

Chapter 1

Thrace, July 1452

Leon Muller was now an accomplished military leader, a general in all but name who commanded the grandly titled Thracian Theme. A 'theme' was essentially a province of what had once been the Roman Empire in the East that was ruled by a general and was organised to raise armies for the emperor, who resided in Constantinople. Thrace had always been strategically important for the empire, being the western bulwark of Constantinople itself. Rich in wheat, grain, wine and all kinds of fruit, it had formerly been a prosperous and densely populated region. Bounded by the Balkan Mountains in the north, the Rhodope Mountains and the Aegean Sea in the south, and by the Black Sea and the Sea of Marmara in the east, it was filled with fertile valleys teeming with cattle, sheep and horses. Thrace also possessed gold and silver mines to fill the imperial coffers, as well as quarries producing marble to decorate the homes of Constantinople's royalty and its wealthiest citizens.

Leon perused the document, written in Greek, which was a transcript of an earlier missive long gone. He prided himself on not only being educated but also possessing a flair for languages. He had been fighting for the Roman emperor for two years now and had learnt to speak the language of the empire – Greek – as well as read it. Writing the local language had proved a harder task but he reckoned he was now reasonably proficient in penning missives that could be understood by the natives.

He was twenty-six but felt older. He had been fighting enemies – fellow Swiss, Italians and now Ottomans – for eight years and the stress had taken its toll. Not the exertions of battle, which were a welcome diversion on many occasions, but the incessant pressure of ensuring his army remained a credible fighting force. He finished reading the document and sighed, shaking his head and looking up when there was a tap at the door.

'Enter.'

Captain Wilhelm Faucigny and a taller, slightly older man beside him walked into the room. Dispensing with salutes, Wilhelm pulled up a chair and sat in it, the older man hesitating and looking at Leon.

'Take the weight off your feet, Skanderbeg.'

Tall, possessing an athletic frame and long hair that looked as though it had never seen a comb, Skanderbeg was the leader of the Albanian mercenaries given to Leon by a grateful emperor. All horsemen, they were armed with recurve bows and swords. When they weren't raiding and looting Ottoman villages, they were the eyes and ears of Leon's army. Wholly a law unto

themselves, the Albanians were nevertheless brave, often recklessly so, and loyal to the Swiss and French they fought beside. To a man they detested the Romans for being weak, poor employers and letting others do their fighting for them. Which is why they were not averse to raiding Roman villages on occasion. For the most part, however, they focused on killing Ottomans, whose Islamic faith they both feared and hated. Like his men, Skanderbeg wore a tall, broad-brimmed hat to make him look taller in the saddle, a sleeveless tunic, baggy leggings and a blue coat with very long sleeves.

Leon picked up the document and waved it at the pair.

‘Ezra found this earlier. It is a list of all the towns and villages in the Thracian Theme. Did you know that at its height, Thrace could raise ten thousand soldiers for the emperor?’

‘I doubt the emperor could even raise ten thousand soldiers in total,’ remarked Wilhelm, ‘now that the territory he controls has shrunk to a fraction of what it used to be.’

‘And will shrink further,’ added Skanderbeg.

‘We bring bad news, Leon,’ said Wilhelm, ‘or rather Skanderbeg does.’

Like Leon, the Albanian, despite being illiterate, had a flair for languages and had mastered Greek, which the trio were speaking. Wilhelm was also illiterate but during his two years of service in Roman lands, had picked up more than a smattering of the local language. He spoke German only when conversing with the members of his company and other Swiss soldiers.

‘Karaja Pasha and his army have left Edirne and are heading this way,’ Skanderbeg informed Leon.

‘Then God help us,’ sighed Leon.

When Constantinople’s emperor ruled the Balkans, Anatolia, the Holy Land and most of North Africa, the capital of the Thracian Theme had been Adrianople. But the Ottomans had conquered the city nearly a hundred years before and renamed it Edirne. They had also renamed Thrace, calling it Rumelia – ‘land of the Romans’ – though technically in Ottoman parlance the name referred to all Christian lands they had taken in the Balkans. And the area of those lands was increasing every year. Karaja Pasha was the bey, or chieftain, of Rumelia and commanded a large army of foot and horse.

‘How many men?’ asked Leon.

Skanderbeg scratched his nose. ‘Ten thousand at least.’

‘What will you do?’ Wilhelm asked Leon.

‘Attack the enemy, he will not be expecting that,’ said Leon. ‘If we sit here, we will almost certainly be besieged and then forced to surrender. I have no faith in the emperor’s ability to send a relief force.’

