 'It might be nothing, but someone is asking about John Challenor. You know of him?'

'I've heard the name.' He knew who John Challenor was and whom he did business with.

'Well,' she said. 'I saw him at the theatre. He has a house here. His servants are discreet. Well, mostly – the cook can be bought. And now he has a woman. I heard a rumour he was going to marry her.' She didn't immediately mention her warning the woman who accompanied Challenor – it probably wasn't important.

'And what use is this to me?' said the priest.

'I don't know.' She hesitated. 'I used to entertain him. I liked him. And he was generous. But those asking the questions weren't asking for themselves. They're regulars of mine. And not just one of them. Two. On different days. That's unusual, isn't it? Merchants I know asking about a ship's captain living in the city? They don't do business with him. He has his own connections.'

'And what did you tell them?'

'I saw no benefit in telling them anything. As I said, Challenor was always generous when we spent time together.'

He heard the curtain pull back as the courtesan readied to leave.

‘But I felt sorry for the woman. I told her to be careful. She’s not one of us. I mean, she’s not Venetian, so she would have no idea how much ill feeling can quickly arrive at your door. Not everyone likes Challenor.’

He heard La Ninetta’s silk dress rustle as her shoes scuffed the church’s uneven stone floor. She was right, he thought, it might be of no importance. But then again, why the sudden interest in John Challenor? He would make sure Nobildonna di Zorzi learnt of it.

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CHAPTER 51

Five Knives Lay on Richard's bench. Each distinct in its design. They had taken weeks to perfect, but now they were ready to be shown to the Nobildonna. The final blade, seven inches long, double-edged, blued with a silver wired guard, had only been completed that morning. Antonio had taken Richard through the workshop to the gold beater's place of work. A child brushed adhesive over the design on the knife's hilt as her master beat a sheet of the precious metal thinner and thinner between two slabs of marble. When satisfied, the gilder nodded to the child. Her tiny fingers delicately lifted the foil's edge, breathed a whisper of air beneath its butterfly wing surface, then laid it on the hilt. The gilder burnished the gold leaf, rubbing until satisfied he had done justice to it, and then sealed it with a clear varnish.

Antonio stood at his apprentice's side. There was no doubt in his mind the young man's rapid mastering of the art of blade making had been nothing less than extraordinary. A release more rapid than a dragonfly emerging from its chrysalis.

'You will soon be part of our fraternity, Riccardo. It has been agreed by the guild. The day will come soon enough when those who talk about Venetian knife makers will mention only your name, Riccardo Sceriffo, from the Antonio Vieri forge. Our names will be remembered.'

The success that lay before Richard did little to appease his ongoing sense of loss of Elizabeth, but he knew where the credit lay for what he had created. A tolerant and kind master had given him free rein and then guided his hand.

'I serve you, *maestro*.'

Back at his bench, Antonio lifted the first knife with its cross-hatched patterning. His thumb felt the punch mark at the top of the blade beneath the crossguard. The *A* and the *V* embraced in a circle. The forge's reputation was now in good hands. He turned the knife over and placed it on the bench.

'No craftsman takes recognition where it is not due, my boy. Here.'

He offered a slender piece of hardened steel only a few inches long. The punch had one end squared that held the engraved mark. 'Turn the knife over and secure it flat.'

Uncertain why he was being asked to do this, Richard obeyed the old man, who nodded and smiled. 'Just so, just so.' He waited a moment, bent fingers pointing to beneath the guard. 'Strike there.'

Richard steadied the punch, lifted the hammer and struck. Another mark had been added to his work. The downward sweep of the letter *R* balanced the letter *S*. Each of his initials embracing the other.

'Riccardo Sceriffo. I had the punch mark engraved and ready for this day.' There was unmistakable pride in the old knife maker's voice.

Richard's mark on a blade was an honour. He was uncertain what to say. The old man remembered when his own had been struck into metal by his master. He patted Richard's shoulder. 'I know, boy. I know. Now let us wrap these fine knives in good cloth and take them to the Nobildonna.'

*

Beneath the tall windows overlooking the Grand Canal, Antonio hovered near the marble table, where a velvet cloth had been laid out to receive the display of knives. Richard stood at the back of the room, no more than a bystander. Elias Jordan watched the Nobildonna's reaction to what had been presented. Her response would either confirm the Englishman's credibility and skill or imply that his designs might be thought too intricate. He corrected himself. Nothing was too decorative or fanciful for the Venetians. They would gaze intently much like the Nobildonna, who hovered her hand above each knife, perhaps expecting the knife maker's genius to pulse from his work.

Antonio had displayed them carefully. The gold-hilted knife nestled between a dark walnut-handled dagger on one side and an ivory-hilted

dagger on the other. The walnut hilt was secured with two silver bolts, the ivory with narrow black burnished pins. Every knife on the table was different.

She placed a gloved finger on one heavily patterned blade, inlaid with silver and gold threads. The delicate pommel a shaped bull's head that would nestle into the underside of the owner's palm.

'This,' she said, intrigued. 'It's of the Turks. I've seen similar knives.'

'He was in Tunis, Nobildonna. He saw the beauty of what they created.'

'And brought it to us,' she said.

'It has a full tang. Strong, from blade to pommel. All of them.' Antonio hovered a finger over the crosshatching on the blade. 'He heats the steel until it becomes blue and uses a fine brass point, a bodkin to mark it. The gold and silver threads are chased into the marks and—'

She raised a hand. 'I don't care how it is done. Only that it is.'

Admonished, Antonio dipped his head and stepped back.

She continued to let her eyes feast on Richard's designs. Turning to face the three men, she addressed Antonio. 'You will have him devote his time only to the making of knives.'

'I have already done so, Nobildonna. And he is to be inducted into our fraternity.'

'Good. The guild listens to you. His reputation is immediately enhanced. The price of his work already increased. I will approach those buyers who have been neglected by your own absent skills, Antonio. We will do as we did when you created your own masterpieces. Riccardo creates objects of desire and I will share them with interested parties, of whom there are many. The knives' rarity means buyers must wait. They will pay more once their appetite is whetted.'

She looked at Richard. 'If a nobleman or merchant desires a specific design, can you oblige?'

'Of course, Nobildonna, but why would they wish to do so? Every blade I make is unique.'

Elias Jordan and Antonio held their breath. To question the Nobildonna from such a lowly status, even if he was now a master knife maker, was insolent. Richard held his nerve and stared at her. She stepped closer to him.

Her voice was calm as she held his gaze. 'You are arrogant.'

‘Nobildonna, I am humbled, having been taught by Maestro Antonio. But I would not wish to make an inferior knife for a man whose pride and limited vision diminish an object of beauty and desire that I can make.’

Silence.

She looked at the two others who stood, eyes cast down.

‘Are there any other demands you would make?’ she asked.

‘I am here to serve the Nobildonna.’

Elias Jordan suppressed a smile. The Englishman was learning.

‘You are crude and rude and yet you create…’ She swept her hand towards the displayed knives. There was no need to say more. ‘My instinct about you was correct. You have courage.’

She retreated to the knives. ‘I will make the appropriate approaches. Elias?’

‘Nobildonna?’

‘It’s time he was better dressed. New shoes, hose and doublet. Two shirts so that he may always have one clean. There will be buyers who will wish to meet him.’

Jordan nodded.

She turned her back.

Jordan ushered Richard and Antonio from the room.

When the door closed behind them, the Nobildonna lifted the gold-hilted knife and pressed it to her lips.

Men’s desire for such things could be played to her advantage. Favours negotiated. Influence exerted. How soon, she wondered, before she might invite the young knife maker to her bed? The thought caught her unawares. She dismissed it. There were more pressing matters than the distraction of desire. Earlier that day a note had been delivered from her informer. Men were asking about Challenor. And if the supplier of her slaves was being asked after she needed to find out why.

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CHAPTER 52

Elizabeth's Bedchamber was her own private domain. Two shuttered double-arched windows gave her a view of the *rio* below. The lower part of the walls were covered in green silk, the plaster above painted in a lighter hue up to the wood-panelled ceiling. There was a reading table, a stool, a crimson-covered chair, and a richly woven rug adding warmth to the room. The canopied bed was curtained with fine muslin to keep mosquitoes at bay.

Standing in front of the full-length mirror. Elizabeth had bound her breasts with a linen wrapping. Lazaro's clothing cut to her slim frame made her look no different from a young man with a wisp of hair beneath a cap. But she could not escape her anxiety at being discovered dressed as a man, her nervousness heightened by Challenor's expected arrival home any day soon. Time was against her. If only fate had allowed her to find Martin sooner, they might have had time to track down Richard's whereabouts. Martin plied the Grand Canal and the *rii*: he might have found someone who knew where English slaves were being used. She comforted herself that so far, over the past few nights, she had gone unnoticed as she accompanied Naira to where Martin moored his barge. The faithful servant had curled herself into the narrow passage while Elizabeth sat with him beneath the barge's awning to share their experiences since being separated.

'I was put with another man who knew the routes to be taken,' Martin had said. 'One week on and then another on my own. If I got lost, I was beaten. I soon learnt. Now I manage the barge alone.'

'Then you're still enslaved?'

'I'm fed is all. Some wine. A cloak for protection against the weather. My barge is checked for any repairs that might need doing. Whoever

bought me has a dozen or more men transporting goods.'

'And you had no thought of… just carrying on up the Canal until you reached the mainland?'

'No point until I find out more and try and make contacts. The Venetians control the mainland as well. But there's a Dutch captain I spoke to when we unloaded his ship. A decent man who trades honestly.' He shrugged. 'But who needs to make money. If I ever find a way of paying him, I believe he would consider smuggling us aboard and then back to England. He's no corsair. And she's a fast ship.'

'One day perhaps. If my life becomes intolerable, then I will run. I don't know where, but I will, providing Richard is found.'

'A slave doesn't run, Elizabeth, they adapt. We keep our freedom tucked away.' He pressed his hand against his chest.

Despite their months of separation, both realized there was little to talk about. Their lives were circumscribed; they had no contact beyond those they interacted with as part of their daily routine: Elizabeth in the house with her servants and Martin alone on his boat speaking only to those to whom he delivered supplies.

'When you're married, perhaps Challenor will relent and tell you where Richard is. He'll want you to be content, and bringing you together again would offer you comfort.'

She peered out from beneath the canvas awning. The sky was studded with stars as clouds shifted across distant roofs beyond the end of the *rio* where they sat. She sighed. 'Challenor has respected me. He could have forced himself on me at any time. But he has kept me safe. For a violent man, there's an unknown part to him I don't understand. I'm grateful for it. But still… I yearn for my home.'

'One day there might be a way. If not with help from the Dutchman then there are people back home who might raise money to pay a ransom.'

She shook her head. His crumbs of comfort were well intentioned, but she knew the reality. 'Not here. Had we been kept with the Turks, perhaps. No, until I can bear it no longer then I must accept what has happened.'

'Not me,' he said. 'Damned if I will. I'll keep looking for a way out. I'll not have any man keep me as a slave. I'll go back to piracy if it comes to it.'

Martin realized he'd spoken too quickly – without thinking. He'd never confessed his past to anyone but Richard. She had recoiled.

'You served men like Challenor?'

'I beg you don't think the worst of me, Elizabeth. Life takes many a strange turn. An ill wind steers us without us knowing where. I abandoned that life a long time ago.'

Despite her affection for the boatman, she immediately felt a sense of disgust and betrayal that this man had been a party to murder. But then the voice in her head scolded her. Had she not killed the merchant Henning by suffocating him to death in his own bedroom after he molested his daughter? That had been a cold act devoid of emotion. A grim, purposeful killing. Justified, she told herself. Murder, her inner voice answered.

She reached out and took the boatman's hand. 'Martin, we shall all be judged one day. But not today.'

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CHAPTER 53

The Old Shoes were better, Richard thought. These were stiff and rubbed his skin through his stockings. He had complained to Elias Jordan, whose attitude was less harsh towards him now that he had proved his worth to the Nobildonna.

‘You cannot meet men of rank and wealth dressed in cobbled shoes or old clothing. You think they won’t notice? A man with patronage has shoes made by the *calegheri*. A peasant, as you once were, has shoes or clogs repaired by the *zavattieri*. A shoemaker does not associate with a common cobbler. Why do you think there are confraternities here in Venice? They have accepted you into one of the most prestigious. You must learn to conduct yourself in a more fitting manner. I have no interest in you, Riccardo, other than for you not to cause insult by being poorly dressed or by using uncouth language. Silence and knife making remain the key for your future wellbeing.’

The pinched shoes were a small price to pay. Antonio had been instructed to take him across the Grand Canal to meet a nobleman anxious to secure one of his knives. The Nobildonna had allowed only two of them to be offered and Antonio’s presence lent authority to the new knife maker’s presence. Richard looked intently about him on the crossing. When they’d brought him along the Canal after taking him from the *Falcon*, the great houses along its banks had overwhelmed him with a whirlwind of colour and majesty. By contrast, the breadth and length of the water back then had been a source of despair as it swept him and the others to an unknown destination. Now it offered hope that one of the many watermen plying their trade might be Martin.

They did not have to travel far. The gondola berthed in front of a columned house, its wooden jetty stretching further into the Canal than most. That alone indicated wealth and influence. Jordan stepped ashore as Richard extended a helping hand to Antonio.

‘Don’t fuss, Riccardo. It’s my hands that are bent and crippled, not my legs.’

Despite his admonishment, the old man took Richard’s arm and gave his thanks.

‘Wait,’ Jordan told him as they went inside.

The grand house had a marble staircase curling upwards high into a domed ceiling, one side clinging to the wall, the other floating in space. Canvas portraits splashed their colour every few feet. Eyes gazed down at him: painted aristocrats observing who had dared to enter their domain. From where he stood there seemed to be a servant at the base of every column as unmoving as the soaring stone behind them. His neck craned. Sunlight pierced the glass dome. Antonio and Jordan were already halfway up the stairs. A half-landing. More servants. A vast door being opened. And closed.

He shifted his weight. The clothing was tight compared to what he wore at the forge. He would be grateful to return and change so that he could get on with his work. He looked around at the servants. They stared ahead, ignoring him. Using the toe of one shoe, he eased off the heel of the other and gratefully let his stockinged foot feel the soothing cool of the marble floor. Was this the kind of house that his sister now lived in? Was John Challenor so wealthy a pirate that he could afford anything like this? If he was, then perhaps Elizabeth was more fortunate than he thought her to be. Anyone living in such palatial luxury would want for nothing.

Except for freedom, he corrected himself.

And her brother, said the voice in his head.

Another voice beckoned, interrupting his daydreaming. ‘Come!’ It was Jordan, peering down from the half-landing.

His absent shoe forgotten, Richard strode forward and nearly fell on the smooth floor. He bent quickly and replaced his shoe. By the time he reached the top of the stairs, his face was flushed. Jordan gave him a merciless stare.

‘Say nothing unless spoken to. Answer without embellishment. You refer to him as Nobiluomo. Thereafter Signor is acceptable.’

He was ushered into a room that demanded his attention. The ceiling was painted with angels and clouds and rays of heavenly sunlight; the walls were hung with silk and glass lamps twisted and shaped into things of beauty. His neck craned as his eyes searched the images painted on the ceiling, which unfolded into a blur of colour at the far side of the ornate room where their story ended in a smudge of colour between an angel and a cloud.

'Riccardo!' Antonio's fierce whisper snatched his attention back to the men in the room, who sat forty feet away around a table. Well-dressed men, several of them playing cards, drinking from ornate glasses, attended to by servants. Another man stood in a corner looking out of a window down onto the Canal, his back to Richard. He was more elegantly dressed than the other men, although his silk tunic was less ostentatious. A man of dignity. The card players laughed, ignoring the three men who had come to show the most senior among them a knife made by the new *maestro* at the Vieri forge.

Richard whispered to Antonio, who stood patiently waiting a half-step in front of him: 'Which of these men will be buying my knife?'

Antonio muttered an answer. 'The older man standing at the window. The others are young noblemen and merchants. He is a patrician. The Nobildonna always makes a first approach to him. Be quiet, lad.'

The man turned and nodded towards them. Antonio stepped forward. Richard was about to follow when Elias Jordan hissed: 'Not you!'

*

Antonio reached the man. He bowed his head, unwrapped the two knives he carried from their velvet covering, placing them on a slender marble table. The elderly nobleman put his drink down.

'It has been too long, Antonio, since we have had the privilege of seeing such blades from your forge.'

'Fortune, smiles, *vostra eccellenza*.'

The nobleman handled the knives with respect. 'Exquisite, Antonio. I would swear your own hands made them.'

Antonio sighed. 'No, these are better.'

The nobleman quelled his look of surprise. Master craftsmen were not usually so willing to relinquish their own legendary status. ‘Which would you choose?’

Antonio spread his hands. ‘How can a man choose between either? I cannot.’

‘Both are comparable. I agree. Then I consider myself fortunate.’ The nobleman’s attention remained on the two knives and scabbards being offered. ‘Send him to me.’

*

Richard had watched the exchange from a distance. The men’s backs were to him, so his attention wandered to the card-playing merchants around the table. They were obviously guests in this palatial house, but there were two of them who felt familiar. He had never been in merchants’ company before, so why he felt drawn to study these men in particular he didn’t know.

Antonio returned. ‘He wishes to speak to you. It will be in English. He is a cultured and educated man. Treat him with the utmost respect.’

‘What do I say?’

‘As little as possible,’ said Jordan.

Antonio cast a weary glance at the Nobildonna’s man. ‘You answer any questions he asks. You don’t need words, Riccardo, your skill speaks for you.’ He smiled. ‘Go on, lad. You’ll be fine.’

Richard approached the nobleman, stopped three feet short, bowed his head, and then shifted his weight uncomfortably as the older man half turned.

‘Come here.’

He stepped closer, still keeping a respectful distance.

The nobleman hovered a finger across the two knives. ‘These are magnificent examples. I commend you.’

Richard managed a mumbled: ‘Nobiluomo.’

‘Now, explain to me, in detail, how each knife was made.’

For what felt to be a slowing down of time, Richard began his explanation with the first knife, going step by step from the moment the base metal was pulled from the firepit. He then did the same with the

second knife. His concentration remained on the blades in front of him while his memory recounted every step along the way. Francesco Falconi gave him his undivided attention. When Richard was finished his throat was dry. He coughed, licked his lips, and shuffled back a step.

'I am told your name is Riccardo Sceriffo.'

'My lord.'

'You will not need my help to be known in Venice as Maestro Sceriffo, but I will lend my name to your success.' Falconi smiled. 'That is how we all share in your glory. It was how your mentor Maestro Vieri became so well regarded.' He paused, glanced towards Antonio and Elias Jordan. 'Now, young man, the Nobildonna Chiara always offers me first choice of a new knife that has been made. It is a tradition that goes back to when her husband was alive. I gift such precious objects to men whom I deem worthy and who in turn will cherish their intrinsic beauty and craftsmanship. It is through such skills that Venice is renowned across the world. These are men of influence, so I expect considerations in return. Not today, next week or year, but when I need them.' He gazed at Richard. 'Do you now understand the wealth you have created for men like me and others? It goes beyond beauty. It creates gratitude.'

Richard couldn't help but blurt out a response. 'But the beauty of my knives remains unsullied by men being obliged to give favours in return.'

He thought the nobleman's intake of breath must have echoed across the great room. A quick glance backwards showed him that no one seemed to have heard. The nobleman's response had been restrained, unlike his own bad manners.

'Forgive me, my lord,' he stumbled.

'The gift of exquisite beauty conferred on someone who has the refined taste to appreciate it binds such men together. Others will pay whatever it takes simply to show your skills at their belts. Do you see the difference?'

Richard nodded.

'Your knives hold power that can persuade and beguile. And being gifted to these men confers on them a compliment they are eager to return. Nothing is sullied. Especially your workmanship.'

Richard remained silent.

'A great future lies before you. And if you will permit me, I shall make you an offer – only once and, if refused, never to be given again.'

Richard raised his head.

‘I will create another forge in the city and give you control over what you make. You will have apprentices and workers. You will be given a stipend. You will still be enslaved, make no error, but you will be as much your own man as any free man in this city. But I will have complete possession of every knife you make. Will you accept this offer?’

There it was. Every hope Richard had held. That one day his skill would open the door to influential men who desired what he could create. To be honoured in a society that was temperate in giving out such honours. He glanced back at Antonio, who stoically ignored the discomfort standing for so long would be inflicting on him. Elias Jordan’s gaze rested on Richard. Was he trying to communicate something? Richard wondered. He too had said benefits would accrue once his skills became known. But now he was going to find Martin, of that he was certain, and then they would search for Elizabeth.

‘Your grace – my lord – forgive me, I have no understanding of even how to address you properly. You have bestowed a great honour on me. I will forever be grateful for your kind words.’ He took a slow breath. ‘I must refuse. Maestro Vieri shared all his knowledge. I am enslaved, but I am in his debt. What accolades come my way from this day forward must also bear the mark of his forge.’

The nobleman remained silent for a moment. He nodded. ‘You may go,’ he said quietly.

Richard returned to Antonio as Elias Jordan was beckoned forward.

‘What did he say?’ said Antonio under his breath.

‘How pleased he was with the knives. He asked me to tell him how I had made each one.’

The old man grunted. ‘Couldn’t you have given him the short version?’

‘What happens now?’ said Richard.

‘He tells Elias what knife he wants, and that he is happy to pay whatever the Nobildonna asks.’ He tilted his chin up at the young man at his side. ‘Now you start making serious money for her.’

*

Antonio and Richard returned to the forge, where he gratefully rid himself of the new clothes and shoes. By the time he had ordered Jacopo to fire up the coals, Elias Jordan was standing with the Nobildonna.

‘Well?’ she asked.

‘As you requested, my lord Falconi offered the bribe to him. It was an offer I did not think he could refuse.’

‘But he did?’

‘Yes. Your master knife maker is loyal. He can be trusted. He is yours.’

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CHAPTER 54

Antonio had Felt the glow of success warming him. They had repeated the offer of choosing one of two knives the next morning with a visit to a wealthy merchant. He chose the most decorative of them for his son's coming of age. Richard had played his part. Elias Jordan had murmured that the Englishman knew how to impress a buyer. Between them they felt a sense of ownership of the knife maker though neither expressed it. The forge hummed with activity. Even Domenico seemed to have improved. The old man had noticed that he and Richard were on good terms now and that if in doubt his grandson referred to Richard for advice. Word had spread as quickly as the pestilence had done all those years before. Vieri was producing knives again and the waiting list to buy them was growing.

Antonio's days would end with his name living on.

'Domenico,' he called.

The youth stopped twisting the last bend in a curved window guard.

'Grandfather?'

'You're doing well, boy.'

Domenico's face creased with pleasure at the compliment. But he knew his grandfather too well. A compliment might soon become a question about why he was doing something a certain way, a way that he might not have learnt well enough from the old man, or a way that he had seen Riccardo use when he was at the anvil. His feral instincts were alerted.

'Where does he go? At night?'

Domenico shrugged. 'He has your trust, Grandfather. I don't know. Perhaps he's looking for a whore.'

‘And pay her with what? Nothing is missing from the workshop. Anything of value is stored under lock and key. I keep inventory.’

‘Then I don’t know.’

‘All right. Don’t mention that I questioned you.’

Antonio went to the door and looked along the *rio*. Venice, he thought. Everyone had a damned secret. His own had been kept hidden for years thanks to the patrician who had owned Elias Jordan. That ownership and the patrician’s wealth and influence passed to his widow after his death. And Antonio was convinced that she had not been privy to her husband’s dealings. The innermost secrets of the Council of Ten, in which he had served, were buried in the state’s archives. And they were never available for scrutiny. Those who ruled Venice took their secrets to the tomb. Antonio’s secret past had gone with them.

*

The night’s silence embraced the city. Domenico crept into Richard’s sleeping quarters, bearing the stub of a candle that was barely any use in the windowless room. He crouched, letting his eyes become accustomed to the near darkness. At first, he could only tell where Richard lay by the sound of his breathing. He edged towards the sleeping figure and put a hand gently on his shoulder. There was no response. The knife maker was in a deep sleep. He shook harder and Richard’s sudden eruption from the bed nearly knocked him off balance. The spluttering flame wavered.

Richard gasped as he was snatched from his sleep.

Domenico declared himself. ‘Riccardo, I have him.’

‘Who?’

‘The *barcaiolo*. Your boatman.’

Richard rubbed the sleep from his face and pulled on his tunic. ‘You’re sure?’

‘It’s him. Yes.’

‘Where is he now?’

‘On the Rio Ca’ Foscari. He’s under the bridge. He can’t stay long.’

Richard nipped the candle’s wick and eased open the door. There was sufficient moonlight to light their way. He gestured Domenico to go ahead with a push in the back to hurry him. Their pace quickened as they crossed

a narrow footbridge, the route Richard had taken to go to the Basilica Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari when he delivered Stefan's chisels. He cast aside the memory that it was the same route Domenico had sent him to be ambushed. For a moment, he wondered if Antonio's grandson had reverted to his former character and that this was another assassination attempt. He took comfort in the moonlight. If he was walking into a trap, anyone stepping from the shadows would be seen clearly.

They were soon striding across the big square where Richard had traded a button for a drink, and then they were at the bridge. Richard held back before climbing down the few steps to the water's edge.

'See if he's still there,' he told Domenico.

He nodded and eased beneath the bridge. Moments later, Martin followed him into the moonlight. His face beamed in the glow. He raised an arm, beckoning him. Richard laid a hand on Domenico's shoulder.

'Thank you, Domenico. I am in your debt. Stay on the steps and keep watch.'

The young blacksmith smiled with gratitude.

Richard clambered down onto the barge. The two men embraced. The boatman's strength was undiminished by age. 'You have grown, lad. You have strength in your body. And I swear you are taller.'

'Or that you have shrunk from bending into an oar.'

'Aye, likely as not. Come under here.'

He took Richard's hand as would a father leading a child beneath the canvas awning. They squatted on rundlets. 'I searched for you, Richard. I never gave up.' He nodded towards where Domenico waited. 'He was the one who said you weren't at the forge. Bastard. You should kick his arse. God knows why his conscience pricks him now.'

'There was ill feeling between me and him. But we have an understanding now. Once he confessed what had happened, he promised to find you and bring us together.'

'I tie up each night in a *rio* in San Marco. So we must arrange how we are to meet again.'

Richard leant forward and clasped his friend's hands. 'I can't tell you what this means to me. Much has happened.'

'Aye, and with me as well.' He took a breath. 'Good fortune blessed Elizabeth and guided her to me. She has never stopped seeking you out.'

‘Take me to her!’

‘I can’t, Richard. She’s in Challenor’s house and even I don’t know where that is.’

‘What has she told you?’

‘Challenor took his ship raiding. For some days now she’s sneaked out of the house and we meet. It’s been dangerous for her. Don’t ask me how she does it, but she dresses as a young man to avoid any suspicion. A cloaked woman at night would draw attention and by now you will know how dangerous Venice’s whispers are.’

‘Then she’s well? And her instincts for survival still strong.’

‘And her love for you.’

‘When do you next meet?’

‘I don’t know. The *Falcon* is back.’

‘How can you be sure?’

‘Every morning I take my barge to the basin where ships unload their cargo. Those who bought me have a dozen barges transporting goods. I saw the *Falcon* this very afternoon. Challenor is back and I doubt she’ll be getting away from the house. That’s why I came across the Canal with the lad outside. She didn’t show up for our meeting.’

‘But we’re so close, Martin. Hours only separate us. And one stretch of water.’

‘She thought they’d sent you to the mainland. That’s what Challenor told her. Why wouldn’t he? If she knew you to be so close, then she’s the kind of woman who’d have plunged in and swum to you.’

‘She would be with us now if the damned *Falcon* had not come in on today’s tide.’

Martin fell silent. The darkness beneath the bridge caught only shards of moonlight from the water. It wavered on the bridge above their heads. Richard stared off into the distance. Being so tantalizingly close to finding Elizabeth but unable to do so frustrated every thought.

‘There’s more,’ said Martin. ‘You know how rumours spread among the bargemen. Word is she’s to marry Challenor in three days. That’s why he returned when he did.’

‘Christ, no. After all this time?’

‘Aye. She told me how she has lived with him, how he has respected her. She admitted that he has a side to him she finds agreeable.’

‘A murdering bastard like him?’

‘So she said. Three days, Richard, and it will be a legal union. I sensed she had fully accepted her life to come.’

Richard dropped his head into his hands.

Martin reached out to comfort him. ‘It would be dangerous if you were seen, but we’ll meet here and I’ll take you to where they are to be married. We’ll mingle with the crowd, then at least you’ll see her. And when Challenor sails again, we will bring you and Elizabeth together. Never give up hope. All is not lost, my friend. Three days and you will see her again.’

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PART FOUR

THE KNIFE MAKER

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CHAPTER 55

John Challenor had duly arrived back in good time to marry Elizabeth. She was sitting in the *piano nobile* and was startled when the yard gate clanged open and she heard Rocco greet his master. Raised voices and Challenor's shout for Leonora to ready a bath for him. Then the sudden pounding up the stairs, a coat, tunic and hat flung off as he strode into the room. He was wind-burnished, hair and beard salt-encrusted, and she realized he must have berthed the *Falcon* no more than a couple of hours before.

She stood awkwardly as he looked at her without taking another step. 'John… we… we weren't told. I thought Master Jordan would have given us warning.'

'Elias is going through my cargo's manifest.' He reached for her hands, kissed them, then sat and pulled off his sea boots.

She remained silent as his enthusiasm for his raiding spilled into the room. 'We had a fine passage. An assorted cargo. Took two Greek ships. The *Falcon* is at the Arsenale. We'll unload there tomorrow instead of the basin.' He smiled. 'Some things are better not declared. Private buyers are eager to see what's hidden in the hold. Elias will find us a good price.'

She remained standing. 'And human cargo?' she said.

He looked abashed, but shook his head. 'I promised you I would not take captives again.' He unlaced his shirt cuffs, ready to disrobe and pull his shirt over his head.

'John, not here. The servants.'

He smiled. 'All right, I see who's mistress of my house.' He went to the door and bellowed again. 'Leonora!'

The housekeeper was already leading Lazaro up the stairs, carrying a bucket of hot water in each hand.

‘A full bath, if you please. At least waist-deep. Not just to cover my vitals.’ He laughed at his crude reference. ‘Now, Elizabeth. I have tales to tell, but they must wait. A bath, then food, then a time with you before sleep claims me.’

The surge of energy left her standing as if someone had opened a door and a whirlwind had swept across the lagoon. It had been five weeks. She had counted the days. When the month had passed, she had begun to wonder if he intended returning at all. Raiding at sea carried its own dangers. Thoughts had crossed her mind about what would happen to her if he did not return. She had not come up with an answer but Martin had promised her that if such an event happened, then he would find a ship for them both – without, he confessed, knowing how that might be achieved. She in turn had obstinately refused to consider escape without her brother. And now here was Challenor. Alive and well, with a handsome cargo. And keyed up, ready for marriage. Too much, too soon. No matter how often she had tried to prepare herself, the moment was looming too fast.

He spread his hands. ‘Now, before I bathe, do you have the dress?’

‘Yes. Isabella finished it more than a week ago.’

‘Then show me.’

‘Very well.’

She took an oil lamp and led him up to the attic workshop. A wooden mannequin covered with a linen drape stood next to Isabella’s sewing table. She teased the protective cover away.

Challenor took the lamp from her and raised it to see what his bride would be wearing. He stared at a gown of figured silk. The gold satin flared at the hips, the bodice woven in ornamental damask in an intricate red and gold pattern. He said nothing for a moment as he stared at it and then he looked to where she stood, before turning back to the dress.

‘Are you pleased with it?’ he asked, his voice as tender as she had ever heard.

‘It’s beautiful. Yes. She has done well.’

‘Then I shall reward her.’

He extended his hand and led her to the floor below. Lazaro and Leonora went into his bedchamber with more buckets of hot water. He kissed her

hand. ‘At last I am home,’ he said and handed her the lamp.

*

Darkness settled as he lounged in a broad, comfortable chair, his energy subdued from the bath and the wine he was now drinking. She sat politely listening to his adventures, of the seized cargo from the merchant ships, grateful he had not spoken of the blood that would have been spilled. He stretched and yawned. ‘I could sleep for a year.’

‘Then shall we postpone the ceremony?’ she teased.

He placed his glass down. ‘Would you run if I let you?’

She reached out and held his hand. ‘I have committed myself to you, John. I’ll be a good wife.’ She glanced around the room. ‘A gilded cage is still a cage.’

‘But when we are married, we’ll travel. There are sights to behold. Florence and Rome will entrance you. I know they will.’

She sensed a change in Challenor. That he had stepped back from his life as a corsair. And it was because of his feelings for her. She had somehow touched his better nature. She acknowledged to herself that she had less doubt now about her feelings for him. Her affection for him had rekindled. There was still an edge of caution to her emotions but since the celebrations on Ascension Day, when she had felt so carefree, Venice and the man who proclaimed his love for her had come to embrace her fully.

Challenor’s idle demeanour changed to one of instinctive alertness. He had heard something.

It broke her reverie. ‘John?’

He raised a hand to silence her and stepped to the window. A shadow was at the gate. Rocco was striding towards the visitor. Challenor watched. A child’s hand reached through the iron bars.

‘Rocco? What is it?’

The house guard looked up to where he stood. ‘A message, Captain.’

*

The scrawled writing on the note was in Chesney’s hand and had the briefest of demands: *Come now*. With the initial *C*. To Challenor that meant

a summons from his bosun.

Rocco had told the messenger to wait so that he might be paid but when Challenor accompanied his guard to the gate there was no sign of the boy. Why would an urchin not wait for payment? Fear was one answer. But fear of whom? The man he delivered the message to or the *Falcon*'s bosun? Unlikely that Chesney had made some threat to the child.

'I must go to Chesney,' he said.

'I'll get my cloak, Captain,' said his bodyguard.

Challenor hesitated. If Chesney was at his usual place, a room above a tavern that overlooked the *Falcon*'s berth at the Arsenale, then there might be trouble on the ship. His cargo was ready to be unloaded the next day and there were enough thieving bastards ready to come by night on boats to steal whatever they could. The watch aboard would be a mere handful of men while most of the crew would be ashore drunk and whoring.

'No, stay here. You and Lazaro lock the gate. Put extra lanterns in the yard. Stay alert.'

The hefty man had shadowed Challenor for years. He was a loyal and well-paid servant and would normally never question Challenor, but now there was something obvious to be asked. 'A scrawled note. The boy runs. Captain, that's an invitation to a trap, don't you think?'

'I trust Chesney, but I'll tread cautiously. You look after the house. No need to alarm anyone. I'll be back in a few hours.'

Rocco nodded and turned on his heel to fetch Lazaro from his quarters.

Challenor took the stairs two at a time. Elizabeth sat reading a book. She looked up as he came into the room, noticing his exertion from the rapid climb. 'Was the message urgent?' she asked, watching anxiously as he gathered his cloak and hat, then tucked a knife into his belt.

'No, it's Chesney,' he said calmly. 'There'll be a problem with the *Falcon*. Perhaps we have to change our anchorage or some such thing and most of the men will be ashore. I'll be as quick as I can.' He smiled, bent down, touched her hair and kissed her forehead. 'Officials here can prove difficult. Don't delay supper. I'll eat when I return.'

Elizabeth reached for his arm, surprising herself as much as Challenor. 'Take care, John.' She smiled self-consciously. 'I'll have Maria keep your food warm.'

Her tenderness momentarily eased his concern about Chesney's note. He smiled. Damned if she hadn't always touched his heart, hardened after so many brutal years. Held him fast.

'Only a few more days,' he said, and left the room.

She closed the book on her lap. Her wedding dress already made, the guest list drawn up, the celebration after the ceremony in one of the grand houses organized by one of Challenor's friends. This was what her life had come to. Those few more days – two to be precise, once the new dawn arrived – would bring marriage vows and her sharing his bed. Yes, she told herself. She was ready. Her sense of unease at Challenor's departure made her go to the window. She saw Rocco lock the gate as Challenor turned down the passageway to find a boatman.

There were usually only two dull lanterns glowing by the gate; now she saw Lazaro place two more in each corner of the courtyard. She went into the room that overlooked the side of the house, which allowed her to look across the *rio* towards the Canal and down into the *calli* whose entrances were enveloped in darkness. Pulling aside the muslin blind that kept mosquitoes at bay, she pushed open the shutters and stood unmoving, letting her senses absorb the city's sounds. It was not the first time she had done this. It was an exercise to try and familiarize herself. A sound, a bell ring, a voice that carried: all would give her a sense of direction. But, like most nights when she had done this from the privacy of her bedchamber, nothing caught her attention. It was as if life had deserted the city. Stillness. The black lagoon bled veins of darkness into the smaller canals. Only the gentle lap of water broke the silence. Whispers reached her, nothing more than a shifting breeze funnelling beneath a low bridge.

A movement caught her eye across the bridge. A white alley cat out hunting. Its senses warned, it stopped and glanced up at her. And was then gone as swiftly as it had appeared. Disappearing as quickly as the friends she'd known and the brother she loved.

Challenor had not lied. This was a city of ghosts.

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CHAPTER 56

It Took Less than a half-hour for the two oarsmen to take Challenor along the Grand Canal and then up the Rio dell'Arsenale. They would wait for his return with the promise of further payment. Chesney's lodgings were another ten minutes' walk in daylight, but the darkness slowed Challenor's pace through the pitch-black streets. A glimmer of light drew his attention. A curved shrine in a wall bearing a statue of the Madonna of Mercy gazed down at him, the pity in her eyes lit by the stub of a flickering candle succumbing to its own melting wax. It was only as he emerged into an open area he saw the distant glow in the sky beyond the buildings. Stumbling and cursing, he increased his pace until he was close to the tavern. Voices were raised. Men scurried along the quayside. Others were already on the water, their barges heading for the burning ship. The *Falcon* was ablaze. Some boats were already fussing around his ship, throwing tow lines to drag her free of the harbour's confines and away from other moored vessels.

Challenor fought his way through the crowds, searching for his bosun. With no sign of him, he thought Chesney might already be in one of the boats trying to pull the *Falcon* away or had gone aboard to do what he could. Challenor jumped into one of the barges pushing free from the quayside. More than anything else he wanted to get onto his ship and steer her clear. The remaining cargo might yet be saved if he could turn her into the tide and get a breeze astern. The flames might satisfy their hunger with his sails and masts. Then he would call for volunteers with hooked poles to pull free the burning canvas and timbers. And if he could get closer to one of the floating docks, then there would be hand pumps available. The nearer he got to the *Falcon*, however, he knew his ambition to save her was close

to defeat. The boats did not have the power to free her from her anchor. There was no sign of anyone on deck.

‘Get me aboard!’ he ordered the oarsmen. ‘Ready those irons,’ he told the half-dozen men with roped grappling irons. ‘She’s held fast!’

The experienced boatmen knew what to do. They pushed hard, ploughing through the water, then slowed the oars to bring their barge alongside.

‘Now!’ Challenor told one man, who hurled the length of rope high. Its hooks caught halfway up the ship’s side on the lip of a gun port. It was enough for Challenor to clamber aboard. The moment he had clawed his way up, looking for a foothold, the barge pulled away. Challenor felt the heat beating down on him. The gun-port hatch was loose. He got his hand behind it and heaved and then threw his shoulder beneath it. He fell into the gun deck. Smoke clung to the deck above his head, rippling as it sought the night air. Smoke swirled about his legs too. Had the flames reached all the lower decks? If they hadn’t they soon would and that’s where he had barrels of lamp oil stored. There was nothing to do but to free the *Falcon* from its anchor. There was some comfort in knowing the powder store had been emptied and stored ashore, and for once he was grateful for Venetian bureaucracy insisting all armed vessels empty their magazines.

Challenor grabbed one of the water buckets next to a cannon and tipped it over himself, drenching his cloak. He pulled it over his head and fought his way through smoke and heat to the main deck. There was no sign of his night watch. He saw blood on the deck and knew that five of his men would be lying at the bottom of the lagoon. He yelled Chesney’s name in case he was aboard, but there was no reply. There was no one living or dead on the decks.

Tattered and flapping, the furled sails succumbed to the flames racing up the masts. The burnt halyards gave way; the main yard crashed down. The flames had not yet reached the foresail, which someone must have tried to set when the killing started; it luffed and then the offshore breeze found it. The *Falcon* lumbered forward, and that gave it a slim chance of reaching open water. As he made his way forward, Challenor realized the fire must have been started deliberately. The flames had taken hold everywhere. He reached the windlass, grabbed an axe from the forward tool chest and swung it against the anchor line. After several blows, the anchor ran free.

