

Prologue

Northern Italy, autumn 1446

Two large groups of horsemen in armour and armed with lances were trotting towards a much smaller army, around them the countryside of Lombardy bathed in glorious autumn sunlight. On the smaller force's left flank was the slow-moving River Po, the wide waterway resembling a muddy coloured snake slithering its way west to east from the Alps to the Adriatic. Either side of the river were great swathes of woodland, open fields, uncultivated land, vineyards and orchards. The smaller army's right flank was open, inviting the large force, now around four hundred paces distant, to sweep around the vulnerable right wing, surround the smaller army and push it into the brown waters of the Po. It would be an easy victory against a numerically inferior force that had been foolish in the extreme to have left the safety of the small Venetian town of Casalmaggiore, situated only seventy miles from Milan.

The war against the Duke of Milan had been going well for the republic and after a successful campaigning season in the lush terrain of Lombardy, Venice's armies had settled into the towns and cities that would be their winter quarters. Venice's captain-general, Micheletto Attendolo, had left the city of Brescia, the headquarters of the army in Lombardy, to return to Venice to report personally to the Doge and the Council of Ten on what had been a very successful campaign against the forces of Milan. He had left strict instructions that there should be no major offensive moves against the Duchy of Milan for the remainder of the year.

The clean-shaven man with long black hair sitting on a white horse stared at the two groups ahead, which were still marshalling into position prior to launching a charge. Among the forest of lances were many banners fluttering in the breeze, displaying the coat of arms of the Duke of Milan – a quartered design. In the top right-hand corner was a blue snake devouring a child on a white background, the design repeated in the bottom left-hand corner. In the top left-hand and bottom right-hand corners was the black imperial eagle on a yellow background, Milan being a dukedom in the Holy Roman Empire. The handsome man began rapping his fingers on the top of his helmet, which was resting on the pommel of his saddle. He pointed at the banners.

'When I was on good terms with the barrel of fat who rules Milan, he bored me senseless with tales of how his family, the Viscontis, adopted the insignia of a snake eating a child.'

He spun in the saddle to look at the commander of his bodyguard.

'Do you know the story?'

'No, lord.'

‘Then allow me to bore you a little. Ottone Visconti, the founder of the family, supposedly killed a Saracen while on crusade and stole his coat of arms. I like that story because the Visconti family and their descendants are nothing more than thieves and upstarts.’

‘Do you think the Duke of Milan is here, lord?’

His commander, Sigismondo Malatesta, Lord of Rimini, laughed.

‘The duke here? On a horse? There is no horse in the world capable of carrying the bulk of that oaf. He prefers to sit in the Red Fortress in Milan and eat small children, or so I have heard. Your men are ready?’

‘Ready, lord.’

His men were a hundred mounted men-at-arms in plate armour and full-face helmets and the same number of mounted squires more lightly armed deployed behind them. Sigismondo called his bodyguard ‘Ravens’ because they wore black armour.

Plate armour was called ‘white armour’ because of its shine. Made up of numerous steel plates of varying sizes that were attached to one another with straps, buckles and hinges, it was often burnished to such an extent that it positively shone in bright conditions. Black armour was very different. An armourer heated a steel plate until it was on the verge of glowing. The piece was then quickly submerged in heated olive oil. The piece was removed from the oil and then heated again to burn off all the remaining wet oil and bake on the black oil residue. The steel plate was quenched again in oil and the process repeated until a wholly black finish was acquired. The resulting blackened armour was rust resistant and lasted a very long time. Black armour also gave its wearer a very distinct appearance on the battlefield.

The Milanese horsemen had finished deploying into several long ranks and began to trot forward, facing them was a thin line of five hundred mounted men-at-arms in plate armour and the same number of light horsemen – their squires – behind them. All the Venetian horsemen were armed with lances but if they attempted to charge the mass of Milanese soldiers they would be easily defeated. The enemy would then be free to attack Sigismondo’s Ravens and their squires. It was an uneven contest and would be over very quickly. To make matters worse for the Venetians, the terrain was flat and unimpeded by any ditches or canals – ideal for horsemen.