‘How much faith do you have in a thousand men defeating ten times their number?’ Skanderbeg asked him.

‘Thirteen hundred, surely?’ said Wilhelm, looking at the Albanian. ‘You and your men will be joining us on this suicide mission, I hope.’

Leon had commanded fifteen hundred men when he had left Venice two years before, but a third had either died or been invalided home in the interim, leaving him with eight hundred Swiss and two hundred Frenchmen. Of the latter, only fifty were hand gunners. In the Swiss contingent, there was an even split between halberdiers and pikemen. The three hundred Albanian horsemen were an essential part of the army that guarded the western approaches to the city of Constantinople.

‘I will write to the emperor requesting reinforcements before we march,’ said Leon.

‘Waste of time,’ spat Wilhelm. ‘How many letters have you written to him during the past two years? He has no army to speak of, aside from the garrison of Constantinople, which will never leave the city. But soon, the Ottomans will be at the gates of his city.’

‘Not this year, my friend,’ stated Skanderbeg. ‘Karaja Pasha will not approach the city with his army. He will wait for the sultan himself before marching to the walls of Constantinople. The city is a great prize that only the sultan can take. This place is but a minor irritant in comparison.’

‘This place’ was the town of Bizye, situated almost halfway between Constantinople and Edirne. Famous for its linden trees and the honey produced by bees from linden flowers, it was an ancient settlement that had been captured by the Ottomans but retaken by the Romans when they had an effective army. Now Bizye, like the few Roman towns still in the emperor’s possession, was a so-called ‘machine for defence’. As such, it was surrounded by thick, high walls with a castle positioned on high ground to tower over the town’s buildings to provide its citizens with a sense of security. Conversely, the fortifications were also a constant reminder of threat. Bizye’s castle occupied the broad top of a hill next to the town and comprised an inner and outer stronghold. It was connected to a sandstone wall that encircled the entire town.

The Swiss and French were quartered in the castle and town, the citizens grateful for the sizeable military presence in their midst, and thankful that Leon kept a tight rein on his soldiers when it came to discipline and paying for goods and services. The redoubtable Ezra Mordecai ensured shopkeepers and business owners were paid promptly, which maintained good relations between the population and the army. The Swiss and French had been paid in advance by Pope Nicholas for a two-year contract to fight on behalf of Emperor Constantine and what was left of his empire. The fee paid to every soldier had been generous, and the Pope had guaranteed that during their service, the Swiss and French would be fed and housed at the expense of the emperor.

The money to pay for the upkeep of Leon's army came from the taxes the emperor levied on the citizens of Thrace, or at least those still under his control. The reality, however, was that after two years fighting the Ottomans, the size of Roman-controlled Thrace had shrunk alarmingly. Neither Leon nor Constantine could prevent thousands of Ottoman soldiers being transported from Anatolia to conquer Thrace.

Leon summoned his senior captains, Jean de Maingre and Henri Russell to the castle to inform them of the news Skanderbeg had brought. It was the height of summer and the days were long and hot. The council of war was therefore held in the early evening when the heat of the day was waning. Everyone wore linen shirts and baggy leggings favoured by the Ottomans, which were looser and cooler than tight-fitting hose. Henri was the governor of the town and the few cannon he possessed were sited on the castle's battlements ready to fire at besiegers. But Leon included him in all deliberations pertaining to military matters. And Henri also now spoke Greek, which allowed him to communicate with the imperial authorities in Constantinople.

The officers gathered in the castle's main hall, a large silver chandelier hanging above the oversized table where the attendees sat. Locals employed as servants served them wine as Leon spoke in German.

'After diverting his attention to subduing the few remaining Roman fortresses in Greece, Karaja Pasha is now turning his eyes towards us. Skanderbeg has brought news that his army has left Edirne and is now marching towards Bizye.'

There were sharp intakes of breath from those at the table.

'We have barely been able to withstand the Ottoman forces in Thrace as it is,' said Ugo 'Scarface'. 'Now the enemy's main army has arrived, it is only a matter of time before this town will be under siege.'

'Where is the emperor, the man we are fighting for?' asked Peter Hewen bitterly.

'He will not come, *mon ami*,' Henri told him. 'He has no army to speak of.'

'Then we are doomed,' remarked Jakob Rot morosely, draining his goblet of wine.

'What say you, Leon?' enquired Urs Steger.

Leon took a sip of the excellent local wine.

'We cannot engage Karaja Pasha's army in battle. We would be outnumbered ten to one.'

'Good odds,' joked 'Scarface'.

