

Prologue

Northern Italy, October 1448

It was autumn and the days were shortening but it was still warm, even humid on some days. The trees were turning brown and yellow, and shedding their leaves. Lombardy was a beautiful land, filled with fields, rivers, orchards and vineyards. It was also a populous place, teeming with splendid towns and cities with ancient histories, and dotted with hundreds of villages. The inhabitants of those villages worked the fields, orchards and vineyards that surrounded their settlements in an unending cycle of grinding toil. Duke Gottfried of Swabia pulled up his horse when he spotted a large group of villagers working in a sprawling vineyard, filling baskets with grapes. His deputy, a swarthy individual wearing a shining suit of plate armour, which paled beside the magnificent armour worn by his lord, halted his mount.

‘Is anything wrong, your grace?’

Gottfried pointed at the villagers.

‘Do you know why there are so many vineyards in the world?’

‘Your grace?’

‘It is because every church service requires wine as well as bread, and wine is healthier to drink than water, which means there is an insatiable desire for wine. Hence the high numbers of vineyards.’

It was the time of the grape harvest, which meant villagers rushed to the vineyards to collect the ripened grapes in baskets before getting them to the presses. The harvest took place in either September or October, though the exact time when the grapes were judged ready to be picked was something of an art form. A few days too early or too late meant the difference between success and failure. The best way to measure if a grapevine was ready to be picked was taste and appearance. The grapes should be sweet to the taste and show no sign of becoming shrivelled, which happened when they began to over-develop. They should also be colourful and plump.

Once picked, it became a race again time to get them pressed as quickly as possible. Baskets of grapes were emptied into large wooden tubs where they were crushed by two or more people, treading endlessly around the tub to produce juices that drained into a waiting basin and which would eventually become wine.

The villagers were so involved in harvesting the grapes that they gave the duke, his mounted men-at-arms, squires and wagons barely a glance. But then, the duke’s party was not a

large one. He had arrived in Italy to fight for the Republic of Venice with five hundred men-at-arms and the same number of squires. But now that army was reduced to barely fifty men-at-arms and double that number of squires. His own squire held his banner behind him: three black lions on a yellow background, though the standard hung limp in the windless early morning air. It reflected how Duke Gottfried, one of the wealthiest nobles in southern Germany, felt. He had arrived in Italy with high expectations of inflicting vengeance on the Swiss who had humiliated him at the Battle of Ragaz, but was leaving with his noble tail very much between his legs. Losing one army was bad enough; losing two was akin to humiliation.

‘At least I was not in command at Caravaggio,’ Gottfried muttered to himself.

His deputy was perplexed. ‘Your grace?’

‘Nothing, we must continue our journey if we are to reach Venice sooner rather than later.’

Just days before, Gottfried and his men had been part of a large army commanded by Venice’s captain-general, the aged Micheletto Attendolo. The general had devised a plan to destroy the army of Milan’s captain-general, Francesco Sforza, who was marching to the relief of the besieged town of Caravaggio. Attendolo had assembled an army of over fourteen thousand men, an impressive feat by any standard. Sforza’s army was half that size, and victory had seemed certain. Attendolo was a veteran *condottiere*, a mercenary leader who had made a career and a fortune fighting for the various duchies and republics on the Italian peninsula. Having cornered the Milanese, Attendolo had devised a bold plan to mount a three-pronged attack on Sforza’s forces. Unfortunately, the plan had failed miserably. The Venetians had been defeated, Duke Gottfried had barely escaped with his life, and the Milanese were now masters of northern Italy. Attendolo had withdrawn to the city of Brescia, the headquarters of the Venetian army in Lombardy. Sigismondo Malatesta, the so-called ‘Wolf of Rimini’, had ridden south, back to Rimini, in the process abandoning his Venetian allies. Gottfried had decided to do the same, though only because his ‘army’ had been reduced to a miniscule force that would not influence future operations in any way. He had decided to return to Lindau, though not before paying his compliments to the Doge who had welcomed him into Venetian service. He had fought as a subordinate to Attendolo at the debacle of Caravaggio and the earlier abortive assault on the village of Marignano, throwing himself into the thick of the fighting on both occasions. He could therefore retire from Venetian service with honour, which in the end was the only thing that really mattered. He had spent a small fortune, first fighting the Swiss, and then raising and financing the army that he had led into Italy. The battered and bruised survivors he now commanded were the paltry remnants of that force. The rest were lying dead in the fields and woods around Caravaggio, along with thousands of Italians.

