

Chapter 1

Leon Muller was now the most powerful man in the kingdom of Wallachia. He commanded a professional, well-equipped army, and had inflicted defeats on King Vladislav who was still the official ruler of Wallachia, which had weakened the Ottoman vassal, perhaps fatally. His employer, Prince Vlad Dracula was, in theory, the man who issued his orders, but the young prince had nearly lost his life near the Serbian town of Krusevac the year before and was indebted to Leon for coming to his rescue. Leon had also saved John Hunyadi, the Hungarian regent, and the ridiculous Serb despot, Durad Brankovic. As a result of Leon's efforts Vlad Dracula was on the cusp of becoming King of Wallachia, but the prince had lost half his bodyguard outside Krusevac and suffered substantial casualties at the Battle of the River Olt the year before. Leon had masterminded this great victory over King Vladislav but whereas his own men had suffered few casualties, thousands of the followers of the king and prince had perished at the river, including many boyars, the backbone of Wallachian society. The result was that Leon Muller now dictated what happened in Wallachia, a state of affairs he found very agreeable.

Created Boyar of Craiova by a grateful Prince Vlad, Leon now ruled a strip of land from the River Danube in the south to the mighty Carpathian Mountains in the north. That land was filled with villages, fields, vineyards, orchards and meadows, all of which he owned. His lands produced wheat, millet, oats, barley, vegetables, wine and fruit in abundance. But Wallachia's greatest wealth came from its livestock and the related products. Cows, pigs and sheep produced fleeces, meat, hides and cheese, all of which were exported to either Ottoman lands, or Hungary, in significant quantities. Wallachia was also rich in beehives, the honey from which was also sent abroad. Leon was a king in all but name, but he shared his domain with an organisation that he wished to retain as an ally to ensure the smooth running of his affairs.

'Where are we going?'

Ulrich was in a testy mood, and like everyone else, the big man was sweating profusely in the spring heat. Winter snows had disappeared, and the land was no longer white but yellow and pink, as meadows filled with daffodils and peonies. Days were lengthening and mostly sunny, with the occasional downpour. The column of soldiers and carts pulled by *panje* ponies was making its way north along the western bank of the River Olt, the waterway filled with spring meltwater.

'We are going to Cozia Monastery,' Leon told him, sweat running down his own face despite the sallet dangling from his belt.

‘If you wanted to pray, there are plenty of churches in Craiova,’ grumbled Ulrich, the halberd resting on his powerful shoulders looking like a child’s toy.

‘We are not going to pray but to settle a dispute,’ said Leon.

‘What dispute?’ enquired Wilhelm marching alongside them.

‘A number of labourers employed by the monastery absconded to work in Tobar’s salt mine,’ explained Leon. ‘The head of the monastery wrote to Bishop Cookianus complaining that I was stealing his workers. So I am visiting him to resolve the issue.’

‘Why don’t you just ignore the fat bishop?’ queried Rudy on Leon’s other side.

‘Everyone else does.’ Wilhelm grinned.

Bishop Cookianus, the corpulent Orthodox prelate of Craiova, was a duplicitous schemer, but he was easy to flatter and bribe with monetary donations to his church, many of which funded his lavish lifestyle. But the bribes ensured Cookianus did not foment trouble, which meant that his priests throughout Oltenia Province, the area Leon ruled, promoted a message of loyalty to the region’s boyar. The rural population of Oltenia was largely Catholic, but they were more than happy with the new boyar who had recruited their sons into his army and paid them regular wages for their services, money which flowed back to rural communities.

‘I could ignore the complaint,’ admitted Leon, ‘but to do so would lead to resentment, which might lead to seditious sentiments among the Orthodox clergy. Something I wish to avoid. If this land is a happy one, then we can go to war knowing there will be no rebellion in our absence.’

‘You don’t think a hundred heavily armed soldiers accompanying you will intimidate the head monk at this monastery?’ asked Wilhelm.