He felt the *Falcon* surge. They were close to the broad expanse of the lagoon. The ship had passed the Arsenale tower. A quarter of a mile beyond was the Isola la Certosa. If the wind and tide didn't take her the *Falcon* would run aground on its mudflats. Then there was a chance it might be salvaged. If she didn't sink first. He leant over the bulwark. A barge was close in. He heard a dull *crump* deep in the ship's bowels. The oil barrels were exploding and they would seep into the plank's caulking and rip through the hull. He shimmied down one of the holding ropes into the barge.

'Clear away!' he bellowed, waving his arms wide to alert the other boats.

One by one the lines were cut and the boats drifted clear. Sailors and boatmen watched the fire-stricken ship wallow. Its timbers creaked. Sparks flew into the night sky. Oarsmen pushed hard for the shore. Challenor saw some of his crew in other boats. So they were not lying drunk in a whore's arms, he realized. The scum of the earth had tried to save their ship. As the wind and tide pushed the *Falcon* into the lagoon, small explosions, their sound dulled beneath the waterline, ripped through the boat just above her keel. She listed. And like a wounded beast fell on her side. Steam hissed as fire met water. The lagoon was too shallow to take the ship down to any depth.

Challenor watched as the last of the flames consumed her. The life he knew aboard her was already gone. She was breaking up. All that was left was wreckage.

He saw his master gunner, Willoughby, in another barge. He raised his arm. The gunner had the oarsmen turn to where Challenor was coming alongside the quay. The two boats nudged.

'That were deliberate, Captain,' said Willoughby.

'Aye, I can see that.'

'I only found a few of the lads, but she were already ablaze. And she's down now. She'll not rise.'

'Where is Mr Chesney? It was he who summoned me.'

'I've not seen him, Captain. There was no sign of him on the water and he couldn't have been on the *Falcon* – we'd have spotted him.'

Challenor extended his arm and pulled his gunner ashore. 'We had no plans to sail for a couple of months. Spread the word to the lads: they'll still

be paid and we'll have another ship, you see if we don't. There are plenty of merchants who'll invest in another vessel for us. They need what we bring them. I'm off to find Mr Chesney. We live to fight another day, eh, Willoughby?' he said with forced cheerfulness.

He left his master gunner at the quayside and made his way to the tavern where Chesney lived when ashore. The tavern's landlord stood with others in the doorway; some stood on stools and benches trying to see across the Arsenale's far wall to the lagoon where Challenor's ship lay in her death throes. The landlord called out when he saw him.

'Your friends left a couple of hours ago, Captain Challenor. Your man was drunk. They carried him off. Said they'd see you later.'

Challenor's stomach squirmed. Friends? Chesney was a man who preferred his own company and Challenor hadn't ever mentioned him to any of his own acquaintances. He ran for the stairs and pushed open Chesney's door. He stopped, not wanting to go any further. The back of an empty chair faced him. Blood ran down the legs and pooled on the floor next to four severed fingers.

Challenor's legs weighed heavily as he approached the chair. A quill, ink pot and torn shards of paper lay in front of him. The man had resisted scribbling the note until the pain became unbearable. Once his torturers had what they wanted, they had cut his throat – the amount of blood bore witness to that. His body would be at the bottom of the harbour.

The note. The burning ship. Chesney's torture. An enemy inflicting maximum damage. And striking fear. It was all a trap to get him out of the house. To buy time. The killers were already there.

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CHAPTER 57

The House was silent. The room where Elizabeth sat was cooled by the open shutters, the muslin still tucked against the window frame. She had gone back to her book after Challenor's departure, but her mind was only half focused on it, so she turned to needlework, hoping the concentration needed might distract her thoughts. Challenor had been absent for hours, which suggested the call from his bosun was more urgent than he had suggested. Either that, she thought, or he was gambling late in a casino with his shipmate. Unlikely, she told herself. Neither man was likely to be on social terms. No, it was something else.

It was usual for the cook and the mute girl, Caterina, to bring the evening meal upstairs from the kitchen, each bearing a tray, the small child carrying the lighter of the two. The table had been set earlier and, rather than risk spoiling Maria's efforts in the kitchen, Elizabeth had sent Naira down to tell the cook to serve her dinner as planned and to keep Challenor's heated.

This night the mute girl had carried the large tray carefully, tongue between her lips as she concentrated on going up the stairs. The door to the room was open. She hesitated, waiting to be summoned by the mistress of the house. Elizabeth saw her and set aside her linen and needle.

'Caterina, child, come in.' She went to take the overladen tray from the willowy girl. Without thinking that the girl could not answer, she asked, 'Why has Maria sent up the captain's meal as well? And why isn't she helping you?'

The anxious child shook her head. Elizabeth carried the tray to the table and began unloading it. Her hand hovered as she was about to put down a

plate – an unusual sound had reached her. The grinding of a key in an old lock. The heft of a door being opened. A heavy door. She stopped and listened. Then she went past the girl and stood at the doorway. Now she could hear Rocco talking to someone. The voices were muffled. He was telling someone on the other side of the gate that Challenor was not at home. She turned for the window, leant out and saw Rocco beneath the lantern's glow, talking to a man whose face was obscured by the darkness on the other side of the iron gate.

The man quietly persisted in his questioning, holding Rocco's attention. Then a sound somewhere near the kitchen made Rocco turn. The man reached through the bars, grabbed his neck and plunged a knife into him. Elizabeth recoiled. A shadow emerged from below, seized the key for the gate from Rocco's body, and let the other man in. Together, they dragged Rocco's body out of sight. A woman's voice cried out and then fell silent.

Heart pounding, her throat closing in fear, Elizabeth ran for the door, slammed it closed and dragged a heavy chair in front of it. Caterina's wide eyes stared at her. Elizabeth grabbed her hand and pulled her further into the room. She got her fingers into the hidden panel and pressed the trembling girl inside.

'Listen to me. Whatever happens, *whatever*, you stay here. Don't move. Understand?'

The girl nodded furiously.

'There are violent men in the house. They will cause harm. You'll be safe here.' She turned. Heavy footfalls were coming up the stairs. 'Be brave. When the men have gone'—she gripped the girl's shoulders—'*whatever* happens,' she said again to press home the threat of violence that she knew was about to befall her, 'you run to Master Elias. Bring him here.'

The girl nodded obediently. Elizabeth kissed her forehead and closed the panelled door, pulling a chair in front of it. As she reached the table, the doors to the room were forced open. Two ruffianly men barged their way past her obstruction. Behind them were two more men, better-dressed, who must have loosed their killers onto her.

She threw a plate of food. One attacker ducked, batting it away with his hand. Grabbing a knife, she crouched, knife held low. It slowed them, each shifting his weight, looking for a way to reach her. She jabbed menacingly. The two other men watched from the doorway, one looking more concerned

than the other. She realized she knew his face, but could not place it. And then one of her attackers kicked a chair at her and she lost her balance; the two louts lunged, she struck, the knife rammed beneath the first man's jaw. He fell back; the second man punched her. She fell through the pain into darkness.

*

Minutes before, when the cook had told Caterina to take the laden tray from the kitchen. Naira was dipping a piece of torn bread into the urn of stew, a meal favoured by the English captain. Bettina was already asleep in a chair, her plate scraped clean, her gentle snores accompanying the bubbling stew.

'Maria, the mistress said to keep Captain Challenor's on the stove.'

The cook ignored her. Naira looked quizzically as the cook walked towards the yard.

Naira sighed and helped herself to another dunk of bread. Maria could be temperamental, but Mistress Elizabeth had given clear orders. She swallowed the bread and sucked her fingers dry as she followed the cook outside. She heard Rocco talking to someone at the gate, but the cook had turned into the hall that led to the *porta d'acqua*. She was turning the key in the lock.

'Maria, what are you doing?'

The door opened; the cook looked back. 'I've been well paid. They've bought my freedom.'

Figures lunged silently through the darkness from the moored boat outside the door. As they surged into the house, she heard a grunt of pain from where Rocco stood. She had no time to scream. The burly men threw her down, a rough hand covered her mouth. Another ran past her; she twisted her head, desperate to scream a warning. The warm glow of the yard lamps showed Lazaro storm out of his room, half dressed. He barely made a yard before being clubbed down. She heard Isabella cry out and was then stifled. Naira arched her back, kicked and squirmed, and bit into the hand. She sucked in air to scream, but a searing pain lanced through her ribs beneath her arm and pierced her chest. The expert knife thrust killed her before the breath escaped her lips.

As the light within her faded, she saw the men go up the stairs.

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CHAPTER 58

Challenor Reached his gate. He looked up. The window shutters were closed. Elizabeth always liked to have cool air coming through the open window. There was no doubt in his mind that the men who had killed Chesney and destroyed the *Falcon* were inside. He smothered the desperation urging him to run into the house. He squatted and peered through the iron gate. There was no sign of Rocco or Lazaro. The yard lights glowed. There was no movement. No sound. Knife in hand, he gently pushed one side of the gate. It was unlocked. Easing it open he stayed low and scurried to one side of the yard. Rocco lay face up. Eyes staring blindly into the night. Challenor stepped quickly to the far side of the building and the kitchen. A pot bubbled on the stove. Bettina lay dead where she sat, her clothing soaked in blood from her cut throat. Now this *uccellino* would sing no more. His heartbeat quickened. Whoever they were they were killing everyone close to him. Challenor went cautiously over to where Lazaro lay sprawled. He was unconscious, but alive. There was no sign of Isabella. He edged along the wall and heard the lapping of water seeping up the *porta d'acqua* steps. The door ajar. That's how they had got in, and that meant someone inside had betrayed him. Naira lay where she had fallen – dead.

Pressing his back against the wall he edged around to the stairs. Light trimmed the door at the top. Moving as quietly as he could, Challenor took the stairs slowly. If he were laying a trap he would have at least one man waiting on the turn of the stairs when he reached the landing. He carefully peeled off his cloak and tightened his grip on the knife, then crossed to the right-hand wall to give himself a chance to defend himself if that was where an attacker waited. Three steps from the landing, he tossed the cloak high

across the space. A shadow leapt at it, arm raised high with a club. As Challenor broke cover, he realized they wanted him alive. A skilled assassin with a knife would have come in low, sweeping up a blade, and – no matter how cautious Challenor had been – would likely have seriously injured him. The man's raised arm gave Challenor the advantage. He struck hard under the man's armpit. The attacker grunted as his body fell across him; the knife was wrenched from Challenor's grasp, still embedded in muscle and ribs. But there was a second man, who had bided his time; he now stepped forward and kicked Challenor in the head. Challenor tried to roll and get to his knees, but a second kick put him down.

He was losing consciousness. He saw Leonora's body spreadeagled further up the steps. He had a vague sense of being dragged inside the room. Garbled voices. Distorted images of more men.

And then blackness.

*

His muscles hurt. His chin lay on his chest. A familiar smell assailed him. A memory. Brandy taken from a Dutch flyboat. Laughter. Was that a memory? Had he got drunk with Chesney and Pewsey? Another confused image. Men laughing because the Venetians did not drink brandy. Who was it who had choked and spat it out? He couldn't remember. But the smell of it brought him around. A man's coarse hand was splashing brandy over his chest.

Rope bound his arms and legs to a chair. A rolled dinner napkin had been forced between his teeth and tied at the back of his neck. Blood clotted his nose. He snorted it away. His first blurred sight was of a roughly dressed man and, as he stepped aside, Elizabeth similarly bound in a chair eight feet away, directly in front of him. She was wide-eyed, staring intently at him. He struggled but was held too tightly and the heavy wooden chair had no give in it.

Elizabeth had a dark bruise on the side of her face. She too, had a dribble of dried blood beneath her nose. They'd hurt her. He howled in frustration. She shook her head at him. They were helpless. There were two men standing behind her. Loose-fitting shirts, grimy doublets. Rough trade. Men prepared to kill. Like him. A third man lay dead with a knife in his throat. She had fought for her life and killed a man. He turned his head.

Sitting in the more comfortable chairs were two better-dressed men. He didn't recognize them. They were drinking his brandy. His mind raced. Three hired killers in the room, another dead in the hallway. At least four men had overwhelmed and murdered his household. One of the better-dressed men looked to be more uncomfortable at the sight of Challenor and Elizabeth than the other, who seemed to be as relaxed as would any house guest enjoying a drink from Challenor's looted brandy. He placed his cut glass goblet down, picked up a knife that had been on the table next to him. He walked over to stand in front of Challenor.

'You don't remember me, do you?'

Challenor stared hard. Studied the man's face. He'd never seen him before in his life. He shook his head. Tried to say 'Who are you?' but the tie across his mouth stopped any sense being made of the words.

The man turned and bent down in front of Elizabeth. His face at arm's length, ignoring her garbled sounds. 'So, here's the captain's whore living in luxury gained from the suffering of others. Now you'll both know what it means to suffer.'

Elizabeth shuddered. The dark eyes seemed to penetrate her soul. Her mind flashed back to when she wrote the captives' names aboard the *Falcon*. He had been among the galley slaves, heavily bearded, with long hair. She looked at the second man, still sitting, squirming at what was happening. He had been one of them as well. The man staring at her had frightened her even then. She could not remember their names. She struggled and shouted that her brother had saved their lives. Her gagged plea was as unintelligible as Challenor's demand.

'For God's sake, let her speak,' said Cassola.

'And let them bellow and scream? Half of Venice would be alerted'

Cassola half rose from the chair. 'There is no honour in this!'

Marasini pointed the knife at him. 'We are beyond that. Do not waver now,' he said, the chill in his voice enough to make Cassola slump back.

Marasini faced Challenor. 'Now you see me. No beard, no sweat- and salt-matted hair. No shit-stained loincloth. But I bear the galley master's whip scars on my back. And all the pain in my heart from what you did.' He spoke without anger or malice. Cold. In control. He held centre stage now, addressing his two captives so that they would understand. 'My wife and child died on the ship you attacked. It was torn apart, as were the woman

and children I loved. You sold me to the Turks in Algeria. Enslaved, but with the chance to be redeemed by the ransom offered by our families and our church. So too my friend.' He glanced at the other man. 'His parents never heard a word more about their son. Ruined, they died penniless after paying the ransom. Both our families raised the huge amount you and the Turks demanded. My father sold his business and died in destitution. Because *you* stole the ransom. You betrayed the Turks; you betrayed us. And we went to the galleys.' He took a slow breath and looked at Challenor. 'While you, Challenor, seized everything. *Everything.*' The final accusation bitter and harsh: the control finally cracking. 'Now I am taking everything from you that you hold dear. Your ship, your trusted man, your whore you intend to marry.' He paused, composing himself, regaining the icy composure. 'You left us in Tunis in the hands of a slave trader. And that was your undoing. He gave us life so that you may lose yours.' He pulled a leather bound document from his coat.

Challenor recognized it for what it was.

'You double-crossed the wrong person this time. I have what he wants. Margos Azarian wishes you dead. And I will oblige him.' He glanced at Elizabeth. 'I've learnt of your love for her. We've watched and planned.' His voice dropped to an urgent whisper. 'And now we will seize everything that your heart holds to be precious. That is our story, Challenor. And now yours will be told.'

He nodded to the two men standing behind Elizabeth. One of them leant over her and grabbed the top of her bodice. She squirmed as he ripped it open, exposing her breasts. She gasped for air, eyes held on Challenor's anguished look, who struggled helplessly. In that moment, it felt as though they had finally come together. She nodded at him. Tears welling.

'You came home drunk. You tried to rape your wife-to-be. She defended herself.' His matter-of-fact cadence was chilling, revealing a man determined to kill. His movement was so fast Challenor barely saw the knife that rammed into his shoulder.

Elizabeth cried out.

Challenor grunted, fought the rope and the pain.

'When she killed you, she slaughtered your household to gain her freedom. The magistrate's agents will be summoned and she will be arrested and taken to the Council. There will be a witness. A written

testimony of events. There is no one to save her. The Council will cast her into the wells for the scum of the earth to rape her. And once they have finished with her, if she is still alive, then she will be executed.' He studied the knife in his hand, stepped back so that Elizabeth could have one last fearful look. Challenor was trying to smile at her. He nodded his head. He was telling her he loved her.

The knife plunged into Challenor's heart.

Elizabeth collapsed.

'And so it is done,' said Challenor's killer.

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CHAPTER 59

Caterina had Watched the unfolding scene through the panel's peephole with a hand across her mouth should the horror force a strangled gasp from her. When the men had left she crept out. They had cut free the bonds that held Challenor and her mistress so that it looked to be a personal assault with no evidence of intruders. Kneeling by her mistress, she shook her, put her lips near her hair, bloodied from where one of the men had clubbed her senseless. Caterina moaned, trying to speak, to rouse her, but her mistress didn't move. A knife, also bloodied, lay close to her. The fearful child dared not touch it.

Challenor had been thrown to the floor, his blood spilling out beyond his sprawled body, staining the terrazzo, one hand flung forward as if trying to reach the woman he loved, even in death.

The mute child stepped cautiously into the hall, recoiled when she saw Leonora's tumbled body, her blood thickening in its final journey as it dripped down step by step. Downstairs Bettina was slumped in her chair, slain. There was no sign of Maria or Lazaro and Isabella. The breeze from the open *porta d'acqua* made the door creak. Naira lay dead. Caterina stood unmoving, uncertain what to do. Not knowing if the killers were still close.

And then she ran.

She knew the twists and turns through the darkened streets as well as a feral cat. When she reached the great house, she clung to the iron gates that, once opened, would lead her through the garden to Elias Jordan. Darkness swamped the house and passageway where she stood, breath heaving, her body shaking from her exertion. She cried out: an animal-like howl. She wept. Made another strangled yowl, the frightening sound cutting through

the darkness. A light appeared from one of the watchmen. He knew the girl from before the Nobildonna had had her banished and Jordan had taken her to Challenor's house. He thrust the lantern closer. The cold breeze carried the first speck of chilling mist. The child stared at him, still wailing, hands clutching the iron bars. A light went on upstairs.

The watchman reached out and smothered the girl's hand with his own. 'Shush, child, shush.' He turned to look up at the figure at the window. Elias Jordan called down.

'What is it?'

'The child, she's in distress.'

'Calm her before she wakes everyone.' He disappeared.

The girl fell silent, nodding gratefully. The concerned watchman was joined by another.

'What's wrong with her?' he asked, tugging on his coat with one arm while his free hand held his lantern.

'She's mute, you damned fool. How am I to know?'

'Anyone else there? In the *calle*?'

'Is there, child? Caterina, is there anyone else with you? Chasing you?'

How could she answer? Two questions in the same breath. She groaned, shook her head, and then nodded, wiping away tears. How could she know if the killers had seen her?

Elias Jordan was dressed, striding from the house. 'Open the damned gate, you fools. Let her in.'

The watchman produced a key and turned the lock. Caterina ran into Elias Jordan's arms. He embraced her. He cared for the child, had always shown her kindness. Both were outcasts in their own way. 'All right, child. You're safe.' He put her at arm's length. 'There's trouble at the captain's house?'

She nodded furiously.

'Someone is hurt?'

She nodded again, made an unintelligible sound and banged her fist into his chest as if stabbing him. Jordan was no fool. 'Stay here.'

She shook her head and ran for the gate.

'All right, give me a lantern,' he told the men. 'Stand at the gate. Rouse the other watchmen and have them guard the water gate. No one must approach. Understood?'

*

Caterina ran ahead as Jordan followed her through the narrow passages. He knew well enough how to get to Challenor's house, but the darkness slowed him. He called for the girl to wait for him. No sooner had he caught up to her than she ran off again, and so it went until they reached Challenor's gates.

The yard lights still burned. The gate was ajar. A fringe of light showed around a shuttered window upstairs. Caterina walked slowly now, her cautious steps making Jordan place a hand on the knife hilt at his belt. He raised the lantern as he reached the house. Caterina showed him the kitchen. The stove had gone cold. The laundry girl slumped, dark-stained. Caterina hovered at the door. She made a dull sound to alert him and beckoned him. With a final glance at the murder scene, he followed her to where Naira lay sprawled. The *porta d'acqua* was half open. No sign of the watchmen, the dressmaker or the cook. Perhaps, he thought, they were inside. The entrance to the house from the *rio* was either the way the killer had come in or escaped. Once they turned onto the stairs and he saw the dead Leonora, his chest tightened. This had been a concerted attack. A pool of blood settled on the landing. His eyes followed the trail of blood downstairs. A man had been killed here and his body dragged away. The girl stood at the half-open door into the room. She nodded, pointed and pushed it wider.

He stepped past her. There was no need to check if Challenor was alive but he stooped quickly next to Elizabeth. She was breathing, but barely it seemed. Badly beaten, her dress torn, but there was no sign of rape. The room had sufficient light to see clearly. He turned Elizabeth over and tried to cover her exposed breasts. Still, she did not make any sound.

He looked at the child, who hung back; then he saw the open panel that concealed the hiding place. 'Did you see everything?'

She nodded.

Jordan kept his hand on Elizabeth's face. She was cold. The cut on her head was congealed with blood, matting her hair. Whoever had struck had done so with force. Her lip was split, one eye swollen. He pointed. 'Pass me the wine.'

Caterina took the already half-filled glass still standing on the table and passed it to him. He dribbled it on Elizabeth's lips. But it made no

impression. He knew he daren't force liquid into her throat for risk of choking her. He eased her head down.

He took in the scene. 'Did she kill Captain Challenor? Was there a fight?'

Too many questions again. The girl made a sound, shook her hands palm forward to make him ask again. He understood.

'Did she kill him?'

Again another sound and a shake of her head. 'Was it Lazaro? He's not here.'

No.

The girl looked frustrated.

'Then they were strangers?'

Yes.

'How many?'

She saw them in her mind's eye. She counted to make sure. Then spread her palm.

'Five men? You saw five men in here?'

Caterina nodded. Then pointed to a pool of blood where Elizabeth had killed the first intruder into the room.

'Mistress Elizabeth killed a man here?'

The child nodded.

He looked around. The room hadn't been ransacked. Nothing obvious had been taken. No simple robbery then. Caterina knelt next to him and pulled back Elizabeth's dress sleeve, showing the marks.

'She was tied.'

The girl nodded.

Jordan lifted Elizabeth's fingers. The rings Challenor had gifted her were missing. 'Was she wearing them when the men assaulted her?'

The girl nodded again, one hand stripping away imaginary rings on the other. She pointed to Challenor's body.

Jordan checked his friend's wrists. The same marks. He and Elizabeth had both been bound, and no doubt gagged. Then Challenor killed, and the bonds released. No sign of the ropes that had held them.

Before he could do anything more for Elizabeth, voices echoed up the stairwell. Caterina pressed back against the wall as Jordan gripped the knife at his belt. He picked up the lantern and stood in front of her to protect her.

Two men and then two more entered the room. They were startled when they saw him. Their caution eased quickly when they recognized him. ‘Master Jordan, what are you doing here?’ said one.

He knew these men. They worked for the state and someone had alerted them.

‘I was summoned.’

The men looked at the frightened girl shielded by Jordan.

‘She’s a witness?’ said the man in charge.

‘She’s mute. A servant. She came for me.’

‘Ah, well, no matter, we have a witness to this.’

‘Who?’ Jordan demanded.

‘With respect, that’s none of your business. The Council’s inquisitors will deal with it. Best keep out of this mess, Master Jordan.’ He pointed to Elizabeth. ‘Take her.’

The men with him reached for Elizabeth’s body as the man in charge bent and picked up the bloodied knife next to her. He tugged free a piece of cloth from his pockets and wrapped the knife as evidence.

Jordan took a step forward. ‘I know this woman. She’s badly injured. She needs a physician.’

‘I doubt it, not where she’s going. Better if she dies on the way is my thought. From what I know, the witness has made his statement. In full. We know what happened here.’ He glanced at Challenor’s body. ‘His ship burnt last night. Seems he came home in a fury, got drunk and attacked her. We have it on good authority she killed him. She was enslaved and took her chance for freedom, and when the servants tried to stop her, she took the blade to them as well. It’s not for me to judge.’

‘Wait. Look at the blood on the stairs. Men came into this house and killed everyone except her. Blood out there, and here, this is where she killed one of them. Surely you can see this is not what it seems? Look at her wrists. And his,’ he said, pointing at Challenor’s wrists. ‘They were bound and then he was killed. She was no slave.’

‘The written sworn statement given to the inquisitors says different. I’ve got my orders. Nothing more. Take my advice and go home. The bodies will be dealt with by morning.’

The men pushed past him, carrying Elizabeth. He blocked them.

‘Now, Master Jordan, we have a boat waiting. Do not impede my men, I beg you.’

Elias Jordan was known in Venice for his contacts and was sufficiently respected not to be harmed by the men he confronted; that and the authority the Nobildonna carried gave Jordan some leeway with them – but no one stood in the way of the Council’s Lords of the Night.

He stepped back. The man nodded, took a final glance at the room and followed his men down the stairs, leaving bloody footprints along the way.

The killing room weighed heavily on Elias Jordan. He reached out for the child and took her hand. She looked imploringly at him. He nodded and picked her up. She nestled into his shoulder and he walked past his dead friend.

Lives lost. Lives changed. Now there would be a reckoning.

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CHAPTER 60

The Nobildonna Wrapped herself in her gown and gazed down from her windows at the traffic moving along the Grand Canal. Sea fog crept across the water, embracing the old buildings, suffocating the spider-web streets. Her status kept her above the day-to-day commoners' concerns, but someone concealed in the shrouded mist down there had torn into her world. John Challenor brought her the slaves she owned, men and women needed to work in her workshops and shipyards. She sat silently with her thoughts for a moment. The dawn had brought Elias Jordan to her bedchamber to insist on seeing her despite the early hour. News of the loss of the *Falcon* was of little consequence. There were other traders. But Challenor's murder cut into the heart of those who dealt with him.

'And you do not believe his woman murdered him?'

'Murdered him, then went through the house killing servants, then went back to the room where he lay and then collapsed from a beating? And for a witness to reach the magistrate's agents so quickly? I can only think the one who condemned her is Lazaro, one of Challenor's bodyguards, which is why he was seized.'

'And the woman who is also missing?'

'A dressmaker. I don't know why she's been taken. I'm using men I know to seek her out. And the cook. But Challenor knew she was passing on information about him. So I think she's the one who betrayed him. It all happened too quickly. Everything was pre-planned.'

'And the child raised the alarm?'

'Late last night.'

'And she was a witness?'

‘Yes, Signora. She was in hiding. She saw it all.’

‘Then she heard what was said?’

‘Some, yes. But she covered her ears so she didn’t hear the cries of pain.’

‘No names?’

Jordan shook his head.

‘I was told by someone I trust that men were asking questions about Challenor,’ she said, then raised a hand, stopping Elias’s immediate and expected question as to who the men might be. ‘I don’t know who they were. They used others to seek out the information they wanted. So, let us assume you’re right. It was planned over time. And if they held a grudge against John Challenor then they might hold a similar grudge towards those who had dealings with him.’ She looked at Elias. ‘And we had many dealings. Put extra men on the gates. Have a guard accompany anyone who leaves the house to buy food.’

‘I have already done so.’

‘Then you think of everything, Elias, as always.’ She gave him a brief smile of appreciation. ‘Those friends Challenor had, they will retire into the shadows. Fear will drive them away, but we must look to our business, especially Riccardo now that he is giving us what was asked of him. Has he been told?’

‘Not yet.’

‘Word will spread quickly. Challenor was too well known. You must tell him.’

Jordan had known the task would fall to him, but even so, the thought of it burdened him. ‘Very well. But his first question will be about his sister.’

She nodded. ‘I don’t know where she is being held or for how long.’

‘If she is convicted, then she will be executed,’ said Elias. ‘The first thing Riccardo will want to do is rescue her.’ He hesitated. ‘An impossible ambition. Your own authority might be brought to bear. You know the people who work behind closed doors. Their lives are as intertwined with your dealings as are the merchants’. And your late husband’s association with the Council would still hold sway.’

The Nobildonna mentally shuddered. Despite her elevated position in Venetian society, no one was ever truly safe from the grasp of the state. For three hundred years power had been held by the Venetian patricians, their

executive authority passing to the judicial Council of Ten who dealt with crimes against the Republic. The security agencies controlled by the Ten existed in a hushed secret world whose name, when mentioned, chilled everyone. More fearful still was the more secretive Council of Three, who maintained a silent tyranny that no one challenged. It was said that if taken by the Ten the accused were sent to the torture chamber, but if seized by the Council of Three, they were sent to their grave. These ruthless and merciless men, drawn from the Ten as an inner executive, could act swiftly without the full Council's deliberation. They exercised their power with an impersonal and carefully crafted air of mystery to suppress any threat of lawlessness in the Republic: a secret police force that met every day wearing black mantles and were known as the black inquisitors. No accused was ever allowed a defence, the unfortunate was never told who their accuser was or what evidence there was against them. Such examinations by the Three were carried out in darkness. If found guilty, there was no appeal. The mildest punishment was banishment, the more usual drowning or strangulation with the victim seated on a stool wearing a specially designed collar around their neck. A silken cord was passed through the holes of the collar into a wheel cranked by the executioner which choked the condemned to death. Such gruesome deaths might often follow incarceration in one of the many prisons in the city. Once convicted the accused was taken down the stairs that led directly from the tribunal to the Doge's palace dungeons. The most notorious and fearsome were the *pozzi*. Those who whispered the name of these wells said it would be better to be entombed alive than be imprisoned in these caged hell holes.

'You expect me to challenge the Council's inquisitors?' she said, her tone no longer obliging.

He bowed his head. 'No, to seek her out. And if payment can be made to release her, then she can be hidden.'

'In the city? There is nowhere. Even if she could be found and released, once the men who killed Challenor find out, then they'll hunt her down. She *is* the witness.'

'But if she is found and there *was* somewhere to conceal her while she recovers from her injuries, we would keep Riccardo with us – he will not abandon the forge and go through the streets drawing attention to himself. Otherwise, the next thing we know, he'll be the one arrested. And if his

anger is such that he publicly condemns the inquisitors or the Council, then he will be executed. Better we work on his behalf. For now. For our benefit.' He drew a silent breath from daring to speak so directly. 'He is your master knife maker.'

Her glare at his impertinence made him bow his head. The occasional intimacy demanded of him in her bed gave him no right to question or challenge her. But no rebuke came his way.

'Yes,' she said quietly. 'We must approach this with a practical mind and put emotion aside. That will be something he will have to learn. Very well. Elias, you know the streets. Find those who can remain silent about what we ask of them. Pay them well for information. Scour every *sestiere* for the men responsible. And if you identify them, we will then decide how to proceed. And I will find where they are holding Riccardo's sister.'

Elias Jordan had won a small but vital battle. He kept the relief to himself. He bowed and turned for the door.

'Elias?'

'Signora?'

'The child. I don't want her here. Get rid of her. She is a curse on a household. As I always suspected.'

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CHAPTER 61

Elias Jordan had made sure Caterina had been fed and kept out of the chilled mist. Yet she still shivered from the cold bite of the wind and, he had no doubt, from witnessing the night's violence. He wrapped a blanket around her and summoned the household's gondolier. Jordan kept the girl curled on his lap, his back to the creeping fog sweeping up the Grand Canal from the lagoon that tried to reach them in the small cabin. It took twenty minutes for the oarsman to reach upstream onto the Dorsoduro side and then another fifteen to ease his boat down the *rio* leading to that narrow strip of water next to the forge.

The sea fog pearled Jordan's cloak and hair as the gondolier assisted him ashore. He carried the bundled child onto the narrow path and through the drizzle to the forge. The sudden clanging of Domenico's hammer against the anvil woke her. She was startled but Jordan comforted her.

'Stay still, child. We are with friends.'

Her arms remained clasped around his neck as she buried her head back into his shoulder. The moment Antonio saw him, he rose from his chair and went forward, telling his grandson to keep his attention on what he was doing. Whatever this was about, it did not concern him.

'Elias? What is this?'

'Refuge, Antonio. We must help this child.' He looked at the old man's inquisitive gaze. 'Trouble.'

Antonio nodded. If the Nobildonna's man had brought the girl, then it was with her authority. 'Is there need for secrecy?'

'Without doubt. The child is mute, but she is still in danger.' He quickly related the night's events.

‘Riccardo must be told,’ Antonio said, the weight of it clear in his voice.

‘Where is he?’

‘Out the back.’

Jordan nodded. First things first. ‘Let’s settle the girl. Her name is Caterina. She can be put to work. She’ll earn her keep. She’s an intelligent and willing child and will quickly learn any skills you can teach her. Speak to your workers.’

*

Antonio summoned Domenico and the boy, Jacopo, who manned the bellows, to gather with the children in the workshop. Then, with his hands resting on the child’s shoulders and Elias Jordan standing next to him, the old man presented Caterina to the gathered workers. Children from the *campo* all knew each other, and so too did their parents and the shopkeepers who lived in the community. It was unusual for outsiders to be brought into the district. People lived, worked and died in the *contrada* where they were born.

‘This girl is Caterina. She is coming to live and work here. You will welcome her and treat her as any other who lives in the *campo*. She will not be mistreated in any way and if anyone raises a hand against her, then they’ll know my anger.’ He pressed his hands over her ears. She turned her face to him. He smiled and nodded, reassuring her. ‘She is a mute. She is in danger. We must protect her as if she were our own blood. No mention of her is to be made until I decide the time is right to do so. Understand?’

There was a murmur of approval. Antonio looked pointedly at his grandson, who shrugged and nodded. Antonio removed the palms of his hands from her ears. ‘She will sleep where Master Riccardo slept. She will eat when you eat. She will learn what she needs to learn.’

Elias Jordan watched the urchins gaze nonplussed at their master. They would obey him, but he wanted the old man’s words to have more bite to them. ‘Caterina can hear what is said, but she cannot speak. When she tries, it is with a sound that is not natural. Accept this. Do not mock her. This girl is under my protection. If I learn that any of you have spoken about her to anyone in the *campo* then I shall take my knife and cut out their tongue. Understood?’

Their fearful looks told him they had.

Jordan crouched down in front of the girl. ‘Stay here, Caterina. All right?’

She nodded obediently. His palm touched her face. ‘You are safe here. Trust me.’

Antonio turned to Domenico and put Caterina into his care. ‘Show her her bed; send one of the children to the *campo* to get food. Remember all that has been said.’

Domenico nodded. Clearly something serious had taken place. He led Caterina to Richard’s mattress.

Jordan turned back to the door. ‘Fetch him,’ he said.

Antonio sighed, nodded and went out the rear of the forge, reappearing a minute later with Riccardo at his side, wiping his hands with a rag.

Jordan nodded his thanks. ‘Both of you, with me. What I have to say must not be heard by those inside.’

He stepped out into the passage. The fog swirled, trying to lift itself free of the water, speckled with intermittent rays of sun. He faced them, directing what he had to say at Richard. ‘John Challenor’s ship was destroyed last night and he was killed,’ he said bluntly.

Richard’s stunned expression lasted only a moment. ‘Good,’ he said. ‘Now my sister is free of him.’

Jordan and Antonio exchanged glances.

‘There’s more to this,’ said the old man, picking up Richard’s note of hope. ‘He was not killed aboard his ship. He died in his house.’

A dull ache pressed into Richard’s chest. ‘Is my sister injured?’ he said, barely managing to get the words out.

‘She was hurt, yes.’ Jordan hesitated. ‘She’s alive.’

‘Master Jordan, I beg you take me to her.’

‘I cannot. She’s been arrested for his murder.’

That struck home. Richard’s jaw clenched. ‘Impossible,’ he gasped.

‘I can tell you she did not kill him. But whoever contrived his death has managed to implicate her. It was a planned attack. The servants were slain as well.’

Richard’s mind raced. ‘We must find her. Get her out of wherever she is. We must do something. If we go to the house, then perhaps there are clues.’ He stepped past Jordan, but Antonio grabbed his arm.

‘Wait, lad. Hear him out.’

Jordan was the voice of reason. ‘Riccardo, you are valued. You have people who will help you. You must not proclaim her innocence on the streets or, worse, condemn the magistrates for their arrest. You would be criticizing the state and it’s you who’ll be hauled before the inquisitors. Then you are both lost. That will condemn her outright because no matter what happened in the house last night, you will both be seen as enemies of the state and for that, there is only one outcome. I have contacts on the streets and the Nobildonna will find out what she can. We must find the killers as well as where she is being held. There’s much to do and not much time to do it in.’

Antonio gripped Richard’s arm. ‘Listen to him. He’s right.’

Richard’s frustration eased. ‘Master Vieri said you brought a child here. Is she a part of this?’

‘Witness to the killing. She needs safety and protection. This is the only place I could think of.’

‘Can she not tell the authorities what happened?’ Richard asked.

‘She’s mute. Even if she weren’t, who would believe a kitchen waif? No, when we get information from our contacts, she will help us identify the men who did this. Do you understand? I need your cooperation on this matter.’

Richard nodded, his mind numb, his thoughts as clouded as the swirling mist.

Jordan said, ‘I’ll reach out to those I trust and find who did this. I know she didn’t kill Challenor and now we must prove it before it’s too late.’

Richard walked with him. ‘I have people *I* can trust. What am I looking for?’

Jordan cast a doubtful glance at the knife maker. ‘You think you can put the word out on the streets?’

‘I can. What do I ask of them?’

Jordan glanced down the *rio* to where his boatman waited. ‘All right. At least six men came into the house last night. I believe Elizabeth killed one of them before she was overwhelmed. Challenor another. Four, or however many more there are, remain. Know this, Riccardo, Challenor’s feelings for your sister were genuine. I believe he fought to save her.’ He hesitated. Her brother would have virtually no knowledge of his sister’s life since being

brought to Venice. Jordan had said all he could to ease the young man's hatred towards Challenor. To make him understand that his sister had mellowed to the point of acceptance was unlikely ever to yield results. 'They were going to be married in three days.' A bell rang the hour. Jordan corrected himself. 'Two days. Perhaps the closeness of their marriage had something to do with it. I don't know.'

Richard remained silent. He was not prepared to admit that Martin had found him and given him the news of the impending marriage. The plan to smuggle Richard into the crowds outside the ceremony was now laid to waste.

Jordan fussed his cloak around his neck. 'If you have contacts, then have them look for rough men who have come into money. They'll not be able to hoard it. Killers like these live for the day. Her fingers were stripped of her rings. We'll seek out anyone selling them. I know what Challenor gave her. Send for me if you find the men. They may be in any of the *sestieri*. If I was planning something like this, I'd draw each in from different districts. Then, when the killing is done, they can disappear back to where they came from.' He paused. 'First, we must find where your sister is being held and see what influence can be brought to bear.'

'I must be part of it,' Richard said.

Elias Jordan placed a hand on his shoulder. 'We'll make sure you are, but the Council does not tolerate vendettas in the Republic. It goes against the common law. Don't take this matter into your own hands.'

Antonio's response was near enough a snarl, hushed and urgent. 'Curse you, Elias. There's honour at stake here. The honour of a man's family. You know damned well the city seethes with feuds. Merchants and noblemen use common men to kill. Count the damned bodies in the *calli* and tell me I'm wrong. If it keeps the rich in control, lets them settle matters their own way, then the state turns a blind eye. This needs justice done. A man who has the power to avenge an injustice and does not is as guilty as he who caused it. It offends the injured and God. A vendetta is what's demanded. Find them, kill them. The state will know justice has been served.'

'I care nothing for Challenor,' Richard said. 'If my sister is returned unharmed, then the matter is closed. If she isn't, then I will do what I must when I find those responsible.'

Richard's measured response gave Elias Jordan the outcome he had hoped for, but he decided the knife maker needed more assurance. 'Then we will help you do it.'

'I need one more thing.'

Jordan studied him. If he provided whatever help the knife maker wanted, within reason, then at least Jordan would be more in control. 'All right, what do you need?'

'A boatman.'

'None can be trusted and those at the house cannot be seen to be involved.'

'You sold my friend to work as a *barcaiolo*. Have the people who bought him release him from those duties until this matter is over. Then I can move around the city when I must.'

Jordan knew the request was easily granted. And it put further distance between the Signora and whatever violence might follow if the killers were apprehended. It was the men behind the killers she was interested in. Were they ambitious merchants or patricians wishing to extend their influence and power by moving in on the Nobildonna's interests?