Sigismondo nodded at the commander of his bodyguard and put on his helmet. Seconds later a signaller blew his trumpet, which was reciprocated by trumpeters among the men-at-arms. The horsemen facing the Milanese sharply turned their horses and retreated from the foe, the Ravens doing likewise, breaking into a canter and heading towards a narrow gap between the river and a thick wood of chestnut trees. The gap would slow the pursuing Milanese as the horsemen would be funnelled through the restricted space, although it would not stop them. But

it was the best place for the men of Rimini to turn and make a stand, to give them at least a chance of reaching Casalmaggiore, some five miles to the east.

Twelve hundred horsemen were being chased by up to three times that number of Milanese, all professional horsemen who slowed to reorder their ranks when approaching the gap, the horsemen of Rimini also slowing prior to wheeling about to present an unbroken line across the gap, the Ravens and their commander in the centre of the line.

The Milanese dressed their lines in preparation for their charge, their frontage now reduced by the expanse of chestnut trees on their left flank from where came a rapid succession of cracks as seven hundred crossbowmen shot their weapons into the horsemen. They directed their bolts not at the men-at-arms encased in plate armour but at their vulnerable horses, which wore no armour. Using so-called goat's foot levers – a steel lever with a pair of hooks that drew back the bowstring while two rear legs hooked over two steel pegs that jutted out from the crossbow's wooden stock – that allowed a man to pull back a weapon with a three-hundred-and-fifty-pound draw weight with ease, the crossbowmen unleashed a blizzard of bolts against the Milanese. Using the shelter of the trees, the crossbowmen were shooting up to three bolts a minute at the enemy horsemen – over two thousand iron-tipped missiles that scythed down dozens of horses.

The impact was immediate: horses collapsing in pain, many killed outright, throwing their riders or pinning them beneath prostrate animals. The unceasing volleys of crossbow bolts also had the effect of creating a tidemark of dead and dying horseflesh that impeded any attempt to organise a charge against the crossbowmen at the wood's edge. Instead, like ripple in a pond after a stone had been tossed into it, panic spread among the Milanese horsemen. Moments before they were preparing to charge and shatter a numerically inferior force of Venetian horsemen that had ridden too far into Milanese territory. Now their left flank was being cut to pieces at the hands of missile troops in the trees. And then the Venetian horsemen charged.

Many Milanese lancers were instinctively trying to manoeuvre away from the trees, turning their horses to the right to place as much distance between themselves and the crossbowmen as possible. But this created a press of horsemen in the centre of the line that disorganised the ranks formed up to charge the Venetians.

Sigismondo heard the succession of cracks, which turned into a demented tapping sound and through the vision slit of his helmet saw enemy banners on the right go down. He smiled, lowered his lance and dug his spurs into his stallion. The beast trotted forward, followed by fifteen hundred others, the earth trembling as the Lord of Rimini's horsemen broke into a canter, and then a gallop. Ahead several banners began moving towards the Venetians in a

counter-charge, but the bulk were stationary, having been discomfited and thrown into disarray by the bolts of the crossbowmen. Suddenly, the odds were better than even, and a ripple of confidence and sense of victory coursed through the Venetian ranks.

The Venetian charge was disciplined: horsemen riding knee-to-knee, lances tucked underarm to present a solid wall of armour and steel-tipped weapons. And the frenzied tapping of hundreds of crossbows being shot at the Milanese could still be heard above the rumble of hundreds of charging horsemen in plate armour.