‘A show of force does no harm,’ replied Leon. ‘It reminds the locals who is in charge.’

The truth, which he did not reveal, was that he grasped any opportunity to march alongside his oldest friends. Wilhelm was now a commander in his own right and Ulrich and Rudy were senior captains in the Dragons, the force of pikemen, halberdiers and crossbowmen recruited from Wallachian peasants after Leon had arrived at Craiova. Trained in Swiss tactics and encased in plate armour and sallets, they had been blooded in a winter raid on a trading post and had proved their worth alongside the Veterans and Wolves on the battlefield of Krusevac. Now they were an integral part of Leon Muller’s army and would soon be instrumental in toppling King Vladislav. But until then, they trained, undertook arduous route marches and were often despatched as companies to assist peasants in clearing meadows and planting crops. And now, two companies were marching north along the Olt because Leon wished to be in the

company of his friends once more. The monastery was fifty miles from Craiova, which meant he would spend a week in the company of his comrades.

‘When do we march against Vladislav?’ asked Wilhelm.

‘At the beginning of autumn. The heat of summer will have abated and there will still be time to inflict a defeat on Vladislav, after which we will lay siege to his capital,’ replied Leon.

Ulrich was surprised. ‘A winter siege? That’s the quickest way to rot a besieging army.’

‘We will not be besieging Targoviste with snow on the ground,’ Leon assured him. ‘If we defeat Vladislav in battle, he will have no more troops left to defend his kingdom, even with his Moldovan allies.’

‘What if he refuses battle?’ asked Rudy.

‘Then we will march straight to Targoviste and besiege it.’

‘What does the valiant Prince Vlad think of your plan?’ enquired Wilhelm.

‘He endorses it fully.’ Leon smiled. ‘Or at least he will when I inform him of the plan.’

‘He is a fool,’ said Ulrich derisively. ‘If it had not been for us, his bones would be lying in Serbia by now.’

‘What about the Ottomans?’ said Rudy. ‘The sultan might decide to cross the Danube and invade Wallachia, which will wreck all your plans.’

‘The sultan will not invade Wallachia, my friend,’ Leon assured him. ‘He does not have to. If he conquers Hungary, then Wallachia will fall into his lap like a ripe apple.’

‘Where will that leave us?’ asked Ulrich.

‘Looking for a new home,’ replied Leon.

As in the rest of the Christian world, all land was owned by either kings, nobles or the church, whether it was Catholic or Orthodox. And regardless of who owned the land, those who worked it were peasants or slaves. In Wallachia, peasants were called serfs although the differences between them and the slaves were minor. There were many monasteries scattered throughout Wallachia and they were not only places of worship and sanctuary, but also flourishing businesses. Well-tended vineyards around monasteries produced fine wines that were often exported to Hungary, Transylvania, Poland and beyond. Monasteries also owned livestock, orchards and fields to feed the monks and generate funds to maintain monastic buildings.

As they were talking, Dragos, Leon’s Wallachian scout, courier and general dogsbody, drew alongside the front rank of the column of soldiers and carts carrying food and tents.

‘The abbot has agreed to meet with you, lord,’ Dragos said to Leon.

‘That’s very generous of him,’ remarked Wilhelm, ‘considering Leon has a hundred soldiers to back up his demands.’

‘Wilhelm, please,’ said Leon. ‘We are here to reassure the good people of Oltenia that they are protected and safe to lead their lives in peace. We are not Habsburgs, after all.’

‘The abbot says your soldiers must stay outside his monastery, lord,’ added Dragos.

‘He’s got no chance,’ growled Ulrich. ‘For all we know, there might be a party of assassins inside the monastery.’

‘I will take you with me,’ Leon told his friend, ‘and if there are assassins, then I can use you as a big shield while I make my escape.’ He turned to Dragos. ‘What’s he like, this abbot?’

‘Prickly, lord,’ replied Dragos.