'All right. You shall have your boatman.'

'And reward paid to those who help me find the killers.'

'Don't press me, Riccardo. I have given more than I should.'

'To serve the Signora's best interests.'

Jordan looked to where his gondola waited. The Englishman had bargained well. It was of little consequence to pay a few ducats to men on the street who might risk their lives. The longer the main perpetrators remained unidentified, the more the Signora and her business, perhaps even her life, might be in jeopardy.

He nodded his agreement. 'You shall have what you want.'

Without hunching his shoulders against the drizzle, Jordan strode to the gondola. Richard watched him go with a depth of despair he had not felt since Elizabeth had told him she was going to marry Challenor. And since learning that by doing so, she was saving him. His father's image in the sea's turmoil, hands outstretched, lungs bursting with his final message to look after his sister, still haunted him. This looked to be his last chance to honour his father and do what had been demanded of him. Protect Elizabeth.

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CHAPTER 62

While Elias Jordan took Caterina to safety and convinced Richard not to consider taking any foolish actions, the Nobildonna Chiara di Zorzi draped herself head to toe in a black velvet cloak. A plain gondola waited for her at her *porta d'acqua*, and accompanied by two guards, she instructed the oarsman to take her to the Rio de Sant'Anzolo. She sat in the cramped cabin, a man in the front well of the boat, the second man at the rear beneath the gondolier's feet. Another gondola went ahead with two more men, plainly dressed without any sign of livery. A similar escort followed in a boat behind her.

John Challenor's death would already be known to those who considered themselves a friend or had business dealings with him. If the violence were to spread, it was prudent to stay out of sight, shutters closed, until any immediate danger passed. There was always the chance that the killing was the beginning of a fight over who controlled the import and distribution of trade. An attempt perhaps to weaken her own power in the city. Slaves were valuable but so was every conceivable cargo that came into Venice. Her influence touched it all. Everyone dealt with one idea in mind. Profit. And those who made the most profit became the most powerful. And it was her intention to remain one of the few.

Those lower in status than the nobility, like wealthy merchants, bought their way into spheres of influence. An understanding had to be reached. Bring in wealth and trade and toe the line. Do not usurp the higher echelons of Venetian society, and acceptance into their ranks might be granted. If John Challenor's murder was to take away one of her key suppliers, a man who had proved more successful at piracy and theft than others she knew,

then one of the merchants might have been ambitious enough to have him killed. To bring in his own cargo and perhaps to cut her out. She could be sidelined if a consortium of merchants wanted her influence reduced. Perhaps. The only thing definite was the murder. The rest was speculation. And that had to be erased if business was to continue. No one doubted the pirate had enemies and most would fervently hope it was a personal grievance that led to his death. Whatever the reason for his murder, she thought, the bankers and moneylenders who sat beneath the portico in the San Giacomo di Rialto church would already be readjusting their bills of exchange. She sighed and looked through the glass obscured by her breath. She wiped a gloved hand to see where they were. Murder had its uses. But it could be bad for business. Finding Challenor's woman was the first step to discovery. A planned assassination or the start of something bigger? Beyond that, the woman's life was of no importance.

The Nobildonna was unafraid of being targeted. Not at this hour of day. Not with the men she employed. Besides, there was no time for fear. An unadorned woman with no sign of status or wealth going to pray would not attract attention. Ignoring the dank smell of the narrow *rio*, she instructed the gondolier to berth behind the front boat and she disembarked. The Campo Sant'Anzolo was quiet. The two men in the front boat knew what to do, fanning out to skirt the edge of the misty square while the two men who followed held back far enough not to draw attention to their presence while still being close enough to run to her aid should there be an unprovoked attack. Those closest to her walked left and right of her, twenty feet apart. She walked to a small parish church. Its front façade was on the *rio* and faced the nearby Monastery of St Stephen, but the rear of the building on the *campo* entrance was where worshippers entered. A few barely visible servants stood at the far side of the square, drawing water from one of the two cisterns. The wealthy merchants of the ancient great houses, old families like Pisani, Morosini and Duodo, remained behind their shutters, and silent. Whatever their reason, sleep or fear, it was what she expected.

The Nobildonna's contacts ranged widely and were used with discretion. There were informers who betrayed and informants who discovered what she needed to know. Where had the Englishwoman Elisabetta Sceriffo been taken and on whose evidence? It was time to speak to the man she had relied on for years, as had her late husband. She had access to cardinals and

bishops and those of the patriciate who played a role in ruling Venice, but it was to Don Marco Barozzi, the humble parish priest she turned. This *parroco* moved in secret circles where his presence would arouse no suspicion.

The front men glanced inside the church dedicated to the Archangel Michael, then nodded, giving her the all-clear. She swept past them. Three commoners knelt apart, praying. Don Marco was lighting the candles in front of the altar; when he saw her enter, he blew out the taper and went without hesitation to the confessional.

She pressed herself into the small box and closed the curtain. She spoke softly. ‘The men who asked about Challenor?’

‘Nothing yet.’

‘Keep looking. An Englishwoman was taken last night. Her name is Elisabetta Sceriffo. She is accused of murdering her husband-to-be and the servants who worked in her house. The man was Captain John Challenor. The Council’s agents were tipped off. I want to know where she is being held and who has given evidence against her. And to see that evidence.’

Her hand reached for the curtain. She thought briefly about Elias Jordan. ‘Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned.’

And then she was gone.

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CHAPTER 63

Elizabeth Awoke with someone bathing her face. She tried to raise her head, but the pounding in her temples forced her back. She was lost in her mind. Images flashed as violently as the shards of light behind her eyes. She blindly reached out to whoever was helping her. A hand grasped her wrist. A soothing whisper tried to calm her. A whisper that felt little more than a breath across her face. A flickering candle flame came closer.

‘Where am I?’ she asked, her voice cracked from a dry throat.

The woman cleaning her drew breath when she heard the beaten woman speak in English. ‘Signora?’

Elizabeth licked her cracked lips. Her mind searched for the simplest of questions. She couldn’t focus on the woman’s face. She mumbled her question again in Venetian. The woman pressed the wet cloth to her lips, her voice still low. There was an edge of warning in her answer. And fear.

‘Council of the Three.’

Impossible, Elizabeth thought. The Council of Three tried criminals. She was a victim. Men had stormed into Challenor’s house and killed him. There were witnesses. The servants must have escaped even though Rocco had been killed. Why wasn’t she in hospital? Her ribs hurt; her head pulsed with pain. Her back ached, muscles strained from the violence inflicted on her and cold from the stone floor beneath her. Her tongue found the gap where one of her lower teeth had been knocked out. Nausea swept over her. She retched. The woman’s hands gently turned her head away, but nothing came. Elizabeth remembered snatches of the horror. The assault had ripped her bodice and exposed her. She remembered that. And Challenor’s look of

helplessness. Her hand went to her chest. Someone had roughly stitched her clothing, returning her modesty.

She formed her words slowly, searching for the words that she had diligently learnt. Some words she couldn't find, but her meaning was clear. Why was she here? Where were her servants?

The woman continued to attend to her head wound, wringing out the cloth in a bucket of stained water. The same water that Elizabeth had gladly sucked the moisture from. The woman sounded weary. Elizabeth was there because she had killed her man and her servants. Elizabeth saw her make the sign of the cross. The devil must have possessed her to do such a thing, the woman told her, a world-weary acceptance in her voice. The woman had been plucked from the Piazza and taken to the underground chambers and told to clean this woman until she was taken for her interrogation and trial.

Elizabeth fought back the tears. She was in too much pain to be tortured. If she were subjected to more hurt, she might confess to anything. She screwed her eyes tight. No, she told herself, she would not confess to the killings. If they were going to execute her, she vowed she would not help them do so. Her resolve wavered when she heard the scrape of boots and a gruff voice in the darkness. Saw the dull glow from a lantern, the bucket being kicked, the splash of water from the cloth being dropped. The voice commanded the woman to leave. A rustle of her skirts. Elizabeth tried to hold on to her, but the woman had no desire to be with someone about to be tried. She snatched free her hand and merged into the darkness behind the men. Two of them. Rough-clad. Wardens or jailers? It didn't matter: they were strong, bending down and lifting her beneath her armpits to her feet. Her legs gave way. They dragged her, ignoring her pleas to slow down, to let her try to walk of her own accord, she would be no trouble. She was tearful, fighting back the fear she had promised herself to ignore. If she could just get strength into her legs, she could at least face her accusers with what little remained of her dignity.

The man held the lantern forward, leading them across an uneven stone floor. Then a turn. A door. Heavy, studded. It opened. She was placed on a stone bench. The men left her; the door thudded closed. She shivered. The darkness gave her no idea of where she was or if she was alone. She waited, desperately trying to stop her body from shaking. She couldn't tell how

long she sat there before she heard the sound of rustling clothes and the slight exhalation of a cough. Someone had entered the room in front of her. A chair scraped. The sound of a ledger being opened. A faint glow appeared ten feet from where she sat. She tried to focus. It appeared to come from behind a panel of wood, like a scribe's desk perhaps, which shielded the low light and the black caps of what she thought to be three men behind it. Faceless men. Consiglio dei Tre Capi.

Without any hint of emotion, a disconnected voice read the charge against her. The murder of Captain John Challenor, the woman known as Leonora Alioni, the woman known as Bettina Briani, the woman known as Naira Petrosian and the man known as Rocco Basegio.

She concentrated on the names being recited. She realized that she was guilty of never asking her servants' surnames. The omission momentarily shamed her. She saw images of the dead in her mind's eye. A sob began to choke her. She forced it back. There had been no mention of Caterina, which meant she might have escaped. And Isabella and her lover Lazaro. Had they run before the killing started? Her thoughts pictured everyone in the house. The cook. Maria. She must have got away as well. Small blessings from a night of violence.

The man's voice paused. He suddenly spoke rapidly. She couldn't follow. She thought he was reciting the events that happened the night of the murder. When was it? Only last night? Was it daylight outside? Was it the same night? How long had she been here? She gazed towards the shadows behind the desk. There was the scratching of a quill against paper. She begged them to speak more slowly. The voice recanted. The speaker was in no hurry. The procedure had to be recorded as being conducted in the correct manner. It was, said the voice, a matter of evidence against her. She heard the rustle of a document. Her eyes struggled to see through the pain and near darkness. A sheet of paper held up above the obscured desk. A witness statement.

She shook her head. No, she told them. It was a lie. Was there no one who would speak for her?

'You have no defence,' the interrogator answered. 'An accused is read the charges. Your sentence is then determined.'

'I am innocent. I was attacked by men. Then they killed the man I was going to marry. I know nothing of the death of my servants. I know those

men.’

Her comment caused the man to fall silent. She listened. A whisper between the men.

‘How would you know them?’ the voice asked.

‘They were taken aboard Captain Challenor’s ship. They were galley slaves. We were all to be sold here.’

‘And these galley slaves came into your home and killed those named?’

‘Yes. One of them stabbed Captain Challenor in front of me. It was in revenge for the death of his family and to seize a document that was of value to them,’ she answered.

‘Their names?’

She stared into the darkness desperately trying to remember any of the names she had recorded on the ship. ‘I don’t know.’

‘Then why would a killer allow himself to be identified and for you to live?’

It was the simplest and most obvious question to ask, and she had not thought of it.

‘I don’t know.’ The only explanation was perhaps the only one. ‘To have me blamed.’

‘Then these men hated you. Had you caused them harm?’

‘No.’

The man sighed. The quill scratched. ‘We have a witness statement, given freely. Your story is fanciful. The witness’s statement has been faithfully recorded. It will stand. Judgement will be made.’

She gasped. ‘No. It’s a lie.’

Nothing more was said. The silence was broken by a ledger slamming closed.

The door opened and the two jailers re-entered. Her legs refused to bear her weight again. They dragged her along a stone-walled narrow corridor. Unable to speak coherently she mumbled in a mixture of English and Venetian. They weren’t interested in hearing a plea for mercy, or a begging voice saying someone had wrongfully accused her. Another turn. Down smooth stone steps. Deeper into the bowels of the building above. They stopped outside a broad door. One of the jailers handed her weight to the other. The large square lock needed a key at the man’s belt. Two bolts held the heavy planked door. Once unlocked and the bolts thrown, they

shouldered the door aside. The lantern's light exposed a tomb. A sliver of light, barely enough to see a hand in front of a face, came from the passage and a narrow slit where wall and barrel ceiling met. The stench of human waste assailed her. She gagged.

The daylight drew her attention for only a moment. It sounded as though rats were scurrying. She turned to face what lay in front of her. Two separate heavily barred cages were filled with men. A dozen and more to a cage. Long-term prisoners. The scuffling sound was that of the bearded, grime-laden men getting to their feet as she was brought in. Every man seemed the same. Matted hair, tattered clothing.

Hunger in their eyes.

Elizabeth recoiled, fighting the jailer's strength. 'No. Don't put me in there. Put me with other women. I beg you.'

The jailer easily overcame her efforts to resist him when he opened one of the cages. His tone was matter-of-fact. 'The cages are full.' He pushed her towards the open cell door. 'You won't be here for long.'

She stumbled forward from his shove. The door clanged shut. The faint window light exposed a huddled body of men. Moving closer.

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CHAPTER 64

The Cleaver Struck bone, splitting the carcass. Ribs were hacked and gathered. Gasparo and the two other butchers worked methodically through their day's work beneath an awning stretched out over their meat tables, a child busy swatting away flies. As Gasparo reached up to lift down another pig's carcass from a meat hook, he saw Richard.

His face broke into a broad grin. There was something he liked about the young Englishman. A slave who would go far was what he'd told the others after he had taken him to Campo San Polo the day of his attack and left him in Stefan the mason's care.

'Riccardo!' He wiped a bloody hand on his apron and offered it. The two men embraced. Gasparo stepped back to look at the young man, who was very much better dressed than the last time he had seen him. 'Boys! Come and see Antonio's apprentice. He's been promoted.'

The two other men left what they were doing and joined him. Their tongues clicked admiringly. 'So, what's this? You're bedding a courtesan who's taken a fancy to you?' said Gasparo. 'An older woman who wants a virile younger man instead of a fat-bellied nobleman who farts as he tries to get it up?'

They laughed. Richard allowed himself a rueful smile.

'I came to ask for your help,' he said.

'With an old courtesan? Any time? I'll pay her in pork ribs.'

Richard raised another smile. He looked around at the busy shopping street. 'Can we talk?'

Gasparo and the others realized something wasn't right. 'Of course. Come on.' Gasparo pointed to one of the others. 'Pietro, get us a drink.'

The butcher went to a clay jug and poured four cups of wine as Gasparo toed a bench forward from a trestle table covered with plates of half-eaten food.

‘Sit,’ said Gasparo as the others joined them. ‘So, you need help but not with a woman. You’ve prospered, we can see that. Has this sudden wealth caused the problem?’

‘I have no wealth, only this new set of clothes and I am no longer Antonio’s apprentice—’

They groaned before he could finish. ‘What?’ they said.

Richard raised a hand. ‘I am the knife maker.’

Gasparo slammed his fist on the table. ‘Well done, Riccardo! We drink to that.’ They tipped the clay cups and drank, but Richard didn’t join them. He waited until they finished.

‘When I was captured in England I was one of a hundred others. They are scattered across Venice: in workshops, shipyards, brothels. We were all sold. My sister was also taken. Do you know of Captain John Challenor?’

The men looked at each other. They didn’t.

‘He was the pirate who took us. He had many connections here. He gave my sister a choice. Marry him or have me sent to the galleys.’

The men’s sour look of disgust had nothing to do with the rough wine they were drinking. Gasparo rattled off a coarse stream of abuse. He looked at his friends. They nodded. ‘You want us to kill him?’

‘He’s dead.’

‘Then that’s good, yes? Saves us the trouble.’

Richard shook his head. He looked at the men. ‘My sister was reconciled to her fate. Challenor returned home from a sea journey. Someone burnt his ship in the Arsenale last night and then came into his house and killed him and his servants.’

‘Your sister?’

‘No. She was injured, but she’s been taken by the magistrate’s agents, charged with killing Challenor and the household servants and is being held somewhere. I don’t know where.’

The men fell silent. When Gasparo replied there was a tinge of sadness in his voice. ‘Riccardo, we have no way of helping you with this matter. Who among us can discover in what prison she’s being held?’

‘There are others, better placed than any of us, who are trying to find that information. You can help in another way.’

Gasparo shrugged. ‘Then ask.’

‘Whoever did the killing, there were at least six of them. Two are most likely dead from the assault. Elias Jordan works for the Nobildonna who owns me. He told Maestro Antonio that if he had organized such a killing he would have hired men from different *sestieri*. Paid them well. Have them commit murder and then let them disappear back where they came from.’

‘Yes. It makes sense,’ said Gasparo. ‘Unless whoever planned this has men of their own. A pirate captain would have had dealings with wealthy merchants and noblemen. Cheat any of them once too often and that would be reason enough to set their dogs on him.’

Richard didn’t want to mention what Caterina had seen that night. ‘From what we know, they were probably common men. They stripped the rings from my sister’s hands.’ He took a sip of wine. ‘I am asking those I know – you, my friends, and, when I leave here, Stefan at the Frari – to pass the word to look out for anyone who might suddenly be spending more money than usual or trying to sell jewellery. You have a guild of butchers, don’t you? The Arte dei Beccai? There are guild members across the city? In all the *sestieri?*’

‘Of course. We’re not considered a prestigious guild because noblemen and rich merchants look down on us.’ He looked at the others for support. They nodded. ‘Without us, the fat bastards would be starved of good quality meat! But we are a fraternity and turn to each other when needs must.’

‘So you can spread the word among them? Ordinary people in the *campo* is where we should look. If there is anyone who suddenly has extra money, perhaps even brags about it, then I might find who is behind the killing and save my sister.’

‘It’s done.’

‘Thank you. But, Gasparo, I don’t want anyone tipping them off in return for payment for their silence.’

Gasparo’s face hardened. ‘Riccardo, this city is awash with whispers. Rumours bounce around the walls, but silence can be found in men’s honour, and those in our guild will never betray you. Not when Gasparo Rossi has asked the question of them.’

The butcher's words comforted Richard. What he was asking was a desperate grasp for information. Even if nothing was heard, at least the city would be alerted.

'Whatever we hear we will send word to the forge. And we will offer prayers for your sister,' Gasparo said, grasping Richard's hand. 'And if we find them, then they'll hang on our meat hooks. Now, let's go and speak to Stefan.'

*

Stefan called a halt to his men's work and brought them together once Richard and Gasparo had explained the night's events. The master stonemason spoke rapidly to his men in German. Whatever he said, Richard saw from their solemn expressions it had the desired effect.

He laid a hand on Richard's shoulder and guided him to sit on one of the workmen's tool boxes. Stefan pulled up another and leant forward, keeping his voice low. Richard noticed his men shielded them. It looked innocent enough. Working men taking a break as they drank, checked tools and ate food. Their casual demeanour disguised how they watched people in the square and those crossing the small bridge who were then lost from sight. Gasparo sat with them.

'Riccardo, we must tread carefully,' Stefan said. 'If what you say was a planned attack, then those who arranged it must be men of influence and power. We can only wait until any of those involved throw caution to the wind and let their behaviour expose them.'

Richard nodded. 'I understand. What if these men of authority have their own assassins killed? If they remove any witness to their crime, then they are free men.'

'No, that would begin a spiral of killing. Who kills the killers? You see? Where would that stop?'

'Yes. Of course. Then we must be vigilant.'

'There are masons working in every *sestiere*. And it's not only the Jews who live in a ghetto. The Armenians are in Santa Croce, we Germans in Rialto. I would know soon enough if any of us were involved.'

'The whores in Castello are a good source of information,' Gasparo said.

Stefan nodded. ‘But my men tread warily in those streets because the Greeks and Slavs are strong there and it wouldn’t be the first time fights have broken out between us. Leave it to us, Riccardo. Gasparo and his people and us, we’ll find these men. Hired killers are like a blunt chisel. Their work is crude. Their minds dull. Sooner or later they will show themselves.’

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CHAPTER 65

Two Days Later, as Elias Jordan, accompanied by two of the household's bodyguards, tracked down Elizabeth Sheriff's jewellery, Nobildonna Chiara di Zorzi and a four-man escort entered the church in Sant'Anzolo. It was empty. The priest came out from a room behind the altar when he heard their echoing footsteps. Information had been obtained. He had sent a messenger barely two hours ago, and she had attended his summons without delay. Her men took their positions: one either side of the door inside, the other two outside.

She followed the priest. The room was frugally furnished, but the lanterns gave warm light, and the chair he offered the Nobildonna was upholstered – the only concession to comfort in the room. He closed the door and sat opposite her. She waited as he considered what to say. Then he reached for a slim leather satchel, small, round, the kind that would hold a rolled document.

'I have the witness statement,' he said.

She showed no sign of acknowledging how quickly he had obtained it. There was no need to question how he retrieved it or from whom. That was his skill and sphere of influence and the reason why the priest had been used by the di Zorzi family for so many years.

'Is it the original testimony?' she asked.

He nodded.

'Not given under duress?'

'Freely given. And in his own hand. He was there when the woman did the killing. Everything here is plain to see. He is a servant.'

He undid the end cap held by a leather thong and slid out a document with the Council of Three's seal.

Her gloved hand fingered the document.

'I wish to take this away. There is someone who knows who served in the household. He will determine if the words that condemn the woman are genuine.'

The priest's expression never changed. He showed no sign of concern that the document was to leave his possession. His long relationship with the family spanned decades; he could trust the document would be returned.

He nodded.

She placed a finger on the wax seal. An unspoken question.

'Signora, do not concern yourself with the seal. If carefully opened, it can be redone. Leave that to me. But it must be returned to me before nightfall.'

She nodded and slid the document back into the barrel-shaped case. The crucifix on the wall behind the priest showed a suffering Christ lingering in agony on the cross. Sacrificed for the good of mankind. Her own motives, she acknowledged to herself, were purely selfish. It was important to discover if Challenor's murder was the beginning of what might become a concerted attack on her because of her association with him. And her desire to find Riccardo's sister served two purposes. It assured her knife maker that she had his best interests at heart, and if the woman was still alive and could be released because of false testimony then those behind the killing would be drawn from the shadows to silence the one person who might know their identity.

'Have you found who was asking about Challenor?'

'I have not, Signora. There is a wall of silence. These men are hidden. Perhaps even protected. I will continue my search.'

The Nobildonna stood and settled her cloak. 'Where is she being held?'

Don Marco shook his head.

She crossed herself. 'Find her by the time I return.'

*

Elias Jordan poured wine into a glass and handed it to Chiara di Zorzi. She gestured him to sit opposite her.

‘The priest gave me the witness’s testimony. He said there is no doubt the woman is guilty.’

‘Is she still alive?’

‘I don’t know. I’ve charged him to find her before we return this.’ She handed Jordan the leather pouch. He slid out the document. ‘The seal must be broken carefully,’ she said.

Jordan nodded and placed the rolled document on a table top. He took out his ornamental dagger with its short blade, its point razor sharp. He delicately cut the seal in half and then handed it back to her. She unfurled it carefully. He waited as her eyes scanned each line until the document was completely opened. He watched for her expression to change, but being the patrician she was, whatever her feelings they were not shown. She handed it to Jordan.

‘I said I wanted you to read it before I decide whether to abandon her.’

He stared at the letters that flowed neatly across the page. Each line was as measured as the one before it. There was no evidence of haste in the evidence given. The shocking reality of what had happened that night, according to the witness’s carefully constructed testimony, evoked images of murder in the reader’s mind. The woman known as Elizabeth Sheriff had been assaulted by a drunken John Challenor. She had vowed that she would never marry him. That she would do anything to escape her enslavement. This was heard by the seamstress Isabella Franco. The witness saw the accused leave the *piano nobile*, streaked with blood, her dress torn, a knife in her hand. Challenor had cried out. The housekeeper had come downstairs and was slain. The witness ran outside when he heard the watchman Rocco Basegio approach her but as he ascended the woman lunged, killing him. The cook got away through the gate. The laundry girl was slaughtered in the kitchen as the woman’s personal servant ran out, opening the *porta d’acqua*, but she was stabbed before she could escape. The witness thought the woman was possessed, such was her fury. It was when Challenor called out again that the woman ran back upstairs. Challenor must have only been wounded from the earlier attack. There was a scuffle. The only thing the witness did not see was how Captain John Challenor struck the woman down before succumbing to his wounds. Protecting the woman he intended to marry, Isabella Franco, the witness escaped with her and summoned the night magistrates.

Elias Jordan raised his eyes from the damning indictment. ‘All of this witnessed by Lazaro? Who then runs into the night with his lover?’ he said. ‘Who then summons the magistrates before I arrived?’

‘He had time, did he not?’

‘He did. Yes. That can’t be denied. But this whole document is a fabrication. The killers took him and used him. Perhaps they threatened the seamstress, Isabella.’

‘That’s not what the Council of Three inquisitors believe.’

‘I have known Lazaro since John Challenor employed him. This is *not* his hand.’

‘You cannot be certain.’

‘I can. And I will swear to it. Lazaro can neither read nor write. He is illiterate.’

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CHAPTER 66

The Forged Confession caused even more concern in the Nobildonna's mind that powerful men were behind the murders. She instructed Jordan to seek out Lazaro and the woman Isabella. Did Elias know which *sestiere* each had lived in before joining Challenor's household?

The woman, no, but Lazaro had come from a San Marco street near the Chiesa di San Zulian, and if he and Isabella were involved, then it would be likely that they would go into hiding in an area he was familiar with.

'Find him, Elias, and bring him here by force, if necessary.'

*

The gondola took Jordan and two of the men from the household. There were no paths along the *rio*'s length, so stopping and questioning those who worked their boats, or locals crossing the bridges from one *calle* to another, took time and yielded no information. And for Jordan, that was too slow a process. They berthed the gondola and went into the narrow streets. Jordan separated the men to make enquiries among shopkeepers while he sought out anyone in the local *osterie* who might know, or at least remember, Lazaro.

It took less than an hour for his enquiry to be answered.

The dimly lit room in an even narrower passageway than the *calle* within walking distance of the *rio* was frequented by boatmen. Several of them were drinking and quickly turned their backs on the well-dressed Jordan. Strangers were never welcome. And the black man looked as

though he worked for someone of importance. And that meant someone in authority. The stranger was trouble.

Jordan had no intention of trying to persuade them to offer up any information. ‘If any man here knows where I can find Lazaro Navagero or the woman Isabella Franco then there’s enough payment for them to drink and eat here for a month.’

That caught their attention. They faced him. ‘We all know where they are,’ said one of them. ‘That means we all need paying.’

‘No,’ said Jordan, ‘it means you can all take an equal share of the one payment. Or’—he looked at each man individually—‘fight among yourselves for the whole amount.’

One of them took a step forward. ‘Or we take the money you have in your purse and kick your arse out of here.’

‘Yes, that’s also an option. But then’—he pulled free his dagger—‘blood will be spilled. My men will come here and not one among you will ever steer a boat again.’

One of the boatmen pulled his friend back. ‘All right, one payment it is. Put the money on the table.’

Jordan slid his knife into its scabbard but kept a wary eye on the men. He spilled out a cascade of coins onto the table next to him. It seemed to satisfy the men.

‘Lazaro and a woman’s body were pulled out of the *rio* three nights ago. Their throats had been cut.’

*

Lazaro’s signed confession rested in Don Marco’s hands. The church was in virtual darkness. One large candle illuminated the crucifix behind the altar. The Signora’s black-cloaked figure sat openly in the front pew, the priest beside her, their faces obscured by shadow like secret lovers hiding from the world. The Signora’s men had closed the doors. This matter was too important to allow anyone in. The priest remained quiet while she explained the information she had about the illiterate Lazaro and why she thought there to be a conspiracy. She was now more convinced than ever that the men involved were likely to be more than hired killers. To write a witness statement, sign it and then present it to the night magistrates indicated that

those responsible were educated, literate men. And that meant they were men of standing in the community. Merchants perhaps, she suggested, and then, after a pause, perhaps even noblemen. It would not be the first time such men had killed each other in a family feud or because of conflicting business interests. And she still did not know whether the murders at Challenor's household might be a forewarning of an attack against her and her own involvement with Challenor. Killing Challenor might have been an attempt to weaken her future business interests. What if this was just the start? If the men behind it all were planning to threaten or kill those involved with her? To gain control? To disguise the killing by blaming Elizabeth Sheriff might be a feint to lower her guard, to make her think it had been a domestic murder and nothing more.

'But there is no proof that this man, Lazaro, was illiterate. It is only your man's word. The inquisitors would need more,' said the priest.

'He is *my* man. That should be enough.'

'I agree. But they might resist overturning their judgement.'

'They've decided?'

He nodded. 'She is to be hanged tomorrow.'

'You found out where is she being held?'

He nodded. 'The *pozzi*.'

She instinctively pulled back from the mention of the vile place. 'The witness statement was delivered the same night as the killing, You said the man had been questioned and confirmed everything in his testimony.'

'Yes, that is correct,' said Don Marco.

'The man who testified was murdered that same night, together with the woman he helped escape from Challenor's house. That was no escape. They were taken, and he was used as false witness. The inquisitors need look no further than the timing of the testament and the death of the man and woman. And if they dare question my own information then have them send night magistrates to where he lived. They will learn quickly enough he was illiterate.'

The information registered with the priest. The testimony he held in his hands now looked to have put an innocent woman in the city's most notorious prison.

She stood and gathered her cloak around her. 'Venetian justice is harsh,' she said. 'But if it is seen to be corrupted, then the Council and those who

questioned the man will not only lose face but their authority. Have them stop the execution. She must be released. She is the witness. There will be two men at the waterside steps at midnight. The jailers must be waiting and take them to the cells.'

'Then you should approach the patricians. They will act against this injustice,' Don Marco suggested.

'For once I can't turn to anyone else. I can't be sure yet whom to trust at this moment, although I have someone in mind. First we must secure her release and then begin the investigation.'

As she reached the aisle, she turned. 'Midnight. No later.'

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CHAPTER 67

The Heat From the forge's firepit did nothing to ease the chill Richard felt. It had nothing to do with the cold air that came across the lagoon as evening fell. The absence of information filled him with a bewildering array of emotions that drove his hammer against the heated iron ever more violently. Fear turned to anger and then plunged him into a hollow void where nothing seemed to matter. A place he had never experienced, even in his darkest days when enslaved by Challenor. The alchemy of turning base iron into an item of beauty was his only escape. That's what dragged him out of the darkness.

Antonio was spending more time outside the forge, alerting contacts in his fraternity. Every time the old master knife maker returned to the forge, Richard would raise his head from the glowing steel, always to be answered with a shake of the old man's head. Richard felt that every trusted contact had been approached since Elizabeth was arrested. Surely the whole of Venice must now know what had happened? Were people not talking because they were fearful or had the killers been absorbed into the different *sestieri* and swallowed into the anonymity of the crowd? For all he knew, they had already executed Elizabeth.

And then Elias Jordan's shadow fell across the threshold.

*

Richard's hope flared when he learnt Elizabeth was alive. It died hearing where she was being held. He fought against the rising tide of panic, grasping at the lifeline thrown by the woman who owned him. Jordan

explained how the man bearing false witness from Challenor's household was dead. So too his woman.

'The Nobildonna has used her contacts and demanded your sister's release. There is no guarantee, but if it is to happen, it will be at midnight. It will be done in secret and only the jailers will be in attendance,' said Jordan. 'She has used her influence. And she did this for you. You are in her debt.'

Richard understood the reasoning behind the Nobildonna's efforts. He was of value to her.

'You'll have men with him? When he goes to the prison?' said Antonio.

'No. The Signora's name is not to be mentioned. There is to be no connection. None of her men or gondolas will be used. I have arranged the *barcaiolo* you asked for to take you. He cannot stay here every day. He must be seen to continue his duties. When you need him, I know how to reach him. Is that agreeable?'

'It is,' said Richard.

'Good. He is already moored outside on the *rio*. You are two men going to retrieve a prisoner. Nothing more must be discussed. The jailers are ignorant of the reason she is imprisoned and equally ignorant of why she is being released.'

'Riccardo's sister is the one who can identify the killers,' said Antonio. 'For all you know, those behind the murders have already been alerted.'

'That's a risk,' said Jordan. 'The Signora's intervention has bought you time enough to get to the prison and secure her release. Word will get out soon enough to those who conspired to have your sister imprisoned.' He saw Richard had not comprehended the likely outcome of Elizabeth being released. 'The killers will want to stop her from identifying them. They will come for her.'

'Then we'll need somewhere to hide her. Where?'

'That has yet to be decided. We might have to move her around the city. No matter where she is hidden that secret will not be kept for long. As soon as she is released, we get her to identify those responsible.'

'Bring her here,' said Antonio. 'I'll have food ready. Riccardo has a room at the end of the workshop.'

Jordan agreed. 'She'll need rest. By tomorrow night, we'll move her. Can you keep her hidden without your workers knowing? If word gets out, it'll spread across the *campo*, no matter how many threats we make to stop

it. You have to keep Riccardo in the forge without him spending time with her.'

Elias and Antonio looked at Richard. The old man said: 'You must play a role, lad. She will sleep and be safe until Elias finds another place for her. Once she tells the Signora what she knows of the killers, it will take time for justice to be served. She must be protected.'

'And we still have word on the streets for the men who did the killing,' said Jordan. 'Who paid them is what we must find out. I'll return here before you leave and wait for you. If she can tell us what we need to know, then we can move quickly.'

There was nothing more to be said. Jordan gave a final glance at the two men and returned to his gondola.

'I must see Martin,' said Richard, turning for the entrance. Antonio tugged his sleeve.

'Give this some thought, Riccardo. In a few hours, you go into the unknown. It's not just ghosts of the dead who haunt the streets around the prison. You tie up at the prison steps and you're defenceless. No matter what assurances Elias might give, you have to be alert to danger. Check doorways and the darkness near the bridges. Desperate men sleep rough and a warm cloak is a prize. Two men can be overwhelmed, especially when your thoughts are elsewhere.'

'I have a good man with me.'

'Then you shall both be armed with knives and clubs. The Signora has done as much as she is willing to do. Stay alert is all I'm saying. And I pray to God that when you are taken into the *pozzi* that the door does not slam closed behind you. It depends who has the greater influence. The men who ordered the killings or the woman who does what she does for her own self-interest.'

*

Martin powered his barge across the Grand Canal. There were barely any lights showing on the far shore. Here and there a lantern being carried along a street or candlelight from one of the grand houses facing the canal cast their glow. The lights bobbing in the lagoon basin belonged to the several ships anchored far enough away for the barge to pass unnoticed. It was a

cool night and Richard felt the keen breeze more than his friend who rowed. The two friends had shared their grief at Elizabeth's plight and then put aside the horror of what had befallen her and set to their task.

Martin eased his barge into the *rio* alongside the prison as the bell in the Piazza campanile struck midnight. The soft light from Martin's lantern on the prow cleaved the pitch blackness. Another dim light appeared ahead. The dark shape of a man, arm extended, carrying his own lamp, drew them to the place where the barge could be moored. He took the rope Martin threw to him and tied it off through an iron ring set in stone, then Richard tucked the blanket they had brought under his arm.

As they stepped ashore, the man grunted: 'Took four out last night,' by way of conversation and without greeting. 'The more the inquisitors drown, the less sleep I get. This way.'

The grumbling jailer made Richard realize moving prisoners at night was not uncommon. He remembered seeing what he thought to be fireflies on the lagoon the night the *Falcon* anchored. Martin kept his lantern high at the back, throwing the shadows of those in front further along the narrow stone passage. A turn, some steps; the wet walls glistened; their footfall scraped the well-worn path in rhythm with the jangling keys on the jailer's belt. He stopped outside a heavy door with a large lock. He chose the key and then raised his lantern so he could see the two men's faces.

'Best you know, there are violent men in here. I'll open their cell and you take what you came for. I don't do no carrying.'

Another jailer appeared from further down the passageway.

'Takes two of us to make sure no one gets any ideas. You get rushed in there, we leave you and slam this door closed. I open the cell, you take her, and you get out. Make it quick. Understood?'

Richard's mouth was dry. His heart thudded. 'She's in with the men?' he said with disbelief.

'I'm a jailer, not a damned house servant.'

Martin put a hand on his shoulder and leant in, whispering close to Richard's ear as the sound of the key grinding in the lock echoed along the passage. 'I've my club ready. Pay no heed to anyone else. We see Elizabeth; you get her. I'll cover your back.'

Richard nodded and followed the first jailer into the stench of confinement as the second man stood at the door. At first the barrel-shaped

roof contorted the light so that it didn't fall onto the cell whose door was being unlocked. Then the jailer and Martin's light showed men huddled. Some asleep. Others palms raised to shield their eyes against the unexpected light. Like rats, they scurried away, fearful they were being taken for the lagoon. The jailer hooked his lantern on the bars and brandished his cudgel. Martin was closer to Richard than his own shadow. Neither man understood what they saw lying crumpled on the floor against the wall. A bundle of rags. A bloodied hand outstretched, fingernails broken. Arms bare, cloth ripped, skin scraped. Streaks of dried blood, blackened with dirt, stained the legs. A predator's talons tore into Richard's heart. Ripping it free, taking with it the restraint he had known of committing violence towards his fellow man.

One of the prisoners nearest the dishevelled figure on the floor leered at Richard. 'You'll have to wait your turn.'

Had he thought Richard a new prisoner being put in the cell? Richard punched the mouth that offered him his own sister. The man tumbled into the others. The sudden violence stirred the men. They got to their feet as Richard reached down for Elizabeth. Martin's lamplight was enough to see that she was barely alive. Matted hair covered her face. Richard teased it aside. Her features were battered. One eye was swollen closed. Blood encrusted her lips and scalp. Her bodice lay ripped open. Bruises covered her breasts and neck, and bite marks marred her flesh. He gulped air, covered her with the blanket, rolled her like a child and swept her into his arms. He pushed past the jailer as a handful of men lunged, perhaps crazed by the sight of the woman being taken from them. Martin and the jailer clubbed them down, backing away until the cell door slammed shut, the key turned and they were back into the snaking passageway. As he strode for the welcoming cold night air, the man that Richard Sheriff once was died.

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CHAPTER 68

It was Quiet around the forge as Antonio and Elias Jordan waited for Richard's return. The younger of the two men pulled his cloak around his neck, seeking protection from the lagoon's chill funnelling up the Grand Canal. Antonio showed no sign of discomfort. His gaze lay unwaveringly on the bobbing lantern approaching from the far end of the *rio*.

'It's them,' he said.

'Where's the woman? I don't see her,' Jordan said, straining through the darkness to make out who was in the barge.

'You think she's going to be upright after being in the *pozzi*? For Christ's sake, Elias, you have no idea.'

Both men remained silent as the barge approached, scraped alongside the low wall and came to a halt as Martin expertly backstroked the oar. Jordan looked for Richard and Elizabeth but the well of the barge was in shadow. Only when Richard stood and threw the mooring rope, forcing Jordan to catch it, did he see the bundled Elizabeth lying unconscious. Jordan handled the dirty line with a disdainful grimace. 'Is she alive?' he called, voice low, urgent, demanding.

'Tie us off,' said Martin as he shipped his oar and fastened the stern rope through an iron mooring ring.

It was Antonio who, despite his crooked fingers, bent down to offer a steadying hand to Richard who carried his sister. As he came ashore the old man saw her facial injuries.

'Does she live?' Jordan insisted again as he finished with the rope.

'Be quiet, Elias,' said Antonio. 'The girl's barely got breath in her body. Stay sharp. We mustn't be seen.' He led the way, opening the door to

Richard's room as Jordan nervously looked up and down the *rio*. Martin brushed past him.

'No one saw us,' he said.

'Your work is done for the night,' said Jordan. 'Get your barge tied up further along.'

Martin held back his contempt for the man who would obviously prefer not to soil his hands on a bargeman's mooring rope. 'Would it not be less suspicious if a barge was tied up outside the forge, Master Jordan? Come morning people might ask why I was alongside further on with no load to transport.'

Jordan didn't need to consider the practical suggestion. He nodded. 'Stay with your boat until you're needed.'

Antonio lit the candle in Richard's room but it was insufficient to see Elizabeth's injuries clearly enough.

'Elias, have the boatman bring his lantern.'