'Even if we beat them in battle, reinforcements would arrive from Anatolia to replace Ottoman battle losses,' stated Leon, 'whereas our own losses cannot be replaced.'

'Please tell me you have a plan to save us,' said Jean.

Leon looked at Henri.

'I'm afraid you will have to be the bait in our plan, my friend. I will lead the army out of town tomorrow morning and we will ambush the enemy before retreating into the hills. The enemy will lay siege to Bizye and we will raid the Ottoman camp in the days afterwards, forcing Karaja Pasha to break off the siege and retreat back to Edirne.'

The captains looked at each other. Jean stared into his wine and Skanderbeg looked quizzically at Henri, who provided a translation of Leon's words. The Albanian laughed.

'Karaja Pasha is a great warlord who will brush away your attempts to break his siege like a man swats away a fly.'

'What did he say?' asked Jakob Rot.

Henri told the fair-haired captain.

'Just what I was thinking,' nodded Rot.

Leon did not get angry or try to convince them his plan had merit.

'We must do something, and that is the best plan I can think of. Henri, if, after a week of being under siege, we have been unable to force the Ottomans to retire, seek terms to safeguard you and your clerks, the garrison and Bizye's population.'

'You will cede the town to the enemy?' asked the Frenchman.

'The emperor will be angry, *mon brave*,' said Jean.

This prompted derisive laughter from the others, even Leon.

'You may be interested to know that I have sent a letter to the emperor,' stated Leon.

'Not another one,' groaned 'Scarface'.

'Leon loves writing letters,' said Wilhelm.

Leon held up a hand to him.

'As well as pleading for reinforcements, I have also reminded him that our contract of employment is about to expire, and so we will be free to quit his service and return home.'

Henri was translating Leon's German words to Skanderbeg, whose jaw dropped.

'You cannot leave,' he wailed. 'Thrace will fall to the infidels if you do.'

'Has it been two years already?' reflected Urs Steger.

Jakob Rot emptied his goblet.

'Time flies when you are enjoying yourself.'

'We march at dawn,' Leon told them.

All the French hand gunners were left in Bizye and would bolster Henri's men, who were mostly all gun crews but knew how to shoot a crossbow and hand gun. They would be reinforced by the town militia, a small but enthusiastic band of part-time soldiers who all possessed helmets,

armour and polearms. In total, Henri would command a garrison of two hundred men to defy the Ottoman army of Rumelia.

Dawn came early in Thrace during the summer, the sun rising quickly to highlight rolling hills and fields filled with ripening wheat. Bizye's gates swung open and Leon led just under a thousand foot soldiers from the town, marching west on the road that led to Edirne, eighty-five miles away. The road was a simple dirt track, there being no paved highway between Bizye and Edirne, though there was one from the latter city to Constantinople.

There was not a cloud in the sky when Skanderbeg and his fellow horse archers cantered past the column of foot soldiers, their leader pulling up his horse alongside Leon marching at the head of the column.

'Once you engage the enemy, we will not be able to assist you,' Skanderbeg told Leon.

'Just get the enemy's attention, Skanderbeg, and goad them into action. We will do the rest.'

The Albanian raised his hand and dug his spurs into his horse's flanks, the beast breaking into a canter to catch up with the other riders.

'So how many soldiers does the enemy have?' asked Rudy beside Leon.

'Ten thousand, approximately, or so Skanderbeg told me.'

'You are aiming to give the enemy a bloody nose?' asked Ulrich.

'And after that to be a thorn in his side,' answered Leon. 'If we sit behind Bizye's walls, we will eat up the food supplies and be forced to surrender. At least this way we have a chance to force the enemy to withdraw.'

The Swiss and their allies had learnt from bitter experience that it was futile to engage the Ottomans in open terrain, where hordes of Turkish horse archers could swarm around the Swiss pike square shooting arrows with impunity. The Ottomans were not averse to feigning withdrawals and bolting from the Swiss when they charged, only to return when the foot soldiers had halted after seemingly winning an easy victory. Leon and his officers had therefore learnt to adapt their tactics accordingly. Their enemies were no longer the Christian knights in plate armour mounted on fine horses whose code of honour demanded they never retreat in the face of low-born Swiss peasants. They now faced a cunning, resourceful foe who used any tactics to achieve their aim, which was to make the whole world Muslim.

'It's going to be a hot day,' complained Wilhelm, the visor of his sallet raised.

'Hotter for the enemy, lord,' grinned Antonio behind him.