Like many rural places of worship, Cozia Monastery was set in beautiful surroundings. At the foot of a tree-covered hill on the west bank of the River Olt, it featured a domed church of alternating stone and brick construction set in the centre of a walled enclosure. Within the monastery walls were workshops, cells where the monks slept, a library, hospital and an orphanage for boys, women being prohibited from entering the monastery. Walls were white-washed and clean and the grounds were neat and tidy.

‘Do you think they will offer us food?’ asked Ulrich as he and Leon paced towards the open gates of the monastery.

‘What day is it?’

Ulrich thought for a moment. ‘Wednesday.’

‘You are out of luck, my friend,’ smiled Leon. ‘In an Orthodox monastery, Wednesdays and Fridays are fast days. Wednesday in remembrance of the betrayal of Christ, and Friday in remembrance of His crucifixion and death.’

‘Mother of Christ,’ boomed Ulrich. ‘Just my luck. Can’t we come back tomorrow when there will be food on the table?’

Meanwhile, Wilhelm had made camp a short distance south of the monastery, the round tents brought from Constantinople arranged inside the carts that ringed the encampment. Sentries stood guard around the carts and at the entrance to the enclosure, a single black banner emblazoned with a red dragon fluttering in the centre of the camp to show the soldiers were in the service of Prince Vlad Dracula.

‘The other days are called Moderation Days when fish, cheese, eggs and yoghurt are allowed, along with red wine.’

‘That sounds better,’ nodded Ulrich. ‘Anyway, I thought monks were supposed to show hospitality to those who show up at their door.’

Leon looked up at his friend. Although he was tall and muscular with supple and straight limbs, Ulrich was taller, broader and more powerful, making his companion seem small in comparison.

‘You are right,’ said Leon. ‘Unfortunately, you don’t look half-starved or in dire need of care. The monks are not fools.’

‘How do you know about monks and fast days?’

‘The Orthodox Church, like its Catholics equivalent, is a powerful institution,’ explained Leon, ‘so I made it my business to find out as much as possible about its hierarchy, customs and organisation. And now we are the rulers in these parts, it is even more important to have the support of the church.’

Ulrich pointed at the stern-looking individual barring the entrance to the monastery.

‘He doesn’t look very supportive.’

Abbot Alexander, like all Orthodox monks, projected a dour, imposing appearance. His height was accentuated by the black hat he wore, his heavy black beard and black habit giving him an air of utmost seriousness. A heavy wooden cross hung around his neck, gold jewellery being anathema to the brotherhood.

‘Thank you for agreeing to meet me.’ Leon smiled.

The abbot did not smile back.

‘I appreciate you coming here in person, lord,’ he said in Greek. ‘The matter is most urgent.’

He was clever, this abbot, mused Leon. He was speaking Greek as a test to see if the new boyar of Oltenia had a degree of learning.

‘I am most eager to resolve your problems as quickly as possible, abbot,’ replied Leon in Greek.

A flicker of a smile showed on Alexander’s long, rather gaunt face.

‘Please follow me,’ he said, turning abruptly and pacing into the compound.

Inside the grounds of the monastery the first words that entered Leon’s mind were ‘ordered’ and ‘calm’. Paths were clean and tidy, there was a soothing quiet and the monks he could see around him continued carrying out essential tasks or moving from one building to another in a determined manner, barely glancing at the two armour-clad individuals walking behind their abbot. Leon and Ulrich had left their halberds and sallets in camp, but they still stuck out like sore thumbs. They were shown to the refectory where, to Ulrich’s delight, a monk served them cheese and freshly cooked bread, washed down with water. Adhering to the strict

rules of the monastery, Abbot Alexander did not eat anything, but allowed himself a wooden cup of water.

'I will come straight to the point, lord,' he said, frowning at Ulrich stuffing cheese into his mouth like he had not eaten in days. 'Our property has been stolen and I desire it is either returned or the monastery be compensated for its loss.'