He could of course return to Lindau and raise another army, but he no longer believed Venice was capable of defeating the newly created Golden Ambrosian Republic of Milan. Francesco Sforza had proved himself a master *condottiere* who in the new year might be laying siege to Venice itself, so decisive had been his victory at Caravaggio. It was not inconceivable that other republics might join Milan to bring Venice low and plunder the republic's rich lands in Lombardy.

As the column of horsemen and wagons journeyed east, Gottfried was struck by how prosperous those lands were. Swamps had been drained to create fields growing barley, rye, oats and millet, while hillsides were blanketed with vineyards, olive groves and orchards, and open pasture supported sheep and cattle. If Venice lost these lands, it would be unable to support its field army in Lombardy.

It was ironic that the armour worn by Duke Gottfried had been made in Milan by master armourer Tommaso Missaglia. It had cost a small fortune, which was irrelevant to the duke as it made a statement regarding Gottfried's wealth and status. Missaglia had sent armourers to Lindau to take the duke's measurements to ensure the completed armour fitted perfectly. And not only that, even when he was covered from head to foot in Milanese plate armour, it felt like a second skin, so light and well-balanced were the integral parts. Its purpose was straightforward enough: to protect the duke from head to foot. But each piece of the suit was both functional and also a work of art in itself.

The armour comprised a 'Venetian' sallet, a breastplate with integral faulds and tassets, a backplate with integral culet to protect the small of the back, an asymmetrical pair of pauldrons to protect the shoulder area, vambraces to cover the forearms, an asymmetrical pair of mitten gauntlets, a pair of cuisses and poleyns to protect the thighs and knees, and a pair of greaves. The sallet had a rounded crown that extended downwards to just above the level of the shoulders where it flared outwards very slightly at each side and then more markedly at the nape to form a short projecting 'tail'.

The rounded breastplate covered the duke's chest and a plackart protected the lower half of his front torso, a separate gorget protecting the neck. The plackart, a Milanese speciality, overlapped the lower edge of the main plate and was articulated to it by means of a single medial strap and buckle. The lower edge of the plackart was flanged outwards to receive faulds, which were pieces of plate armour that protected the waist and hips. These overlapping horizontal lames of metal were connected by leather strips to form an apron-like skirt. They ended just above the knees.

His thighs were shielded by cuisses, his knees by poleyns and his shins by greaves. Even his feet were encased in sabatons to provide complete protection. The pauldrons were etched with three lions to give the suit a personal touch. Gottfried was thankful his armour, at least, had escaped unscathed from the debacle of Caravaggio. As it was warm and no enemy was near, his sallet was dangling from his saddle.

The column journeyed on along the dirt road, skirting villages filled with yellow stone buildings with tiled roofs and hale and hearty commoners. They paid the mounted men-at-arms equipped with lances scant attention, indicating this part of Venetian-controlled territory in Lombardy was free of bandits and under the rule of law. Fields, pastures, canals and irrigation ditches were all well-maintained, and all bridges were in good order. He wondered how the landscape would change once Milan assumed control of what was now in effect a land without an army to defend it. If the leaders of the curiously named Golden Ambrosian Republic had any sense, they would ensure there was a seamless transition of power to guarantee the continued prosperity of this part of Lombardy.

Gottfried was distracted from his musings by the appearance of a ragged band of what appeared to be women and young girls on foot, escorted by horsemen. But not any horsemen. The riders were dressed in baggy white leggings, long blue coats and white turbans wrapped around red caps. They looked like something out of a travelling circus. The duke's deputy pointed at them.

'Slave traders, your grace.'

Gottfried saw the whips being held by some of the exotic riders, along with the carts in front of the captives.

'Stand ready!' he called to his men, spurring his horse forward.

Two of the slavers at the rear of the column turned their horses to block the road, which was nothing more than a narrow dirt track. Gottfried pulled up his horse and pointed at the captives trudging along with heads bowed.