The former page of an Italian man-at-arms was still scrawny, despite the voluminous quantities of food he consumed, but he had grown taller and stronger, and had learnt to speak German and even Greek. He had also become an enthusiastic member of the Swiss army of

Emperor Constantine, everything being a great adventure in his youthful eyes. He also called Leon and his friends 'lord', which amused everyone aside from Wilhelm.

'You just concentrate on what I have taught you,' Wilhelm told him.

'Perhaps we will capture one of the enemy's generals today and become rich,' said Antonio.

'How will we become rich?' asked Rudy.

'It is well known the Ottomans have vast amounts of treasure. If we capture one of their generals, we can sell him back to the sultan for a mountain of gold,' declared Antonio.

'Listening to you, boy,' said Ulrich, 'reminds me of Sigmund Thyg.'

'He would have liked you, Antonio,' said Leon.

'He would?' beamed Antonio.

'He was dazzled by the prospect of great wealth, too,' stated Rudy. 'He's probably bargaining with God as we speak over his fee for standing guard over heaven.'

'Or with Satan in hell,' mused Wilhelm. 'At least he died a rich man, which is something.'

'He should not have died at all,' spat Leon. 'Being stabbed in the back by your allies is no way to die.'

'As opposed to being stabbed in the front by an Ottoman lance?' queried Wilhelm.

The column marched west along the dirt road, the sun on the backs of the men who were following their Albanian allies. They marched adjacent to a series of low-lying hills on their right flank, the rises carpeted with oaks and chestnuts. To their left was a great expanse of fields filled with crops. Thrace was a rich and prosperous theme and was now almost wholly under Ottoman rule. Leon would have liked to believe the Turks were ruthless, bloodthirsty conquerors who put all those who did not follow their faith to the sword. But the reality was that they were benevolent rulers, administering the Christian lands they absorbed into their empire with a light touch. As long as people paid their taxes to the sultan, they were free to follow their faith. There were no forced conversions or burning of heretics, and, in a move that guaranteed newly conquered peoples would not be hostile to their new lords, Ottoman taxes were lower than their Roman equivalents.

After two hours of marching, the Swiss reached the small village of Poyrali, ten miles from Bizye, now deserted after its residents had fled into the hills north of the settlement, taking their livestock with them. A small stream ran from the hills through the village to provide it with water all year round. Men fell out the ranks to drink from the stream as Leon called an impromptu council of war in the middle of the village.

‘As soon as Skanderbeg and his men appear, we make a stand outside the village and then fall back up the creek. The trees will provide cover and a degree of protection from Ottoman arrows.’

He turned to the commander of the crossbowmen.

‘Get your men into the trees either side of the creek.’

‘And don’t shoot us when we pass by,’ joked Urs Steger.

‘Do not worry, *mon ami*,’ said the French captain, ‘my men always hit what they aim at. Just do not stand between them and their targets.’

‘We will be moving at such speed, we will just a blur,’ boasted Jakob Rot.

An excitable Antonio ran up and saluted Leon.

‘Horsemen approaching, lord.’

‘To your positions, gentlemen.’

The captains raced back to their companies and moments later eight hundred Swiss soldiers stood in their ranks directly north of the village, the stream in front of them. Pike and halberd points glinted in the sunlight and burnished plate armour sparkled in the bright conditions. Leon paced from the line of Swiss soldiers when Skanderbeg and his Albanians galloped into view, the riders diverting south of the village and through the fields while their leader brought his horse to a halt in front of Leon, showering him with dust. He spat the particles from his mouth.

‘The enemy are a few minutes behind us, *akinjis* and *sipahis*, hundreds of them.’

‘How many hundreds?’

Skanderbeg grinned. ‘More than your hundreds.’

He looked at the stream flowing from the hills on his left.

‘You will lure them up the creek?’

‘That is the plan.’

‘We will aid you once the Ottomans are in the trap.’

He raised his hand, turned his horse and galloped away. Leon walked back to the front rank of halberdiers. The signaller next to him had a horn attached to a baldrick slung over his right shoulder.

‘When I tell you, blow it twice to signal the withdrawal.’

‘Yes, Outcast.’

‘We withdraw up the creek on two blasts of the horn,’ he shouted.

The order was relayed up and down the line, and then he lowered his visor and waited for the enemy to arrive.

They approached, hollering and whooping, bows held aloft as they galloped towards the village, a mass of horsemen in white turbans, sleeveless blue coats and baggy leggings.