Ulrich, who understood only a smattering of Greek, continued to eat the food placed on the table at which he, Leon and Alexander sat on benches, the abbot sitting opposite the two friends.

'I will make it my priority,' Leon assured him, taking a sip of water. 'May I enquire what specific property had been stolen from you?'

'Gypsies'

'Gypsies?'

'Roma, to be precise,' said the abbot. 'Encouraged to abscond by a Roma brigand called Tobar who came here and incited the Roma and their families to desert the monastery to work in his salt mine.'

Leon felt himself blushing.

'Ah, I see.'

'I want them back. They are church property and I also want this Tobar punished for his actions.'

Ulrich's ears pricked up when he heard Tobar's name. 'The Roma leader causing trouble, is he?' he said in German.

'He is indeed,' replied the abbot in Ulrich's mother tongue.

Leon felt even more uncomfortable.

'This Tobar had no right to speak to the monastery's slaves without my permission,' stated the abbot, 'much less steal them away.'

'With respect, abbot,' said Leon in German, 'as ruler of this land, I have to tell you I do not tolerate slavery in Oltenia.'

'Quite right,' grunted Ulrich.

'With equal respect, lord,' said Alexander forcefully, 'when this monastery was established by the great Wallachian prince Mircea the Elder seventy years ago, he made it law that the Roma who lived around Cozia were its property in perpetuity. That means forever.'

'I know what it means,' replied Leon. 'I have no knowledge of this Mircea or the rights and privileges he granted this monastery. But the slaves, so-called, will not be returned to you. If they were recruited by Tobar then the menfolk are working in my salt mine north of Craiova.'

‘That is what he told me before he left,’ said the abbot.

This sour-faced old man was a crafty fox, Leon reflected. But he still wished to be placatory rather than confrontational, and he was also aware he was a newcomer to this land and wished to respect its laws. Well, most of them. Ulrich had stopped eating and was looking at Leon, wondering what his reply would be. The big man’s hand went to the hilt of his dagger but Leon shook his head.

‘I make no comment on the privileges granted to this monastery many years ago,’ said Leon. ‘However, out of respect for those privileges and the inconvenience the loss of the Roma has caused you, I will arrange for this monastery to receive a regular gift of salt from the mine to offset any monetary losses you have suffered.’

If Leon was expecting Abbot Alexander to jump up from his bench and embrace him in heartfelt thanks he was to be disappointed. The abbot’s dark eyes went from Leon to Ulrich and then back to the Count of Thrace.

‘I accept your kind offer, lord. My advice would be not to encourage the Roma to depart from the path God has assigned them.’

‘And what path would that be, abbot?’

‘To be servants of the true faith, lord. They are a rootless, lawless people, childlike in many ways, who require firm discipline, leadership and moral guidance to steer them away from banditry and heresy.’

Leon stood.

‘I will speak to my treasurer regarding the delivery of the salt, abbot. I bid you good day.’

Ulrich followed his friend from the refectory into the sunlight, the pair not speaking until they had exited the monastery and were walking back to camp, the fast-flowing waters of the Olt on their left.

‘You should have let me kill him,’ grunted Ulrich. ‘Who does he think he is?’

‘The abbot of a monastery and a disciple of a great faith,’ answered Leon. ‘He and thousands like him are not like us, my friend. They were not raised in the cradle of Swiss freedom. To the abbot, and the bishops, princes and nobles in this part of the world, everyone has their place in the world. And just as they are at the top, the rest, the vast majority, are at the bottom.’

‘Like the Habsburgs look down on the Swiss.’

Leon nodded. ‘Exactly.’

‘Are you really going to send salt to the abbot?’

'I never go back on a promise,' said Leon. 'Besides, it is a cheap bargain. I give him a few sacks of salt, he does not stir up trouble.'

'He doesn't like you,' stated Ulrich. 'He thinks you are a fool for paying the Roma when you can work them for free. I saw it in his eyes.'