Jordan was at the room's threshold and chose to ignore the affront of being ordered what to do by the old knife maker. He turned and whispered urgently. Moments later Martin handed him his lantern. Jordan made no fuss as the enslaved *barcaiolo* stepped into the room behind him and closed the door. The men spoke in hushed tones, less from the need for secrecy than from respect for the badly injured woman as they hovered over Richard's unconscious sister.

Richard looked at Antonio and Jordan. 'I cannot remove the blanket to see what other injuries she has…' he faltered. 'Her dress is ripped; she is exposed.'

Antonio took control. 'Elias, pour water into the basin. Richard, bathe her face gently. Moisten her lips.' He turned to Martin. 'Keep watch at the door.' He turned for the workshop door.

'Where are you going?' said Jordan.

'Caterina sleeps in there. She can help.'

Elias shook his head. 'Antonio, no. She's a child. She has already witnessed too much. It would be too cruel for her to see her mistress like this.'

Antonio hesitated. 'All right. There's a woman I know. She brings me food. I'll fetch her.'

'No,' said Elias. 'Only those in this room can know what goes on here.'

‘Let him go,’ said Richard. ‘My sister needs help. As soon as she is able she’ll tell us who killed Challenor.’

Jordan relented. ‘Be quick.’ He poured water into the bowl and wrung out a cloth. Richard dabbed Elizabeth’s face gently, trying to wipe away the ingrained dirt and blood. ‘Is there another cloth?’ he said as the first became soiled.

Jordan reached into his doublet and pulled out a large silk handkerchief. He soaked it and gave it to Richard. The generous gesture did not go unnoticed. Richard nodded his thanks and used the delicate material to wipe Elizabeth’s encrusted lips. Martin took the soiled used cloth, rinsed it, and threw the water outside. He poured fresh water into the bowl and rinsed the cloth out again.

‘Richard, she’s not moving,’ said Martin. ‘Is she breathing?’

Richard placed his face next to his sister’s lips. He stepped back uncertainly. ‘I can’t hear anything. I can’t tell.’

Martin eased the two men aside and bent close to Elizabeth’s face with the candle flame. Shielding it with his hand from any movement of air through the door, he watched the flame. It barely wavered but it was enough to know she was alive.

He put the candle back. Jordan and Richard stood helplessly looking at the battered woman.

‘No one takes a beating like that and recovers quickly,’ said Martin.

The door opened as Antonio ushered in an elderly woman, unkempt hair, a shawl around her shoulders, who had obviously been dragged from her sleep. Her reluctance at being brought there was clear to see. She looked nervously between the unmoving woman on the bed and the four men.

Richard stepped aside from the bed. ‘Please,’ he said. ‘Do what you can to help her.’

The woman gave a final look of disapproval at the men and went to Elizabeth. Her expression of disgust became a hushed curse when she lifted the blanket carefully so that only she could see Elizabeth’s state of undress and injuries.

She rounded on the men. ‘Who did this? You? Which one of you did this!’

Antonio gestured to placate her. ‘None here. She was in the *pozzi*.’

The woman made the sign of the cross. ‘Merciful Mother of God. She escaped? The Signori di Notte are searching for her?’

‘You didn’t tell her what’s happened?’ said Jordan.

‘She might not have come with me if I had.’ Antonio faced the woman. ‘Giustina, she was released,’ he said. ‘These friends helped but we didn’t know she had been put in a cell with the men.’

The woman looked as though she had sucked on a sour lemon. ‘*Bastardi,*’ she said beneath her breath. A condemnation of men in general. Gazing at the woman on the bed she nodded and, without looking at anyone in particular, told them what she needed. ‘Hot water. Fresh cloth. Vinegar. Needle and thread.’ She slipped off her shawl and delicately began to lift the blanket away from Elizabeth. She half turned to face them. ‘Get out.’

*

An hour later they were summoned back inside. Martin remained outside to keep watch. The bloodstained cloths and water told their own grim story. Elizabeth’s face was cleaner than before but the scabbed skin and bruising would remain for some time to come.

‘Someone had stitched her clothing before. It was badly torn again so what little I could do I have done. But this woman needs more help than any of us can give her. I petition God that the men who did this to her suffer the worst fate He can inflict on them.’ She looked at each of them. ‘Without mercy.’ She placed her palm on Elizabeth’s forehead. ‘She runs a fever but she has injuries I cannot heal. She needs a doctor. And soon.’ She shrugged, pulled her shawl around her and went to the door.

Antonio opened it for her. ‘Giustina, I’ll walk you home.’

‘After all these years you think I can’t find my own way back? Antonio, don’t let your mind become as withered as your hands. Get out of the way.’ It was not said unkindly, the hand she placed on his arm spoke for two old lovers knowing the best of life was behind them.

When the door closed behind her Antonio sighed. ‘She’s right and we all know it. We need a physician to heal her.’

‘And a place of safety,’ said Richard. ‘We don’t know when the men behind the killing will hear of her release. She is the only living witness other than the mute child who might identify them.’

‘The killers will be lying drunk in a whorehouse. It’s the men who paid them we want,’ said Jordan.

‘She can’t stay here,’ said Antonio. ‘I trust Giustina to keep her mouth shut but come daylight the *campo* awakes, the workers arrive at the forge, people come and go. And no matter what we threaten, someone will see the value in sending a whisper down the *calli* to whoever might be listening.’

‘Then where?’ said Richard.

Antonio eased his aching bones and sat on the stool. ‘The best place is to send her to the Cannaregio.’

‘The Jews?’ said Richard.

‘They have the best doctors. Get her into their ghetto and she’s safe. The drawbridge is raised every night. No one gets in or out.’

‘Can we do that?’ Richard asked Jordan.

He nodded. ‘Perhaps. It’s risky. I know good doctors there. Men I trust. They treat some of the merchants. But too many foreigners stay there. Spanish and Portuguese itinerants always find lodgings in the ghetto. And some Greeks spill over into *sestiere* Cannaregio from Castello. The bridge might be raised but that could be as much a trap as a safe haven. There are guards on the bridge day and night and you would never get your friend’s barge into the *rii* because they’re patrolled.’

‘Then where?’

Jordan looked uncertain. ‘I don’t know yet. I have contacts across the city, but taking a doctor through the streets and having him come and go will always raise suspicion, no matter how careful we are.’

They fell silent.

Jordan went to the door. ‘I’ll go back and speak to the Signora.’

‘We have to move her before daybreak. Waste no time,’ said Antonio.

Jordan’s hand lingered on the door handle. ‘I didn’t expect her to be so injured. We needed names from her and now we don’t even have that.’

‘Master Jordan, I would ask you to increase your efforts and find the men who did the killing, and let me take care of my sister. I know where to take her,’ said Richard.

‘And where is that?’ said Jordan.

Richard looked down at Elizabeth, lying helpless. ‘Somewhere she can be helped and where no one will think of looking for her.’

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CHAPTER 69

Asquall Danced Across the lagoon and raced along the Grand Canal. It soaked Martin as the barge pushed through the water. They had already passed under the Rialto Bridge without being noticed. The darkness and fast-moving clouds obliterated any occasional light that might have been seen onshore.

Elizabeth lay on sacking in the barge's well covered by canvas with Richard at her side for warmth. The barge's lantern gave enough light for him to see her features.

'Not far now,' said Martin, oblivious to the chill wind at his back. 'What if they turn us away?'

'Then I don't know,' he answered.

The long oar groaned in the *fórcola*, allowing it to pivot so that Martin could steer the broad-beam barge. 'Venetian women and children aren't allowed anywhere inside their buildings. You know that, right?'

'Then we should be all right. She's neither a child nor Venetian.'

'Aye, but there's no denying she's a woman, Richard. I fear for what might happen to her if we leave her in their hands.'

'They'll treat her with respect,' he said. And then added, perhaps to comfort himself, 'I know they will.'

Richard snuggled up to his sister, a hand resting on her matted hair. He felt a slight movement beneath his caress. A whisper of a sigh escaped her lips. Perhaps the flapping canvas and the flurry of cold raindrops had woken her.

'Beth?' he said. 'It's Richard. You're safe. Can you hear me?'

Her head moved a little to one side. She groaned in pain. Her eyes were closed, her lips trying to form his name.

‘Richard,’ she murmured. ‘Help me.’

Anguish stabbed him, driving deep into his belly. Had she called out for him in her most desperate of times? Cried out when he had not been there?

He put his lips close to her ear. ‘You-are-safe-now,’ he said deliberately. ‘I’m taking you to a doctor. You’re hurt, I know that. Be strong a while longer, dear sister.’ He studied her face. Could she understand? ‘Can you hear me, Beth? Martin is here. We are taking you to a doctor. Do you understand? You’re safe,’ he said, repeating himself in the hope she could release the terror that had held her.

There was the slightest of movements as her chin tilted down. Her eyes remained closed.

Richard hesitated to ask the question that needed an answer. ‘Beth. Who killed Challenor?’

He waited, his ear close to her lips. There was no response. He asked again: ‘Who attacked you and John Challenor?’

After a few seconds her lips moved. He put his ear close again. Her answer was barely audible. ‘Galley… slaves.’

Her response made him pull back. Could he have misheard? He bent his head down to her. ‘Galley slaves?’ he said firmly.

He waited.

Again, there was the slightest tilt of her chin. There was nothing more. She had slipped away.

‘Coming alongside, Richard,’ said Martin, manoeuvring the barge against mooring posts. ‘Best get yourself ready. They might not be too friendly having strangers arriving at this time of night.’

The barge nudged the stanchions. Martin shipped his oar and threw a rope around the nearest post. Richard had clambered forward and done the same. They gazed up at the black shape that loomed next to them. The building had no lights showing. Nor would there be at such an hour.

‘Stay with her,’ said Richard, taking the barge’s lantern and jumping ashore.

‘Careful, lad. These people have a wealth of goods stored in there. There’ll be guards coming your way soon.’

‘I know. I don’t intend doing anything until they get here.’

Richard stood beneath the arches of the landing quay with the lantern held so his face could be seen. Light seeped from inside the building. A door opened and two armed men appeared. They carried curved swords and lanterns of their own and strode towards him. Richard placed his lamp down and pulled up his sleeve exposing the tattoo of the Janissary knife.

*

One nightwatchman stayed on the quay as the other ushered Richard through a vast warehouse. More lights appeared at the foot of a staircase. He knew the upstairs rooms were places the Turks did business, as well as it being accommodation for some of the important merchants who brought their spices and silks into Venice. Their long-established trade links made a valuable contribution to Venetian wealth. The gamble was whether they would help him. The two guards escorted him upstairs to the second floor. The corridor was wide, the doors few. That meant, he reasoned, that whoever lived here had status and took as much space as they wanted.

One of the guards stopped him from going any further. Richard made no protest but stood with his back against the wall, the armed man not four feet from him, the lantern held steadily, the sword ready for use should whoever be in charge decide his life was not worth saving.

The second guard returned minutes later. ‘Your name?’ he asked in Venetian.

‘Richard Sheriff,’ he answered in English.

The guard showed no sign of recognition and went back into the room. A stronger light was visible inside the room as the door opened and closed, which meant whoever they had dragged from his sleep was now awake. The guard reappeared. He beckoned Richard. The man guarding him lowered his sword and allowed Richard past. He was escorted through the doorway into a lavishly furnished room, rich with woven rugs smothering the floor. Light glowed through a stained-glass lamp. A servant brought lit candles and placed them on either side of a low divan. The intimacy of the room created a warmth that contrasted with the patrician’s house he had visited. Richard could smell a gentle fragrance of incense. As the servants left, an adjoining door opened and a man in his fifties, tall with a light beard peppered grey, entered the room. He wore a robe undergarment and a silk

embroidered kaftan over it, his feet encased in ornately decorated slippers. His bearing and dress denoted his status. He settled himself on the divan and gazed at Richard, who by comparison looked little better than a common bargeman.

‘I am Yûsuf Bey,’ the Turk said in English, and then pressed a hand on his heart, dipping his head in greeting. ‘*Selamün aleyküm*.’

Richard did not know how to respond to the man’s greeting, so he placed his hand on his heart and bowed his head, continuing in English. ‘Thank you, sir, for seeing me. I apologize for the late hour, but there is some urgency in me being here. My name is Richard Sheriff.’

‘The Englishman,’ said the Turk.

‘I am,’ said Richard. Realizing that it was a statement rather than a question. Yûsuf Bey had not asked whether he was *an* Englishman, but had declared his knowledge of Richard’s identity.

Yûsuf Bey gestured for Richard to show his tattoo. He bent forward and obliged the man who was his only hope of helping his sister. The Turk nodded when he saw it.

‘Your name is already known to me,’ said Yûsuf Bey. ‘My ships trade and messages are sent that can be as valuable as the cargo they carry. Mehmet Artan is the Janissary captain who gave you that tattoo. He knew you were being sold here in Venice. We know your story.’

Richard felt a surge of gratitude towards the fighting man back in Tunis. ‘I am honoured, Yûsuf Bey, but he could not know that I would seek help from the Turks in Venice.’

‘But should you ever have needed our hospitality, we were forewarned, and it is gladly given.’ He extended his hand to the divan opposite his own. ‘Please, make yourself comfortable. How is it we can assist you?’

Richard quickly related what had happened to Elizabeth and why he had sought help from the Turkish merchant and his community. As the story unfolded, Yûsuf Bey’s expression of concern deepened. ‘She is here?’

‘With my bargeman.’

The Turk got to his feet, Richard did the same.

‘We have Turk and Arab physicians. Please, allow me to offer you their services and her presence here will not be known beyond this place. One moment, please.’

He rang a small bell on a side table. The door opened. Yûsuf Bey spoke rapidly with a gentle lilt to his voice. He was obviously giving commands. The guard nodded and turned away.

‘I have instructed my men to bring your sister from the barge. Go to her and ensure everything is done as you would wish. They will bring her to a private room. Two physicians have been summoned and will be here shortly. You and your man can stay until they arrive and examine her. From what you have told me, her violation requires women to help in her examination. We have such women who are here to assist should a doctor require it. Rest assured she will be treated with respect.’

Richard went back along the corridor where one of the guards waited, his sword back in its scabbard, and who now acted as his guide. By the time they returned to the quayside, four other servants had joined them while two guards remained vigilant that what was happening was not being observed. The servants carried a large embroidered cloth, padded and stitched. A cover, perhaps for a bed, Richard thought. It didn’t matter. It would ensure his sister was going to be as comfortable as possible while being carried inside.

He and Martin gently eased Elizabeth from the barge onto the cover. The four men took the strain at each corner, tightening the material so that her body was well supported.

‘We can go with her,’ said Richard to Martin.

‘Best I stay with the barge. It’ll be light in a couple of hours. We should be gone by then if we’re not to arouse suspicion.’

Richard followed the men inside and back up to the first floor. The men took Elizabeth into another room: smaller, less furnished. It was simple and uncluttered. The bed had a muslin netting around it, already tied back so that his sister, still covered by Richard’s blanket, could be lifted gently onto the bed. Once that was done the servants left. Two women came in with towels and water, a chemise draped over one of the women’s arm. They arranged small lanterns on side tables, and carried another next to the bed so that everything they needed was to hand.

As one of the women eased back the blanket from Elizabeth, the other faced Richard. She made a delicate gesture for him to leave. He took a step forward to his sister, wanting desperately to enfold her hand into his, but the

woman blocked his path. She shook her head and smiled. The other woman was already cutting free Elizabeth's dress.

Richard closed the door gently behind him. A servant beckoned him back to Yûsuf Bey's room. As he went in another servant was whispering to his master, who nodded and then dismissed him. A tray of food and drink was on a low table.

'You and your… is the bargeman friend or servant?'

'Friend. I am enslaved, as is he.'

'Of course. I understand.' Slavery was of no consequence to the Turk. 'There is food and drink for you both.'

'Thank you, but I'm not hungry.'

'Concern for those we love gnaws at us worse than hunger, but if we feed the stomach, we feed our strength to face what must be faced. Please. Eat. I have already sent food and drink to the bargeman.'

Richard chose a few choice pieces. The food was spiced and made him crave more. Of course, he was hungry. It had been a few tormented hours since he had last eaten. He slowed, not wanting to appear ravenous or ill-mannered. He dipped his fingers into the small bowl of water provided and wiped his hands. He looked at the door, hoping that someone would bring him news.

Yûsuf Bey saw the young man's concern. 'The doctors are already with her,' he said. 'In good time, Master Riccardo. We will know what must be done soon enough.' He changed the subject quickly to divert Richard's worry. 'But I am told you are now a knife maker at the Vieri forge.'

'How would you know that, sir?'

'How would I not?' came the reply. 'The Vieri forge is famous and has needed a knife maker of repute for some time. It appears they have found one. Perhaps I might commission such a knife for myself.'

'I am already in your debt, Yûsuf Bey. I will make you the finest of knives as a mark of my gratitude.'

'Then what debt can remain between us?' He smiled.

The door opened. A man in his thirties, accompanied by an older man twice his age, entered the room. The younger of the two was a Turk; the other's dress indicated he was Arab. The younger man glanced at Richard. His look of concern was clear to see.

Richard stood as the two men bowed to Yûsuf Bey. Each spoke in turn. Neither man expressed urgency in their voice, at least to Richard's ear. That did not mean there was none. Yûsuf Bey nodded and dismissed them.

'Your sister is in need of my physicians' skills. I would ask you to leave her in our care. It is a hardship you must endure until I can send better news.'

'I can't be seen coming here, Yûsuf Bey. Once those responsible learn my sister has been released, they will be searching for her.'

'I can guarantee her safety here, and your task is simple. Hunt them down and kill them. And in that, I cannot be involved.'

'Of course.'

'Return in seven days unless you hear from me. Have your boatman bring you here in darkness.'

'Thank you, Yûsuf Bey.'

The Turk nodded. 'There is no need. Now, you must excuse me. I must attend to my prayers. It will soon be dawn.'

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PART FIVE

THE SERPENT AND THE LION

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CHAPTER 70

It was First light when Richard and Martin returned to the forge. Sea mist lifted from the water's surface like breath cut with a knife blade. The workshop urchins were not yet at their benches, but Elias Jordan and Antonio had waited for their return.

As Martin secured the barge, Richard stepped into the welcoming warmth of the forge's firepit, already glowing. Jordan and the old knife maker looked as though they had had as little sleep as Richard and his companion.

'Where did you take her?' asked Jordan. 'I must assure the Signora that she is safe.'

Antonio offered his apprentice a flask of wine.

Richard made the *maggiordomo* wait for his answer. He gulped. 'She's safe, Master Jordan. That's all she needs to know.'

'Dammit, you'll obey or you'll feel her displeasure and my fist.'

'Then strike me because when she learns that you have beaten her knife maker, it'll be you who feels her anger.'

Antonio raised a hand to calm them. 'It's been a long night, Elias. Let's not forget what Riccardo has been through, and more importantly his sister.'

Jordan took a moment to let his frustration settle. 'Very well. My first question should have been how she has fared from her ordeal.'

'She's alive and you can assure the Nobildonna that she is in the best of care.'

'But you won't divulge where?' said Jordan.

'Listen,' said Antonio. 'The less we know, the better. Even your great household has spies, as does the Doge's Palace. A slip of the tongue, a

conversation overheard through the crack of a door, a whisper slithering through a keyhole. If Riccardo says she's safe, then let's be thankful she's alive and in good hands.'

'As you protect your sister, I—' Elias stopped as Domenico came through the back of the forge pulling on his apron and saw Richard with his grandfather and Jordan.

Antonio turned. 'Domenico, come here.'

He stepped forward cautiously.

'You're not in any trouble,' said his grandfather. 'This is business about what knives the Nobildonna wants from Riccardo. Go into the *campo* and bring back fresh bread. There's a *barcaiolo* moored outside. Give some to him and bring the rest in here. Understand?'

Domenico nodded, casting an uncertain glance at Richard, who smiled and patted his shoulder. 'I'll need your help today, Domenico. We've blades to forge and steel to harden.'

Richard's encouragement did the trick.

Jordan waited until the door closed. He lowered his voice and picked up from where he was interrupted. 'As you protect your sister, I'm charged with protecting the Signora. And finding who killed Challenor and his people. Someone conspired to use a house watchman to send your sister to the *pozzi* and then have him murdered. This attack on Challenor was planned.'

'I think it was revenge,' said Richard. 'My sister regained consciousness enough to tell me who had killed him.'

The two men looked momentarily stunned.

'It was galley slaves.'

Jordan and Antonio stared at him in disbelief.

'That's what she told me.'

'Galley slaves from Challenor's piracy?' said Jordan.

Richard nodded. 'How else would she know? She must have recognized them. There were more than twenty saved from an Algerian galley. Didn't you sell the poor wretches like you sold me?'

Jordan searched his memory. 'I did, but…' He pulled on his cloak. 'If that's all she told you, then that is where we start our search. I must get back.'

'You still have word on the street looking for the killers?' said Richard.

‘Yes, but from what the child saw, I can’t believe the men who went into Challenor’s house that night were who your sister thinks them to be. Those galley slaves were separated and sold on. How would they come together and plan this attack?’

‘Someone found them and paid them,’ said Antonio.

‘And those are the men we are concerned about,’ said Jordan. ‘Galley slaves do not plan such an attack without help.’

‘My sister barely had the breath to speak, but that’s what she told me. Galley slaves went into the house that night and murdered Challenor and the others.’

Jordan gave it some thought. ‘Then I’ll check the ledger of the men taken from Challenor’s ship.’ After a pause, he added, ‘You know she’s a free woman, don’t you?’

The thought had not occurred to Richard.

Jordan saw his knife maker needed an explanation. ‘Had she been enslaved by Challenor, although I’ll wager she didn’t know she wasn’t, his death would have granted her freedom. She has always been free – Challenor loved her – but the authorities won’t know that. It still sits badly for her. A slave’s owner dies and the slave is free. It will look as though she sought her freedom by killing him.’

‘Then she could be found passage to England?’

‘Yes. Secretly. But you can’t go with her. You’re a member of Antonio’s fraternity now, and you swore allegiance to Venice. Your skills are needed here. The reputation of the forge must continue. The Signora owns us both, Richard, and we must do what is expected of us.’

‘Then that’s a trade I’ll gladly make.’

‘I suspect she won’t leave,’ Jordan told him. ‘If you’re here, then she’ll stay. And that is when we must find her a suitable position in a merchant’s house.’

It made sense. The thought of them both being together in the place Challenor had abducted them to was at least a small mercy. ‘She was governess and housekeeper for a merchant at home,’ he said.

Jordan’s tone was matter-of-fact. ‘Then, once her health is restored, her future will be secured. So that is one less matter to concern you.’

‘Thank you, Master Jordan.’

Jordan tugged the cloak's collar into his neck. 'You are to be looked after. Make your knives, Richard, and the Signora will be content.'

Jordan turned away to find his gondolier and return to the Signora's house with the hope that names in the slave ledger might reveal the killers.

*

Bells rang across the city, signalling the start of the working day. When Jordan left, the old man took Richard to a room at the back of the forge.

'Domenico will be back soon enough, but we must talk, you and me.'

'I'll do my work for you, Maestro Antonio, but I'd ask you to let me go to my sister if I am beckoned.'

'You have my blessing and I offer prayers for her quick recovery. We must attend to the present. If she is to be cleansed of any dishonour, then the men responsible must be found. And once Elias believes he has found them, then the matter rests with you. We have spoken about this before. It is your vendetta, and when it is done your life will change again.' He sighed and sat down on a bench, then he reached into a low drawer, stiff with lack of use. 'When you kill a man, you must look into his eyes. You commit his soul to hell because these are the men who need to be killed. But you are still taking a man's life. And that look will never leave you. You remember the shame of taking a life. And one day that shrivels and dies and you accept what you have done without guilt. Do you understand?'

Richard nodded.

'When you strike, it must be done without fear or hesitation, otherwise you might be lying in your own blood. You cannot let anger or grief flood your heart or your mind.'

'I have neither left inside me. Not since I witnessed what they'd done to her.'

'Good!' said Antonio. 'That's as it should be.' He pulled out a long object wrapped in an oilskin and set it to one side.

He stood and placed a finger on Richard's neck beneath the chin. 'Here from the front, drive a blade through the man's brain.' He touched his throat. 'Strike here and he'll drown in his own blood.' Antonio's finger moved to Richard's ear. 'This too. An instant kill.' His chest: 'Here, the heart.' Then a grubby fingernail went to his stomach. 'The belly floods with

blood. Nothing can save a man with a thrust there.' Antonio opened his palm and made a cutting motion with his hand across his own groin. 'There is an artery here that, once severed, no surgeon, even if he stood at your side, could save a man.'

Richard remained impassive. That the old man knew the death cuts suggested he had personal knowledge of how to kill a man. Antonio sat down again and beckoned Richard to sit opposite him.

'Some men are powerful and even when wounded can retaliate. Strike hard and true and seize the life from them.' His hand rested on the oilskin. Whatever lay beneath it seemed to make the old man think for a moment of some unspoken past. 'What I tell you now is what no one but the dead know. The Signora's husband, a man of power and authority, a member of the Council of Ten, saw my talent for knife making just as yours has been seen. His wealth bought me my life since I was a young man. He was a rich nobleman, one of the patricians; such people have ruled for hundreds of years and there are times when they deem men should be killed. Don't ask me for what reason. Political or personal, it made no difference. The state has assassins ready to strike here and on the mainland, and those on the Terraferma range far and wide. When I was asked if I was willing to repay his patronage, I readily agreed.'

Antonio unwrapped the cloth and revealed a thin twelve-inch blade, its crossguard straight, its hilt wound with metal and leather for grip and an undecorated pommel to help balance the deadly weapon.

'I forged this stiletto. It's what I used in the service of my patrician di Zorzi and of Venice. In my day, when word was sent for the knife maker, it meant there was killing to be done. And I believe the men I killed deserved to die. To this day, I am sure my secret is safe. It was well guarded so that no threat came back on me from another's vendetta. I was of great value as a master knife maker, so I was protected.' He offered the hilt to Richard. 'Take it and my secret with my blessing because once you've avenged your sister those in power will want you to kill again. It will be the price you pay for your own life.'

Richard felt the weapon's balance. It was perfect. He handed it back. 'I'm grateful. Your secret is safe with me, but I want to forge my own blade.'

‘Riccardo, if there are high-born men behind these killings, you must strike swiftly. Such men are the lions of Venice. They are the power within the state. This will pierce leather and layers of cloth. Even mail. It can easily be concealed in your sleeve so that the victim will never see it before you strike.’

Richard stood. ‘Maestro Antonio, I want them to see my knife before I kill them.’

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CHAPTER 71

Nobildonna Chiara di Zorzi's day started far later than Elias Jordan's return to her house. It had been a long night, and he ordered hot water to bathe, fresh clothing, and food. Washed and changed and with his hunger satisfied, he was ready to face the Signora whose personal attendants had dressed her.

He related what had occurred the previous night.

'She was badly abused?'

'By the look of her she had been through torment few women would survive.'

The Signora showed no sign of distress at the thought of a woman being beaten and raped. Her concern lay elsewhere. 'But she's alive?'

'Yes. Barely it would seem.'

He recounted how Richard had moved her away from the forge and what his sister had told him. The Signora Chiara was as disbelieving as he had been when she heard that galley slaves were responsible.

'Common men? Finding Challenor's house and doing what they did? Unlikely,' she said.

'And so I thought,' he answered. He held the ledger where the sale of the *Falcon*'s captives had been recorded. 'I have checked those that Challenor declared taken from the Algerian galley. There were twenty-three in total that came ashore.'

'And if any of those men had the opportunity to stage the attack on Challenor's house then they would have looted and raped before the killing.'

'I agree, Signora.'

'And so you checked?'

‘I did. The men from the galleys were sent to the mainland. Five to the timber-cutting plantations; the remainder to the quarries in Istria. They were sold to people we have used over the years. Had any man escaped we would have been told.’

He offered her the ledger. She checked his records and handed it back. ‘Then the woman was delirious. Where is she?’

‘Safe and with medical care.’

‘That’s not what I asked.’

‘Riccardo took her to a place and does not wish to reveal where.’

‘Since when does a slave dictate to me!’

‘I thought it best to accept his decision because—’

She snapped. ‘Know your place, Elias! You are as enslaved as him. When I demand an answer, I expect it to be given.’

Elias Jordan felt the verbal lashing like the sting of the whip that had once been wielded twenty years before, when he was captured as a sixteen-year-old boy from an English merchant ship. It had been the Signora’s husband who had trained him in the ways of Venice, and it had been he who had kept him as his personal servant. The Signora had lost two infants in childbirth, and thereafter her husband contented himself with courtesans. The patrician’s death changed little except for him being taken to the Signora’s bed when she commanded. That, and the opportunity to deal with merchants and ships’ captains that allowed him to receive bribes for favouring them over others when it came to bypassing customs and finding willing buyers for their cargo. Especially slaves. He prided himself that he was never greedy enough to cause complaint and arouse suspicion from the Signora. She might have suspected such a misdemeanour in this age of corruption, but if she did, she chose to ignore it. He had proved his worth to her in more ways than one. Challenor’s death, though, would now cause them both financial loss.

He lowered his head to accept her anger. Such bad temper usually presaged a visit to her bedchamber that night. ‘I apologize, Nobildonna, but I did not pursue where he had taken her because it reassured him that a slip of the tongue would not betray her location. And you commanded that his best interests be considered. He is back at the forge. His knives must still be made.’

Her irritation passed almost as quickly as she had rebuked him. Jordan's explanation was practical. As always. She nodded her acceptance. 'And so we are no closer to finding the killers and who it is behind them?'

'We are not. But my contacts are scouring the streets. We find one killer and he will lead us to the others.'

'Double the reward I agreed to offer. I want the men who planned this attack.' She turned her attention away from him by way of dismissal.

Elias Jordan left the room. The sooner they found the killers the better his life would be and he could get back to overseeing all the elements that constituted the Nobildonna's household. And his loss of Challenor's income needed to be made up elsewhere.

*

No word from the Turks had reached Richard about his sister, making him hope she was on the road to recovery. Waiting tested his patience, but five days of silence drove him to work day and night at the forge to finish his killing knife. When Jacopo the bellows boy slumped from tiredness, Domenico took his place, and when more fuel was needed, it was he who fed the fire. Antonio had the doors closed and the windows shuttered at night to muffle the noise of retribution being hammered into white-hot steel. What emerged from the fire was a seven-inch double-edged honed blade. A pommel, its weight balancing blade and handle, was a lion's head, the symbol of Venice. The metal hilt was forged to fit Richard's hand with a depression at its base to accommodate his thumb and give a better grip where he had stamped the Vieri and Sceriffo mark. Below the recurved crossguard – one side of which twisted upward, the other down – was a fuller, a groove channelled into the blade, cut into the steel from the base of the guard to the needle-sharp tip. It made the knife lighter and gave it the weight Richard desired. The groove was criss-crossed by a twisting line in the form of a slender snake inlaid with silver that drew the eye of the beholder from the blued steel blade as it curled towards the lion's head.

Antonio had studied his knife maker's drawing and measurements and knew it to be an effective killing weapon. He laid a hand on the young knife maker's shoulder. 'And so this is what will strike a Venetian lion if they're involved. A blade that shows its intent. It's good. It's justice.'

When Richard was in the final stages of polishing the knife, Antonio had overseen the making of its scabbard in the workshop to ensure a perfect fit. Domenico was fast asleep, head slumped on his arms across the workbench, as Richard slid the blade into the scabbard. Its chape was silver, as was the locket at its throat to ensure an effortless movement for the blade in and out. A skilled leather worker had tooled on it the design of the Janissary tattoo from Richard's arm.

The knife was a thing of beauty. Now it lay like a resting serpent waiting to strike.

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CHAPTER 72

One of Elias Jordan's contacts alerted him about a prostitute wanting to sell a ring who had approached a Greek pawnbroker in *sestiere* Castello. The wary broker had given the woman a little money, explaining the jewel she thought to be valuable might be nothing more than a piece of polished Venetian glass. He made sure he recorded her name. Prostitutes did not usually get paid with jewellery and word had reached him of interest from Elias Jordan, a man with connections to the patriciate. Perhaps there was business to be done.

Richard climbed aboard Jordan's gondola. Two men were already aboard. Jordan made no introduction but to Richard's eye they looked like bodyguards, most likely taken from their house duties. There was an oarsman front and back who, once they had pushed away from the bank, powered the slim vessel rapidly along the *rio*, turning onto the Grand Canal and then across to the other side.

'This man trades in the Castello. He does good business with sailors who bring him artefacts. The woman came into his shop yesterday. It might be nothing. A sailor might have given her cheap jewellery. We'll know soon enough.'

Jordan ordered the gondoliers to take a narrow *rio* once they were across. It doglegged and then he told them to stop where steps led onto a path, and from there a narrow passage that swallowed the light. Richard followed Jordan, who clearly knew his way. The pawnbroker's window was a jumble of goods. Cobwebs strung across an old painted carved box to a cabinet of snuff boxes, pocket knives and trinkets. As soon as Jordan strode through the door, the man behind the counter got to his feet and pushed

aside his chair. There was no doubting the authority of the well-dressed black man. The younger man with him seemed of little consequence. The two others who stood outside the door were not men to argue with. He smiled. ‘I sent word.’

‘Why would I be here if you had not?’ said a stony-faced Jordan. ‘Where is it?’

The Greek bent below the counter, lifted out a soft cloth, blew on his fingers and delicately unwrapped a ring. It was a rich blue colour with bevelled edges, each corner bearing a small gold and silver clasp to hold it onto a broad silver band.

‘You told the woman this was not valuable?’

The Greek shrugged. ‘She was a whore. I gave her enough to buy wine and bread for a month. Told her I’d try and sell it on. That it would take time.’ He watched Jordan examine the ring.

‘You convinced her it was glass?’

‘I did. Jewellers make a good living making cheap jewellery look like the real thing.’

‘The woman’s name?’

‘Maddalena.’

‘There are a thousand and more whores in Venice. How many do you think are called Maddalena? If that is indeed her name.’

‘I’ve seen her before. She works with the whores at the Rialto, near the warehouses, and then comes across here to the docks when there are enough ships in the harbour.’

Jordan nodded. It was information he could investigate further. ‘There are no other rings?’

The Greek shook his head. His chin tilted downwards. As if he couldn’t bear to meet the black man’s penetrating gaze. He had no chance of carrying off the lie.

‘So, she brings this one ring in. Only one? You don’t want to refresh your memory?’

The man swallowed. ‘I sent word, didn’t I?’

‘You did,’ said Jordan. ‘You wish to collect a reward on this ring, but you have kept… what… another two or three? Because you know their real value. Because a woman has brought in rings that someone has given her to pawn, so that he does not have to show his face. He hides behind a woman

as you hide behind a lie. You take me for a fool? I know what I'm looking for. Shall I have my man here search the place? If he finds anything more of interest to me, my companions outside will come into your shop. One will hold you in that chair and the other will garrotte you.' Jordan paused and watched the frightened man. 'Now, you will be rewarded and I will say nothing more on the matter. If you speak of this or warn this woman, then… well, you understand. So what else did she bring you?'

With trembling hands, the man reached down again and pulled out a small box. He handed it to Jordan. There were three rings inside. Jordan sighed. He knew Elizabeth had worn two rings on each hand. He remembered Challenor telling him that she had refused them at first, thinking them to be stolen. Challenor vowed they had been made by a jeweller in the Cannaregio. And, for once, he had not lied.

Jordan looked at Richard, who nodded. He recognized the slender band of Devonshire silver as Elizabeth's. Jordan emptied the rings into his hand, wrapped them in the soft cloth with the first ring, and tucked it into his doublet.

The Greek's voice trembled. 'You will pay me? I risked a lot—'

'Sending word?' Jordan finished his sentence.

The man's head bobbed.

'I offered a reward and I am a man of my word. If I was not, what informer would ever trust me again?' He pulled free a purse from his belt and tossed it to the man. Richard didn't know how much would be in the leather pouch, but its weight alone told him it was substantial.

'Do we have an understanding?' said Jordan as the happy pawnbroker peeked inside the purse.

As he lifted his head to agree, he saw the black man and his companion were already at the door, their backs to him.

'You can trust me.'

Jordan was outside the door and one of his henchmen reached in to pull it closed, glaring at the Greek pawnbroker.

'I know,' said Jordan without looking back.

*

When they reached the gondola, Jordan handed Richard the rings. ‘These belonged to your sister. They are valuable. They are part of her dowry. You are still enslaved so you have no right to them. If I let you keep them, you would never be able to sell them. In time, I can sell them for you and would keep the money for that day in the future when it will be rightfully yours. I shouldn’t even speak of this, but these are unusual circumstances. What would you have me do?’

‘They came from Challenor. I want nothing to do with them.’

Jordan extended his hand to take them back, but Richard pressed the cloth to his chest. ‘They’re my sister’s. And she can decide what to do with them when she recovers.’

Jordan resisted telling him that having heard nothing for almost a week, the likelihood was that she wouldn’t survive. But there was always a chance. Once the outcome was known the matter of the rings could be addressed again. It was important to keep the young knife maker loyal to the woman who owned him.

‘Very well. Now the matter of finding the man who took them. I am not here to apprehend anyone. I seek information and confirm its validity. The rings needed to be identified. Neither I nor the Signora’s men can be seen to be directly involved.’

‘We have a chance to find one of these men now.’

‘We’ll employ others to do that. There are more than a hundred thousand people on this island and among them, twelve thousand whores. Finding one man will take time.’

‘We don’t have time. We must flush him out. This is the first chance we’ve had. He’s close, he has to be. He’s already taken a risk by trying to sell the rings. How long will he wait until he panics and believes someone has betrayed him? Even the woman’s life might be at risk. I can find him,’ said Richard.

‘You’re required to keep working.’

‘I’ll work. I have knives in preparation. I also have friends who will help me search out the killers. The people I know have no link to the Signora.’

‘But you do.’

‘I have a right. You heard what Antonio said. Venetians understand honour.’

‘And where will you be?’

‘Take me to San Polo.’

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CHAPTER 73

Stefan Carefully Listened to the young knife maker's information as he looked at the rings that confirmed everything he had been told.

'We'll do what we can, Riccardo. I can't pull men off this work, otherwise I'll have the authorities breathing down my neck, but I can rotate one man at a time.' He gave the matter some thought. He had promised to help, but it was deciding the best way to do so. 'We've heard of one man, not here, not in the Rialto area, who has been spending a lot of money in a casino, and he's not a regular. So, who suddenly gets his hands on a large amount of money? For doing what? He's over in Santa Croce – we haven't found him yet. Do you think it might be the same man who took your sister's rings? Maybe it's just a coincidence.'

Richard felt uncertainty creep into his thoughts. The lead to this man was so slender. His anguish was plain to see. 'Stefan, I don't know. This is all I have. The Greek said the woman was from the Rialto warehouses. Is that close to Santa Croce?'

'Well, it's the next *sestiere*. If it's two different men, then each might be known to the other.' The master mason looked to where his men worked on the scaffolding. 'I can take one man: Gregor. He's the best choice for this. He knows more women than any of the others working here, which is why he never has any money. All right, so we ask around Campo San Cassiano. That's where most of the brothels are. It's as good a place as any to start.'

*

The man called Gregor was an agreeable companion, promising absolute success in his boss's mission to find the woman Maddalena. Everyone knew him, he boasted. Wherever she was, he would find her. The small *campo* was a fifteen-minute walk from the Frari. Richard followed the two masons over a footbridge across a *rio* into the square where a plain-looking church faced them on the far side and groups of women of all ages gathered on corners and in doorways. Men strolled among them, choosing the women they wanted. Gregor went from one group to another while Richard and Stefan held back. He had no success, even though he was obviously known to many of them. Richard had not been close to so many women willing to offer sex before. The sight made him think of the women he had tried to save before his fateful journey had begun. A woman stripped to the waist and whipped along the street in Totnes. Another who had no choice but to sell herself, hanged because her infant had died. What he saw now was little else but a scene of despair. These women seemed to him to be just as helpless.

As they pressed through a narrow passageway, women exposed their breasts and pressed against him. Stefan brushed them aside, sent a concerned look to the young knife maker and, grabbing his arm, tugged him through the eager whores with a warning to an equally distracted Gregor to keep his mind on finding the woman. Gregor half turned and shrugged, a wide grin on his face. He said something to Stefan that Richard couldn't catch, but he heard the word *convento* as they emerged into a corner of the *campo*. Richard held back. 'There's a convent here?'