They headed straight for the Swiss, loosing arrows from the saddle, Leon and hundreds of others dropping to their knees as the missiles shot through the air. The Ottoman recurve bow was an efficient piece of military engineering, its limbs that curved away from the archer when unstrung storing more energy and delivering it more efficiently than an equivalent straight-limbed bow, thereby increasing the speed of the arrow it shot. Ideally suited for shooting lightweight arrows on dry, flat plains with high visibility, it was the weapon of choice for the enemy's light horsemen, the *akinjis*. And because a recurve bow had a lower draw weight than a straight-limbed equivalent, it was less tiring for its user.

The *akinjis* began shooting at a range of around fifty paces, the arrows hissing through the air on a flat trajectory. They struck the compact column of Swiss soldiers and glanced off plate armour and sallets, the majority of the Ottoman riders swarming in and round the village to clear it of any enemy. Leon turned and shoved up his visor.

'Now!'

The signaller blew his war horn twice and as one, the Swiss column stood, faced right and fast-paced up the creek. From the open ground on either side of the stream it was around twenty paces to the trees that covered the hills flanking the creek. Those trees were white oaks and were ideal for the battle Leon intended to fight against a numerically superior foe. The *akinjis* reformed and followed the fleeing Swiss soldiers up the creek, splashing through the stream and filling the ground either side of it, archers at the head of the disorganised mass of riders loosing arrows at the Swiss. A few struck legs and boots and caused men to fall, leaving those who could, to hobble into the trees to avoid the riders, others, unable to walk, were trampled under the hooves of horses.

Leon, his visor still raised, grabbed the signaller and ordered him to blow his war horn again. The column slowed, halted and then reformed into line formation to face the onrushing horsemen. Pikemen lowered their weapons to the horizontal position to stop the *akinjis* getting close, a futile manoeuvre against horsemen trained to shoot at their targets from long range. Or so they thought as they slowed their horses and bunched in front of the two ranks of Swiss pikemen, preparing to unleash a blizzard of arrows at the unarmoured legs of the foot soldiers. The halberdiers had fled left and right into the trees. Those trees – white oaks – were large, imposing specimens with short, stocky trunks and massive horizontal limbs. Their wide-spacing branches formed an upright, broad-rounded crown and because they liked the sun, they were widely spaced. And before the *akinjis* could unleash their volleys of arrows, the crossbowmen beside the oaks on both sides of the creek began shooting.

There were one hundred and sixty of them – eighty on each side of the creek – and using their goat's foot levers they could shoot at least three bolts a minute. Nearly five hundred crossbow bolts scythed down the front ranks of the *akinjis*, most striking horses, the animals squealing and groaning when they were hit, collapsing to the ground and either throwing their riders or trapping them beneath their wounded bodies. The crossbowmen kept on shooting at horses, cutting down dozens in under two minutes. The rear ranks of the *akinjis* turned and fled back down the creek, and then Leon and the other halberdiers ran from the cover of the trees where they had reformed after leaving the pikemen. The surviving *akinjis*, injured, demoralised and disorientated, put up no resistance when Leon and hundreds of other Swiss soldiers sprang at them to stab and slash with their halberds. The *akinjis* wore no helmets or armour and could only try to fight back with their swords. It was a hopeless struggle.

Leon jumped over a dead horse and saw its rider trying to free his leg from under the carcass. He chopped down with his weapon, the axe blade slicing through the Ottoman's turban, skull and cut deep into his brain. Leon wrenched the steel blade from the bloody pulp and stabbed the spike into the belly of another Ottoman who had managed to stagger to his feet and found himself facing Leon in full plate armour. He fell back down, dead, when Leon withdrew his spike and looked for more targets. All he saw were dead Ottoman riders, horse carcasses and triumphant Swiss soldiers.

Leon looked back down the creek and saw horsemen massing in front of the village. These were not horse archers but heavier horsemen: men in mail armour wearing conical helmets complete with neck and nasal guards. There was a host of red banners bearing a golden crescent among them, and kettle drummers who banged their instruments constantly. Wilhelm paced over to where Leon stood admiring the assembling enemy army.

'You think they will withdraw?'

'No, they are preparing a second assault.'

Wilhelm looked around at the mass of horse carcasses and dead horse archers blocking the path to the Swiss pikemen across the creek. The stream was now running red with Ottoman blood.

'It would be foolish in the extreme to attempt another mounted assault. Perhaps they are going to shoot at us at long range.'

Leon pointed down the hill.

'Or attack on foot.'

The Ottoman armoured horsemen in mail and helmets – *sipahis* – were dismounting and forming up in a dense phalanx in front of their horses, *akinjis* taking the reins of their horses. Wilhelm shook his head.

‘This will be easy enough.’