'That look you saw? I've seen it a hundred times on the faces of nobles and churchmen.'

'Does it not bother you, even though you yourself are now a noble and have land and titles?'

Leon winked at him.

'No, because when we save their necks when we march to their rescue, as we have done many times, the look of relief and humiliation in their eyes makes them realise who the true masters really are.'

They looked at each other and burst into laughter.

Bad news awaited Leon when he returned to Craiova.

'Pope Nicholas is dead.'

Henri sat in Leon's study in the town's castle and handed his friend the letter that Prince Vlad had sent from Severin, to the west.

'It was addressed to you, but as you weren't here I opened it in my position as governor. I trust the visit to the monastery was a success?'

'The abbot has been placated, so yes, it was a success.'

Leon perused the letter and sighed.

'I liked him.'

'And he liked you, *mon ami*, but his death might be problematic for us.'

'In what way?'

Henri ran a hand through his thick mop of black hair. 'Thanks to the intervention of Pope Nicholas, last year we received weapons, ammunition and armour from German armouries and workshops. A Habsburg Holy Roman Emperor even purchased the spices you captured at Pitesti, which was extraordinary, I have to say. But the new Pope might not be so accommodating when it comes to supplying Leon Muller with military material.'

'The salt mine continues to generate substantial funds,' said Leon.

'Another source of income that might dry up in the near future,' warned Henri. 'I always found it strange that Sultan Mehmet has essentially financed our army by purchasing the salt mined north of this town.'

Leon leaned back in his chair and stared at the intricately carved wooden ceiling. 'I have often thought that myself. Ostensibly it makes no sense, and yet the sultan would not allow Karaja Pasha to purchase our salt without having an ulterior motive. I think the battle at Krusevac last year holds a clue.'

'In what way?'

'The sultan was on the verge of a great victory until our intervention. I think it suits his strategy to keep us here, in Wallachia, fighting for Prince Vlad rather than joining with John Hunyadi.'

'And how is our employer?' asked Henri. 'Not that he has made any contribution to the upkeep of the army. It must be a first. A man who hired an army of mercenaries without paying them a single gold ducat.'

'Prince Vlad needs us more than we need him,' said Leon. 'But in the great battle between Christendom and Islam, he is a pivotal figure. If he takes control of Wallachia, then the sultan loses not only a vassal but also a kingdom, which might interfere with his campaign against Hungary.'

'You are crediting him with being a great military commander, *mon ami*. There are those who say he could not fail at Constantinople leading such a large army against an emperor bereft of an army and navy of his own.'

'He still took a city that had defied its enemies for a thousand years,' replied Leon. 'That alone makes him a member of a select band of generals. If he conquers Hungary, then there will be nothing to stop him advancing into the heart of the empire.'

'Except you and John Hunyadi,' Henri grinned.

The mention of Hungary's warlord was prophetic because the day after, when Leon was playing with his baby daughter Melissa in the castle's nursery, a note arrived for him from Hunyadi himself. The child, now over a year old, was on the verge of taking a few steps and even uttering one or two words, though sadly for Leon 'daddy' was not one of them. Still, she was a healthy, happy child who was well cared-for by the women of the army, a mixture of Swiss, Italian and Greek females. All were in the charge of Inge Aarberg, whose husband Ugo was Leon's second-in-command and castellan of Craiova Castle.

Inge was on her knees holding Melissa and encouraging the child to take a few steps into the arms of her father. Leon, also on his knees, held out his hands.

'Come to Daddy.'

Melissa squealed with delight but danced up and down in Inge's grip rather than step forward.

‘It won’t be long now, Leon,’ smiled Inge, giving the child a kiss on the cheek.

‘I can’t believe how she has grown.’

‘Babies grow fast. How old will your son be now?’

Leon thought for a moment.

‘He will be ten this year, God willing.’