Stefan shook his head. 'It's the name of a brothel. It's run like a damned convent. They call the woman in charge the abbess and the whores are sisters.'

'I know someone who was sent there. I thought she had gone to a real convent. She might help me.'

Stefan quickly translated to Gregor. He pointed further along the street. His pace quickened until he stopped in front of an arched entrance where a dozen women loitered, their world-weary faces creasing into welcoming smiles. Behind them was a dead-end alley with an iron gate and courtyard.

Gregor questioned the women. The name, Maddalena, was mentioned more than once. The women's uncertainty twisted smiles into scowls. They folded their arms and turned their backs. They knew something.

‘They don’t want to talk,’ said Stefan. ‘If she’s living with a man, then he’s trouble and frightens them.’

‘Can we get inside?’ said Richard. ‘If I can find the woman who was sent here, then she might talk to me. Ask them if an Englishwoman is here. Her name is Elaine Ross.’

Being asked about a different woman seemed to relax them. They repeated the English name Elaine, but then one of them said, ‘Elena!’ which Richard realized would be the closest sounding name in their language. The women nodded and pointed down the dead-end passage.

Once through the gate and inside the main door they entered a cold, barely lit hall, with a heavy wood staircase to the left and a guard sitting on a stool, a cudgel at his side and a knife in his belt. He was burly enough to deter anyone who might cause trouble. He didn’t bother to stand up when he saw the three men, quickly assessing that they posed no threat. He tilted his head towards the stairs. Stefan led the way. The next floor was a reception area that had chairs on one wall and a desk with a woman in her sixties sitting behind it on the other. Her fingers were scrolling down a ledger. Her hair was pinned up, her make-up was not as garish as Richard might have imagined, and although her attire had seen better days, it was still impressively adorned with pearls and lace. Perhaps, he thought, she had once been one of the famed courtesans who, when she reached an age when she was no longer desirable, had had the choice of retiring to a convent. Or, Richard thought, opening her own.

Stefan did the talking. The woman looked from him to Gregor and Richard. She did not seem too interested in being helpful until Stefan spilled some coins onto the desk. She nodded, pointed to a corridor, and entered the amount in her ledger.

‘Your Englishwoman is in the third room on the right. Gregor and I will wait here. You owe me a new chisel.’

Gregor made an imploring gesture to Stefan and a plea to spend time there himself. Stefan’s rebuke was for the mason to sit and wait.

‘For God’s sake, Riccardo. We don’t have all day. Ask what you must…’ He paused, then relented as he sensed the knife maker’s anxiety. ‘Do what you will. It’s paid for.’

Richard stood outside the room. His heartbeat quickened with the hope of finding information about the other woman and the killer. He stepped

inside the room. It was bright enough. A single window. A bed. A small table with a bowl, water jug and a towel. The woman sitting on the side of the bed stared up at him. Her chemise undone, her breasts half exposed. Her tousled hair unkempt. This was not Elaine Ross, the young woman who had shared their journey from Dartmouth. This was a woman at least ten years older than the twenty-two-year-old fish seller, whose ready smile radiated a willingness to take life as it came. This life had not been kind to her. Her protruding belly pushed at the thin cotton. She gazed at him uncertainly.

'Elaine,' he said gently. 'It's me. Richard Sheriff. Elizabeth's brother.'

The girl stood, hand to mouth. Speechless, she reached out. He took her hand and eased her back to the bed. 'Richard, merciful God. How is it you are here?' The Elaine Ross he knew returned. Her head shook as she laughed. 'I have become more stupid than I was. I know why you are here.' She kissed the back of his hand. 'You never noticed me when you came to Dartmouth. You never knew how pleased I'd have been to take you to my bed without even a halfpenny being pressed into my hand. Others paid a shilling. But you would have had my pleasures for free. And now here you are, being obliged to pay the abbess. Oh, Richard.'

He covered his hand with his own. 'Elaine, you're with child.'

She sighed matter-of-factly, without any hint of regret. 'I know. They'll take it from me when the time comes. There are homes for orphans in the city and I can earn good money as a wet nurse. Merchant's wives think they have suffered enough once they produce a child.' She smiled. 'But it will be all right. There'll be no harm in lying with me.'

He sat back at arm's length. 'Elaine, that's not why I'm here. I need your help. It's about Elizabeth.'

'Was she taken to a brothel?'

'No. Far worse.'

Elaine stared at him, realizing the young blacksmith she knew from what felt like a lifetime ago was in trouble. She reached for her shawl and draped it around her shoulders. 'What is it? What has happened? Your good sister never offered a harsh word against me. She knew what I was like, but…' Her voice trailed away. 'Tell me.'

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CHAPTER 74

Richard Pressed Himself into a doorway opposite the building where the killer was staying with the prostitute Maddalena. Stefan and Gregor were at his shoulder. The street was quiet. The killer had chosen a house in a dead-end alley. Washing hung from windows; the smell of cooking wafted down.

‘Elaine said he’s on the first floor in the end room. He’s lying low until he thinks he’s sold the rings. Maddalena takes him food and wine. She’s across at the Castello working until tonight.’

Stefan looked left and right. ‘There’ll be a back door. He won’t box himself in like this without an escape route.’

‘There is a narrow *calle* at the back,’ said Gregor. ‘I know this area. Fifty yards along the *calle* is a *rio* that goes straight into the Grand Canal.’

‘You have a choice, Riccardo,’ said Stefan. ‘We could go in, but he’ll be armed. If we wait here, he might never come out. He has no reason to. And if that house is occupied by women and children they could get in the way, or worse still, raise the alarm. For all we know the people there have no issue with him.’

Richard immediately thought of sending word to Martin, who by now might be waiting at the forge. ‘If we could overpower him, could we get him onto a barge?’

‘And do what with him? I can’t take him back to the Frari. I say if we go in, we force him to talk and then make our escape.’ Stefan’s look emphasized the obvious.

‘Then we would have to kill him in there,’ said Richard.

‘He has to die whatever happens.’

Richard heard the sound of babies crying, a raised voice from a woman, and the laughter of older children. ‘We can’t kill him in there. The magistrates will make life hard for those people.’

‘Time to stop thinking of others and get the information you need,’ said the stonemason.

Richard shook his head. ‘He won’t give up information easily.’ He pictured what might have to be done to the killer. ‘We need to get him out of there and take him somewhere.’

Stefan sighed. ‘Where? The day’s running short, Richard. I should get back to the men.’

‘Can we leave Gregor to watch the house? I need to go and speak to Gasparo,’ Richard said.

Stefan thought for a moment. ‘If I leave him here, he’ll have his hose down, cock out and his purse lightened. I’ll send him back to tell the men what I want doing. I’ll stay. Gasparo is a good man: he’ll do what he can. Get going.’

Stefan instructed Gregor who then accompanied Richard down the *calle*.

*

Gasparo and the two other butchers sat at the same table and drank the same red wine, dipping torn pieces of bread into their cups. They listened to what Richard had discovered so far. Gasparo rubbed a hand across his beard, part of the decision-making process. He turned to his companions.

‘What do you think?’

‘Scum like that need to pay the price,’ said one.

The other nodded. ‘Take the cart, bring the bastard here.’

Gasparo considered what they’d said. At least there was agreement. He grunted. ‘Riccardo, we said we would help and we will. If we bring him here, he dies here. You understand that? He’ll be gutted like a pig, we’ll chop him up and get rid of him come nightfall. Once you get the information you need, that is.’ He drained his cup. ‘Which won’t be difficult.’

The butcher sounded matter-of-fact about the slaughter of the wanted man. Richard felt himself being drawn into a world of pain and violence that he knew could no longer be avoided. The time had come to act and to

do so decisively and without mercy. *No mercy.* That was a harsh thing to accept. A part of him hoped that the man might admit everything he knew in exchange for his life and then for him to run. But that was a foolish thought. The first thing he would do would be to warn whoever else had been involved in the murder of Challenor's household.

He nodded at Gasparo. He understood what had to be done.

*

Gasparo's men pushed a handcart with four dead pigs half covered by canvas. They hauled it over the bridges and then waited as Gasparo and Richard went down the dead-end street to where Stefan waited. Once they discussed how they were to get the man out, Gasparo told the others to go around the back of the house while he and Stefan shadowed Richard inside.

'You have to get him to open the door,' said Stefan. 'We'll knock him down, but he mustn't have a chance to raise the alarm. Can you do that?'

'I think so. You'll have to move fast.'

Gasparo grunted. 'We're not young enough to move too fast, Riccardo, but we can hit hard.' He grinned and made a fist. 'He won't know what hit him.'

Stefan took charge of what they had to do. He looked at Richard. 'He opens the door, you reach out and pull him forward. Leave the rest to us.'

Richard's mouth was dry. He nodded, picturing his own plan in his mind's eye. If the man was bigger and heavier, such an attempt might result in him being dragged inside the room rather than the man pulled into the corridor. He decided to keep his decision to himself.

'All right?' said the mason. 'You know what to say? Keep it simple. I want to hear it.'

Richard ran through what had to be said. Stefan looked at Gasparo, who shrugged. 'He'll know he's not Venetian, but around here there are plenty of incomers.'

'All right. It'll do,' said Stefan. 'Ignore everyone we come across. They won't get in our way. No one wants trouble. The less they see and hear, the better.'

*

The tenement had a dozen families crammed inside. The ground-floor entrance stank, buckets of human waste stood outside most doors ready to be taken out and tipped into the *rio*. The air felt oppressive as Richard led the way up to the first floor. An infant's constant crying filled the air. The dimness of the corridor was a blessing as it shielded their identity from anyone who might see them through their open door. As the three men went along the corridor, doors closed behind them. Stefan was right. No one wanted to bear witness.

They stopped outside the killer's door. Stefan and Gasparo stood on either side. Richard took the cloth holding the rings from his tunic. With a final look at the two men, he knocked on the door.

No one answered for a rapid-heart-beating minute.

'What?' said a voice inside.

'I want Maddelena,' Richard said. The baby's crying piercing his thoughts. A distraction he fought to ignore.

'She's not here,' came the gruff reply.

Richard tried to imagine the man behind the voice. Forty years old, a labourer, strong.

'She's not at the docks. The Greek sent me to find her.'

'The Greek?'

'She took him rings to sell. I'll come back another time.'

They heard a bolt being drawn. The door opened a couple of inches. A pit-marked bearded face, creases around the eyes etched with dirt, peered out. From the angle at which the man stood, Richard knew he would have a shoulder against the door and a foot as a doorstop. The man peered left and right as best as the narrow gap permitted.

'You've got the money?'

'No. He can't sell them. I have them.'

'Bastard Greek. I should have gone to the Jews.'

Richard played along. 'The Greek said they're worthless.'

'Then he's blind. I know where they came from. Give them to me!'

The agitated man opened the door slightly wider, one hand through the gap.

Richard offered the rolled cloth, his fingers holding one end deliberately so that the rings tumbled. He groaned, stepping back as if to bend down and retrieve the fallen rings. The door opened.

‘Get back!’ said the man, now in the doorway, a knife in his hand. The killer levelled it at Richard as he stooped. Stefan took a half-step, smashed his cosh down onto the knife hand as Gasparo gave the man’s head a swift strike. The knife fell free, the man slumped in the doorway. The butcher and the mason dragged him clear.

‘Get the knife and your rings,’ Stefan told him. They were already dragging the unconscious man away. Richard bent, found the rings and secured them back inside his doublet. By the time he had closed the door, his two accomplices had dragged the body unceremoniously down the staircase.

Richard stopped halfway down the corridor. Every door was closed. It was silent.

The infant had stopped crying.

*

At the back door the two butchers hauled aside the pig carcasses as Stefan and Gasparo threw the unconscious man into the handcart. They piled the pig carcasses on top of him; the canvas was drawn back over. Without another word, Gasparo’s men hauled the cart away.

Stefan placed his hand on Richard’s shoulder. ‘Question him, Riccardo. If he gives up information about the gambler in Santa Croce then we know where to find him. Good luck.’

The mason turned into the house and out through the main door, making his way back to the Frari.

Gasparo’s grim countenance left Richard in no doubt about what was going to follow.

‘Now he’ll know what pain is,’ said the butcher. ‘Prepare yourself, Riccardo. It will be unpleasant.’

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CHAPTER 75

His Name was Giovanni Caratelli. His bound wrists were held on a meat hook, his feet dangling off the floor, his shirt stripped, his hose already bloodied. Hanging around him were a dozen gutted pigs, their knowing death smile taunting him.

He worked at the Arsenale as a labourer on the docks. Physical strength was his biggest attribute, but once Gasparo's men began to cut him the truth quickly spilled out. Caratelli had no reason to endure pain. He was willing to tell the men with the long knives whatever they wished to know.

He and three others had done the killing. 'Me, two I'd never met and a man who made contact. He's the one who came to me. He said he'd been asked by someone with money to do a job. I'd seen him at one of the back-street casinos in Santa Croce. He came to me. There were two more. I didn't know them. None of us knew each other. Only him.'

'His name?'

'I don't know. Russo. He was called Russo. He had hair… you know… red hair. Russo. That was his nickname. We did Challenor's bosun in his lodgings and then dumped his body.'

'And who had approached this Russo?'

'I swear I don't know. Whoever he was, he paid for everything. Like I said, me and the three others to do the job. He looked like a nobleman. Not old. He wasn't an old man. A merchant, perhaps? There were two of them. Did I tell you that? Yeah, I did. I told you, right? Well-dressed, clean-shaven. Quality clothes and shoes.' What he did know was that these men had money and plenty of it. It was a simple job. All it needed was some killing to be done.

‘So, there were two of these rich men,’ said Richard. ‘They gave no names; they gave no reasons. You were just meant to do the killing.’

‘Right, that’s right.’

Caratelli babbled on, running through the sequence of events. Torturing the ship’s bosun to scrawl a note was done while men in the Arsenale that he had found went aboard the ship and set it alight. He had no part in the killing of the night watch aboard the ship.

The words spilled out. He was bargaining for his life.

‘You must have known the man who arranged everything,’ said Richard. ‘The man who paid you. Why would he trust strangers?’

Caratelli shook his head. ‘Never saw him before.’

Gasparo twisted the boning knife into his thigh.

The hanging man bellowed in pain. ‘I swear!’ he gasped, sweat dripping from his nose and chin, blood trickling down his leg. ‘He paid when the job was done.’

‘What happened at the house?’ said Richard.

‘Who are you? Why are you doing this to me?’ he spat. ‘I did a job. That’s all.’

‘Who else was involved?’ Richard demanded. He stood close to the sweating man, ignoring the pungent stench of his sweat-soaked body and urine-soaked hose. The night’s events at Challenor’s house were slowly being illuminated by the tortured man’s testimony.

‘Those that burnt the ship – they were men on the docks. No names. Paid when the ship burnt. Those with the money then took us to the house.’

‘You knew the house?’

The wounded man nodded. ‘I’d been following the woman who lived there. I saw the guards. Knew who was there. How many were in the house. Merciful Christ, there is nothing more to tell you. For pity’s sake, let me go.’

‘How did you get into the house?

‘The cook was paid off. I killed the man at the gate. She opened the water gate. It was easy. Easy money,’ he snorted, shaking his head, snot and spittle dribbling into his beard. He sounded resigned to explaining everything in detail. One thought stark in his mind: tell what happened and stop the blade cutting into him. He groaned, knowing that if they didn’t release him, the best he could hope for would be a quick death.

‘Easy,’ he repeated. ‘We knocked down the second guard. Him and his woman. Got her into the boat before Challenor got back to the house. Had to leave the man until after we did the killings. The men who paid us said they needed them kept alive. We killed the other women downstairs. One of our men died when Challenor came home, another when his whore stabbed the first man into the room.’

Richard saw his sister lunging. Determined to fight as long as she was able.

Caratelli breathed agony. He forced it out through gritted teeth, groaned and gave a short, harsh laugh. ‘We wanted her. Thought we could rape her. But they said no. No touching. No nothing. That would spoil his plan. Sweet Jesus…’ His head nodded at the memory. ‘Could have ridden her all right. I tore her dress. Spilled her tits out. All part of the plan. But we still couldn’t touch her.’

The knife in Caratelli’s thigh trickled blood. The muscle spasmed around the embedded blade. It would have been agony. Richard felt a cold-blooded compulsion to grab its hilt and twist it viciously.

Ignoring the temptation, he asked: ‘Why did these men want Challenor dead?’

Caratelli’s voice was weary from pain. ‘Challenor was responsible for the death of the family of one of them.’

‘Then why slaughter everyone else?’

Caratelli shook his head. He was defeated. ‘I don’t know. To make Challenor suffer even more before he died because he would know the blame would be laid on his woman and that she’d be thrown into prison?’ His head dropped onto his chest. ‘The man who paid – he took a document. Found it in a desk. We were told not to take anything. It was made to look like the woman did the killing, not a robbery.’ He took a breath. ‘I took the rings when no one was looking.’

‘Who killed Challenor?’

‘The man with the money.’

‘And his name?’ Richard asked again.

‘I don’t know. I was paid like the others. I had nothing to do with them.’

‘Where’s the other man? This Russo?’

‘For fuck’s sake! I don’t know,’ Caratelli whimpered. ‘The money owed to the two dead men was split between me and Russo. We went our separate

ways.’

‘And the other house guard and the woman?’

‘Went with the paymaster and Russo. I went back to Maddalena.’ He moaned. ‘I should never have taken the damned rings. You’d never have found me if I hadn’t taken the rings.’

Richard fell silent. Gasparo and the others looked at him. He shook his head.

‘There’s nothing more he can tell me.’

Gasparo stood close to Richard, his back to the tortured man. His voice low enough for only Richard to hear. ‘You must kill him now, Riccardo. We will do the rest.’

The butcher saw doubt crease the young knife maker’s face.

‘It is necessary. There is a first time for everything. We cannot have his blood on our hands. It is your vendetta. It is your honour that must be avenged.’

Richard looked at his friend, who gave a sympathetic smile and a nod of understanding.

His knife hilt waited for his hand to embrace it. *There are times in life when you have to act and damn the consequences.* Words spoken with such conviction to his sister in Dartmouth. In another life.

He looked into Giovanni Caratelli’s eyes, showed him the blade that would kill him. The killer’s eyes fixed on the knife’s pattern.

‘The woman is my sister,’ Richard said without anger. ‘Look at me.’

Caratelli squirmed with fear. Richard rammed the blade into his heart.

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CHAPTER 76

Two Days After Caratelli's death, Richard and a nervous Caterina sat on the steps of a footbridge with Stefan. Richard held the child's hand to calm her. A barrel-chested, clean-shaven man, his clothes of good quality, his face unseen because of the darkness of the stone portal on the opposite side of a *rio*, stood in front of a door and looked up.

'The casino has a tile in the floor they lift to check who wants entry. He was here two days running, so I think he's seen as a regular. We heard he has a purse full of ducats. I'll wager he didn't get that from an honest day's work.'

'You think that's him?' said Richard.

'Hard to be certain. He wears a velvet cap so we can't see his hair and if we stage someone to bump into him, then it might alert him. But yesterday one of the men I had watching the casino heard someone call the name Russo when he was in the street but he didn't turn around. What he did was quicken his pace.'

'A nickname means little. There could be plenty of men with red hair. We have to be sure.'

Caterina had kept her eyes on the footpath, eating the food Richard had bought her from a street seller.

'Caterina, do you think that's the man you saw at Captain Challenor's house?'

The mute child shrugged, her face crumpled into confusion.

'It's all right. You won't be here for long, I promise. I've sent word for Domenico to come and meet us here in case I have to stay. You like Domenico, don't you?'

She nodded.

The last thing Richard wanted was for the child to witness sudden violence and then to make her way back to the forge alone through the darkening streets. If the gambler was the suspected killer and she identified him, that alone would bring back a harsh enough memory for her.

‘He’ll be out before dark. It’s a matter of waiting,’ said the stonemason. ‘How long until your *barcaiolo* gets here?’

Once Stefan had alerted him that a man known as Russo might have been identified Richard had sent word to Martin. If Caterina could recognize the killer, then they needed a plan to snatch him and they needed it to be swift and discreet.

‘He’s here already,’ said Richard and nodded towards Martin who had walked into view on the opposite bank and then, once he realized Richard had seen him, turned back along the *rio*.

‘His barge is a hundred yards further downstream. We’re as ready as we can be,’ Richard told them.

Another two hours passed. The rain had held off, but the clouds added to the dull light, making it hard to see faces clearly at any distance. The *rio* was narrow enough, but the portal opposite extended into an arched walkway beside the water. Richard’s concern was that if this ‘Russo’ came out of the casino, went along the footpath and then turned across the bridge where they waited, any chance of surprise was likely to be lost.

‘I’m here,’ said a breathless Domenico as he squatted next to them. He smiled at Caterina who smiled back, showing food-clogged teeth. ‘Grandfather told me what’s happened. Riccardo, I grieve for you. I will do whatever you ask of me. Is there news?’

Richard gave him a quick glance and then turned his attention back to the *sotoportego*. No one else had stood under its arched roof and looked up, wanting entrance to the casino. ‘Not yet.’

‘Am I to help you?’

‘I’m trusting you to get Caterina back to the forge. That’s a big responsibility,’ Richard told him, hoping his emphasis would impress the blacksmith.’

‘Then I won’t let go of her hand. Not once. Hey, Caterina? Shall we go back together?’

The child turned and nodded.

‘Domenico, don’t distract her. We need her eyes on the opposite side,’ said Richard.

Domenico nodded and settled down to wait.

The light was fading. People were going home. Food and fruit sellers in the street were packing up their stalls. Anyone gambling into the night would have either a lamplit gondolier waiting to get them home or employ a lantern bearer to see them through the pitch-black streets. Neither had yet appeared. The *calli* around them fell silent. The colonnaded walkway opposite was now as dark as night.

‘We should leave,’ said Richard. ‘It’s too late now.’

And then good fortune abandoned the gambler and blessed Richard and his companions. The casino door opened just as a man and woman made their way past the door under the portal. The woman’s companion man held aloft a lantern that illuminated the man Richard sought. In that moment, Caterina flinched, with a whimper of strangled fear.

It was enough of a signal for Richard to embrace the child close to him, pulling her into his chest both to comfort her and to stop her from crying out again.

‘That’s him,’ said Richard. The man was making his way along the pathway, his hand guiding him, his legs unsteady. Too much wine to compensate for his losses. Richard put Caterina into Domenico’s arms. ‘I’m relying on you.’

The blacksmith nodded at his responsibility.

Richard bent and soothed the girl. ‘You’ll be home soon and Domenico will get your food. Your warm bed awaits you. Don’t be afraid.’

With a nod to Domenico, Richard and Stefan crossed the bridge.

As they entered the colonnade that ran along the path they saw a light a hundred yards ahead. It was Martin’s barge lantern throwing shadows from the pillars onto the walkway and silhouetting the man who was walking slowly, still using the wall for support. Richard and Stefan stopped as the man ahead hesitated. He faltered, turned back, and looked in their direction. The killer’s instinct was flagging danger. He stared into the darkness behind him and appeared to be more sober. Richard and Stefan had used a pillar to hide behind, but they could see the man seventy yards ahead squaring himself to face the void.

‘Who’s there?’ he demanded. Then he listened.

There was enough of Russo's shape visible for Richard to see that he had drawn a knife. Satisfied there was no one behind him, the killer turned his back and continued walking. All he saw now was a bargeman securing his boat for the night: the man was bent over, tying off his ropes, paying no attention to his approach.

As Richard and Stefan dared to move closer, they saw their prey stop and talk to Martin. There was no obvious threat being made. Martin was nodding, glanced behind him, saw Richard point at the man, then extended his arm to help him board his barge, an arm that was disdainfully brushed away. The killer stepped forward confidently onto the barge and that's when Martin struck him on the back of his neck, tumbling him into the well of the barge. By the time Richard and Stefan reached the vessel, Martin was already tying the man's hands. They clambered aboard.

Martin grinned. 'Asked if he could pay me to take him to his lodgings.'

Stefan looked around. Footfalls and voices were echoing in one of the narrow passages nearby. Richard pulled the barge's canvas over the bareheaded man, whose hair glowed in the warm tone of the lamplight.

Russo.

*

Stefan had done what he had promised his young friend in helping to track down a killer. His work done, he left Richard and Martin and made his way back to San Polo. As Martin guided his barge through one *rio* to a broader waterway, Richard gagged the burly man under the canvas and bound his ankles. A man that strong might lash out when he regained consciousness. He was still out cold when, twenty minutes later, Martin eased the barge against mooring posts next to a tree-filled area on a promontory. There were no houses in sight on either side of the broad *rio* that curved away into the night. The dark shape of a church loomed out of the darkness.

'Turn the bastard over,' said Martin, bringing the lantern closer so they could see the man's face.

Richard hauled him upright, pressing his back against the barge's side. He pulled free the gag. Blood trickled down Russo's face from where he'd landed heavily in the barge. Martin leant over and heaved a bucket of the cold water aboard and threw it over the man.

He gasped. Shook the wet from his face and glared defiantly at the two men. ‘*Borsaroli!*’

Martin gave him a kick.

‘We’re no common thieves,’ said Richard. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Fuck off.’

Martin slapped him. ‘Your name.’

‘Piero Vettore,’ he spat.

‘All right, Piero, we seek information about the men who paid you to kill Captain John Challenor and his household.’

That made Vettore less confrontational. Bargaining with common thieves gave him a chance. Being linked to multiple killings was another matter.

‘Who are you?’ he demanded.

Martin slapped him again. Harder this time. ‘There’s a time for you to open your mouth and that’s to answer questions.’

‘I didn’t kill him,’ he said, spitting blood from his split lip. ‘Another did the killing. I organized the men they wanted.’

‘We know there was more than one man behind the killings. Who were they?’

Vettore realized the man questioning him knew there were two paymasters. That meant he was likely to be somehow involved with Challenor’s household.

‘Money changed hands,’ Vettore said. His thoughts raced. Come clean. Deflect the blame. Maybe there was a chance for him to live. ‘It was business. I didn’t know anyone in the house or why they wanted Challenor and the others dead.’

‘Don’t lie. Your friend Caratelli told us Challenor had killed the family of one of the men. It was a revenge killing.’

Vettore looked startled. If they had questioned Caratelli then the man was dead. His life hung in the balance.

‘I swear to Christ, I only heard that when we were in the house. He could have been lying. Who cares?’

‘What was the name of the man who paid you?’ said Richard, drawing his knife deliberately so Vettore saw the blade gleam in the lantern light. Richard pressed the knife point below the man’s eye.

He pulled back his head as far as the side of the barge allowed.

‘I don’t know. I only heard them talk to each other when we were in the house. They never addressed each other by name. The one who killed Challenor taunted him. Whispered in his ear. We heard nothing more than Challenor had killed his family.’

The knife tip pierced skin. ‘For pity’s sake. I wouldn’t lose an eye to keep back a man’s name if I knew it.’ He took a breath. ‘I met him in the casino. Weeks ago. I was on a losing streak. He needed men for a job, he said. He knew I had contacts at the Arsenale. It was well paid. They were rich. They looked like noblemen. Men who didn’t want to get their hands dirty – except this one did. He killed Challenor. Stabbed him twice. Once to look like a wound so the woman was blamed, then the knife in the heart. I’ve never seen either of them since. That’s everything I know. I swear.’

‘What happened with the night magistrates? The man who gave testimony against the woman?’

The killer winced. His sins were mounting against him. ‘He gave evidence. They questioned him. He told them everything the money man told him to. There was a written statement. He had no choice. We had his woman. I dunno who wrote it. Not him. But it was enough for the magistrates.’

‘Who killed him and his woman?’

‘We were told to take them back somewhere out of the way. The man had a room in his old neighbourhood. I kept them there. Then the nobleman, or whatever he was, he came and told me to finish them. That he had what he needed.’ He took a breath and gave a sigh of admission. ‘Me, I did them. Cut their throats and put them in the *rio*.’

Richard stared into Vettore’s face, who turned his head away from the blade and the man who looked at him without a shred of pity.

‘Look at me,’ said Richard.

Vettore squeezed his eyes closed. He shook his head, his face scrunched in fear.

‘Look at me, Russo,’ said Richard quietly. ‘Look at me or lose your eye.’

The killer’s arrogance and courage had long since deserted him. He trembled. He stared at Richard, who lowered the knife.

‘It’s better you know why you’re going to die. The woman you condemned to the *pozzi* is my sister,’ he said.

Vettore’s mouth gaped.

Richard grabbed a handful of his copper-coloured hair and drew the blade across his throat. Vettore gagged, bound hands reaching for his throat.

Martin held back his surprise at seeing Richard kill a man, then he hauled Vettore up and pushed him over the side.

The thrashing water soon subsided.

‘There’s a strong undertow here,’ said Martin. ‘He’ll be swept out into the lagoon. He won’t be found.’ He wiped his hands free of blood and looked at the younger man. ‘I didn’t think I’d ever see you kill a man.’

Richard looked at the settling water that had swallowed Vettore.

‘And I never thought I would be able to. Events change a man, my friend, and not always for the better.’

Martin nodded and moved to the back of the boat; he pushed it away with the long oar. ‘What now?’

Richard wiped the blade clean. ‘Find the two noblemen,’ he said.

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CHAPTER 77

The Darkness Covered their passage back towards the Grand Canal. A *barcaiolo* making his way home caused no curiosity. Martin knew where to find a side mooring in a nearby *rio* as Richard went ashore. They were only a couple of streets away from where Elizabeth was being looked after by the Turks.

Venice was a licentious city, but some practices were more punishable than others. Richard stepped into a doorway as two Signori di Notte went along a cross street, making their rounds to ensure public order. These Lords of the Night were particularly keen to snare men who practised sex together, and the Rialto area was a known haunt of male and female prostitutes. The women were too many to arrest and were tolerated. They had their own guild and paid taxes. But those men who sought out others in shadowed doorways fell foul of religious laws and, despite the Venetian absence of respect for the Pope, arresting such transgressors was an act of appeasement to the Church that cost nothing more than effort; the miscreants, once found, were thrown in prison for a while.

Once the night magistrates' lantern light had faded, Richard walked in near darkness, the passage lit by candlelight from a small shrine in a wall to the Madonna, whose beatific gaze suggested that anyone who passed her by would be forgiven their sins. A thought not lost on Richard, now responsible for the death of three men. There was enough light to show him a route to the Turks. The same guards let him into the building and guided him upstairs. The night was still young and Yûsuf Bey had not retired; he was alerted to Richard's presence. Once he sent for the doctors, he offered food and drink. Richard declined, eager to hear of Elizabeth's condition.

‘I will tell you what I can, Master Riccardo,’ said Yûsuf Bey. ‘But before I do, you should know that my people hear whispers on the streets and in the markets wanting to know where the woman released from the *pozzi* is being kept. There are those who have little regard for us and who barely acknowledge us among them, but they ask openly, and we listen.’

‘Do we know who is doing the asking? Who is sending their people into the streets?’

Yûsuf Bey shook his head. ‘Those who committed murder have learnt of her release and they are now fearful of being identified. They will continue to search or…’ He splayed his hands. ‘They will run. And if they run, then their absence might cause them to be known. You must have no fear for your sister. She is safe here. She progresses,’ he said. ‘She has a female attendant with her night and day. She gains her strength but is not yet healed.’ He paused, made a small gesture of apology. ‘Forgive me, but she was hurt badly. What was done to her can never fully be restored.’

There was a knock on the door and the servant ushered in the two doctors. Both bowed before Yûsuf Bey.

‘I am ignorant of a physician’s skill and observations, so my doctors will explain to you what information they can about your sister. The younger of the two speaks English.’

‘Can I see her?’ Richard asked.

The two doctors looked at Yûsuf Bey, who dipped his head in consent. The younger doctor deferred to the older Arab. ‘Of course, but for her sake, she is not to be disturbed.’

‘I understand,’ Richard told them.

The Arab doctor led the way from the room, the younger man gesturing for Richard to go before him.

Richard turned to Yûsuf Bey. ‘I found two of the men responsible.’

The Turkish leader gestured to Richard’s knife. ‘A blade hardened by fire is only as strong as the man’s heart who wields it.’

‘So I’m learning,’ said Richard. He placed a hand across his heart. ‘Peace be upon you.’

Yûsuf Bey dipped his head and responded in kind. ‘*Aleyküm selam*.’

*

Richard followed the elderly Arab doctor as the servant closed the door behind them. The Turkish doctor walked at Richard's side. As the older of the two men reached the room, the Turk placed a hand on Richard's arm.

'Do not be alarmed when you see your sister. When injuries begin to heal, they can look distressing.'

Forewarned, Richard went to the open door. The young doctor stood behind him. The room was softly lit by two scented candles. One of the young women who had initially taken Elizabeth into care sat at her bedside. She stood when the three men entered. Despite the cold night the room was warm. As Richard's eyes adjusted to the dim light, he saw a decorative brass container with a lid that was giving the room its heat. Hot coals placed inside would take the chill off any room. Elizabeth lay on top of the mattress, wearing only a cotton chemise. He stepped closer. He faltered. She looked dead. A corpse laid out. The exposed parts of her body – face, neck, legs and arms – were mottled in various hues of black and purple bruising. Half her face was just as marked. The swelling to the eye that had been closed when he rescued her now had reduced somewhat. Her left arm was bandaged and had a splint. It rooted him to the spot when he saw her, unable to go any closer. Frightened by her fragility.

'We keep her free from pain with narcotics,' said the young doctor. 'Her attendant massages her limbs every two hours day and night. When this woman's time ends, another takes her place. We use healing oils and herbs.'

'How badly hurt is she? I can see her arm was broken.'

The Arab had stood back and let his young colleague do the explaining.

'She has a broken rib, so we place no weight on her body. Her nose was broken and has been attended to, so too her broken cheekbone. The wound on her scalp was cleaned and stitched. We could see no damage to her skull. We use ice on the swelling and bruises. It has to be done little by little.'

'Has she spoken?'

'A little, yes. With difficulty. They had used force to stop her cries for help. So the marks you see on her neck are from someone trying to strangle her. She is still uncertain where she is. She is given every assurance and told that it was you who brought her to this place of safety. She is conscious more during the day, but we regulate that. Sleep is the best cure for her, which is why we administer that which will reduce pain and induce sleep.

When the attendants change over, the two women get her out of bed and, with support, make her walk so that she regains movement in her legs.'

'How long before she can get up and move around without help?'

'She's strong. We will let you know as soon as she is able to leave here.'

'I need to speak to her.'

'Is it important?'

'Yes. I have to ask her a question.'

The Turk spoke to the other doctor in Arabic. After a moment, he nodded.

'We will give her something that will rouse her from her sleep. But it will be for a very short time that she will be able to hear you and to answer.'

The Turk spoke rapidly to the nurse in their own language. She went across to a lattice-fronted cupboard and took out a small dark brown bottle. The Turk stepped forward and then she handed him a small silver spoon, which he tipped the potion into. He instructed the attendant to raise Elizabeth's shoulders and then he knelt by her side and carefully eased the spoon between his patient's lips. Satisfied, he told the woman to ease her back down onto the pillow.

'A few minutes and she will be awake,' he told Richard.

Richard watched her gradually regain consciousness. A slow, unfolding return to the world from wherever her dreams had taken her. Her tongue moistened her lips. Her eyes opened and then closed again. She moaned gently and then stirred. The Turk gestured. 'Go to her, Master Riccardo.'

The female attending Elizabeth moved away from the bedside. Richard sat on the stool opposite his sister's broken arm. He spoke gently to her. 'Beth, it's Richard. Wake up. I'm here.' He gazed at her badly bruised face, but kept any look of dismay hidden behind a smiling mask.

She showed no sign of hearing him. Then her eyelids fluttered open, her brow creased with uncertainty. Her head turned towards his voice.

'Richard?' she said, her voice weak.

She tried to lift her head, but he restrained her. 'It's all right. I wanted to see you. You're being cared for by friends. You'll soon be well. I promise.'

The words were all he could think of; he knew they were commonplace. What was important was for her to understand what he had to ask her.

'I remember,' she whispered.

He didn’t know what that memory might be. Concern nagged him that he had caused her to remember being raped and beaten in the prison.

She sighed and smiled. ‘You taking me somewhere. In a boat.’

‘With Martin. Yes,’ he told her.

‘Martin? He’s here?’

‘Outside. All is well.’

‘Martin,’ she murmured.

He fingered her silver ring from his pocket and raised her uninjured arm and slipped it onto her middle finger. ‘I brought this back for you.’

She focused on her hand and stared at it.

He realized she must have pieced together how he had recovered it.

‘Oh, Richard.’ A tear spilled from her eyes. ‘What have my troubles made you do?’

‘Only what had to be done,’ he said reassuringly.

She nodded. She understood. What else could she have expected?

‘Thank you,’ she said. ‘For saving me.’

He kissed the back of her hand, and she placed it on his face. He laid her arm down and covered her hand with his own. He stayed silent, giving her time to settle her breathing after the rush of emotion. He wiped away her tears and kissed her forehead.

‘I must ask you a question, and I fear the memory of the event will cause you pain to remember.’

‘All right,’ she said, her voice little more than a hoarse whisper.

‘When I brought you here, I asked you who was responsible for Challenor’s death that night.’

‘Everyone’s death,’ she said.

‘Caterina is alive,’ he told her.

Her gasp of relief reflected the miracle.

‘She is well and cared for.’

‘Isabella?’ she whispered.

Richard shook his head. ‘They used Lazaro as a witness against you, then they were both murdered.’

Her eyes closed as she fought back the tears.

He waited, his thumb easing away her tears, and then, as she became more composed, pressed her with his questions. ‘You told me that galley

slaves were responsible for that night. The two men I found were common criminals. They had no connection to the galleys.'

She concentrated with a look of confusion as she searched her memory. 'Yes… galley slaves. Two of them… but… I can't remember their names. I cannot. You were there.'

'Where?'

'With them. On the ship. You saved them.'

'On the galley that was burning?'

'Yes. I can't remember their names,' she repeated. 'You were there,' she said again.

'Yes, I know, but more than twenty men came off that galley.'

'On the ship. On John's ship. You were there.'

'I don't understand,' he said, concerned that she might soon become distressed. He saw the Turk take a step forward, ready to stop him questioning her. Richard raised his hand, imploring him for a moment longer.

'Yes, I was on John's ship. We all were.'

She blinked, trying to form the words that the picture in her mind was showing her. 'You were on the ship… standing behind them… that day when… I wrote down everyone's name.'

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CHAPTER 78

The Guards at the Casa di Zorzi recognized the newly appointed knife maker as he called through the gates for Elias Jordan. They went hastily to the entrance, keys in hand to unlock the gate, but they hesitated when they saw the bleary-eyed man with exhaustion etched on his stubbled face. He looked agitated. They saw the snarling lion's head pommel peeping from the scabbard on his belt. His status earned him a formal politeness, but letting an armed man into the house, and one who might pose a threat, made them exercise caution.

'Master Riccardo, I must ask what business you have here,' said one man.

'To speak to Master Jordan.'

'Of course, but to what end? It's early in the day.'

Richard held back his desire to curse the house guard. He understood their responsibility to the Nobildonna. He took a breath. 'What I have to tell him is for his and the Signora's ears alone.'

'Then be good enough to wait while we send word and see that Master Jordan is dressed and willing to receive you.'

Richard stared past the guard as the second man turned back to the house. He shivered. The rain had swept through during the night and left bone-cold, damp air coming off the water. His shoulders hunched against it, but he had no wish to appear so pitiful in front of Elias Jordan, so he banished the tremors, buttoned his doublet to his neck and pulled his fingers through his damp hair.

It didn't take long for the second guard to return. 'I'm to accompany you, Master Riccardo. But I am ordered that you surrender your knife.'

Richard hesitated. His instinct was not to be disarmed, but logic told him Elias Jordan had no cause to harm him and that his own dishevelled appearance would have sown uncertainty in the *maggiordomo*'s mind. He pulled free the knife and handed it hilt first to the guard. The two guards glanced at it. They could never afford such a weapon. The gate creaked open. He followed the man into the lower hall and up the stairs, past two more guards to where Jordan was waiting. He looked immaculate, as always. Did the man never sleep? Richard thought. The guard handed him Richard's knife and returned to his duties.

Jordan had already poured two glasses of red wine and handed one to Richard.