The pikemen relaxed, drank from their water bottles and chatted among themselves as the Ottomans stood idle and the kettledrummers continued playing. Leon and the other halberdiers walked back to their positions in the trees to stand with the crossbowmen once more. Their French commander came over to Leon as he drank the tepid liquid from his water bottle.

‘The enemy seeks to unnerve us before attacking, commander.’

‘Their drums will be the accompaniment to your men cutting them down once again,’ said Leon.

‘Why do they wait?’ asked the Frenchman.

The trees were suddenly filled with war cries and shouts of ‘*Allahu Akbar*’. Leon turned to see a seething mass of enemy foot soldiers charging at the Swiss and French. They were *azabs* and were armed with spears, swords and daggers, their only protection being red turbans and round leather shields. The equivalent of Christian militias, their eagerness and religious fervour compensated for their lack of training and poor equipment. To a degree.

In the face of such an onslaught part-time militia would have run; ordinary soldiers would have put up a token resistance before being swept away; but Leon’s men were neither part-time nor ordinary. They saw not an unstoppable tide but an ill-armed rabble. Leon ran to where Wilhelm’s company was forming up, other companies deploying into two ranks. The crossbowmen were already shooting, loosing three bolts a minute – each missile striking an enemy soldier. Rather than wait for the *azabs* to come to them, the crossbowmen rushed forward, halted, began shooting and then fell back in relays in a splendid display of military discipline. The *azabs* were a hundred paces from the Swiss, who waited patiently in their fifty-man companies, the front ranks being cutting down by French bolts. Then the Frenchmen took to their heels and ran, passing the Swiss halberdiers, who charged at the Turks.

The widely spaced oaks meant it was a charge of sections rather than companies, and once battle was joined, the sections would be on their own. Leon attached himself to Wilhelm’s section, the captain on his left and Rudy and Ulrich on his right. Visors down, halberds levelled, they plunged into the Ottoman mass. The *azabs* did what all poorly trained soldiers did – they hesitated and then tried to avoid the steel-clad men charging at them. To falter was to die and that is what they did, hundreds of them.

Leon did not see the mass in front of him; all he saw was his target, a man with a thick beard and fear in his eyes who had brought his shield across his chest to defeat the spike of Leon’s weapon, who drove the point into the Turk’s neck instead. Leon barged into the shield to send the dying Ottoman reeling backwards, Leon raising his weapon and chopping down with the axe

blade to split open the skull of the man behind, then turned the halberd and swung it right to embed the hook on the back of the axe blade into the head of another Ottoman. He felt a spear glance off his curved breastplate and forged on. His friends were likewise carving a path of carnage with their weapons, the Ottomans' lack of head protection proving especially costly. The torso is the largest target, but unprotected faces and skulls are a higher priority, and once struck by a steel blade or spike with force behind it, the victim does not recover.

Stab and chop, stab and chop. The steel head of Leon's weapon was red as he and hundreds of other Swiss cut the *azabs* to pieces. The Ottoman formation disintegrated under the relentless, remorseless Swiss attack, men running back down the slope as Turkish morale collapsed.

Leon, panting heavily, shoved up his visor and looked around. He saw a lot of dead *azabs* and a few men in armour lying on the ground. He could hear fighting on his left and knew a battle was still raging.

'To me, to me,' he shouted, running to the creek. 'Shit, shit, shit!'

He had been duped, deceived, and now he realised why the *sipahis* had been standing idle as the kettle drummers played. They were waiting for the *azabs* to attack to provide a distraction while another assault was mounted further up the creek. Divide and conquer. A simple tactic as old as warfare itself.

The halberdiers and crossbowmen raced to the treeline beside the creek and saw hundreds of *sipahis* on foot battling the pikemen. Foot archers behind the *sipahis* turned to shoot at the Swiss and French as soon as they spotted them.

'Into them!' ordered Leon.

The other companies did not hear his command, and neither did the rest of Wilhelm's company, but it did not matter. The pikemen were in danger of being overwhelmed and had to be assisted. The sections reformed and then charged the flanks of the dismounted *sipahis*. These men were wearing helmets and armour and were armed with maces, war hammers and swords. The war hammer was a fearsome weapon, comprising a metal hammer with a slightly turned-down spike at the rear and spike on top. Primarily a horseman's weapon, it had a leather thong attached to the end of the two-foot-long wooden shaft for ease of retention when fighting in the saddle. More effective when wielded from the saddle, the war hammer had a better chance of delivering a full-force blow when travelling downwards. The small surface area of the hammer resulted in a concentrated point of impact. A war hammer could not penetrate the quality plate armour and sallets worn by the Swiss, but it could dent plate and render a victim temporarily stunned. However, the *sipahis* were not fighting from the saddle but on foot and if their supporting archers

failed to keep the Swiss in the trees away from the Ottoman column, they would be at a disadvantage.