Melissa’s happy expression changed when a Swiss soldier in plate armour and carrying a halberd walked into the nursery and paced up to Leon, towering over the boyar and his daughter, who promptly burst into tears. The soldier snapped to attention, causing Melissa to wail, and held out a sealed letter.

‘This just arrived at the castle gates, Outcast. It is for you.’

Inge scooped up Melissa in her arms and carried her off to another part of the nursery. Leon stood and took the letter, which had a wax seal impressed with a raven. He broke the seal and read the missive.

Later that day, he toyed with the letter at the weekly council meeting, half listening to Ezra as the Jewish treasurer provided a summary of the army’s financial health.

‘The treasury is in rude health, though I note with alarm the commander’s decision to increase the army’s number of soldiers once again.’

‘Which commander?’ asked Wilhelm.

Leon looked up from his papers. ‘What?’

‘I am a commander, as is Commander Aarberg and Commander Hewen,’ said Wilhelm.

‘I was referring to Leon,’ replied Ezra.

‘He is a general now,’ Wilhelm informed him. ‘Or you can call him count or boyar.’

‘Please continue, Ezra,’ pleaded Leon.

‘Well, general,’ continued Ezra, ‘you have authorised an increase in the army’s size, which incurs more costs.’

Ezra was alluding to the establishment of a training company formed to recruit new foot soldiers to replace battle casualties. It currently had two hundred Wallachian serfs undergoing training to replace any losses suffered by the Veterans, Wolves and Dragons.

‘Armies need a continuous supply of new recruits, Ezra,’ Leon told him. ‘We have many villages to provide recruits, a profitable salt mine and a regular income from taxes paid by the same villages and Oltenia’s merchants.’

The previous boyar of Craiova, Nicolae Golescu, had denied himself nothing when it came to furnishing the castle, filling it with marble floor mosaics, fine Italian furniture, marble busts and paintings. The weekly meetings were held in the main hall, each of the attendees lounging in

expensive high-backed wooden chairs with square seats stuffed with velvet cushions. The walls of the main hall were decorated with the banners of the different groups who made up Leon's army: the flags of Bern, Schwyz, the Grey League, the League of the Ten Jurisdictions, the League of God's House, France, Albania and the Red Dragon of Wallachia. There had been much discussion over the inclusion of the banner of the city of Bern because only one individual in the army was from the Swiss city, but as it was Leon Muller, no one raised any objections.

The boyar tossed the letter on the large rectangular table.

'John Hunyadi has invited me to his stronghold.'

'Just you, or is Prince Vlad going as well?' enquired 'Scarface'.

'I do not know,' replied Leon. 'He probably wants to discuss strategy.'

'He will want you to abandon the prince and join him in Hungary,' opined Jean.

'Especially after the mauling he received last year,' added Wilhelm.

Ezra's eyes lit up.

'Perhaps I should come along to negotiate a contract of employment.'

Leon shook his head.

'I will not abandon Prince Vlad, not when ultimate victory is near.'

'Your loyalty to him does you credit, *mon ami*,' said Henri. 'Let us hope it is reciprocated after you have made him King of Wallachia.'

'Why bother going to Hunyadi's palace, then?' asked 'Scarface'.

'I was wondering that,' agreed Peter Hewen.

'No, no, the general must go,' insisted Ezra.

'Why?' asked Wilhelm.

'The Hungarian will be in a very generous mood after Leon saved him last year,' said Ezra gleefully. 'He probably wants to give him a large sum of money in gratitude.'

Skanderbeg, the leader of Leon's growing band of horse archers, tipped his head at the dark-haired Jew.

'Perhaps he should go instead of you, lord. He will return with all the Hunyadi money.'

The others laughed, but Ezra was having none of it.

'You might pour scorn on my efforts to keep the army's accounts in a healthy condition, but without money this army would cease to exist. I find your collective attitude tiresome in the extreme.'

The others made whining noises at him, which infuriated Ezra further. Leon raised a hand.