'What is going on here?'

The pair of olive-skinned riders looked at each other in confusion and swapped words in a language that was unknown to Gottfried. Their eyes opened wide when the duke's deputy and fifty heavily armed men-at-arms appeared behind their lord. The slavers began babbling to each other in alarm.

'Stand aside,' commanded the duke, slowly extracting his sword from its scabbard.

The two slave traders were now silent, staring with alarm at the duke and his soldiers. They began babbling again when a third rider appeared, bringing his white horse to a halt and flashing

a set of white teeth at Gottfried. He had a narrow face and full brown beard, and like his men he wore a white turban.

‘Greetings, *effendi*,’ he said in Italian to Gottfried. ‘I am Abdul Hamid, a merchant in the service of the Lord of Rimini.’

‘I am Duke Gottfried of Swabia, currently in the service of the Doge of Venice. What sort of service do you perform?’ asked Gottfried, already knowing the answer.

Hamid turned in the saddle and made a sweeping gesture with his arm.

‘I am taking these captives to Venice to sell in the slave market, *effendi*.’

Gottfried nudged his horse forward.

‘Tell your men to move aside,’ he hissed.

Hamid spoke a few words to the pair who had blocked the road, the two turning their mounts to allow the duke to pass. He walked his horse forward, Hamid falling in beside him and every slaver now focused on the handsome, clean-shaven German lord, the sun reflecting of his combed, black hair. The carts had stopped, as had the captives, who lifted their heads and looked at Gottfried with pitiful expressions. They were all young, most around fourteen or fifteen, chains around their ankles and ropes on their wrists attached to the back of the carts. Their clothes were dirty and torn and their ankles were bloody from the chafing of the fetters. Gottfried felt anger rise in him at their treatment at the hands of infidels.

‘Where do you come from?’ he asked the leader of the slavers.

‘Anatolia, *effendi*, a land to the east of Venice.’

‘A land of infidels.’

Hamid continued to smile.

‘A land of Ottoman followers of the Prophet, lord.’

Gottfried halted his horse beside an older captive, a woman with a leather strap covering her mouth and curly brown hair. Her clothes indicated a degree of wealth, notwithstanding being dirty and torn. Her brown eyes pleaded with Gottfried to be released. The duke sheathed his sword and pointed at her.

‘Why is she gagged?’

Hamid’s smile disappeared.

‘She is a troublemaker, *effendi*, who has a poisonous tongue and was a traitor to the Lord of Rimini.’

Gottfried had only just left the company of Sigismondo Malatesta, the Italian noble who had an inflated view of his own military abilities and who treated those of equal social rank as his

inferiors. Gottfried had no liking or respect for the man who revelled in the ridiculous name, 'Wolf of Rimini'.

'I would hear her speak,' said Gottfried.

'I would advise against that, *effendi*. She is a sorceress who may bewitch you.'

Gottfried beckoned his deputy to ride forward.

'Troublemaker, traitor and now a witch? There appears to be no end to her skills,' remarked Gottfried.

His deputy rode up and saluted. Gottfried pointed at the gagged captive.

'Remove her gag,' said the duke.

'I must protest,' wailed Hamid. 'This woman is my property until she is sold in Venice.'

Gottfried rounded on him.

'You would do well to keep your mouth shut, infidel. As a Christian knight, it appals me you are given free rein to kidnap Christian women and children, to sell as slaves.'

Hamid pulled a folded piece of paper from one of his saddlebags and held it out to Gottfried.

'I have permission from the Venetian authorities to trade in their territories, *effendi*.'

Gottfried ignored him as his deputy unbuckled the leather strap around the woman's mouth.

'My name is Rosina Perkini, lord,' she told Gottfried. 'I was illegally seized in Rimini, having been found guilty of no crimes.'

'Silence, whore,' spat Hamid.

'A whore as well,' remarked Gottfried. 'Your crimes increase by the minute, lady.'

'She is no lady,' hissed Hamid.

'And you will be silent,' roared Gottfried.

His men-at-arms lowered their lances and the slavers looked at each other nervously. Gottfried peered down at Rosina Perkini.

'You come from Rimini?'