'You come before the rest of the house is awake,' said Jordan. 'I have to take precautions.' He admired the knife and placed it on a side table next to his chair. Richard accepted the glass as Jordan gestured him to sit. The English knife maker might have been enslaved, but his skills and the Signora's patronage required a certain level of civility. Where once Richard Sheriff would have been made to stand, now he rested in a square-backed upholstered chair with padded arms. Its comfort was in stark contrast to his long vigil in Santa Croce and the uncomfortable barge that exposed him and his friend to the elements.

'I have information, but did you know there's someone trying to find where my sister is?'

Before Richard could explain his reason for his visit, Jordan pre-empted him. 'We knew that would happen and we'll stay alert, but if I can't find where you've placed her, then others will have little success. But they're frightened and that serves us.' He raised a hand to stop Richard from interrupting. 'You must keep me informed, Richard. That's our agreement. Santa Croce is far enough away for anyone here in San Marco to give it scant attention, but I'm told you took Caterina there yesterday.'

'Master Antonio?' Richard asked.

'Don't worry, he hasn't betrayed you. I went to the forge to check on the child. So, you needed her to identify one of the men involved. I have to report everything to the Signora. She doesn't like surprises, especially those that might rebound on her and cause her embarrassment or implicate her any more than she desires.'

‘I took care to ensure that Caterina wasn’t frightened and then I sent her back with Domenico.’

‘After she recognized someone?’

‘Yes. His name was Piero Vettore.’

‘I don’t know him. A common man?’

‘He was the man who gathered the killers together.’

‘And he is now dead?’

‘Yes.’

‘And you killed him?’

‘Yes. I killed him and Giovanni Caratelli.’

‘And he is?’

‘The man who tried to sell Elizabeth’s jewellery.’

Jordan sighed. ‘Ah, I see. Now I know who you have killed, and that it was justified. And how did you find Vettore?’

‘From Caratelli.’

‘And he knew this man?’

‘No, but he knew he was from Santa Croce.’

‘Then how did—’

Richard interrupted the questioning. ‘Master Jordan, I have friends who heard rumours about a man spending a lot of money in a casino.’

‘Then do we have all those responsible?’

‘No. We have the men who were hired. They’re now dead. Those who were killed in Challenor’s house and the two men I dealt with.’

By now Elias Jordan’s glass was empty. He topped it up without offering the carafe to Richard, whose glass was still full. The young blacksmith had changed. He could see that. Antonio had called him an artist, a man who forged beauty from fire, but the man that Jordan studied now had killed two men in quick succession. The vendetta had started and was not yet resolved. He would have to convince the Signora not to rein in the knife maker now that he had another skill that could be useful to her. He glanced at the knife on the side table.

‘I’d have thought an unadorned blade like a stiletto would be a better choice than a blade as well crafted as yours.’

Richard knew not to mention Antonio’s offer to use the knife he had once used. ‘If a man about to die gazes on a thing of beauty, it distracts him for a heartbeat before he dies.’

‘But from everything that has occurred,’ said Jordan, ‘we are no closer to finding those who planned everything. Whoever it is, they remain faceless. Unknown. Ghosts.’

Richard gulped down the wine. It fortified him against his tiredness. ‘I saw my sister last night.’

‘She’s recovering?’

‘Slowly. Barely able to stand or speak, but she told me again that the two men who instigated the attack on Challenor’s house and who killed him were former galley slaves.’

Elias Jordan shook his head, a hint of despair in his voice. ‘No, that can’t be true. I’ve checked. I sent word beyond the island to the mainland. Every one of the galley slaves I sent are accounted for. Living or dead. I checked the ledger, recording every man against their sale. The Signora demanded to see it. There is no error. Your sister is mistaken.’

‘Challenor gave you a list of names when you first came aboard the *Falcon*. I saw you take it. My sister wrote that list. Challenor had her record every captive’s name who was aboard. Do you still have it?’

Jordan had never considered looking at the recorded names. The clerk had copied it at the slave auction into the ledger. He stood and strode across the room to a desk and opened a drawer, didn’t find what he was looking for, but the second drawer yielded a sheaf of papers. If the list had been kept, it would be among these documents relating to various business dealings over the year. And indeed, he found Elizabeth’s record of the *Falcon*’s captives and then reached for and opened the ledger. His finger traced the names.

‘Every galley slave is listed,’ he said. It didn’t take long for him to find names that were not in the ledger, but were on the third sheet of paper. Challenor had made a small mark next to their names.

He checked again. ‘Challenor said he left three men in Tunis. When the *Falcon* anchored he told me one of them had died. A Greek. The other two are Venetians he had taken off the list. Andrea Cassola and Massimo Marasini. Galley slaves.’ Elias looked at Richard. ‘If they’ve made their way back to Venice then they are the men responsible. These are your sister’s galley slaves. The men who orchestrated everything.’

But Richard wasn’t listening. An elusive thought had escaped his grasp… but then the image emerged from wherever memories lie hidden

until beckoned. A man's eyes.

'I've seen him,' he said.

Jordan dropped the ledger onto the desk and stared at Richard, who lifted his head to face him.

'I've seen Massimo Marasini. I saved him and the other man from a burning Algerian galley. He never spoke. But I remember his eyes. They were unforgiving – of what I don't know.'

'A man's eyes? That means nothing.'

'It does. I stood not five paces behind the two of them when our names were put down on that paper. I heard him as clear as day. The day you took me to the patrician's house to sell my knives, I saw him playing cards. He was there, he and Andrea Cassola. Signor Falconi knows these men.'

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CHAPTER 79

Nobildonna Chiara di Zorzi agonized over the information Elias Jordan had shared. Was it possible that Francesco Falconi, a lifelong friend of her husband, who had served on the Council of Ten with him, was implicated? Was he behind a conspiracy to seize her business? The link between the named former galley slaves and him rested on the word of her knife maker. Was it enough? The only way she could be certain was to face him. She knew him well enough to see the truth in his eyes.

She sent a messenger to the patrician Falconi, requesting a meeting. It had been granted without delay, in deference to the families' close association over generations.

He wore a flowing black robe trimmed with fur, a sign of a patrician's disciplined austerity in clothing, in contrast to his sumptuous surroundings. It set the tone for an unexpected yet important meeting that was not social. He listened to the story that had been related to Elias Jordan, who waited with the young knife maker in the ante-room.

'He has killed the two men who were involved that night?' said Falconi.

'Yes. He freely admits it,' di Zorzi said.

'And you have evidence that the two men who were believed drowned are in fact alive and seen in my house.'

Chiara di Zorzi realized the patrician was being cautious. For him to be associated with those suspected of murder and false accusation against a woman who had been hours from execution posed not only a threat to his name but it could implicate him in the conspiracy.

'Yes,' she replied, searching his features for any giveaway sign of guilt.

'And the woman?'

‘Beaten and raped in the *pozzi*. Now hidden and cared for.’

‘You arranged this?’

‘No, her brother Riccardo.’

‘But you secured her release?’

She showed no sign of triumph. ‘It was an injustice and needed to be corrected quickly,’ she said, hoping her own self-interest in the matter was not obvious. Not yet. That would come later when she bargained to keep her knife maker safe.

‘Then I shall not ask how you achieved it, Chiara. It appears that even I do not know all the secrets that I should.’

Everything about his demeanour and the inflection in his voice told her he was not involved. She had to believe it now. She had given him everything she knew. If she was wrong then he would ask her to leave everything in his hands. That would give him total authority to investigate. And conceal the truth. And would be a sign of guilt.

‘This is a tragic affair. I’m grateful you came to me.’ He took her arm, a tender gesture of intimacy. ‘I can understand why you did not come to me sooner. I will share everything I can find out with you. Now, let’s have your knife maker in and hear it directly. The matter, if it is true, must be attended to, and swiftly.’ He gestured to a servant across the great room, too far away to hear the conversation but attentive enough to watch when he was needed. The door opened and closed behind him.

‘Chiara, your dear husband and my closest friend Sebastiano and I spent years working to ensure that we knew everything vital for the smooth running of the city and the safety of the Republic. Information was the cornerstone of our success. I miss him; he would have sorted this out with more thoroughness than the haste taken by the magistrates.’

The mention of her late husband’s name and his authority and power within the city felt like a coded message. The Council of Ten and the more terrifying Council of Three were male-dominated councils. Her husband had served both. There was no room for even patrician women to become involved. Yet she had her own contacts across the city and Elias Jordan could reach out to the common men and women. She was a source of valuable information. Was her family’s old friend making some kind of invitation for her to become informally involved in the state’s business?

‘I have my own modest areas of influence, Francesco.’

‘Then I must depend on you to use everyone at your disposal to search for these two men. I must remain silent in this matter until we are close to a resolution.’

The door opened; Elias Jordan and Richard were ushered in. They bowed. The patrician gestured for them to approach. Richard stayed a step behind Jordan so he knew how close he should go to the nobleman. Jordan stopped twelve strides from them.

‘Master Elias, the Nobildonna has explained that you found the discrepancy in the ledger that differed from the cargo originally planned to be brought ashore.’

‘Signor Falconi, there was a list made prior to the ship’s arrival. Riccardo Sceriffo’s sister was responsible for that list, commissioned by Captain Challenor.’

‘And she is the sole living witness to this attack on Challenor’s household?’

‘She is. And we have already learnt of enquiries being made as to where she is being cared for.’

‘Then you have traced that back to who pays for this information?’

‘Those my people questioned extracted no information, nothing but a dead end. It can be none other than the two men on that first list who were named but marked as remaining in Tunis.’

As Jordan laid down the sheaf of papers and the ledger open at the appropriate page on a table and then explained, the patrician’s eyes went back and forth to Richard who stood unmoving, his own gaze looking to where he had seen Marasini playing cards. Both men unaware of the other. Richard’s instinct had nudged his memory that day and now the well-dressed, clean-shaven nobleman’s real identity was firmly in his mind’s eye.

‘Here you say?’

Richard snapped back his attention. Had the nobleman been speaking to him? ‘Signore?’

‘Here, you swear you saw these men here?’

‘I do, Signore.’

The patrician waved Jordan away, who stepped back smartly to rejoin Richard.

He pointed at Richard. ‘And yet you said nothing. A man you suspect of murder, false accusation and imprisonment.’

‘At that time the attack and the killings had not taken place.’

Clearly the patrician hadn’t put the timeline of the events together.

‘I had rescued Massimo Marasini and Andrea Cassola and others from a burning Algerian galley. His appearance then was very different from the day I came into this room, Signore.’

Francesco Falconi grimaced. He sighed, cast a glance at a stoic-looking Chiara di Zorzi. He appeared frustrated, uncertain of the whole situation. Exasperation crept into his voice. ‘But why would they risk returning and committing murder?’

Chiara di Zorzi watched as he struggled with the mounting evidence that two killers had been entertained in his home. She had known him long enough. This was no act. He was too high in the order of the patriciate to involve himself with such blatant butchery. No, if Falconi had wanted Challenor and her dead that would have come swiftly and without intrigue. What she witnessed now was a man of authority sensing his own precarious situation. Guilt by association.

After what must have been a painful acknowledgment of the facts presented to him, Falconi nodded. ‘The two men whose names you have mentioned came to this house seeking help and refuge. They were brought here by others asking me to offer what assistance I could. I agreed. I spoke to them. They told me they had escaped from a slaver. That the Church had paid their redemption money. And that they were now eager to restart their lives. I knew of their families when they were alive and prosperous, minor nobles, but good people by all accounts. They died penniless. It is not the first time that noble families have known penury. Rank does not always guarantee good luck when making a business arrangement or paying for a ship that founders or is seized. And these two men had had such ill fortune befall them.’

He paused and reached for a glass of wine. His thoughts faltered; his hand rested on the glass, but he never raised it to his lips. ‘And that is why I took pity on them. I wished to return these two men to dignity. No young nobleman should endure what they had gone through. I arranged a modest stipend for each of them.’ He hesitated. ‘And welcomed them as guests to rejoin society at my table.’

‘Your generosity paid for those men to burn, torture and kill and then to lay the guilt on an innocent woman,’ said the Nobildonna. She chose her

next words carefully. ‘There is no blame on this noble house.’

The patrician was aware of how easily that could be reversed. ‘They are missing,’ he said. ‘From what the Nobildonna has told me, I gauge it to be from the time your innocent sister was rescued from the *pozzi*. I have neither seen nor heard from them since. Which convinces me that everything you have told me today is true.’ He stared at Richard. ‘And you have already killed two men involved in this matter.’

‘I have, Signore.’

‘And you believe justice must be done for the sake of your honour.’

Richard didn’t answer. It wasn’t a question. The elderly patrician knew full well what was required.

Falconi’s authority was quick to reassert itself. He addressed Elias. ‘Master Jordan, go back to your people on the streets. Let it be known that the woman they seek is dead.’ He nodded. It was a dismissal.

As soon as Richard and Jordan had left the room, Falconi leant forward to the Signora. ‘Chiara, you know as well as I do I am a breath away from being implicated in this obscenity. Marasini and Cassola have incriminated me by their very presence. As you said, my money paid for murder. They must be killed. Can the boy do it?’

‘What they did to his sister demands nothing less. He’s killed two of them already. Yes, he can do it. Inflict pain on one you love and the heart shrivels and dies.’

‘If a nobleman killed a commoner, he would be brought to trial and banished for three or four years. For a common man to kill a nobleman, that would prompt a death penalty.’

‘I have no wish to lose my master knife maker.’ She returned his gaze. ‘Can he not be… sanctioned? Be of use again in the future?’

Francesco Falconi knew she had never been made aware of her late husband’s arrangement with Antonio Vieri, who had served her husband and the Council when he was a master blade smith. Some secrets in Venice were buried so deeply they were entombed in lead.

‘Can we trust him to do so without revealing what’s being asked of him?’ said Falconi.

‘Can we find a place for his sister if she recovers?’ di Zorzi countered. It was time to bargain, now that she believed Challenor’s murder had not been a challenge against her and that Falconi’s distress was genuine. The young

English knife maker was a valuable asset. ‘She’s a free woman. She has intelligence and, from what I’ve learnt, ran a merchant’s house in England. Bargain one against the other. Then he remains my master knife maker and becomes your weapon against those who must be dealt with.’

‘Perhaps,’ he said. ‘But it serves us better if she does not recover.’

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CHAPTER 80

Elizabeth Sheriff was dead.

Over the six weeks following the meeting at Falconi's house, word of her death seeped through the salons and gambling houses, back streets and brothels. The authorities gave notice that they had found and identified a body as the woman who had killed Captain John Challenor and his servants. It was of little interest to those who whored and gambled or frequented grand houses to eat fine food from gilded plates. The city of ghosts had claimed another victim. But Marasini and Cassola, avoiding the usual haunts of nobles and merchants since Piero Vettore and Caratelli vanished, welcomed the news. The two henchmen's bodies had never been found. A drunken fight? A boat to the mainland? Dead or not, their disappearance was added insurance that neither Marasini nor Cassola were associated with the murder at Challenor's house. Even though the hired men could never name those who hired them, Marasini and Cassola had been cautious. No one ever mentioned their names around the illicit gambling dens. No one was looking for them. And now the woman was dead. They were in the clear. They would cite illness for their absence from the salons and casino and they would make a profit from the document that Margos Azarian was desperate to recover. Then, financially secure, society beckoned.

*

With word of his sister's death being whispered through the city, Richard had been urged by Elias Jordan to exercise patience and continue his work. He agreed – logic dictated he had to – but that patience was a burden ready

to be thrown off as soon as the whereabouts of either of the remaining men responsible for the killing became known. The forge rang with a new-found energy. Coals blazed. Richard was as one with the knives he made. Steel was struck. Folded. Shaped. Hardened. Quenched. Honed. He absorbed himself in his blade making. The gilders and goldsmiths, the workshops, all worked long into the night to keep up with him. He was driven. Eager to use the constrained energy; eager to avenge his sister.

Antonio knew he was privileged to witness the wonder of a master blade maker who had yet to reach his full potential. During the waiting weeks, Richard forged six new knives, each fawned over by Nobildonna Chiara di Zorzi and released one by one to those who lusted after such beauty and who were prepared to pay the price. And the Signora had buyers already waiting.

Was there news of the men yet? Richard asked every day.

Antonio would shake his head and return to the workbenches, checking those trying to keep pace with his young knife maker. Richard took comfort from the knowledge that he now had the support of one of the most powerful patricians of the city. Stefan and Gasparo were as much his eyes and ears in the city's back streets as were Elias Jordan and his contacts. And di Zorzi's *maggiordomo* assured him that the Nobildonna had her own sources of information.

And still there was no word.

The city had swallowed the killers.

The search for Marasini and Cassola had gone cold. Fearing they would run, Falconi insisted that their names not be circulated. Better for those who listened and watched to discover when the two men broke cover.

And then Venice spat out a killer.

*

The priest, Don Marco Barozzi, found Andrea Cassola.

Men of the cloth, some loyal to the Pope, others to Venice, had spoken in hushed tones to the humble priest. Gossip was their daily bread. The Lords of the Night suspected one of the Church's own, a priest whose personal habits were unacceptable to both Church and state. Could anything be done to deflect this interest?

How could he do anything for a degenerate priest? Don Marco had asked, feigning innocence. They answered carefully. Might Don Marco know a person of influence who could help? His parish in Sant'Anzolo had many powerful families. Don Marco demurred as long as was necessary to play the game of contrived innocence. He might know someone, he finally admitted, letting them think what they would about the patrons of his parish. And without mentioning the family he had served for so many years. And he didn't care whether the priest who was of interest to the authorities was saved or not. Let the corrupt priest go the way of all flesh. And rot.

His offer to do what he could satisfied those asking. And what they offered in return had value.

The priest under investigation was suspicious of one of his congregation who had been absent for a while but who had suddenly returned. The man was a merchant and minor nobleman who had declined to take confession. His burden appeared to be such that he dared not trust a priest. Why? No burden was too great for confession unless he who bore it was fearful of it being exposed.

Don Marco observed the parishioner. His identity was confirmed. Cassola had thought himself safe. The lies spread about Elizabeth's death had soothed his fear. Stricken with guilt for his part in the killings, he had returned to his church. Where else would he find solace?

*

Richard visited Elizabeth every week. She was walking unaided, her wounds healing, but she had not yet regained full strength. The young Turkish doctor had confided to him that his sister would be unlikely to conceive a child should she marry and that the multiple assaults perpetrated on her had infected her with malign humours: a contamination of the blood. The disease was common enough across the city, and the physicians had assumed from the moment she was brought into their care that the assault made the outcome inevitable. They had applied every treatment known to them, including the use of mercury. She would recover, he assured Richard, but her injuries had taken longer to heal than anticipated.

When Richard sat with her, she tired easily and although her voice had returned, it was quieter than he remembered. Its gentle cadence was not

deliberate but a result of the rapists strangling her to silence her screams.

As he left her in the Turk's care, she took his hands into her own. 'Don't put yourself in danger,' she said, knowing full well he still sought the two men she had identified. 'We're together,' she told him. 'And I cannot wish for anything more.'

*

Elias Jordan was the emissary between the patrician and the Nobildonna and Richard. Andrea Cassola had been observed mingling with the crowds across the Rialto Bridge before attending services at the Chiesa San Giacomo di Rialto every day. It was in the same *campo* where the money changers and bankers sat beneath the church's portico waiting for their customers.

'And close to the market where you sold a hundred good people from Challenor's ship,' Richard said. He and Elias Jordan were in Antonio's office at the back of the forge where the old knife maker's records were kept, their conversation unheard by anyone else, including Antonio who was not privy to the secret information being delivered or the role Richard was to play.

Jordan shrugged. 'You've done well enough. Be thankful you had a talent and a skill that placed your value above the others. And now you not only have patronage but the blessing of a patrician of the Council of Ten. Kill Cassola on the bridge. Make it quick. Always best to kill a man in a crowd.'

'What of Marasini?'

Jordan tied his cloak. 'No word yet. Be patient. The first one you seek has crawled from his hiding place, believing he's safe. Cassola has no idea his crime has been discovered. His guard is down. Marasini? Well, he's probably the more intelligent of the two. I'll wager he's prepared to lie low for as long as it takes.

Elias Jordan left the forge, bidding farewell to Antonio, and strode to where his gondola was waiting. The old master knife maker saw Richard standing lost in thought.

'He brought news?'

Richard nodded. ‘Falconi told the Signora he was confident I would kill without it being discovered by the authorities. He’s protecting me.’

Antonio eased himself into the chair. ‘He’s covering his arse. No different from when I did their bidding all those years ago.’

‘And when I kill Cassola and then Marasini, will he use me again?’

Antonio spread the palms of his hands. ‘Who knows? They have you where they want you, and you’ll do their bidding – if they ask it. Better to have them on your side than not. They might turn a blind eye this once and leave it be. I’ll wager Falconi will breathe a sigh of relief when they’re dead. His patronage of them could bring him down. Who have they found?’

‘Andrea Cassola.’ He explained where his victim would be and what Jordan’s instructions had been.

‘You want some advice, Riccardo?’

Richard nodded and leant back against the old man’s table, heaped with papers, drawings, bills, invoices and orders. All held in untidy piles by scraps of old metal.

‘You kill him on the bridge it could be nothing more than a *borsarolo* trying to snatch a purse, but Marasini will still be suspicious. Maybe even stay in hiding longer than he’d planned. Cassola’s death needs to be a statement. Then Marasini will *know* there’s an assassin after him. A public execution that will shock him into running. Flush the bastard out. And with Falconi’s reputation at risk, he’ll be the one to find him.’

‘There isn’t a more public place than the bridge. If I don’t kill him there, where else is there in public?’

‘The church. You kill him in front of the priest and everyone worshipping there. It’s a small place. Easy to walk out of. No one will stop you. Not someone killing a nobleman without taking his purse. They’ll know there’s authority behind the man who wields the blade.’ A rueful smile creased his face. He sighed. ‘Kill him in front of God.’

*

The bell for noon Mass had rung. The Chiesa di San Giacomo still had the money changers and bankers huddled under its portico along the front of the building. Stall holders flanked the small square. Those inclined to take the sacrament crowded into the small church, standing shoulder to shoulder.

Along two sides of the church, benches were provided for the elderly and infirm. Everyone else stood, Richard among them. And he had remained standing for half an hour when the Latin prayers paused and those wishing to take the sacrament began moving forward. The service was open to everyone: tradesmen and unskilled labourers mingled together but merchants and nobility occupied a privileged position to one side of the church and would be ahead of anyone else wanting communion. Richard saw the nobleman smiling and talking to the merchant at his side as they shuffled forward towards the priest. They fell silent as narrow planked stands, each no more than three feet long, were moved to take the place of an absent altar rail. Each communicant then knelt, hands folded, arms resting. The priest began at the far end. Andrea Cassola paid no attention to the man who knelt on his other side. Cassola's eyes were raised towards the altarpiece and the statue of Jesus and his angels. He sensed rather than saw a movement to his left. An object had been slid along the wooden surface. He could make no sense of the carved lion's head pommel that lay half hidden in the man's wide sleeve. The man's hand lifted it so that the snake's design caught the light. It was a slow, deliberate movement. Cassola gasped. And then he stared in disbelief into the eyes of the young man next to him. Whatever triggered the recognition gave him barely time to choke:

'You!'

'Your actions sent my sister to the *pozzi* the night you had Challenor killed. I saved your life once, so it is now mine to take back,' said Richard quietly as the priest moved closer along the line.

Andrea Cassola lurched back, his escape blocked by the merchant next to him.

The blade rammed into his ear. By the time the wide-eyed man had slumped, Richard had withdrawn the knife, turned and pushed through the crowd as panic struck the communicants and the priest, who dropped the goblet of wine. Richard reached the door as Cassola's blood spread across the floor, mingling with that of the Blood of Christ.

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CHAPTER 81

Antonio Vieri Watched his young knife maker when he returned to the forge. He went silently into his room and sluiced blood from his hands and knife. The old man knew what it felt like to do such killing. He saw the same gaunt, haunted look on Riccardo's face as had settled on his own. It was as if a spectre had taken possession of his body and devoured the young man's soul. He had seen that same image in a mirror so many years before. Age had swept over the knife maker's features. Killing had a way of stripping away youth.

When he reappeared in the forge ready to begin work, Antonio took him into the back room and pushed a clay flask of wine into his hand.

'Not today, Riccardo. Enough has been done. You have knives to spare. The Signora has enough for the rich bastards she sells them to. You change and go to your sister. We don't need you here.'

Richard gratefully drank the wine.

'And you should eat.'

'Food?'

'When you kill a man, all the disquiet of your thoughts settles like ash in the bottom of the firepit. It needs to be raked into the coals again to regain heat.'

'What disquiet, Maestro Antonio? The ash is what's left on my tongue. I have no taste for food any more than I have a taste of guilt. As you told me, their eyes sear into your own. But I have become frightened now.'

'Of the men you seek to kill?'

'No. Of what I've become. A hollowed man.'

Antonio knew words would never take such a loss away. It had never left him, either. He offered a comforting smile and a hand on the young man's shoulder. 'Eat and you regain the fire in your belly. You need it. Eat and drink. And then spend time with your sister. There is the answer to the doubt that haunts you.'

*

The day following Cassola's assassination, Richard sat once again at Elizabeth's bedside. The feel of steel piercing bone in Andrea Cassola's head and the image of the statue of a benign Christ, gazing down from the altar, left Richard detached from the brutal act. He and God had abandoned each other the night the *Dove* went down. The sight of his sister as she sat propped up in her bed reinforced his emotional disengagement.

The attendants had cut her hair short so that the injury to her neck and throat could be treated. Her features had altered, although he wouldn't mention it to her; she would see that for herself soon enough when a mirror was presented. Despite her nose being reset, it had a slightly misshapen bridge and her broken cheekbone threw her face off kilter. He hadn't appreciated how unblemished her features had been before the attack. Now the stitches from her eyebrow down across her temple would leave a scar.

He had learnt how to address the physicians. The elderly Arab was known as Ibn al-Jarir, and the more approachable Turkish doctor's name was Abdülhamid Hekim. Both had shown tender care towards his sister, who was now stronger than he had seen her since being assaulted. Richard stood back as Abdülhamid administered a few drops of liquid from a medium-sized bottle of smoked glass into a glass of water, swirling the colourless fluid for a moment before handing it to Elizabeth, who drank it without question.

The Turk handed the bottle back to the attendant and addressed brother and sister. 'You are to stay here until you believe it is safe for you to leave and when you feel strong enough. You have Yûsuf Bey's hospitality for as long as you wish.'

Richard and Elizabeth expressed their gratitude.

'What is it you gave my sister?'

‘It is for pain. Very little is needed, it’s potent, but as I have discussed with her, it will be some time yet before the discomfort she experiences eases. We will make sure she has what she needs when you decide it is time for her to leave us. Now, you have much to discuss, and I must attend to other matters.’

Richard bade farewell in the customary Muslim manner and Abdülhamid and the female attendant left the room.

‘You look so much better,’ he said.

‘I’m looked after with great care. Safiye and Meryem take it in turns to sit with me.’

‘The attendants? They act like nurses?’

‘Yes. We teach each other words in our own language and they take me to the window, open the shutters and let me look along the Canal. The air is good for me and seeing the world go by makes me grateful to be alive.’

He couldn’t help but see how fragile she looked. She caught his look of concern.

‘I’m recovering quickly, Richard. Believe me. I’m stronger every day.’

His smile reflected his sadness.

‘You’ve killed Andrea Cassola.’ She reached for his hand with a loving smile to soothe his look of discomfort at her knowing. ‘The Turks. They know everything. And I still couldn’t remember his name until they told me.’

‘Do you remember Massimo Marasini?’

‘The other galley slave? His eyes, yes, but I can’t remember most names from the ship. I’m told my memory will improve in time.’

‘He’s still alive. We don’t know where. A lot of people are searching for him. We’ll find him.’

‘And then it is finished?’

He nodded. They fell silent, grateful for the other’s touch.

‘I want to know what we should do when it is. A position is being prepared for you in Venice. You’re a free woman. And the people I know will make sure it will be a good family you can be with. You’ll be a housekeeper like you were in Dartmouth with Mistress Henning.’

‘What choice do I have?’

‘You can go home.’

‘How would that be possible?’

‘Do you remember Martin telling you about the Dutch captain willing to take you both?’

‘Before I found you, yes. But they’ll want payment.’

‘You have payment. The rings Challenor gave you have great value and I have them. They’ll buy you and Martin passage home. He’s already arranged it when the ship returns to Venice. Two weeks, a month, no more.’

‘Martin and me?’

‘Yes.’

‘And you? Do you think I would leave you here?’

‘I’m enslaved.’

‘So is Martin, but you won’t be pursued once we reach home.’

Richard hesitated. He hadn’t told her that his future would be not only as a master knife maker but perhaps to serve the patrician Falconi and the Council of Ten when needed. ‘I have a good life here. What I create is desired. What could I do back in England? Go back to forging plough shares and wealthy merchants’ gates? This is where I belong now.’

‘You take a single knife back with you and men’s greed for what you can do will give you a forge of your own and apprentices to teach. You’ll be your own master. Your name will be known everywhere.’

She was sharp enough, even in her injured state, to see how a new world could open for them both. And he knew it.

‘We’ve cared for each other all our lives, Beth. You’ve done more for me than I have for you.’

‘You saved my life. I don’t know how. Now I’m recovering with the help of people who have shown me nothing but kindness.’ She took his hand and exposed the tattoo. ‘These people hold you in high esteem, Richard.’ She curled his hand into her own, raised it to her lips and kissed it. ‘Father would be so very proud of you. I know I am.’

Richard felt the impending pain of losing her. He wanted her to return on the Dutch ship with Martin. A safe passage. A good man at her side to protect her. He was torn, part of him wanting to urge her to leave, the other to tempt her to stay. ‘If there was nothing standing in your way, tell me what you would prefer? Venice will be a kind mistress to you now. You will have a good life here. We both will.’

‘I’m a simple woman, Richard. I want a simple life. In a place where I was born. Except for you, everything that is bad in my life is here. I want to

be with my own kind. I do not desire brocade silk and rings on my fingers.' She squeezed his hand. 'I'll go with Martin if you will come with us.'

'We're both changed, Beth. We are not who we were.' Richard knew she would not leave unless he agreed to go with her. He would have to find a way to backtrack from the lie he now told: 'When the time comes, we'll go home together.'

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CHAPTER 82

Massimo Marasini did not break cover until three nights after Cassola's death. News of the public execution, for that was what it had been, had swept plague-like through alleyways and crevices. It seeped through porous stone walls and slithered beneath doorframes and rickety windows. What had the nobleman done to be slain in such a manner? Venetians were used to waking one morning and finding a corpse hanging in the Piazza San Marco, someone taken in the night and condemned by the Council of Three. But to kill a man in the church suggested the victim had committed a heinous crime.

News of Challenor's woman's death had eased the noblemen's fear. Cassola had broken cover first and paid the price. And Marasini knew who had set the assassin on them. Francesco Falconi had somehow learnt of their involvement in Challenor's murder. Whether the woman was dead or alive now made no difference. They had been identified. Massimo Marasini knew he had to make his escape. He felt confident that he would evade whoever would be sent to kill him: he had planned his flight carefully.

Marasini's heightened sense of unease had likewise reached another who had taken part that night at Challenor's house and who, unlike the others, had stayed in the shadows, his payment for his involvement spent carefully. He was the boatman who took Marasini and the killers to the *porta d'acqua* at Challenor's house. He had also murdered the woman Maria, who had been bribed to open its doors, whose body had yet to be discovered. Tommaso Cavazza knew the lagoon as well as he knew his own *campo*. Maria would never be found. Three years before the killing, he had been a gondolier but was discovered to have overcharged passengers and cheated

fares. Disgraced, he was cast out from Scuola dei Traghetti, the gondoliers' guild. After that, he found it difficult to find work on the canals and waterways until he became a *barcaiolo* for hire at the San Marco waterfront and transported goods from the ships unloading. And then Piero Vettore approached him… Now, after Cassola's assassination, he was frightened. Two of those involved at Challenor's house had disappeared and one of the noblemen tracked down and killed.

His saviour was Massimo Marasini. He sought out the boatman in order to save himself. Marasini had a place to hide, a small, uninhabited island in the lagoon. A place known to him from childhood summers when his grandfather took him fishing there. It was a time when Marasini's family wealth had ensured they wouldn't endure any hardship, and servants in other boats would transport their food and drinks. Long since abandoned, there was nothing more than the remains of a crumbling brick and stone house, a rotten wooden jetty into marshland and the lagoon's cloying mist. It was remote; the only other people to be seen would be an occasional crab or eel fisherman from another of the scattered outlying islands. It was reached through a series of channels between marsh and mudflats. And that's why Marasini needed a skilled boatman. A week, no more, he assured Cavazza. Lying low would allow them to escape to the Venetian mainland. Once on Terraferma, he knew he would abandon Tommaso Cavazza. And then Florence or Rome beckoned, beyond the Republic's borders, where Venetian state assassins were less likely to seek him out.

Marasini slipped into the autumn mist from his secret lodgings in the Cannaregio. No one saw him leave in the middle of the night carrying nothing more than a pistol and dagger concealed beneath his cloak and a satchel of clothing in which nestled the document promising blackmailed wealth from the slave trader, Margos Azarian. Cassola's death had robbed Marasini of time to sell Challenor's incriminating evidence. As soon as he found a broker in Florence he would begin a new life of comfort. No longer would he endure such cold, poorly furnished rooms where he had been hiding. The widow who had rented him the two rooms on the top floor did not see him go. Nor did her three children, who slept soundly knowing the tall man with the dark eyes had always paid what he owed on time, which meant there was ample food on the table. No one stirred along the footpath he took where Cavazza waited in a stolen *sandolo*, a narrow flat-bottomed

boat, bow and stern sharp-pointed, lighter than a gondola, which could carry three passengers in meagre comfort. Marasini clambered aboard in what space remained from the sack of provisions he had paid Cavazza to buy.

Venetians had little tolerance for those who cheated others outright. To skim cream from milk was no crime for it made little difference to the milk; everyone tended to take a little of what they could, provided it caused no harm. A boatman took a handful of apples, a mason a length of timber. But to cheat a man of a payment owed was despised. As was a *borsarolo*: a thief who stole what another had worked for.

Tommaso Cavazza had stolen a fisherman's *sandolo*, which deprived him of his livelihood. That theft would be reported to the authorities the next morning, as would a cheated widow's account of a missing tenant. Massimo Marasini absconded the night before his rent was due. A small matter he had forgotten in his haste. When a man runs for his life, such a simple mistake can be fatal.

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CHAPTER 83

When Nobildonna Chiara di Zorzi was told by Elias Jordan about the manner of Cassola's death at the hand of her knife maker, she felt shocked and angered. It was blasphemy, was it not? All those in her circle, not least her informer the priest, would rail against such a sacrilegious act.

However, Francesco Falconi had calmed her immediate response, assuring her that such a public murder showed courage and determination and a willingness to do what was necessary in the most telling way. He reminded her it had been her idea to use Riccardo Sceriffo thus. It was a decision worthy of her late husband. And one that had enhanced her reputation in the patrician Falconi's eyes. She ignored the patronizing remark. The Signora knew well enough how every fragment of success, in all aspects of life and in business, often depended on support from men of power and influence. That she had been so successful without a man at her side, or in her bed, was what put steel in her backbone. She did not need men in her life. Widowhood suited her admirably. And when the urge for sex demanded to be satisfied, she used Elias.

She had swiftly forgiven Richard for his daring act.

Men. A double-edged blade.

She took solace that the exposure and killing of the men responsible for Challenor's death confirmed that there was never any threat against her. Whatever their reason to commit murder it was a personal matter that had slithered to the surface from the pirate's dark past.

Now, after four days of fevered speculation on the streets and among the servants about why Cassola had been slain in such a manner, the nobleman

sent a message to have Elias Jordan bring Riccardo Sceriffo to his house. The net had snared Marasini.

*

Richard stood with Elias Jordan in an anteroom in the Casa Falconi. This was not the grand, lavishly decorated room where he had once stood as his knife was inspected. Where he had seen the two killers at the card table and not recognized them. This was half that room's size and less ornate. It was still a magnificent chamber.

The patrician stood at a marble-top table studying an unfolded map. He faced them.

'Master Jordan, are you familiar with the islands?'

'Only those where goods and cargo are moved to and from, Signore.'

The answer received no further query. 'Then you are of no use here. Wait outside. Leave Master Riccardo with me.'

Jordan was used to abrupt commands from those who saw him as nothing more than an enslaved servant, despite how useful he had been over the years to the Signora's late husband, who, like Falconi, had served the Council of Ten. This dismissal further diminished his status. The young Englishman's skills as a knife maker and assassin had superseded his own value. At least in this situation. He turned his back on Richard and left the room.

Without raising his head, the patrician summoned Richard. 'Come here.'

Richard approached and stood a respectful few feet away.

Falconi glanced at him. 'No, here. Look at this chart.'

Richard obeyed and saw an image of Venice imprinted on thick paper. It was the first time he had been given any idea of how the city looked. The lagoon spread out until it touched the ragged shore of Terraferma. Scattered spots peppered the lagoon.

'A hundred and more islands, Master Riccardo, and the man you seek is on one of them.'

'Marasini?'

'Yes. He made a run for it a few nights ago.' He sighed, his finger tracing a route through the tidal charts. 'He's a well-educated man. Intelligent. Speaks and reads Greek, Latin and English. But he has made a

clumsy error I would not have thought he'd make. A widow has made an official complaint against a man who lodged with her and absconded without paying his rent. No matter. He's been identified and so too has a man with him.'

'There's another man involved?' said Richard. He'd thought all those who attacked Challenor's house had been accounted for.

'A *barcaiolo*. They had loaded his barge at the basin, but he did not arrive for work. He's disappeared. He was sighted near the fishermen's quarters in *sestiere* Castello. A boat was stolen. It was seen with two men in it. A boatman and a passenger. And so I believe he has been paid by, or was involved with, Marasini.'

Falconi lifted the chart and walked to a large, ornate desk, its surface neatly stacked with papers of state. He dipped his quill and marked a speck on the map. He dried the ink and turned to Richard. 'Don't just stand there, come here.'

Richard obeyed. Falconi leant on the chart and placed a book on one end and the heavy silver inkwell on the other. 'This island once belonged to his family. It is difficult to reach. I thought Elias Jordan might have been able to guide you. You have a boatman, don't you?'

'He doesn't know the waters of the lagoon.'

'But he has been helping you, so you trust him?'

'I do.'

'I cannot have any of my gondoliers involved in this. Elias Jordan will pay a fisherman to guide you to the mouth of this channel here,' he said, tracing his finger across the lagoon. 'Once there, the fisherman will return. The channel twists and turns between mudflats and marshland. Your man will take you to where Marasini, and no doubt this other man, will be hiding. You will kill them both. I do not wish to see their bodies, but I need proof of their death.'

'Signor Falconi, they'll be armed. A knife is only of use when as close to the man as I am to you.'

Francesco Falconi barely concealed his look of alarm at standing next to Richard, who had killed so efficiently. With true patrician coolness, he stepped around the desk and removed his inkwell. The chart furled.

'Your man is experienced enough to do this?'

Richard gathered the chart. ‘A former sailor with the English fleet. He understands wind and tides, my lord.’

The old patrician sat behind his desk. He fingered a pile of state papers. He didn’t look up.

‘You will have a pistol apiece. Master Jordan will inform me of your success. And then…’ He looked up. ‘You must return to your knife making until these other skills are required again.’

Richard walked to the door, chart in hand. Killing Massimo Marasini had nothing to do with Venetian justice. He was pursuing his own vendetta while safeguarding a patrician’s reputation.

He vowed to himself this would be the last time he killed a man.

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CHAPTER 84

The Fisherman who guided them brought his boat to a halt. It had taken almost two hours to reach the mouth of the channel across the lagoon. Martin could feel the current tugging at his oar. The patrician's men had provided a *sandolo*, lighter than his barge, which gave more feel to an oarsman. Had the weather not settled into a windless night with thickening mist, he would have raised its single mast, taken half the time and worked up less of a sweat. At least he wasn't obliged to sit in the boat's well like Richard, hunched and shivering.

The other boatman came alongside. His breath plumed in the cold air. 'A mile down the channel. There's a scrape of an island if that's where I think you're heading. Be warned: there's a broad curve in the channel, reed beds on your right, mud and scrubland on your left, so the channel's narrow. Even if the mist thickens and smothers what moonlight there is, once around that curve, if there's anyone on watch, they'll see your boat.' He wiped his nose across his cloak sleeve. 'None of my business, just a word of advice from one waterman to another.'