The charge of the Milanese horsemen was disorganised and fragmented, isolated groups charging forward to meet the Venetian riders rather than sit and wait to be skewered. There was a series of loud cracks as Milanese steel lance points struck plate armour, and then a clattering sound as Venetian lances toppled men from saddles and smashed into the enemy. Sigismondo ducked when a lance was directed at his head, passing the rider in the front rank and driving his own lance into the shoulder of a man behind, the force knocking the man-at-arms from his saddle. He released the lance, gripped the handle of the poleaxe that hung from his saddle and swung it at the helmet of a third rider whose lance was still in the vertical position. Plate armour provided an excellent defence against many weapon types, but a horseman's poleaxe was specifically designed to penetrate any weak spots. An all-metal instrument, it comprised a heavily curved steel blade and a long back spike. In a single movement Rimini's lord of war swung the axe sideways to strike the rider's helmet, the spike penetrating the metal to enter the man's skull. He dropped his lance and slumped in the saddle, lifeless.

All the Ravens and the Venetian men-at-arms were armed with such weapons, their swords being reserved for cutting down fleeing foot soldiers. Still being shot at by hundreds of crossbowmen and now attacked frontally by the Venetians, the Milanese horsemen, their morale shattered, began to look for a way to escape the carnage. Their left flank had been shattered and their front ranks were being cut to pieces. But the road to the west, the road they had ridden down earlier when their scouts had brought news that an enemy force had left the town of Casalmaggiore, still lay open. And so groups began to wheel about and ride back along the dirt road they had ridden down. To find it lined with the enemy.

Seven hundred crossbowmen had advanced from the trees to form a line at right angles to the retreating horsemen, raking the riders with crossbow bolts as they galloped away from the scene of carnage. Once more they shot at the horses to kill or wound the beasts, the riders being thrown to the ground or being pinned beneath the carcasses of their slain mounts. The crossbowmen reaped another cruel harvest with their weapons, scores of horses being killed or wounded. That still left hundreds of now dismounted men-at-arms on the battlefield, many

staggering from being winded or stunned after being thrown from the saddle. They began to wander in a westerly direction but were intercepted by a new threat to emerge from the trees – sword and buckler men.

They could fight as foot soldiers or as light horsemen, being equipped with open-faced helmets and simple back and breast plates. They all carried a steel buckler some fifteen inches in diameter with a rounded, protruding centre that could deflect enemy strikes. Light and portable, it could also be used offensively. The sword carried by these soldiers was a straight, double-edged weapon with a single-handed hilt and a blade nearly two feet in length. A light, versatile weapon used for cutting and thrusting, parties of sword and buckler men now descended on the dismounted, disorientated men-at-arms like hungry wolves. Groups of them surrounded individuals, overpowered them and killed them.

The Milanese army had been routed, the charge of Sigismondo's horsemen having not only shattered the front ranks of the enemy's horsemen, but also causing many riders on the Milanese right flank to beat a speedy retreat in a southerly direction. Straight into the muddy waters of the Po. The river current was slow, but the waterway was still deep and for men wearing plate armour to attempt to cross over two hundred yards of water clutching the saddle of a horse was a hazardous venture. The crossing was risky enough, but the quick-thinking deputy of Sigismondo deployed crossbowmen and a hundred hand gunners along the bank to shoot at the dozens of fleeing and slow-moving targets. Meanwhile, the rest of the crossbowmen and sword and buckler soldiers finished off the dismounted Milanese men-at-arms.

The Lord of Rimini and the Ravens stayed on the battlefield as the rest of the victorious mounted men-at-arms and the light horsemen were despatched west to hunt down and kill any fleeing Milanese riders, capture the enemy camp and seize anything of value. Sigismondo trotted over to the riverbank as the sword and buckler men trawled the battlefield looking for any wounded Milanese, which they killed instantly before beginning to strip the dead of armour and weapons. Sigismondo halted his horse at the end of the line of hand gunners still shooting at targets in the river. Beyond them, dozens of crossbowmen were unleashing volley after volley at the men-at-arms clinging to swimming horses, turning the brown water red as bolts struck horses and men.

Sigismondo removed his helmet and looked down at the man holding a sword and buckler and wearing a mischievous grin.

'Find your targets, you bastards. Don't let them escape.'