'Yes, lord.'

Gottfried glanced at the other female captives.

'And those?'

'Taken from their homes during a raid, during which their parents and grandparents were slaughtered, lord.'

Gottfried's expression hardened. He had no idea if she was telling the truth, but he had taken an instant dislike to Abdul Hamid, so he was inclined to give her the benefit of the doubt.

‘Cut her free and remove those shackles from her ankles. And after that, release the other captives,’ he instructed his deputy.

‘You cannot do that, *effendi*,’ protested Hamid, ‘I have a legal right to—’

In a blur Gottfried whipped the dagger with its thin blade from its sheath with his left hand and plunged it into the neck of the Ottoman slave trader. The needle-like point easily penetrated his flesh to inflict a fatal blow.

‘Kill them all,’ shouted the duke.

His men needed no second prompting, digging their spurs into their horses and charging the slavers. The Ottomans scattered into the vineyards on either side of the road, pursued by the duke’s men-at-arms. Hamid, blood gushing from his neck, toppled from his saddle to land at the feet of Rosina Perkin. She spat on his corpse.

‘God will thank you, lord.’

The German squires had ridden forward to protect their duke. The other captives were screaming and weeping after the men-at-arms thundered by them in pursuit of the slavers.

‘Get the smiths to free the prisoners of their shackles,’ Gottfried told his deputy.

Like all great lords, Gottfried was accompanied by a shadow army of cooks, servants, smiths, farriers, priests and musicians to keep the duke in the style he was accustomed to when on campaign.

‘We will camp here so we may return these young girls to their homes.’

‘They have no homes to return to thanks to him,’ said Rosina, curling her lip at the dead Hamid.

‘Then what do you suggest?’ asked Gottfried, not really interested in the welfare of commoners now he had done his Christian duty in freeing them.

Rosina rubbed her wrists after the rope around them had been cut.

‘Where are you travelling to, lord?’

‘Venice.’

Her eyes lit up.

‘Then I would ask you to allow me and the girls to travel with you. The Doge knows me, and I am sure he will show these girls Christian mercy when I plead their case with him.’

Gottfried raised an eyebrow.

‘You know the Doge?’

‘I was a guest in his palace last year, lord.’

He did not enquire as to how a guest of one of the most powerful men in Christendom had been reduced to the position of being sold into slavery. Perhaps she was a liar and witch,

though he had to admit there was something about her that was intriguing. And she became useful when her shackles had been removed, comforting the girls and informing them they would not be sold into slavery but instead would receive kindness and charity from the king of Venice. Gottfried doubted that, but, like Sigismondo Malatesta, he had underestimated the tenacity and survival instincts of Rosina Perkini.

The slavers were all hunted down and killed, their carts used to transport the hapless girls to Venice. They sat huddled together with heads down, rubbing red-raw ankles and sore wrists. But at least they were alive and being fed decent food, which restored some colour to their cheeks. Gottfried had wanted to drop them off at the nearest nunnery but Rosina persuaded him to allow them to accompany him to Venice so the Doge might see the cruelty of Sigismondo Malatesta for himself. After she had washed, changed her clothes and eaten a hearty meal, he allowed her to ride beside him on the road east. Her dress was beyond saving and so she donned a shirt, doublet and hose, and rode like a man, which the duke found unusual but not dislikeable. In truth, agreeable female company was a welcome relief after the defeat at Caravaggio.

He had to admit Rosina Perkini was pleasant company and an individual obviously used to mixing with the cream of society. She was intelligent but not too forward, listening to Gottfried as he waxed lyrical about the world and its failings.

‘I have been in Italy for two years now and have been saddened by what I have seen.’

‘In what way, lord?’

‘There are too many Jews and infidels in this land, Mistress Perkini. There are no Jews or Ottomans in Lindau, which means the church and the nobility are not corrupted, unlike in Italy.’

He did not mention he had consigned all the Jews in Lindau to the stake as a convenient way of erasing the considerable debts he owed to his city’s Jewish residents. Indeed, the proceeds of selling their property and seizing their gold and jewels had allowed him to raise an army to campaign in Italy.

‘You believe the church to be corrupt, lord?’