He nodded his farewell and turned his boat for home.

Martin guided the *sandolo* into the channel. It was important to know how fast the undercurrent might sweep them along. Controlling the boat from now on might be a matter of life or death. He felt a conflicting pull on his oar. The channel's surface water looked to be calm and undisturbed, but he knew that below it ran the currents which shaped the lagoon bed, creating mudflats and sandbanks.

'Look ahead, lad,' he said, 'we need to be alert now. Ignore the cold. Our lives depend on it.'

Martin felt the boat meander along the channel. It took little effort to propel the narrow craft. All he had to do was steer. He kept it close to the left bank so that if they turned the expected bend, they would have a better chance of steering it into the nearside mudbank. The smell of marsh gas wafted through the mist. The reed beds seemed as dense as any forest. Richard and Martin flinched from the sudden noisy flapping of an unseen waterfowl escaping the reed bed as they glided past.

Fear served its purpose. Richard felt it surge into his cold limbs. His heartbeat raced.

Martin hissed, ‘Down!’ and promptly steered close to the bank. The mist had obscured the bend in the channel, but a distant blurred glow of firelight appeared ahead. The bank side held the boat.

‘I see it,’ said Richard in barely a whisper. Even though the mist muffled sound, it would travel across water.

‘Aye, and if whoever’s by that fire heard that bird causing a ruckus, then they’d know something disturbed it.’

Richard looked back. ‘Maybe not.’

Martin shrugged. ‘Maybe not.’

‘How far do you think?’

‘Can’t tell in this. Three hundred yards? No more.’

Richard reached over the boat’s side. His hand found deep, squelching mud. Slime that clung to his hand. He sluiced it off. ‘We can’t go from here, Martin. That mud’ll suck us down, and even if it doesn’t, we’ll make too much damned noise reaching the place.’

Martin squatted on his haunches. ‘If you need to go through with this, then there’s only one way to do it. And you won’t welcome the idea.’

‘Which is?’

‘We go in the water. Get close to the old landing jetty.’ He pinched snot dribbling from his nose. ‘Them pistols are wrapped in oilcloth, primed and ready, but on a night like this and with my idea of how to get ashore, then there’s a good chance they’ll misfire. So. Do we go on?’

*

The empty *sandolo* appeared to drift aimlessly along the channel, but it was being nudged from the back by Richard and Martin, kicking gently in the

cold water. The weight of their wet clothing made them gasp from the exertion and it seemed impossible they wouldn't be heard. They kept the oilcloth clear of the water. Martin peered around the stern of the boat. They were fifty yards from the fire. A figure stepped away from the fire glow. He put his hand on his belt. Exactly where a pistol would be.

He called out a warning. 'A boat!'

Martin saw the man move closer to the bank, beyond the old jetty where another slim craft was moored and which helped to obscure Richard and Martin in the water. He followed the drifting *sandolo*'s slow journey.

'It's all right! It's nothing. A boat adrift is all.' And then he turned back from the water's rising mist to huddle next to the blaze.

Richard's teeth chattered. He clenched his jaw, released it, and readied himself. Martin would wait until Richard slithered ashore. Now that they were this close, they saw that the building was brick-built, crumbling in places, its roof long lost to the elements. A muted glow from a fire inside tinged the mist lingering on top of the walls. Marasini would be by that fire while his guard suffered the night's chill. Richard noted the route he would take to breach the ruin. The patch of scrubland where the house stood was remote enough, he thought, and that meant the man at the fire probably knew there was little chance of anyone approaching at night. And should the mist lift in the daylight, the men on the island would have a clear view up and down the channel, so they felt safe.

Richard patted Martin on his back and then left his friend in the water while he belly crawled through the slime. It took only six feet for his outstretched hands to grasp turf. Now he was at the same level as the man by the fire thirty yards away, hunched with his back to him. Gnarled trees, their growth stunted from salt-laden wind, stood sentinel-like at the rear of the low building. The overgrown bushes gave Richard cover. He unwrapped the pistol from its oilskin then, crouching, he stepped forward warily. The undergrowth was tangled and if he tripped over a root or put his weight on any dead wood he would alert the man at the fireside.

He decided the safest way to approach the rear of the house was by getting as close as he could to the side walls. With slow, careful movements he pushed aside clawing branches until the guard was out of his sight. He was three steps away from the side of the house when he put his foot into a

hole. He stumbled forward, making even more of a racket as he went head first into the foliage.

A cry of alarm from someone inside. ‘Tommaso!’

As Richard scrambled to his feet and ran headlong for the corner of the building, he felt a fluttering, whirring noise close to his head. Fragments of old brick shattered, quickly followed by the gunshot. No warning given. Crouching, he ran hard, leaping over tangled undergrowth. Two more shots boomed away from him. Dull, as if buffered by the mist. And a cry of pain. Martin!

Richard turned the corner, chest heaving, hand clasping the pistol. A dull glow leaked through the rotten planked door at the back of the ruin. There was no time for caution. He pushed his shoulder against it. The wood splintered without resistance. As he straightened, he saw a man facing him, pistol levelled, ten yards away, silhouetted from the fire behind him. The impact of the ball tore through Richard’s doublet’s padding at the shoulder. Unharmed, he panicked, raised his own pistol and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. He had forgotten to cock the weapon. The other man was rapidly reloading, pouring powder, ramming home a ball. Richard pulled back the hammer, aimed and pulled the trigger again. Unfamiliar with firing a weapon, he had forgotten the flare of smoke and flame when the hammer’s flint struck the gunpowder in the pan and then the momentary delay in the ball leaving the barrel. He flinched as the hammer struck. His shot went wide.

Marasini had reloaded, raised the weapon as Richard hurled his pistol and raced towards him. His action saved his life. The nobleman ducked, pulled the trigger; the ball shattered against the wall. Richard threw himself at Marasini who grappled with him. He was heavier than when Richard had pulled him from the burning galley and it gave him a brief advantage as he punched and gouged his assailant. Richard took the blows, twisted away from the fingers trying to blind him, tucked his arms in to protect his ribs and headbutted him. Blood spurted. Marasini rocked back on his heels but came in hard again. The firelight twisted his snarling blood-smeared face into a grotesque mask. They wrestled. Marasini elbowed Richard’s head. The short, sharp jab had force behind it and made Richard take a step back. Marasini swung a fist and caught Richard’s temple. His head whipped away from the blow, but Marasini followed it with a savage punch to Richard’s

stomach. He went down on one knee, an arm reaching for the floor to steady himself, the other across his stomach to brace against the pain. Marasini closed in to aim a kick at his head. Richard's hand touched the barrel of the pistol he'd hurled at Challenor's killer. Its two-pound weight in the hand of a blacksmith was as lethal as any anvil hammer. He smashed its butt against Marasini's knee, who screamed and fell back.

The two of them lay heaving for breath. Neither made any attempt to get to their feet. Marasini was propped against the wall and wiped a sleeve across his bloodied, pain-twisted face. Richard was on hands and knees, sucking in air, and spat phlegm. Both men were winded and hurting.

'Was it you who killed Cassola? And the others? You?'

Richard nodded.

'I can pay you,' said Marasini. 'Pay you more than the man who sent you. It was Falconi, wasn't it? It was him. Damned if it wasn't. I can pay you more,' he said again.

With neither man posing a threat, they remained where they were.

Richard shook his head. 'You don't have enough money.'

'I have money. I have money!'

Richard shook his head. His breath was coming more easily, despite the pain still gripping his stomach. 'He didn't pay me.'

Confusion creased Marasini's face. After a moment he said: 'Then why? Who are you?'

Richard looked at him. 'You don't remember?'

Marasini stared at him. Shook his head.

'Cassola remembered. Seconds before he died.' He sank back onto his haunches. 'Perhaps the light is too dim in here.' He paused. 'I was enslaved on Challenor's ship. I'm the one who pulled you out of that burning galley.'

It didn't make any sense. Marasini couldn't grasp the reality. His head bent forward, peering in the half-light to try to identify the man who had risked his life to save his own. 'Then I owe you my life. Why this? Why try and kill me? I'm in your debt.'

'You killed Challenor and his people.'

'Is that what this is about?' Marasini pushed his back against the wall to get to his feet. 'Challenor?' He shook his head. 'Challenor was scum. He killed my wife and children. He had to pay. I took everything from him before I pushed my blade into his heart and he knew it. He deserved to die.'

‘He did. But you killed him without honour. You didn’t claim the killing to be rightful. You laid the blame on an innocent woman.’

‘She was his whore. She was nothing.’

‘She was not his whore. She had sacrificed herself to save me from being sent to the galleys. Her name is Elizabeth Sheriff. She’s alive. I dragged her from the *pozzi*. She’s my sister.’

Richard let his words sink in.

Marasini’s mouth opened and closed, but he made no utterance other than a hoarse gasp of disbelief. ‘I didn’t know. I swear. I didn’t know.’

‘How could you? It doesn’t matter now.’

Marasini looked frantically around for a weapon. He saw none. Using one hand for support against the wall, he limped for the ruin’s front door. Richard got slowly to his feet. He pulled the knife free from its scabbard. He followed Marasini into the eerily moonlit mist. A hobbling figure going nowhere. A hunched shadow being consumed by the swirling fog. Slipping in the mud. Trying to reach the moored boat. A last desperate attempt to save himself.

Richard saw Martin lying face down on the ground. The guard lay on his back. Eyes staring blindly below his shattered forehead where Martin’s shot had killed him. Both men down, the result of the two gunshots Richard had heard.

Marasini’s determination almost paid off, but his cold hands couldn’t untie the small boat’s mooring line. He twisted around, slumped down, his back against one of the jetty’s posts. Staring at the man slowly approaching with a knife in his hand. He took a deep breath. His eyes squeezed tight.

Richard knelt on one knee in front of him. He placed the palm of his hand on Marasini’s face, who opened his eyes. Tears welling. Trembling from the combined enemy of fear and cold.

Richard stared into the dark, haunting eyes he had first seen on the burning galley. ‘I’m sorry for the death of your family,’ he said. ‘A cruel act that drove you to do what you did. It would have been a kindness to my sister had you killed her.’

Marasini gasped at his killer’s gentle words of compassion. As if in friendship, his hand reached for and held Richard’s wrist. For a brief, startling moment, he saw the silver pattern of a serpent in the moonlight before its cold bite slid across his throat.

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CHAPTER 85

Apassing Breeze Swayed and rustled the bulrushes, then moved on. Silence settled over the marshland. If he listened closely, Richard could hear a single bell so far away across the lagoon its dull chime was barely audible.

Richard's rasping breath and rapid heartbeat had slowed now that the killing was over. He attended to Martin, who was unconscious but alive. Dragging him inside the ruin, he propped him on the fugitive's sack of supplies, stoked the fire and examined his friend's wound. The ball shot from the guard's pistol had grazed the side of his scalp, but the bruise on his forehead was from something else.

Richard undressed his friend, covered him in a blanket, then laid out his clothes next to the fire. He did the same for his own soaking garments. With a blanket around his shoulders, he bathed and dried the wound, then eased wine between Martin's lips until the old ferryman coughed and spluttered. He blinked, his eyes focusing. He smiled and then coughed.

'Sweet Jesus, you're alive.'

'As are you.'

'Is it done?'

'It is.'

Martin sighed. 'Thank God. Now we can live in peace.'

Richard sat back and took a swig from the bottle. 'If they allow it, my friend.' He passed the bottle back.

'Aye,' said Martin. 'There is that.' He swigged. 'Good wine,' he said, without moving, happy to be propped up by the fire and covered with a dry blanket. 'But then it would be.'

'You have a line of blood on your scalp. A scrape. Nothing more.'

‘A man needs luck in these situations. I heard the alarm raised and the guard shoot. I slithered up the bank. He heard me. He had two pistols. We both fired. I slipped. Had I not, his second shot would have killed me. I hit my head on a stone.

‘A boatman who ran aground,’ said Richard.

‘Aye. Big feet.’

‘Clumsy.’

‘Lucky.’ He took a long drink. ‘I don’t see Marasini.’

‘Outside.’

Martin nodded, passed the bottle back.

‘There’s food,’ said Richard. ‘I say we spend the night, get warm and dry, eat what we can and get some sleep and then go back across the lagoon in daylight.’

His friend nodded. ‘Leave Marasini outside. I don’t fancy sleeping with the dead.’

*

The fog was lifting the next day; the air warmed by the low sun and pushed across the lagoon by a freshening breeze. Before they left, they stripped Marasini of his three-quarter top coat and took what money they could find on the corpses and among the bundle of Marasini’s clothing. Richard showed Martin the leather-bound document.

‘I was with Challenor the night he blackmailed the Armenian. This is what he held back. He double-crossed Azarian. That’s how Marasini and Cassola must have got back to Venice from Tunis. The slave trader financed them.’

‘Then you have a man’s life in your hands,’ said Martin. ‘The Signora would be very interested in that. So too Falconi. Leverage over a man who sells slaves is profitable.’

Richard shrugged, uncertain of what to do with the document. ‘You and I are enslaved, my friend – how many poor souls would we want to see bartered?’ he said. ‘I’ll think on it.’

Richard heaved the two corpses into the water. The bodies floated for a while as they were pushed into the channel, and then the undercurrent took them down.

‘You and Beth will share what’s taken from those I killed, and Challenor’s jewellery will pay the Dutch captain for the passage home.’

‘We have to be nimble. He sails on the night tide in a couple of days and your sister can be a stubborn woman. She’ll not go without you.’

‘I have a chance to make a name for myself here and I have a skill they want. But I’m not going to kill for them, Martin. What I did was necessary. Nothing more.’

‘And if the Council or Falconi won’t release you from doing what they want?’

‘Then we’ll sail home together. Whatever happens, Beth must make her own decision and if she stays here, then you buy passage with the jewellery for yourself and she can have what there is of the money. Is that agreeable?’

Martin nodded. ‘No need to ask, lad. No need to ask.’

There was nothing more to discuss. Richard’s fate was in the hands of others.

*

Martin raised the *sandolo*’s mast and used the gentle breeze to sail them back across the lagoon, easing the vessel through the handful of moored merchant ships in the basin. The Dutch boat’s flag wavered as if in greeting. The two men looked at the sturdy vessel that might soon take at least one of them home.

Before returning the *sandolo* and exchanging it for Martin’s barge, they lowered the mast and Martin rowed them to the forge.

It was noisy and busy as usual.

Domenico was hammering shape into hot iron on the anvil when he saw Richard. ‘Grandfather!’

Antonio had been dozing. He snapped awake and eased himself out of his chair with a broad smile to greet his protégé. Richard tapped Domenico’s shoulder in greeting as Antonio reached out and clasped Richard’s arm. ‘Riccardo. You’re safe. Praise be.’

The warmth of the old man’s greeting was as welcoming as the smell of hot iron and acrid firepit.

Antonio saw doubt cross the young knife maker’s face. He pulled him into the back room.

‘It’s over, Riccardo. You have honoured your family,’ he said.

‘I did as you asked, Maestro Antonio. I stared into their eyes. Every man I killed.’

‘That is the price, my boy. You do not kill a man without carrying that burden.’

‘What burden? I’m as wretched as any other killer. What was taken from me when I saw what they had done to my sister can’t be replaced. I know what I have become. Given the chance I’ll turn my back on it.’

Antonio studied the tired man in front of him. ‘Get clean. Eat. Start work again.’

Richard couldn’t tell his mentor about his plans. Not yet. ‘I have knives already prepared, *maestro*.’

‘And the Signora will want more.’

‘I need your help,’ said Richard.

Antonio sensed his urgency. ‘If I am able, then ask and it will be done.’

‘What threat there might have been against my sister has now gone. She’s recovered well from her injuries, and those who cared for her have been more than generous. I need a place for her to stay. For a while. Perhaps only a few days. I don’t know yet what decision she will make for herself.’

‘A room then. And someone to feed her and be close to here. Giustina. The woman who cared for her that dreadful night. Bring your sister here, Riccardo, and then deal with Elias and Signor Falconi.’

*

Richard gazed at the Grand Canal as Martin rowed the *sandolo* to the Fondaco dei Turchi where Elizabeth was being cared for. The Canal now looked so familiar to him that the thought of the slow-moving, quiet River Dart seemed to pale by comparison. If he were to return, how could Totnes, a small market town at the head of the river, compare to Venice? Except, of course, he reminded himself, he would not be enslaved in England.

‘Yes, she can travel,’ said Abdülhamid, before taking Richard to Elizabeth’s room. ‘I’ll arrange clothing for her and send word to Yûsuf Bey that you are here.’

The doctor opened the door and stepped aside, letting Richard into the room. The door closed behind him. Elizabeth was sitting in a chair by the

open window. She turned, saw him, and smiled. ‘Richard!’

He held back, uncertain if she could manage on her own to get out of the chair. She did so with ease, but walked slowly to embrace him. Her external wounds had faded, but he still could not reconcile the way she now looked. Thinner, short-haired, slow-moving. Diminished.

‘Beth,’ he whispered. ‘My God, you’re up and about,’ he said, trying to sound more cheerful than he felt.

‘I’m improving every hour, dearest brother. And they have a strong potion for pain when I need it.’ The tinge of regret was obvious.

There was nothing he could ask about the injuries inflicted on her. Her pain was her own burden to be dealt with as best she could. ‘The air’s cold and you’re in front of an open window.’

‘It invigorates me. I breathe in the life I nearly lost.’

He guided her to the edge of the bed. Her mood was lighter than he imagined. The spark that had been extinguished now flared back. The surge of joy made him embrace her again.

‘There is no threat against you any longer,’ he told her. ‘That matter is closed. ‘

She knew what that meant. She took his hands in her own and kissed them.

‘You’re free to leave here if you’re strong enough. Abdülhamid said he’ll arrange clothes for you. It’s time to go, Beth.’

She beamed. ‘Yes. I’m ready.’

There was a knock at the door.

‘Come,’ she answered.

The two women who had cared for her entered, carrying plain, long robes.

‘Meryem, Safiye. Thank you!’ She turned to Richard. ‘Let me dress.’

Richard went to the door and turned back to thank the two women whose day-and-night care had helped his sister. The three women were clinging to each other in a tearful embrace. He closed the door.

*

Yûsuf Bey noted the torn shoulder padding on the young man’s doublet, which still showed dried patches of mud. The Englishman appeared weary,

as if demanding work had now been completed. It didn't take much guesswork to know what the young knife maker had done.

'I regret I was not here to greet you, Master Riccardo. Business matters intrude on a man's hospitality.'

'*Selamün aleyküm,*' said Richard. 'I am here to take my sister home and to offer my gratitude for your kindness.'

'There is no need, I assure you. Mehmet Artan honoured you with the mark of a Janissary. No word of thanks for what little we have done need ever be mentioned.'

Richard bowed his head towards the young doctor, who stood behind Yûsuf Bey. 'We owe so much to your skilled physicians and attendants.'

He reached into his doublet and pulled out one of his knives. The scabbard was studded with semi-precious stones and bound in silver thread. The decorated blade's hilt bore the pommel of a horse's head. It was as close a replica as he could manage of the knife he had seen in Tunis.

'A poor copy of a blade Mehmet showed me. It doesn't do justice to the skill of whoever forged his knife. I hope you will accept this as a token of my appreciation for what you have done for my sister. God bless you, Yûsuf Bey.'

There was no pretence in Yûsuf Bey's expression of delight. The knife was clearly the work of a master knife maker. 'It will be treasured,' the Turk said.

'As will your kindness,' said Richard. 'I have one more request of you.' He pulled out the leather-bound document and handed it to Yûsuf Bey, explaining the origin and importance of its contents. 'I believe it was Azarian who financed the two killers to return here. Beyond their own desire to kill Challenor, the slave trader was desperate for this to be found and returned to him. It proves he cheated Uthmân Dey. That's what Captain Challenor held over him.'

'And your request?' said Yûsuf Bey.

'What do I do with it? Signor Falconi will hear of it sooner or later. The Nobildonna will use it against Azarian and secure better terms when she buys slaves. Should anyone benefit from this? Or should I destroy it?'

Yûsuf Bey felt the weight of the document. It weighed nothing of consequence but the value was a man's weight in gold.

‘You have asked for my advice and I will give it, freely. I can have this returned to Margos Azarian and he will be in your debt forever because I will stand witness to you returning it to him.’

Yûsuf Bey paused. He gazed at Richard. There was another choice to be considered.

‘Or?’ said Richard.

‘You bear the tattoo of the Janissaries. You are honoured by them. It was their esteem for you that opened my door to your plight. Uthmân Dey rules Tunis because he was chosen by the Janissaries. Gift this to him. Margos Azarian is an Armenian slave trader who would steal a blind man’s begging bowl. His corruption has been tolerated because he has been careful. It looks as though your English captain played the game well. Gift it to the Dey and you will have his favour and that of the Janissaries for as long as you live. That is my advice.’

Richard took only a moment to consider the choice. ‘Then I beg you to see it delivered into his hands with my blessing.’

Events that brought him to this place swirled in Richard’s mind. A selfless act saving a stranger from a burning galley had brought a mortal enemy into his life, yet had also offered sanctuary and life-saving help for his sister.

As if reading his thoughts, Yûsuf Bey embraced him. ‘The Almighty works in ways we cannot understand, Master Riccardo. But he brings together those who must become known to one another.’ He smiled. ‘Never doubt it.’

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CHAPTER 86

Domenico and his grandfather welcomed Elizabeth at the forge when Richard left to see Elias Jordan with news of Marasini's death. Antonio introduced her to Giustina. The widow's usual stern expression softened when she saw the woman who had been so badly assaulted.

'Master Antonio told me what you did for me that night,' Elizabeth said, clasping the woman's hands in her own.

'It was what any woman would do. Something a man could not,' she said, glancing at Antonio. 'There's no need for it to be mentioned. You required help.' She paused. 'More help than I could give you. It looks as though the physicians your brother found saved your life. I feared you dead.'

Elizabeth had agreed to Richard's request that she did not mention where she had been cared for. He thought it better for the Turks to be kept out of it. Nor did she mention that Martin had arranged passage on the Dutch ship the next night. In a city of spies and informers, the truth was at times best kept hidden.

'I have a room and food,' said Giustina. 'You are welcome.'

'And I can work for you to help repay you,' said Elizabeth.

'There is no need to be repaid for anything. Besides, a woman like you does not work for a woman like me, Signora Sceriffo.'

'I would rather do something than sit and watch others work.'

Giustina tugged her shawl around her shoulders. 'I believe you have earned the time to rest. Domenico will bring you to me when you are finished here. There is no need to pay me, understand?'

Elizabeth nodded.

‘He pays,’ she said, looking at Antonio.

‘As I always have done,’ muttered the old man as his former lover turned to leave.

She glared at him with a look that could turn a man to stone. Then she smiled. ‘What else are men good for?’

*

Antonio ushered Elizabeth into the bustling workshop. A strangled cry of delight rang out from Caterina, who was at the far end of a bench. She ran to the woman who had saved her. Elizabeth scooped her up, hiding the stab of pain deep in her belly as she hugged the tearful child, knowing she would soon need a dose of the strong liquid Abdülhamid had given her. Placing her down, she knelt. ‘You’re safe here, Caterina. I could wish for nothing more. Master Antonio has told me that it was you who raised the alarm and ran for Master Jordan.’

The mute girl wiped her cheeks and nodded, smiling all the time.

‘I am sorry you saw what you did, but your bravery saved my life. I will always be grateful to you.’

The child pointed to her heart and then to Elizabeth.

‘Yes, I will hold you in my heart as well.’ She took a strand of thin leather thong used for binding a knife hilt from the workbench and then slipped off her silver ring. Looping the cord through the ring, she tied it off and put it around Caterina’s neck. The child’s incredulous look was worth far more than the silver ring’s value.

‘This is so you will remember me. And also… one day when you are grown up, and a man offers you a ring to gain your affections, he might promise you silver, but try to give you only copper. Well, you will already have one of silver. And then you can decide if his affections are what you want.’ The gist of Mrs Henning’s words travelled across an ocean from another life.

Caterina hugged Elizabeth again and tucked the necklace beneath her dress. Antonio placed a hand on her head.

‘Child, go back to your work now.’

Elizabeth bent and kissed her forehead, and the girl walked back to her bench, one hand pressed against the hidden treasure.

‘This is where the local children use their skills to add and refine the design features for your brother’s knives.’ Antonio showed her a selection of completed knives on the workbench. ‘These are what he creates. One day noblemen will come from as far as Milan and Florence in an attempt to lure him away. They’ll pay the Signora di Zorzi a high price to take him there and make knives for them. He won’t go. He belongs here now. He’s one of us. His name will stretch across Italy and then to wherever a ship sails and a merchant trades.’ He eased the blade from her hands. ‘Your brother’s name will go down in history.’

Elizabeth looked at the way the old man caressed the knife. She felt a pang of regret. She realized she was asking too much of her brother to return with her to England. He did indeed belong here.

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CHAPTER 87

The guard at Casa di Zorzi escorted Richard to where Elias Jordan waited in a first-floor room of the grand house.

Richard dropped a weighty half-filled sack on the floor. The *maggiordomo* wasn't amused.

'What the hell is this?'

'Massimo Marasini's bloodstained coat and five flintlock pistols. Signor Falconi wanted proof of his death.'

'Then get it off my floor and take it to him yourself.'

'Master Jordan, I've done all I am going to do for him. The Nobildonna arranged this. I have no status at Ca' Falconi.'

Jordan saw the etched weariness on Richard's face, whose tone of voice was edging towards impertinence. 'The Nobildonna has bought and paid for you and your knife-making skills. Your dirty work is sanctioned by an authority-wielding patrician. He gave you a task to save your sister. Your sister! Nothing less than permission to commit murder.'

'It was my vendetta. I had the right.'

'You had *nothing*. You *have* a blessed life. You serve two masters now. You obey them. When he beckons, you do what he commands. When she beckons, you run to her with what she wants.'

Richard's frustration spilled over. Unbidden words spilled out from his mouth. 'To her bed, like you?'

Jordan swung a hefty fist; Richard half turned, pushing it away, forcing Jordan off balance, who sprawled across a side table, sending glassware crashing. He was pinned by Richard's weight, who suddenly had his killing

knife at his throat. ‘Don’t ever raise your hand to me again. I could kill you and still remain her knife maker. I am of more value to her than you now.’

A woman servant alerted by the noise opened the door, took in the scene and stood gaping.

Realizing he had gone too far, Richard stepped back, quickly concealing the knife. Jordan lifted a hand to assure the servant as he brushed himself down.

‘It’s all right. An accident. Clean it up later.’

The woman hesitated, nodded, and closed the door.

Elias Jordan was remarkably calm. He poured himself a glass of wine and studied the young knife maker for a moment. He had changed. More confident. Killing a man with a knife took resolve. ‘Do not bite the hand that feeds you, Richard. I helped find the killers. I gave you your bargeman friend. I stand between you and two powerful people.’

‘People who use me.’

‘Of course.’

‘Falconi sanctioned the killing to save his own reputation. It was nothing to do with helping my sister.’

Elias Jordan sat in a chair. He appeared relaxed, as if the incident had never happened. ‘And in so doing allowed you to kill two noblemen. Without his blessing, that would bring you the death penalty.’ He sipped the wine and smiled. ‘You are trapped like a crab in a pot. There is no way out for you.’

‘I’ll do no more killing for Falconi.’

‘Then you should tell him yourself.’

‘The Signora will speak for me. She arranged it; she can stop it.’

‘Don’t be naïve. She traded your desire for revenge with his need to save his reputation and that exchange kept you from the Lords of the Night – the black magistrates would like nothing better than to put a rope around your neck. They take their work seriously. A job well done is satisfying. Is it not? You have no room to move, Richard. You cannot threaten her. You cannot refuse to make your knives.’

‘She’s lost slave cargoes with Challenor’s death,’ said Richard. ‘Her greed offers me a chance to bargain. If you won’t speak to her, then I will. Is she prepared to send me to the galleys if I no longer do what she asks? I think she’ll speak on my behalf.’

Elias Jordan’s wine looked to have soured on his tongue. ‘You think you can get past me to speak to her directly?’

‘I have value. You run a house full of servants and auction men and women. You can be replaced. What I do cannot.’

Jordan’s demeanour remained calm despite the insulting truth of what the young knife maker had said.

‘I’ll speak to her,’ he said flatly, looking away. The classic gesture of dismissal to someone considered of lesser status.

Elias Jordan felt the chill wind of change creeping into his domain. It was time to consider what to do about the young man’s behaviour. While it would not usurp his own status at Casa di Zorzi, it might undermine it.

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CHAPTER 88

Elias Jordan took time to think of how best to approach the Nobildonna di Zorzi. The more wine he drank the more he fought to suppress his resentment at her fickle moods. Timing was a skill he had learnt, like a cunning animal, over the years. It was important for him to speak to her before the young knife maker had an opportunity to do so, which he would have when delivering his next knife. Richard's success could open doors to the Signora and others. Words could be as incisive as a honed blade. A prick here and there, hardly noticed but felt, wielded influence. It was Jordan who for years had had the ear of those who mattered. He did not wish to appear indecisive when she queried what course of action he would advise when her knife maker refused to do what Falconi might want done in the future.

He knocked on her door and entered her room. She was sitting at an ornate desk, making notations on a sheet of paper while studying ledgers spread across its surface. A glass of wine was within reach.

'I'm busy,' she said without raising her head, a finger tracing columns of figures.

'A few moments, Signora. There is something I'd like to discuss.'

She showed no interest in him. He stepped closer. 'I'm concerned about Riccardo,' he said.

She paused. Looked up, finger holding its place on the page. 'He's injured?'

'No. He has done everything expected of him.'

She grunted and returned to her ledgers. 'Well, then. That matter is closed. There was never any threat to me or my business interests, after all.' She looked up again. 'Was there?' she asked, just to make sure.

‘None. A personal matter between Marasini and Challenor.’

‘And Marasini overplayed his hand. He let emotion get in the way. Letting Riccardo’s sister live was a mistake. Why would he do that?’

‘To taunt Challenor before he died. So that he knew the woman he loved would be incarcerated in the *pozzi*, which is a punishment worse than death. He inflicted pain.’

‘It was a glaring weakness in his plan. It allowed the truth to be discovered. And when the witness was murdered it became ever more obvious that it was a conspiracy. A living witness would have made all the difference. No matter. It’s done.’ She turned a page on a ledger. ‘We have lost the benefit of Challenor’s raiding. Without slaves being brought here, we must look to increase revenue elsewhere before we engage another scavenger of the sea. Now that the English King has made peace with Spain, ships will travel more safely.’ She turned a page in the ledger and ran a finger down a column of figures. ‘Some of these figures need looking into.’

Jordan hesitated. For a moment, his heart raced. Was she checking the payments he had always presented from the various sources of income she received? Delivery quotas from the mines to fulfil building contracts for the city and privately owned grand houses? The amount of timber cut and sold to the state authorities? Returns on slave labour sold to various guilds and labour contractors across the city? He had always been careful that she would not raise any query when she checked these records. For years, he had kept his own ledger. One that showed steady payments made to him. Small percentages. Compensation for favours given. Contracts awarded. Comfort for when the time came and he was no longer enslaved.

His concern made him move closer and try to identify what discrepancies she might have found. Without thinking he sat in the chair opposite the desk. Her head snapped up.

‘Did I invite you to sit?’ she said sharply.

He promptly stood. ‘Apologies, Signora, I was concerned there might be a problem. I was forgetting myself.’

She studied him for a moment. ‘It appears you’re concerned about too many things.’

‘The ledgers? Is there an issue with them?’ he said, pushing the matter of Richard aside.

‘Yes. Quota rates are down. Stone, marble, timber.’

He felt a gush of relief. ‘Heavy rain storms across the Terraferma caused production to slow. The quarries suffered an outbreak of disease. It’s been contained. They assure me they will soon be back to normal.’

She sat back and reached for her glass of wine. After a few sips, she closed the main ledger. ‘You think I don’t know you steal from me?’ she said with no hint of malice.

He was dumbstruck.

‘Of course I know. My husband knew. It’s nothing, Elias. It’s petty. You’re no different from anyone else. Husbands cheat on wives – God knows, mine did often enough. Wives take lovers to their beds. I took you. Deception is as natural as fornication. It’s human instinct. So, what about Riccardo? Is it his sister? Is he seeking a position for her? Perhaps I should have her take your place. Let her run the affairs of the house. You’ve been here since you were a boy.’ Her smile added to her cruelty. ‘I could sell you at a profit.’ She saw the look of dismay that even an experienced servant like him could not disguise.

Her gibe brought home Richard’s insult that he could easily be replaced.

‘Take that pitiful look off your face.’ She pushed the ledgers away from her. ‘You are devious, Elias. But you have your uses. Now, Riccardo. What of him?’

Elias Jordan’s throat had dried.

He stuttered for a moment, then quickly regained his composure. ‘He is refusing to act for Signor Falconi or the Council. He said he would stop making his knives unless he was released from that obligation.’

She sighed. ‘He threatens me? Don’t be stupid. He’s my knife maker. He’s sworn allegiance to the Republic. If Falconi and the Council use him, he has no choice. I made the agreement.’ She fussed her paperwork. ‘There’s nothing to discuss. Tell him if he doesn’t do as he’s asked, we’ll put his sister back in the *pozzi*. And him with her to teach him a lesson.’

‘That would entrench his refusal to cooperate.’

She slammed the flat of her hand on the desk. ‘I do not bargain with a man enslaved to me! He is mine! He will show *gratitude* for what I have done for him!’

Jordan took a breath. Now that she swirled in anger, he was calm. ‘He believes he is of great value to you, and that value might convince you to

talk to Signor Falconi to release him from that arrangement. Signor Falconi benefited personally from the killing of Marasini and Cassola.'

'I've sent a message summoning Riccardo here tomorrow with his new knives. I have no desire to begin a discussion about him and the Council of Ten. Do what you think is necessary to dissuade him from even asking the question. Do your damned job.'

In that moment, Elias Jordan knew precisely what was going to unfold. It both shocked and surprised him. It was crystal clear. How long had it been lurking in his mind like an assassin in the shadows? Marasini had made a fatal mistake.

Elias Jordan would not.

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CHAPTER 89

Richard and Elizabeth finished their shared meal in the privacy of Elizabeth's quarters. If he could not persuade Signora di Zorzi to intercede with the patrician Falconi, then there would be no choice but to escape. And if that was his future, this was to be their last night in Venice, and they didn't want to risk anyone at the forge overhearing their plan to leave the city. His sense of betrayal towards Antonio gnawed at his conscience. Despite Richard being enslaved, the old man had treated him with kindness and respect and guided his eye and his hand when he made his first knife. And the thought of planning an escape while his mentor slept made Richard feel as if he were a thief in the night.

Martin had confirmed the time of the Dutch ship's departure the following night.

'You believe it's safe for us to go aboard?' she asked.

'The captain is a God-fearing Christian who trades with Venice. It's as safe a berth as can be found. The ship will leave on the midnight tide,' Richard told her. 'We can't be seen boarding in daylight. Darkness is our only hope of success. We must avoid the Signori di Notte. They patrol the waterfront.'

'And will Martin take us into the basin on his barge?'

'Yes. He'll be waiting close by in the *rio*. We'll be understood to be your servants. There is accommodation for you and he and I will be in the crew's quarters.'

She listened dutifully, then she took a little sip of the potion given to her by the Turkish doctors. She reached out and touched his hand when she saw

his look of concern. ‘It’s nothing. They told me it would take time for the pain to leave me.’

‘And you’re certain you can undertake the voyage?’

‘Of course. But I still need my rest.’

‘Then I’ll get back to the forge. I’ve another knife to finish for tomorrow. They’ll expect me to carry on as usual. Then, once I’ve delivered it, I’ll meet you and Martin. Where we arranged. You remember?’

She nodded and pulled her cloak around her. There was a chill in the unheated room.

He smiled. ‘We’ll soon be home.’ He bent to kiss her cheek. She held his hand.

‘Wait a moment, Richard.’

He sat back down.

Her tenderness embraced him. ‘We are no longer children. We’ve grown and cared for each other since being orphaned. And here, in Venice, you have shown such courage. Even more than going aboard that burning galley.’ She paused. ‘There is no longer any need for you to sacrifice yourself. You must stay.’

Richard stared blankly at her.

She touched his face. ‘I saw an old man with tears in his eyes when he held one of your knives. This city has artists and people who create unique beauty in contrast to the deceit and violence that simmer beneath its surface. You belong here now because of what you do. You open the eyes of men who are blind to such beauty. And a Sceriffo knife forged in the Vieri workshop will create a demand that will one day give you your freedom. I was mistaken before. You cannot achieve this back in England. Your desire and passion are here. In Venice. In La Serenissima.’

Richard was torn. He knew in his heart he would prefer to stay at the forge and use his God-given gift. But would it be at the cost of tasting the bitter ash of murder again?

He had not told his sister of the fight with Elias or that he had threatened him with a knife. Such news would cause her more concern for a brother with blood already on his hands. Now he held her hand in his. Tomorrow he would apologize to Elias Jordan for his temper and for drawing a knife on him. ‘I am to deliver more knives tomorrow to the Signora,’ he said. ‘I’ll appeal for her to use her influence with Falconi.’

‘To do what?’ she asked.

‘I was sanctioned to kill those men. And I may be asked to kill again – kill those who threaten Venice.’

Elizabeth stared at her brother. A man capable of inflicting vengeance. She hesitated. ‘And could you do so? Kill again?’

He didn’t lower his eyes away from her searching look. ‘I am a changed man, Beth. Yes, I could, but I would urge the Signora to have me released from any such demand. If she agrees, then with your blessing I will stay. If she does not then I will join you and Martin and sail for England. Whatever happens, I’ll see you and Martin where we agreed to meet.’

*

Richard walked home from the *campo*, the moonlight glistening on the now familiar *rio.* No need for a lantern when the finger of water showed the way. The thought of losing his sister reawakened his feelings, which had been brutally cut from his heart the night he rescued her from the prison. Ignoring the chill breeze, he faltered as he reached halfway home. The silence caressed by lapping water was the city’s lullaby as it drew its beholder into its dream.

A boat’s rope creaked against its mooring post. Tension pulling against that which wouldn’t yield. If the boat broke free, it would find the current and its freedom. It was no different, he thought, to him being bound to the Signora di Zorzi. There was no escaping the truth. She would never let him go. And yet he owed the venal woman everything. She took the knives he made and stoked others’ desire to own one. Every knife made and sold enhanced his reputation. And had she not intervened, his sister would have died in that foul place of a prison. Self-serving she might be, but the Signora was the key to… what? he asked himself.

Life, came the answer.

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CHAPTER 90

Venice Sparkled. Crystalline fragments of light danced across the smooth windless waters. The autumn sun caught every droplet of water and etched every dark, narrow alley. It was cold enough for Richard to tug his doublet's collar around his neck, grateful his felt-lined cap kept his head warm. He would need a cloak when winter came. He had been told the weather swept down from the distant mountains on the Terraferma and that it could become so cold that parts of the lagoon would freeze over. He wiped the cold-air tears from his eyes and shook his head. He felt certain it had been someone trying to fool him.

It usually took only a few minutes to cross the Grand Canal from Dorsoduro to San Marco, but the *traghettatore* eased back on his oar to let barges loaded with goods travel upstream unimpeded. The boat wallowed as the barges pushed a gentle bow wave across the surface, breaking the glittering display. He was halfway across. Behind him, the forge and the work he loved, ahead the prospect of confrontation. Would he be forced to abandon Venice?

As he waited for the traffic to ease, he remembered the conversation that had taken place at the forge twenty minutes before.

*

Antonio supervised Domenico, wrapping two new knives to be taken to the Nobildonna. To protect the embellished scabbards, Antonio wrapped each knife in a soft cloth. Then he wrapped them together in a clean linen cloth and bound the package with twine.

‘Where’s the third knife?’ said Richard.

‘Not yet back from the goldsmith,’ Antonio told him. ‘Two knives are enough for the Signora. If the third is returned in time, I’ll send Domenico with it.’

Richard took the knives and eased them into the leather Vieri satchel. As he reached the door, Antonio went after him.

‘Riccardo. Wait.’

Richard waited until the old man reached him. Placing a hand on Richard’s arm, he gave his young knife maker a warning. ‘Be careful. The knives will be welcome and might make the Signora less angry about your request, but I fear your insistence to do no more killing may still meet with resistance.’