Leon and the other Swiss halberdiers moved fast, the *sipahis* having pushed back the pikemen beyond the carpet of dead *akinjis* and their horses that had been created earlier. This meant the ground was not littered with obstacles to slow the Swiss charge. The archers shot their arrows at the halberdiers and saw their missiles glance off the plate armour and sallets. And then the Swiss were among them, stabbing and hacking at unarmoured bowmen. The one-sided battle was soon over, allowing Leon to reorganise the companies for the assault on the *sipahis*. The Swiss who had been in the trees on the other side of the creek had also defeated the *azabs* and now joined Leon for the final clash that would decide the Battle of Poyrali.

It was midday and the heat was intense. Leon was drenched in sweat and his mouth was dry. Rivulets of sweat ran into his eyes, making them sting, but his determination to finish off the Ottomans made his physical discomfort pale into insignificance. The companies having been formed into line formation that spanned the creek, with crossbowmen ahead of them shooting at the rear of the *sipahis*, Leon ordered the signaller to blow his war horn to commence the attack, just as a fanfare of Ottoman trumpets sounded and the *sipahis* abandoned their battle against the pikemen and turned their fury on the halberdiers.

The crossbowmen shot one volley and then retreated through the ranks of the Swiss, Leon and hundreds of others then charging forward to meet the Turkish tide. The Swiss could have simply moved aside and let the enemy retreat to the village and their horses. But retreating was not part of the Swiss mentality.

The war hammers and maces of the foe were fearsome weapons, but they did not have the reach of the eight-foot halberds carried by the Swiss, and soon *sipahis* were being cut down. It was harder fighting men in helmets and armour, who were better trained and better armed than the *azabs*, but the greater reach of the halberd frustrated the efforts of *sipahis* wielding war hammers and maces to close with the Swiss.

Leon worked in tandem with Rudy, one deflecting or stopping an enemy weapon, the other thrusting forward with the spike of his halberd to penetrate thighs or put out eyes. Soon there was a wall of dead in front of the Swiss, which grew taller as the slaughter continued. But the Swiss halberdiers were four hundred and the Ottomans were two, three times that number and the Turks continued to scramble over the wall of their own dead to force a way through the Swiss line, a thin line that was beginning to buckle. The red banners emblazoned with a gold crescent were not as numerous as they had been at the beginning of the battle, but Ottoman pressure was not lessening. If anything, it was increasing.

Rudy blocked an enemy mace with his halberd and was saved from a war hammer by Leon stabbing its owner in the armpit. Leon tried to stab the owner of the war hammer in the face but had to block an Ottoman sword that was chopped down against his sallet. Then there was a surge of *sipahis* that prised apart the Swiss. Dozens of Turks struck the centre of the Swiss line that gave way, Leon grabbing Rudy's arm and hauling him back as dozens of Turks swept past them. He and his friend slashed at the legs of the enemy soldiers with their halberds as they passed, hundreds of Turks fleeing back down the creek. Leon shoved up his visor and watched them go. Wilhelm was beside them, looking around with a worried look on his face.

'Where's Ulrich?'

For the first time since Leon had been a part of what originally had been the army of Schwyz, Ulrich was not beside him in battle. The big man had vanished, his reassuring presence gone. Leon could scarcely believe it. He looked forlornly at Wilhelm and Rudy, unsure what to do. It was hot but he felt chilled to the bone. Ulrich dead? How could this be? The big man who brushed aside his enemies with ease, cut down?

'Outcast, you had better see this.'

The call brought Leon back to harsh reality. He took a deep breath and pointed at Wilhelm.

'Find the body. We will take it back to Bizye for a proper burial. *All* our dead will be taken back. Leave the enemy where they are.'

It was Urs Steger who had called to Leon and now the pair of them walked to where a group of Swiss soldiers stood with halberds lowered around a man surrounded by dead Ottomans. He was holding a standard in one hand and a mace in the other, a look of defiance on his face. Thoughts of a dead Ulrich were swirling in Leon's mind and he was angry that Steger was bothering him with such an inconsequential matter.

'Kill him', ordered Leon.

Steger pointed at the Turk's gilded helmet and silver shoulder armour covering his chainmail, the round disc on his chest also silver.

'This man is important. He might be worth ransoming.'