'Enough. We all fulfil important tasks to allow the army to function both on and off the battlefield. Ezra's contribution is just as valuable as yours, Skanderbeg.'

‘When will you leave?’ asked Henri.

‘Tomorrow,’ replied Leon.

He took Dragos, Skanderbeg and half a dozen of the Albanian’s wild-haired horse archers as an escort, blankets strapped to the backs of saddles and food stuffed in saddlebags. The group trotted from the castle on a bright early morning, riding through a town awakening for a new day. They headed north towards the mighty Carpathian Mountains. The first part of the hundred-mile journey to Hunyadi Castle was along dirt tracks and through prosperous villages. This part of Wallachia in the gently rolling Oltenia Hills had been untouched by war; indeed, it had been untouched by civilisation, the wooden buildings looking like something from a distant past. Men in shaggy hats and linen shirts and trousers stopped their labours and eyed the horsemen warily when they trotted by, geese scattering before the riders and barefoot children squealing in delight as they chased the disturbed animals. The party covered forty miles on the first day but thereafter progress slowed when the horsemen reached the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains. Leon and the others slept in a forest of hornbeam on the first night, waking aching and cold, the evenings distinctly cool despite the approach of summer. Everyone was equipped with thick woollen cloaks with hoods to complement their thick woollen trousers and leather boots. The tops of trees were still wreathed in mist when the group set off north again on the second day along a grassy track between the forest and the raging stream that everyone had used for their ablutions.

Dragos led the group, Leon behind him and Skanderbeg and his horsemen following. All the Albanians were attired in sleeveless tunics, beneath which were coats with extremely long sleeves and tall, broad-brimmed hats. Skanderbeg had given Leon a hat to wear, which he was grateful for as they continued to climb the path and the mist thickened. He pulled his cloak around him. There was no wind but the damp was all-enveloping and then he heard the pitter-patter of rain. The mist did not clear as the rain fell but the trees changed from hornbeam to pine as they continued to climb. Visibility was down to less than ten paces as they entered low-hanging cloud, the rain stopping, but men and horses still riding through cold, damp air.

It seemed like they had been on the trail for hours when they reached the top of the mountain and entered a grassy meadow filled with sheep. Dragos turned in his saddle.

‘Keep to the trail and away from the sheep. Shepherds in this part of the world are very protective of their animals. There are many bears and wolves in this area so they are used to fighting off dangerous animals. And bandits when necessary.’

The sheep scattered away from the riders, who kept to the trail that cut through the centre of the pasture. Leon spotted a figure standing with a large dog and what appeared to be a spear,

but the shepherd did not move and the riders continued on their way, entering another forest of pine. Once more the mist enveloped them, but this time they were descending. It was still cool and wet but at least the rain had stopped. The slow plodding of the horse he was sitting on lulled Leon into a daze and his mind wandered to where it always did when he had the opportunity to daydream. He wondered what Emma Steiner was doing at this moment. He had not seen her in eleven years but he would wager everything he had in the Medici Bank that she was still a rare beauty. He hoped she was happy. He hoped his son was happy and thriving. The son he had never seen. He smiled when he thought of Melissa, the child he had fathered in Constantinople, then felt sad about the fate of her mother.

A sharp crack behind him startled Leon out of his daydream. Dragos in front pulled up his horse and spun in the saddle, sword in hand. Leon likewise drew his blade and turned to see a beaming Skanderbeg.

‘We will eat well tonight,’ he boasted.

He had brought down a large stag that had been watching the group from the trees, a shot that was testament to the archery skills of the commander of Leon’s horse archers. Skanderbeg instructed one of his men to ride into the trees to retrieve the carcass.

‘Good shot,’ said Dragos. ‘And I have an idea that will allow us to sleep indoors tonight.’

‘All ideas to get us out of this damp are welcome,’ Leon told him.