‘I’ve done everything the Signora and Master Jordan have asked of me. All I ask of them is that I return here and continue my work.’

‘I understand. I once tried to cut myself free from doing the Council’s bidding, but I failed. The obligation continued until they decided I was no longer needed to do their work. All I’m saying is that you must choose your words carefully. Do not challenge them. In their own way, they are dangerous people. One has survived and prospered despite being enslaved for over twenty years. Challenging him could make an enemy for life. And the Signora has succeeded in a man’s world. You need her, Riccardo, as much as she needs your skill.’

‘I’m going to make peace with Master Jordan. I was hard-pressed for sleep when I threatened him, and killing Marasini…’ He hesitated. ‘Despite everything I felt the grief he had for his family. It tore at me.’

*

Richard was snatched from his reverie as the *traghettatore* nudged his boat along the landing quay. As he stepped ashore, Richard’s confidence returned, perhaps bolstered by standing on solid ground. He had made his decision and he would not waver from it. Everything was in place to escape that night should he have to. All he needed was a promise from the Signora that she would speak for him. Knowing her desire for his knives and the noblemen and merchants who paid such high prices for them, he could see no reason she would not press his case.

*

Elias Jordan watched the knife maker's approach from the top floor of the grand house. He had quickly bathed and changed his clothing for a fresh shirt and doublet. The day had gone as usual, save for one exception. He had carried on with his duties as if nothing was going to happen. Part of his plan had already been completed. He steeled himself for the confrontation that he knew would come with the young Englishman.

The guards at the gate let Richard in.

Jordan went down to the *piano nobile*, eased open the door of the main reception room. Signora di Zorzi was where he had left her half an hour before. The window shutters were closed on her side of the room, the dim light showing her on a divan. The Signora often took a nap in the afternoon before readying herself for an evening out, either a dinner invitation or party. He had instructed the servants she was not to be disturbed.

The steady footfall of Richard Sheriff coming up the stairs echoed across the vast stairway. Elias Jordan waited in an anteroom off the hall, where guests could leave their cloaks or catch their breath from the stairs, before being ushered into their meeting with the Signora.

He had sent the servant who had witnessed the previous altercation between Richard and him to escort the knife maker upstairs. She knocked on the door; Jordan gave her permission to enter. She had kept her distance from Richard, and when Jordan called from inside the room she stepped away and gestured for Richard to go in alone, her nervous expression unmistakable. Richard thought for a moment about saying something, apologizing to her for what had gone before, but his hand had already depressed the handle. His attention focused on Jordan, who sat in a chair, a glass of wine on a side table and a sheaf of papers on his lap. Richard considered it to be a typical working day, but he had never been led into this room before. It was as elegant as the Signora's main room, where she usually inspected the knives. Or at least that was where her examination of his skills had taken place when Antonio had presented him and his first efforts to her.

Elias Jordan raised his eyes from the papers he was examining. 'You're on time. That's good.' He showed no sign of antagonism.

Richard dipped his head in greeting, one hand pressing the satchel to his side. ‘I have the new knives, Master Jordan.’

‘How many?’

‘Two. A third was not yet back from the gilders. Domenico will bring it if they return it to the forge in time.’

Jordan nodded. ‘Let me see. You can use that table,’ he said, meaning for Richard to unpack his satchel.

Richard took out the carefully wrapped knives and held the two daggers nestling in their scabbards.

‘Master Jordan, I believe these are two of my best knives. Am I to show them to the Signora?’

‘In a moment. Do you carry your own knife? The one you used to kill Marasini and the others?’

‘No, I left it with Master Antonio. I hope to have no further use for it.’

Jordan gave a slight shrug, as if the matter was irrelevant.

‘And, Master Jordan, I apologize for my previous behaviour. I was close to exhaustion and wound tight by the killing.’

Jordan finished the half-glass of wine in a gulp.

‘What’s said is said. Words cannot be taken back.’

Richard gritted his teeth, hoping Jordan would not bait him.

Jordan put down the glass. ‘You’re correct. They can replace me in this grand house, but what you do cannot be replicated. There the matter rests. The truth is painful.’

Richard faltered for a moment, trying to find words that might console the offended man. ‘I spoke in haste and anger and in response to your attempt to strike me. It was instinctive.’

‘A spur of the moment,’ said Jordan.

‘Yes. No one can replace your experience. I know that.’

Jordan raised a hand to stop any further explanation. He had offered no smile of conciliation. ‘I’ll take you into the Signora now. I’ll find out if she will see you and listen to what you want to ask of her.’

Richard felt a keen sense of nervousness. He had tried to rehearse what he wanted to say to her, possible words going back and forth in his mind. ‘Thank you for speaking to her on my behalf.’

Jordan ignored him and walked to the door. ‘You will wait until I tell you to enter the room. Understood?’

‘Yes.’

‘Directly in front of you, across the room, is a long table. Three of your other knives are already there. Place those two next to them. So that she may compare them.’

Richard nodded.

Jordan stepped into the hall. ‘Leave your cap and satchel where they are.’

Richard followed him across the breadth of the hall to the carved doors leading to the floor’s main room. Jordan knocked, stepped into the room, closed the door behind him, leaving Richard in the hall. His mouth was dry. He licked his lips to moisten them and wished he could have stolen a sip of Jordan’s wine while he waited. A foolish thought, he knew, but in these next few minutes his fate hung in the balance.

Jordan came back into the hall. ‘Are you ready?’

Richard nodded.

‘I’ll be right behind you. Go straight to the table and place your knives there, as I instructed.’ He opened the wide door. Richard saw the table directly ahead of him, a good twenty strides across the vast room. On his left, shutter-free windows spilled light on the table. The knives in their scabbards resting on the tabletop glinted from their inlaid decoration. He heard the door close behind him. Concentrating on the task at hand, he reached the table and placed the two knives down. For a moment, he hadn’t noticed what was missing. Then he saw the middle scabbard was empty.

He turned to question Jordan and, as he did so, his attention focused on the figure lying in the shade at the far end of the room. For a moment, what he saw made no sense. Her gold-embroidered silk dress blossomed across the divan. One of her shoes lay on the floor as if lost in sleep, exposing her white-stockinged foot. Uncertainly, he took a step closer. Her eyes were closed. Her lips parted. The missing knife’s hilt protruded from her throat. Her blood, still wet, added deep crimson to the gold dress, then pooled on the marble floor.

He jerked around to face Jordan, who stood framed in the doorway, a pistol levelled at him.

Richard instantly knew who would bear the blame for the Signora’s death. He lunged towards Jordan. There was a flash of gunpowder. A shock wave of deafening sound. Richard felt the ball tear into his side. Its force

spun him around on the floor's smooth surface. He fell. Tried to get up, but the pain pulled at every muscle.

'Freedom comes at a price,' said Jordan. 'And no matter how high, it must be paid. I'm sorry for you, Richard.'

Despite his pain, Richard slithered upright, slipping in his own blood, determined to reach Jordan. And the feelings he thought he had banished rushed through him. To kill again.

The door burst open as two house guards, pistols in hand, stormed into the room. The sight of Richard, blood oozing through his fingers as he gripped his wound, and the dead Signora halted them.

'I was too late,' said Jordan. 'He killed the Signora with one of his own knives.' With a final pitying look, Jordan kept his eyes on Richard. 'Take him.'

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CHAPTER 91

Domenico Ran Hard to Giustina's house. It was nearly dark. His furious banging on the door brought Antonio's former lover to the door and then moments later a bewildered Elizabeth, already dressed to meet Martin and Richard at their planned meeting place on the *rio*. Domenico chattered so quickly she understood nothing except his urgency. As he tugged her free of the house and walked rapidly towards the forge, she could barely keep up or comprehend what he was saying.

She begged him to slow down. He took a breath, remembered she had been injured and gave her his arm for support. And then explained slowly. He had gone to the Casa di Zorzi to deliver a knife after Richard had already left the forge. When he arrived he saw magistrates dragging Richard away. He was wounded, and the guards told him that the knife maker had killed the Nobildonna.

When she heard that she faltered. Her head spun and what strength she had in her legs gave way. Domenico held her, his distress compounded by her weakness. The young blacksmith lifted her into his arms and carried her, walking at a rapid pace until she groaned and begged him to let her stand. Taking a deep breath of cold night air, she told him she could continue. They were only minutes from the forge and now the urgency gave her strength.

They arrived at the forge and found Antonio cursing with frustration as he attempted to open a heavy wooden drawer that had become stuck. A bottle of wine, almost empty, lay on its side, as he finally yanked the drawer free.

He faced his grandson and the frail-looking woman who accompanied him. ‘You should run, Mistress Elisabetta. That bastard Elias has committed murder.’ He pulled out the oilskin-wrapped stiletto. ‘I’ll finish this.’

He slumped into his chair, grief-stricken. Elizabeth and Domenico stood helplessly as he wept. ‘He has condemned Riccardo. A man who created beauty. That bastard has sacrificed him. I know it. I know it!’

Elizabeth went to him, bending down to grasp his hands. ‘Master Antonio. What has happened? Tell me. What have they done to Richard? Domenico says he killed the Signora. That can’t be true.’

Antonio wiped a sleeve across his dribbling nose. He groaned, found his voice and pushed aside the emotion. ‘Yesterday he threatened Elias Jordan —’

Elizabeth grasped his arm. ‘What? He never told me this.’

‘No matter. Today he went to apologize and beg the Nobildonna to speak on his behalf to Signor Falconi, who’s a member of the Council of Ten. He vowed he would do no more killing.’

‘Then how is he being blamed?’

‘Because as you were blamed for the killing at Challenor’s house, then so too has Riccardo been blamed for killing her. He walked into a trap. Elias Jordan seized the moment. He killed the woman who owned him. I warned Riccardo. I told him how dangerous these people were. I warned him,’ he said again. He unwrapped the stiletto. ‘I will kill that bastard for what he has done.’

Elizabeth stood in his way, a restraining hand on the old man. ‘Why would Elias Jordan do such a thing? He sought shelter for Caterina. He helped find the men who attacked me. And the Signora secured my freedom. It makes no sense. How does it benefit him to kill her? Why? How can you know this? How is it he could blame my brother?’ The questions tumbled out of her, grasping for any answer, driven by panic.

Domenico saw the change in his grandfather, who had wiped away his tears. A different man emerging from grief. It was someone Domenico had not seen before. ‘Grandfather, I beg you, don’t do anything.’

‘Stand aside, boy.’

‘They’ll kill you.’

Antonio raised the stiletto so his grandson and Elizabeth understood. ‘Years ago, I was obliged to use this blade. And then they snared Riccardo

the same way. They will kill me, but not before I get to him.'

Elizabeth's calm and gentle voice eased the tension. 'Master Antonio, let us be clear why you believe Elias Jordan has implicated my brother. I beg you. Let us think this through.'

'Please, Grandfather, listen to her.'

Antonio looked from one to the other. He placed the blade on the bench, his palm resting on it, not yet ready to abandon his intent. 'I'll not deny Elias cared for the mute child. He had a place in his heart for her. But that is only one part of a man. Riccardo told me what had been said between him and Elias. I have known him for twenty years and more and he has made sure he has benefited at every turn. That takes cunning. He is now a free man. And Elias Jordan has every contact he needs to continue lining his pocket. Riccardo gave him the opportunity to act swiftly in his own interest. And now he has snatched away the life of the most gifted knife maker Venice will ever know. It serves no one but Elias Jordan.'

Elizabeth shook her head. 'My brother would never kill a woman. And in England there's proof of him going to jail because he tried to help a condemned woman. There is evidence that he stood against authority to do that.'

'And that is why you must flee Venice,' said Antonio. 'Elias Jordan would never risk you even suspecting his involvement. He will hire an assassin before you might do the same and avenge Riccardo.'

'Master Antonio, I'm in no danger. Richard made plans for me to leave Venice tonight.'

She saw the look of surprise on the old man's and Domenico's face.

'How?' said Domenico.

'Planned with his friend the *barcaiolo*. He'll be waiting for me soon. I'm no threat to Elias Jordan, and you must consider your grandson. If you kill Jordan, you'll implicate him simply because he is of your blood. Everything here will be lost. The children abandoned, Caterina cast onto the street, the Vieri forge's name condemned and all its skill lost forever.'

The cost of killing Jordan made the old man slump back into his chair.

'My brother is lost. I know that. And I'll leave this place and grieve for him for the rest of my days. But you must cherish and hold close what he created here. If a knife of his exists in the world, then my brother's name

will live on. We must take what comfort we can.' She nodded to Domenico, indicating the stiletto. 'Put that away.'

He carefully wrapped his grandfather's killing knife in the oilskin and returned it to the drawer.

She reached for Antonio's hand. It was cold. The old man looked broken. 'Promise me not to harm Elias Jordan. Save what you have built here. And keep the Vieri name alive. Make sure Riccardo's friends know of his innocence and let fate deal with Elias Jordan, as surely it will.'

She bent and kissed his forehead. He gazed up at her and nodded. 'I will keep your brother's name alive. You have my word.'

'Thank you for your kindness to him. I have little time left.'

'Where will you go?' said Antonio.

'To England. To my home.'

'Then hurry. Take yourself away from this place of misery. And we'll pray for you and Riccardo.'

'Master Antonio, that knife Domenico was to deliver. Would you gift it to me so I might have something of my brother's skill?'

The old man nodded. 'I have the knife he used to avenge you. Take that instead and let it remind you of his courage.'

The old *maestro* gazed at the dull embers in the fire pit after Elizabeth had left the forge. Life was being extinguished as surely as the sun had been swallowed by the lagoon. Roof timbers creaked. A spurt of flame erupted in the coals, then spluttered and died. He smelled the tang of the sea through the open door. Antonio glanced at his grandson, who looked as bereft as he felt.

The old man got to his feet. 'Hail me a boat.'

'To go where, Grandfather?'

'To make a pact with the devil.'

*

The moon shone in a clear sky, lighting Elizabeth's way to where Martin waited. A breeze had picked up. Ragged clouds approached.

'We must hurry,' he said, holding out his arm to help her down into the barge. 'I want to be out in the basin before they weigh anchor. Where's Richard?'

Elizabeth sat in the barge's well and told him everything that had happened. The moonlight made his face more gaunt than usual. He shook his head. 'Sweet Christ, he is lost.'

'I know…' she said, her voice trailing, the energy draining from her. She winced, an arm across her stomach. She pulled free the pain-relieving bottle and took a sip. Martin said nothing, but his concern was obvious.

'It passes,' she said. 'Once aboard, I will be fine.'

She showed her brother's knife to him. 'Antonio gave this to me. So I might know what Richard did for me.'

Martin stared at it. 'It will be hard to put this place behind us.' He stood to loosen the mooring rope. 'But we will.'

'Yes,' she said, 'but first you must take me to Elias Jordan.'

'The house?' he said, shocked.

'I must settle this. I'm fearful that if he demands the knife owed him by Antonio's forge the old man will take matters into his own hands. I'll give him this one.'

'We don't have the time, Elizabeth.'

'It won't take long,' she said.

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CHAPTER 92

Elizabeth stood at the Casa's gate. Its lanterns glowed warmly. The two grim-faced guards, faces half in shadows, glowered at her. She held her nerve and asked for Master Elias Jordan.

Neither man had seen her before and a woman calling at night could mean only one thing in their minds.

'He's expecting you?' one of them said.

'No. I wish to speak to him as a matter of urgency.'

'About?'

'What occurred here today.'

She sensed them flinch.

'Who are you?'

She told them.

Their faces creased in disbelief. One of them spat to one side.

'You won't be welcome here, Mistress Sceriffo.'

'Are you permitted to speak for Master Jordan?'

Berated, the guard nudged his companion. 'Go and tell him.'

The remaining guard studied her a moment longer. A woman who had been rescued from the *pozzi* and looked frail enough to barely carry the weight of her cloak wasn't likely to cause any trouble.

'Is Master Jordan grieving?' she asked, willing to engage the guard and glean any information she could.

'Him?' His tone alone showed his true feelings. He stopped himself from saying anything against the man who might offer future employment. 'Aye. He's upset. Been drinking hard. Seeing what he saw would be a shock to any man.'

She remained silent. A drunken Jordan might prove dangerous.

It took little time for the second guard to return. ‘Do you carry a weapon?’

She took Richard’s knife and scabbard from beneath her cloak and unfolded the cloth around it. ‘I am here to deliver this.’

She saw their surprised expressions. The guard who had asked reached through the bars. ‘Give it here.’

She refolded the cloth and handed it over.

‘All right. In you come. Follow me.’

The gate swung open, and she followed the man ahead. ‘If you please, I’m unable to walk so quickly.’

He stopped and glanced at her. ‘I know what happened to you. I’m sorry for it. Captain Challenor was a good sort. We all liked him here. You got punished for what he did. You can take my arm if it’ll help?’

She nodded and used his support as they went up the broad staircase. It was a slow climb. When they reached the top, he pushed open the door. She saw Jordan in shirtsleeves. The heat of the room came from the iron stove.

‘She needed help, Master Jordan,’ said the guard. ‘Brought this with her.’ He gave the knife to a surprised Jordan. ‘She offered it. Wasn’t concealing it. Said it was to be brought here.’

Jordan hadn’t stood when she entered. He lounged in an upholstered chair, a half-glass of wine in his hand.

‘Might she be seated?’ said the guard.

‘Yes. Here. Close to me.’ Elias Jordan sounded like the master of the house even though the Casa di Zorzi would never be his.

The guard settled Elizabeth in the chair next to Jordan, which was separated by a small marble side table.

‘Thank you,’ she told the guard. ‘You’ve been kind.’

‘Like I said, mistress, Captain Challenor was a friend to this house. No good blaming you for what your brother did.’ He glanced nervously at Jordan, fearing he had spoken out of turn.

‘Leave us,’ said Jordan.

The door closed behind the guard. Elizabeth looked past Jordan, who was examining the knife. Candlelight showed enough of the far side of the room to reveal where a sheet covered the divan. A dull stain had seeped into its hem from the floor and another smudge discoloured the sheet halfway

up. She thought Jordan not to be drunk, but he had obviously been drinking for a while. An empty bottle at his feet nestled next to its near-empty companion and red wine stains on his white shirt were witness to it.

She held the tension in her chest and forced the words out, knowing the answer to what she asked would be a lie. ‘Is that where my brother killed the Signora?’

Elias Jordan didn’t even glance in that direction.

‘Yes. Why are you here? Why bring this to me?’ He spoke slower than she remembered, but his speech wasn’t slurred, which showed that he was still sufficiently alert to any danger he might perceive her to pose.

‘The Signora was owed three knives. I thought it would complete the arrangement. Master Antonio told me when I was given the news of my brother’s actions here today that it’s the knife he used to avenge me.’ She forced down the sense of disgust she felt at being in the same room as Elias Jordan, where a woman had been slain and her brother blamed.

He grunted: ‘Did you think to avenge your brother as he did you?’

‘Why would I avenge my brother if what they say he did was true?’

He smiled. ‘Because you might not believe it.’

‘I have no choice but to believe it.’

He reached down, found the bottle, drained what was in it. It was enough to fill his glass. The bottle clinked back on the floor.

‘Could I have a glass of wine? The night’s cold and I’m uncomfortable being here.’

He took a sip and looked over the goblet’s rim at her. ‘Of course.’ He put it down on the table and the knife in its scabbard next to it. Then changed his mind, smiled again, and took the knife with him as he went to a cabinet that displayed bottles of wine. She saw there were two or three other bottles already opened – he must have tested each one.

‘Did you kill my brother?’ she asked as he concentrated on finding her a glass.

‘No. I wounded him. Shot him in his side when he lunged at me.’ He faced her. ‘I had no choice.’ He paused. ‘I’m sure you know where the magistrates took him and what will happen to him.’

‘Better for you to have killed him.’

He returned with a half-glass of red wine and another bottle. He handed her the glass. ‘That had been my intention, but I am not adept at firing a

pistol.’

She took the glass as he sat down next to her again. ‘Which you had primed and readied.’

‘What?’

‘You had a pistol ready – ready to defend the Nobildonna? To try and stop him before he killed her meant you must have had a pistol ready. Was that usual?’

‘Richard had made a threat. I thought it wise to be cautious.’ He studied her as they both drank. ‘You see, I’m not sure you believe what happened and that’ —he struggled to find the correct expression— ‘concerns me. It makes me think’ —he squinted in the fluttering candlelight— ‘that you might not believe… what happened here…’ He frowned.

‘Master Jordan, you have already said that to me.’

He looked uncertain. ‘Yes. I have. But if that is so… that you do not believe me’—he gulped the wine—‘then you are a threat to me. Are you not?’

She watched him a moment longer. ‘I am not. In fact, I brought the knife to close the arrangement you had with Master Vieri and to tell you that I planned to leave on a Dutch ship tonight.’

His head dipped in disbelief. ‘You need permission to leave.’

‘I am asking you not to alert the authorities and to let whatever matter lies between us end tonight,’ she said. She needed him to believe he was in no danger. She thought he looked worse the wear for drink than when she had first entered the room.

He was concentrating on who else might pose a threat. ‘And his friend? The *barcaiolo*?’

‘I’m taking him with me.’

‘He’s enslaved.’

‘He has offered me his protection. I ask that you turn a blind eye to us going now that I have no reason to stay.’

He cocked his head and drained the glass, as if telling himself it wasn’t a bad idea to be rid of her. It made sense to let them go and for him to remain silent. Two potential enemies far from Venice.

‘Yes. Go. Dammit. Go.’

He reached for the bottle, but his hand couldn’t grip it. He looked confused and tried again, without success. He licked his lips as if the wine

had soured on his tongue.

She stood up and faced him. ‘It won’t take long. You will have an easier death than that which my brother faces.’

He tried to get to his feet, but his body wouldn’t respond.

She showed him the bottle containing the drug that eased her pain. ‘The Turks cared for me. They gave me this potion for the pain I suffer, but warned me of its strength. Take too much and it paralyses the body. Your lungs will close and then your throat. You’ll choke and gasp for breath. Like my brother when they drown him.’

Jordan’s eyes bulged. He fought the creeping paralysis without success. His throat made a gurgling noise as he tried to speak. A questioning look creased his features.

She bent closer to him. ‘When you went to fetch me wine, you left your glass. I watched another man choke to death once. I felt nothing then. I feel nothing now. You’re a killer. And I have avenged my brother as he avenged me.’ She retrieved Richard’s knives and concealed them under her cloak. She turned at the door and looked back at Elias Jordan’s contorted body and his last rasping breaths. ‘We were sworn to care for each other.’

*

Elizabeth forced herself to walk calmly from the house. Every step measured to retain the illusion that nothing untoward had happened. Her heart raced. Killing Elias Jordan had been as necessary a death as that of Henning. She felt no guilt. The deep sense of loss for her beloved brother was now cocooned by an indescribable contentment that she had honoured him.

Going past the guards at the gate she turned to where Martin waited at the end of the path, next to his moored boat. She pulled her cloak around her neck. The breeze chilled. Her pace quickened. She saw Martin turn, alerted by something to one side. Out of sight from where she walked.

And then a cloaked and hooded figure stepped into view.

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CHAPTER 93

They had taken Richard into the dark chamber to be judged by the black magistrates. The evidence against him had been convincing. A living witness had seen him threaten Master Jordan with a knife. The following day, moments after he had murdered the Nobildonna Chiara di Zorzi, he was shot and wounded by Master Jordan. The magistrates had ordered Richard's wound bound so he would not die of blood loss before his execution. Hands tied, they bundled him from the chamber out onto a waiting boat where a jailer fastened a weight about his ankles. A small lantern hung from the front of the boat.

The jailer nodded to the oarsman, who pushed out into the lagoon. Black clouds skimmed across the face of the moon. Richard watched the shapes of the buildings merge into a darkening mass. Other small bobbing lights were already gathering across the lagoon's surface, the tell-tale lights that he and Elizabeth once thought to be fireflies. He gazed at them a moment longer. In the distance he saw a Dutch vessel easing away. Challenor's gift of jewellery had bought life and a safe passage home for Beth. He embraced her in his thoughts. The voyage he and the others had made had now come almost full circle. The Dutch ship's timbers creaked as unfurled sails filled with the following wind. Its large ensign fluttered from its stern. The moonlight laid a veil across the lagoon's dark waters. A life saved. A life lost.

The boatman reached the place where the channel was deepest. The jailer gripped Richard's arms and steadied him. The man's touch was a comfort. When death is inevitable, calm acceptance settles on the heart like a sigh of regret for all that is lost.

Richard plunged into the cold water. He stared up into the blackness. Plummeting downwards. He kicked hard. Thought he felt the ropes loosen. Air escaped from his lungs. The moon obscured. And then, as the clouds shifted, the shimmering surface revealed the moon's distorted face grimacing at his death.

He was dying. He was alone. And then, in a moment of startling clarity, his father's spectre appeared, banishing the distraught moon. Arms reaching for him as the sea he once feared embraced him.

He kicked again. A band of pain across his chest. His lungs collapsing. Fighting for his life, the weight dropped from his ankles. His father's arms were within reach. Streaks of light cut behind his eyes. He was losing consciousness. His mind fought the darkness. *Kick for the light!* his father's voice bellowed, piercing the thudding pressure in his ears. His head broke through the surface. Cold air brushed his face. The sky was black. The moon hidden again. Mist snaked towards him. He sucked the salty air. Coughed and spluttered. Eyes stinging.

Strong arms grabbed him. Hauling him out of the water. He fell hard into the boat. Richard could neither see nor hear. He spewed salt water. His vision cleared. Staring wide-eyed, he saw a figure bend over him with a knife. The blade a sliver of light from the boat's lantern glow. His wrists were freed. Those same muscular arms turned him over.

A calloused hand brushed the hair from his face.

'Martin!

'Aye, lad. Things have not worked out as we planned.'

*

The boat edged along the San Marco quay. The mist was down. It swirled, smothering the Piazza. An orange glow haloed the lights from the few lanterns along the walls. Martin had said little other than to explain that Elias Jordan was dead. That Elizabeth had poisoned him. And that two of Francesco Falconi's men had waylaid them.

'Then she did not sail with the Dutch captain?'

'She did not.'

'You were to get her aboard, Martin. You were her protection.'

‘I know,’ said the boatman, ‘but Falconi is in the Council of Ten. We were helpless.’

The news shook Richard. Nothing was clear. Nothing made sense.

By the time they stood in the Piazza San Marco beneath the column of the Venetian winged lion, Richard had banished the chill from his soaked clothing. His mind had cleared. He stood with his friend, watching the smudged glow of lanterns approaching. The colonnades, no longer sharp-edged, retreated in the swirling mist. Those who approached were closer. He heard the scrape of boots on stone. He half turned to Martin, who was backing away.

‘Martin?’

‘What will happen now is not for me to hear.’

If Richard considered running from what looked to be an approaching threat it was too late. Four of the lanterns had spread out. If he tried to escape whatever he was to face, they would cut him off. The dark figure loomed in front of him. Dressed the same as those who stood on either side of him bearing the light. Their faces remained concealed.

The patrician Francesco Falconi drew back his hood. Richard stared at the man’s features. Mist clung to his beard. His cloak was speckled in light from the lanterns.

‘I gave instructions to ensure the weights tied to you could be loosened.’ His hand lifted from beneath his cloak, a gesture meant to indicate someone who stood behind him. ‘A man I have trusted for many years had approached me.’

A lantern glowed close to Antonio Vieri’s face as he pulled back his cowl where he stood five paces behind the nobleman. He made no sign or smile of acknowledgement to Richard. The shrouded night’s meeting was as sullen as a funeral.

‘His instincts are as sharp as the honed knives you make,’ said Falconi. ‘And he convinced me that your arrest was unjust. And that we – both Venice and my house – must not lose your skills. I am your mentor now. I am convinced by Maestro Antonio’s account of what happened with you and Elias Jordan. And of the just cause in that which occurred at Ca’ di Zorzi tonight from what Donna Elisabetta confessed. Justice has been served.’

Standing near Antonio, with one of Falconi's men at her side, Elizabeth pulled back her hood. Richard's pulse quickened. Were they both under threat? She smiled, and raised a hand, palm forward, to stop him from making any impulsive gesture.

He stared at the ghostly features of those standing in front of him. 'Signore, I am saved from an unjust death. And all of this is on your authority.'

'A vendetta can be a just cause for killing.'

Richard glanced at Antonio. His mentor had gambled his own reputation, asking Falconi to intervene and save his life. The old man dipped his head.

'Signor Falconi, I owe you my life. I'll create the finest knives that Venice has ever seen. And you will have noblemen from far and wide desiring them.'

Falconi nodded. 'Then your future under my patronage is assured. Should your sister desire it I will place her in a nobleman's house of my choosing; she will run that household as a woman of authority and respect.'

For a moment, Richard imagined the huddled dark shapes standing before him as hooded ravens waiting to pick his bones. He understood the agreement remained incomplete. By saving him, Falconi had not only honoured his lifelong friendship with the di Zorzi family but had also seized the prize of the knife maker that she treasured. Falconi stepped closer to him. Arm's length. His voice lowered. 'Tonight, the Council of Three's ledger records that they executed an Englishman, Richard Sheriff. Riccardo Sceriffo, knife maker of Venice, is not that man. Do you agree?'

'I do, Signore.'

He knew the agreement remained incomplete. There would be a demand. A harsh one. One that, before, he had wanted to refuse, but now knew he could not. He gazed into the patrician's face. There was more than breeding sculpted there.

Falconi's eyes narrowed. Searching Richard's. Power and authority demanded a ruthless streak. 'And when La Serenissima is threatened and I send for my knife maker to right a wrong, will Riccardo Sceriffo honour that summons?'

Richard settled his breathing. So much was different now. Five men were dead by his hand. The Janissaries honoured and respected him. The

ruler of Tunis was in his debt. It was as if his life until now had been shrouded in mist like that clinging to the black-cloaked figures before him. Any disquiet he felt about what was being asked of him needed to be swept away just as the night's mist would evaporate in the next day's warmth. The future beckoned.

Richard glanced at Elizabeth. She looked serene. At peace with herself and the life being offered to her. Falconi's patronage carried a cost. She smiled. Richard understood. *There is always a price to pay.*

Richard's gaze was unwavering in front of Falconi. 'I will honour your summons. The knife maker of Venice serves Signor Falconi and the Republic.'

*

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

My publisher asked me for a standalone historical novel before I continued with the next book in my *Master of War* series. I had nothing in mind, but then remembered seeing a plaque twenty-odd years ago at Dartmouth Castle, commemorating the tragic capture of a local boy during a raid by Barbary pirates. My publisher's unexpected request brought this memory to mind, and I linked it to a very hazy title that had been snagged in the corner of my brain for a while: a title without a story behind it. Bringing together the recollection and this title conjured up a few thoughts about a young blacksmith seized by pirates. I went back recently to find that plaque but it's no longer where I thought it to be. And after all these years no one at Dartmouth Castle or the Dartmouth Museum can recall the plaque. However, it was not a figment of my imagination and, wherever it is now, it spurred this novel all these years later.

The unfolding story became a journey of discovery for me. Research for *The Knife Maker of Venice* continued until I finally came to writing the end of the novel. One thing I did know was where to begin the book.

*

The Knife Maker of Venice starts in the Devon market town of Totnes, the second oldest borough in England. It's where my wife and I lived when we returned to the UK in 1994. Our flat was in Fore Street on the first floor of a merchant's house built in the late sixteenth/early seventeenth century above an ornamental glass shop (long gone). The two bedrooms were cramped, the bathroom tiny and the kitchenette barely adequate. What this humble flat had though was a magnificent sitting room of thirty square metres from that time period. Original thick oak planking, uneven and cracked with the patina of age, covered robust floor joists, but the outstanding feature was the hand-moulded decorative ceiling, Grade 1* listed by English Heritage. I

was living in what was once a wealthy Totnes merchant's front room from the reign of Queen Elizabeth I.

If anyone visiting Devon wishes to see a merchant's house from the period, there is a fine example at 70 Fore Street, which is home to the Totnes Museum. Examples of clothing, coins and tools are exhibited. The house stretches to the rear, spanning a central courtyard: www.totnesmuseum.org. It's usually closed during winter and opens in late March, so it's worth checking on opening times.

The museum's booklets, available to buy, helped me appreciate the history of the town I lived in: *Totnes: A Thousand Years of History* by Kirsten Saunders (Totnes Museum Society); *Totnes Town Gaol* by Ken Prout (Totnes Museum Society). Moving my research downriver to Dartmouth I visited the Dartmouth Museum, www.dartmouthmuseum.org, and its exhibits, which give excellent examples of the town's history and its people. A helpful guide to the history of the ferrymen on the River Dart, where the corsair Captain John Challenor's ship was to arrive, was found in *A River to Cross: A History of the Dartmouth Ferries* by David Stranack (Dartmouth History Research Group). *Devon and its Peoples* by W. G. Hoskins (Augustus M. Kelley Publishers, 1968, out of print), helped me appreciate the landscape and its people, from farm labourers to ship captains (and corsairs/pirates who retired wealthy men in south coast towns). My thanks to Penny Norris PhD for the loan of this rare book. The Salcombe Maritime Museum's paper on 'The Newfoundland Cod Trade' by Roger Barrett is a fascinating brief history of the trade between England and those far-flung fishing grounds. In Venice, my characters visited two churches that any visitor will soon discover no longer exist. In the Campo Sant'Anzolo (the Venetian name for Campo Sant'Angelo), in the heart of the San Marco district, there was a church and bell tower. The church, dedicated to the Archangel Michael and built in 1096, no longer exists. It was demolished with its bell tower in 1837.

Those familiar with Piazza San Marco will also recognize that there is no church on the far side of the Piazza opposite the Doge's Palace. It was here in the west corner of the Piazza in 1505 that the construction began of the Church of San Geminiano, which became famous for its ornate finish of marble and Istrian stone. Napoleon had it demolished in 1807 to make way for a suitably grand staircase and ballroom for his Palazzo Reale.

In this novel I wanted to standardize the language throughout so I decided to mostly use Tuscan (the term Italian as a country or language was not recognized as such in that period). I hope the purists among my readers will accommodate my decision. On occasion I have used a Venetian term to add a sense of local colour.

To enable an understanding of life aboard a square-rigged vessel I turned to *The Safeguard of the Sea: A Naval History of Britain 660–1649* by Professor N. A. M. Rodger (Penguin Books, 2004) and *Seamanship in the Age of Sail* by Dr John Harland (Conway Maritime Press, 1984). To appreciate the type of men and markets of raiding pirates, *Pirates of Barbary* by Adrian Tinniswood (Jonathan Cape, 2010) was invaluable and a fascinating read. Among the many historical and academic articles and books written about slavery I consulted to help guide me through this turbulent time of note were: 'Slavery and Interethnic Sexual Violence' by Tamar Herzig in the *American Historical Review* (vol. 127, iss. 1); 'Slavery in the Mediterranean' by Giulia Bonazza in *The Palgrave Handbook of Global Slavery throughout History* edited by Damian A. Pargas and Juliane Schiel (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023); *The Cambridge World History of Slavery* edited by David Eltis and Stanley L. Engerman (Cambridge University Press, 2011); 'Domestic Slavery in Renaissance Italy' by Sally McKee in *Slavery and Abolition* (vol. 29, no. 3).

Estimates suggest that approximately 1 million to 1.25 million Europeans were captured and sold through the North African slave markets from the beginning of the sixteenth century to the early eighteenth century. And although sub-Saharan Africa is often the focus of the Atlantic slave routes, there is plenty of evidence to show African slaves were also captured and sold into Italy and other European countries. The trade in human misery was widespread.

Before and after visiting Venice to finalize my research, I referred to various books on my shelves. Among them: *Venice: Pure City* by Peter Ackroyd (Chatto and Windus, 2009); *The Imperial Age of Venice 1380–1580* by Dr D. S. Chambers (Thames & Hudson, 1970); *Venice* by Jan Morris (Faber & Faber, 1993); *Secret Venice* by Thomas Jonglez, Paolo Zoffoli and Irene Galifi (Jonglez Publishing, 2010); *The Venice Lido* by Robin Saikia (Somerset Books, 2011); *The Pursuit of Italy* by David

Gilmour (Allen Lane, 2011); and John Ruskin's *Stones of Venice* (Penguin Classic History Series, 2001).

Art & Architecture: Venice by Marion Kaminski (Könemann, 2000) is available in several languages through second-hand booksellers. During my last visit to Venice I had the pleasure of meeting Venetian residents Ermanno and Marina Talluto, who very kindly gave me a copy of *Venice and its Lagoon* by Giulio Lorenzetti (Edizioni Erredici Padova), a contemporary reprint from the original 1926 edition, a book that is unlikely to be surpassed in its wealth of information about this magical city.

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Venice was the ultimate destination for this novel and after researching the city beforehand, I turned to a professional registered tour guide, Luisella Romeo, https://www.seevenice.it/en/. Luisella expertly guided me through the places I needed to see and the many queries I had, including the time it might take to travel from one location in my novel to another. Her advice was invaluable when checking my previous research from various source materials. I discovered that some names I had previously found were incorrect, and when I mentioned a certain street or *fondamenta* that I planned to use in the novel, I learnt they did not always exist in my time period. The assistance from a qualified guide who lives and works in Venice proved extremely helpful and reassuring. Any errors or changes I may have made to suit my story are mine alone.

Luisella also arranged for me to visit two workshops. My thanks to Marco Tenderini at the Bottega da Fabbro Tenderini, a blacksmith's workshop that has existed since the seventeenth century: www.veniceoriginal.it/it/artigiani/135-tenderini. During my visit, Marco kindly provided me with a demonstration of his craft and showed me old documents from when the forge first came into existence. He also explained the history of his commune and elaborated on why the glassblowers of Venice were eventually moved out of the city to Murano, a helpful piece of history I included in the book. Thanks also to Saverio Pastor, a master craftsman making oars and *fórcole*, tailor-made oarlocks for Venetian gondoliers and ferrymen: www.forcole.com/it-saverio-pastor.html. He generously let me view his workshop and observe his skill in carving a *fórcola*. I am grateful to Trudy Sellers, a volunteer at the Dartmouth Museum, who spent time patiently answering my questions about the structure and population of the town in my chosen period of the early seventeenth century.

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David Gilman
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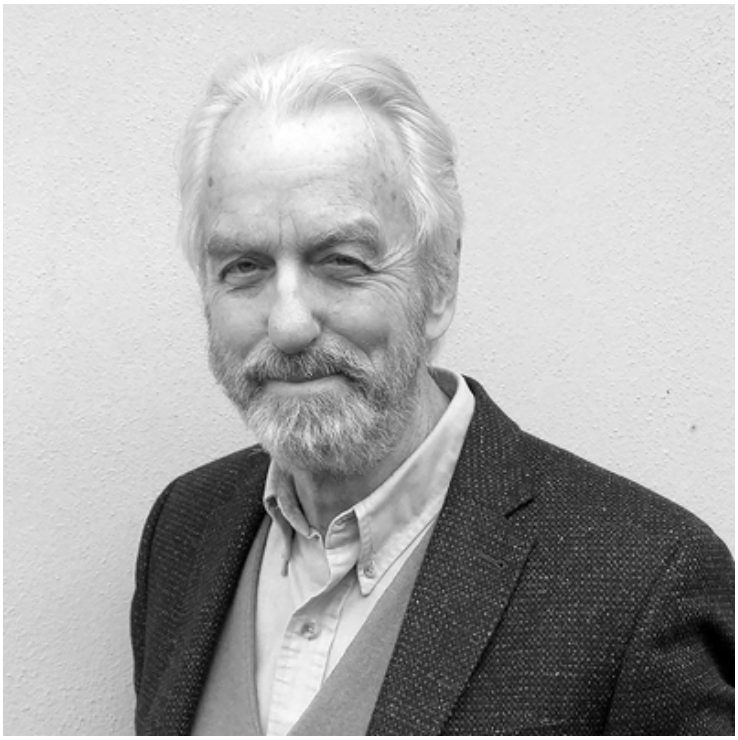

David Gilman has enjoyed many careers, including paratrooper, firefighter, and photographer. An award-winning author and screenwriter, he is the author of the critically acclaimed Master of War series of historical novels, and was shortlisted for the Wilbur Smith Adventure Writing Prize for *The Last Horseman*. He was longlisted for the same prize for *The Englishman*, the first book featuring ex-French Foreign Legionnaire Dan Raglan. David lives in Devon.

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