Ordinarily, the Swiss did not take prisoners because they had never been shown mercy by their enemies. And the tall, slender individual ringed by soldiers could consider himself lucky he had been spared. That said, every Swiss soldier was very aware that his contract with Pope Nicholas in Rome was coming to an end. And the Swiss were also very mindful that Emperor Constantine sitting in his palace in Constantinople was as poor as a church mouse. These things considered; it was perhaps not surprising that a rich enemy might be spared.

Leon removed his sallet and the padded cap underneath.

‘What is your name?’ he asked the Turk in Greek.

‘What is *your* name?’ the captive shot back.

Despite his precarious position, he appeared calm, almost reflective, unconcerned that he might be stabbed and hacked to death at any moment. His demeanour indicated a man of breeding.

‘Commander Leon Muller, the man who holds Thrace for Emperor Constantine, and God.’

The Turk smiled but his black viper eyes displayed no emotion.

‘Karaja Pasha, Bey of Rumelia, who has been ordered by the sultan to conquer the land you call Thrace. A man, who like me, follows the true faith.’

Leon was momentarily lost for words. This was the man he had fought for two years. He had never actually seen the Bey of Rumelia in person, even though he had fought and killed many of his soldiers. But the truth was that Rumelia was increasing in size just as Roman Thrace was shrinking, and the man standing in front of Leon had been instrumental in the remorseless Ottoman advance. Leon looked around at the piles of Turkish dead.

‘Every man who fights in battle believes God is on his side. I wonder what God thinks of it all?’

Leon ordered the Swiss ringing the Turk to stand at ease and offered Karaja Pasha his water bottle. The bey took it and sated his thirst, handing it back to Leon.

‘Long have I desired to meet with you, commander, though perhaps not in these circumstances.’

Leon pointed at the Turk’s mace.

‘If you give me your word you will not attempt to escape or harm any of my men, you will be spared.’

Karaja tossed the mace to Leon. He then unbuckled his sword belt and handed it to a bemused Urs Steger.

‘You have my word, commander.’

Captain Steger admired the sword in a gilt-copper scabbard covered in burgundy velvet, its rounded pommel decorated with ovals and roundels set with red corals.

‘This must be worth a fortune.’

‘It is not ours to sell,’ Leon told him.

‘Walk with me, lord,’ he requested the bey, calling back to Steger. ‘We are leaving immediately. Skanderbeg reported there were ten thousand Ottomans marching toward Bizye, which means the main enemy army is yet to arrive. Tell the other captains.’

The Albanian and his men had returned to capture the enemy’s horses after skirmishing with the survivors of the *sipahis* who had forced their way through the Swiss line to live to fight another

day, which meant he was in possession of several hundred examples of Anatolian horseflesh. He could barely contain his excitement after riding up the creek to report to Leon.

‘Two or three hundred have escaped, lord, but they will be back, and with many more men.’

‘Which is why we are leaving.’

Skanderbeg looked at Karaja Pasha.

‘Who’s he?’

‘A man under my protection. Escort him back to Bizye and place him in the care of Henri Russell. He is not to be harmed in any way.’

Skanderbeg’s curiosity had been aroused but he nodded and rode back down the creek.

‘That man will escort you back to Bizye, lord,’ Leon told the bey. ‘He will treat you with all the courtesies a man of your rank deserves.’

Karaja chuckled. ‘Did you tell him who I was?’

‘I told him all he needs to know.’

‘I will take that as a no. You have saved me twice, commander. Once from the *uzun mizraklar*, and now from an Albanian dagger in the back.’

‘*Uzun mizraklar*?’ queried Leon.

‘It means “long spears”, the name my soldiers call your troops.’

The Swiss and French dead were strapped to horses and given over to the care of Skanderbeg and his men to get them back to Bizye. The Albanian leader himself rode back to the town beside Karaja Pasha, half a dozen of his men ringing the Ottoman general to ensure he did not escape from their clutches. But Leon believed the Turk would make no attempt to flee, though he did wonder if Skanderbeg would interrogate him during the brief time he would be in his charge.

‘We can’t find him.’

Rudy was distraught the body of Ulrich had not been found, despite an extensive search of the trees and the creek, and indeed the village. He stood beside Leon shaking his head in despair. Wilhelm was also present and was similarly distressed by the absence of their friend’s body.

‘He has been taken prisoner,’ announced Leon. ‘That is the only logical explanation.’

His friends stared at him with incredulity.

‘Why would anyone want to capture Ulrich?’ asked Rudy.

‘And if that’s true, how are we going to get him back?’ asked Wilhelm.