A hand gun was a simple weapon comprising a long metal barrel and wooden stock that fired a lead ball. It was fired by applying a smouldering match to a hole drilled in the top of the

rear of the barrel, which ignited powder in the barrel and fired the ball. Although slow to reload compared to bows and crossbows, no self-respecting Italian commander would take the field without a complement of hand gunners. The loud crack announcing the firing of a hand gun was accompanied by prodigious quantities of white smoke, which fortunately the breeze dissipated.

‘This would appear to be an extravagant waste of ammunition, Vito.’

Vito Solari turned away from the line of hand gunners he had been cursing to peer up at his commander, a broad grin on his face.

‘I’ll let the men vent their fury for a while longer, lord. There should be plenty of powder and ammunition in the enemy camp to replenish our stocks. My congratulations on your victory, by the way. This should please their lordships in Venice.’

Sigismondo showed a thin smile when the helmet of a Milanese soldier in the river was knocked off his head by what he assumed was a lead shot, the soldier gently drifting away from his horse and floating face-down in the water.

‘Will you be sending the spoils of victory to Venice as a present for the republic?’

Sigismondo’s smile vanished.

‘I will be sending the captured banners back to Venice, that is all. Everything else is to be taken back to Casalmaggiore, from where it will be sent on to Rimini.’

‘You could always sell the captured weapons and armour to Venice. After all, the republic has more money than it knows what to do with.’

Sigismondo rolled his eyes and frowned at his deputy, a tall man as thin as a lance with a round face decorated with stubble, pale-grey eyes and hair as black as night. He wore a simple cuirass and back plate and open-faced helmet, a buckler dangling from his belt and a sword in his right hand. The only thing that differentiated him from the rest of the men was an expensive pair of thigh-length leather boots.

‘Your summary of the commercial power of the Republic of Venice is most succinct, Vito. However, even *it* will not purchase plunder taken in its service. It will demand what we have captured here today as a matter of right. Stop their shooting, the crossbowmen, too.’

Vito turned to a signaller behind him and gave the order. The man blew his instrument and the hand gunners ceased their shooting, followed by the crossbowmen. On the other side of the river a few horses were emerging from the water with riders on their backs; others emerged with empty saddles. The hand gunners and crossbowmen whistled and jeered at the pathetic remnants of the Milanese army.

‘No sign of your father-in-law, lord,’ remarked Vito.

Sigismondo's expression hardened. His father-in-law was Francesco Sforza, the commander of Milan's armies, once a friend and ally, but now a mortal enemy. Sigismondo had not entered the marriage to Sforza's daughter Polissena with any great enthusiasm. He found the woman to be plain, pious and boring. But her father had promised him that should he marry his daughter, Sforza would give him the city of Pesaro, a wealthy, populous place on the coast south of Rimini. But Sforza had reneged on the deal and Sigismondo was saddled with a wife he neither loved nor cared for, and so he had offered his sword to the Republic of Venice for no other reason than to fight and hopefully kill Francesco Sforza.

'More's the pity,' sneered Rimini's master.

Vito Solari pointed at the wood where he and a thousand men had hidden before springing their surprise on the Milanese.

'I doubt he would have fallen or such an obvious trick.'

Sigismondo leaned forward in the saddle.

'Trick? I think you mean my meticulous tactical planning of the battle that has just defeated Milan's main army.'

Vito coughed up some phlegm and spat it on the ground.

'Truth be told, lord, I never thought it would work. Any fool could see it would be folly to ride into a narrow gap between a wood and the river, especially the enemy not having scouted the trees first.'

'You are forgetting one thing, Vito. Honour. After I had offered them battle, there was no way the enemy would have retreated in the face of a numerically inferior foe without having engaged them first. The shame would have been intolerable. As you have no honour, I would not expect you to understand.'

'Yes, lord.'

Sigismondo looked to the west, towards the vineyards, orchards and fields of the Duchy of Milan.

'The harvest will have been gathered in by now. In the morning we will divide into small raiding parties and visit the villages of the enemy. We will burn their granaries and barns and carry off their livestock. Any who resist are to be killed on the spot. Let's see if we can provoke my father-in-law into leaving his hiding place.'