‘Earlier in the year, I attended a ceremony in Rome, in the Basilica of Saint Mary Major itself, which saddened me greatly. I saw with my own eyes the Pope induct a low-born Swiss thief and murderer into the Order of the Golden Spur.’

Rosina thought of the handsome Swiss soldier who had entertained her in Rome in the summer.

‘I was at the ceremony, lord,’ she smiled. ‘The Swiss individual in question had saved the life of His Holiness, or so I was informed.’

‘There is always a cardinal available to make Pope,’ said Gottfried scathingly. ‘It was a grave error of judgement to induct a commoner into the Order of the Golden Spur, which is supposed to be an award reserved for those who have displayed faith and devotion and are graced with the merits of probity and virtue. It is an outrage.’

He spat out the last sentence with venom. Rosina recognised jealousy when she saw it but said nothing. The duke turned in the saddle to look at her, examining her round, attractive face.

‘You were at the ceremony?’

She decided to be honest with him. It was the least she could do after he had rescued her from a life of being endlessly humped by Ottomans in some stinking, disease-ridden brothel far from Italy.

‘I was the mistress of Sigismondo Malatesta, lord, which is why the Doge will know me when we arrive in Venice.’

He raised an eyebrow.

‘And how is it that you were reduced to being a slave of infidels?’

‘Sigismondo Malatesta is a violent, volatile individual, lord,’ she replied. ‘I do not claim to be a pious individual, or indeed one who has led a virtuous life. Some might say I deserved my fate, but my prayers were answered when you and your brave soldiers appeared. That confirmed to me that God did not believe I deserved further punishment after being the prisoner of the Lord of Rimini.’

A tear ran from her eye down her cheek. Gottfried pulled a clean cloth from the top of one of his steel mittens and offered it to her.

‘Thank you, lord.’

They rode on in silence for a while, Gottfried deep in thought. The countryside around the column of riders and wagons was alive with activity. Shepherds were tending flocks, fields were being ploughed for the planting of the winter crops of wheat and rye, and grapes were being harvested.

‘He wants to be Venice’s captain-general,’ announced Rosina out of the blue. ‘The Lord of Rimini, I mean.’

A sardonic smile crept over Gottfried’s face.

‘Allow me to bring you up to date, mistress. While you were a guest of the Ottomans, the Venetian army was defeated at a place called Caravaggio. I fought in the battle, as did the Lord of Rimini. According to the current Venetian captain-general, Micheletto Attendolo, Sigismondo Malatesta did not press his attack with vigour, thus losing us the battle. I am sure his report to

the Doge will state as much. That being the case, it seems highly unlikely the Lord of Rimini will be made Venice's new captain-general.'

'What of the current one, lord?'

'Failure of such magnitude tends to end military careers,' he told her. 'I fear the *Terraferma* will shrink considerably after the defeat at Caravaggio.'

'*Terraferma*?'

'The name of the territory on the mainland controlled by Venice,' he informed her.

He made a great sweep with his arm.

'All that you see is the *Terraferma*. It provides the food to feed Venice and the soldiers who fight in the republic's army. Venice also extracts taxes from the cities and towns in the *Terraferma*. You will therefore appreciate how calamitous the recent defeat will be when all this is lost to the Golden Ambrosian Republic.'

'What is that, lord?'

He found her ignorance about Italian politics endearing. Then again, what would a mistress of a lord know of such things?

'Until recently, Milan was ruled by a duke named Filippo Maria Visconti. When he died without a male heir, the nobles of Milan decided to declare a republic and share power among themselves, thus was the Golden Ambrosian Republic born.'

Rosina Perkin may not have heard of the Ambrosian Republic but she was not ignorant of the man who had ruled Milan, who had an illegitimate daughter by the name of Bianca Maria who had married Francesco Sforza. Sforza's daughter, Polissena, had married the Wolf of Rimini, who had come to loathe his wife and Sforza on account of a promise made by Francesco to gift Sigismondo the city of Pesaro. Thus had begun a private war between the two that had turned into a real war.

'Soon this land will be ruled by Milan,' stated Gottfried.

'Alas for Venice,' sighed Rosina, smiling at the thought that Sforza had triumphed over Sigismondo.