With the dead stag loaded on the back of Skanderbeg’s horse, the party continued its journey. After half an hour Leon and his men rode into a small village of around a score of wooden buildings, a mixture of houses and barns beside a bubbling stream at the edge of a large area of pastureland dotted with haystacks. The buildings were all of wooden construction with shingle roofs.

‘Wait here, lord,’ said Dragos. ‘I will speak with the headman about sleeping in his village tonight.’

Leon, Skanderbeg and his horse archers waited on their horses at the edge of the trees while Dragos rode into the village and dismounted, the seemingly empty settlement suddenly filling with people who gathered around Dragos. Leon saw him shaking the hands of one villager and pointing at the group of stationary horsemen. Moments later he was cantering back to the group with good news.

‘The headman has agreed to us staying in his village tonight in return for the stag we shot earlier.’

‘It is to fill *our* bellies,’ complained Skanderbeg, ‘not theirs.’

Leon weighed up the options.

‘Give him the stag. I would rather sleep in a hut than on the damp ground.’

He and the others were not offered a hut to sleep in but rather a barn where grain and other vegetables were stored. Leon and Dragos were invited to dine with the headman, a sour-faced individual with two daughters and a submissive wife, who entertained them in his home while Skanderbeg and his men ate in the barn. Leon and Dragos, sitting on wooden boards on the floor, were served a thick vegetable stew and, surprisingly, a rather good local red wine. The daughters were delightful company, smiling at Leon as he greedily consumed the stew and the fresh bread provided. Dragos explained to the headman who Leon was and why he was visiting the region. Leon could tell the leader was uninterested in Leon but grateful for the gift of the stag, which was roasted on a large spit in the centre of the settlement, the meat being shared among the villagers. He was even more thankful when Leon reached into the leather pouch fixed to his belt, pulled out a gold ducat and handed it to the headman.

‘For your generosity.’

Dragos translated the words as the headman bit the coin to ensure it was gold, then bowed his head to Leon.

‘Thank you, lord.’

His belly full, Leon thanked his host and got to his feet. But the leader of the settlement jumped up and pointed to the loft in the hut, which filled half the roof and was reached by a ladder. The wine had brightened his disposition and his cheeks glowed red in the light cast by the fire crackling in the stone hearth, a small chimney above it allowing most of the smoke to leave the single room. He grinned at Leon and babbled a few words.

‘He says you can sleep in his home tonight, lord,’ reported Dragos. ‘It is a great honour.’

Leon looked at the drunken man, his shrewish wife and two delightful daughters.

‘Tell him I accept.’

Leon’s decision was greeted with joy by the headman, who embraced Leon, fixed him with his pale eyes and spoke a few words.

‘What did he say?’

‘He said what’s his is yours, lord.’

Like the other villagers, the headman and his family were dressed in typical Wallachian peasant attire. They all wore leather moccasins called *opinci* with calf-length woollen socks called *ciorapi*. The father wore white linen trousers and a long white shirt, over which he wore a sleeveless vest called an *ilic*. The three women all wore a skirt, a *fusta*, a double apron and a shawl covering their heads, a garment called a *mabrama*. Their attire was clean and free of holes, suggesting the village was a thriving settlement. Leon toyed with the idea of giving Dragos his

pouch of money but decided against it. It would be seen as a sign he did not trust the headman and his family. So he said goodnight to Dragos, ascended the ladder to the loft where a straw-filled mattress awaited him. He removed his doublet and boots and smiled when he heard the headman snoring loudly below. The fire was still crackling and warming the hut, which was remarkably well insulated and appeared to be free of mice and lice.

He was gradually drifting into slumber when he heard a creaking sound. His reflexes snapped him out of his relaxed state and he gripped the hilt of his dagger. Someone was ascending the ladder. He crept forward, ready to thrust the point of the dagger into the face of the assassin. The glow of the fire illuminated the interior of the hut and Leon saw a head appear before him, a beautiful face with sparkling eyes. He relaxed when he saw one of the daughters of the headman slowly crawl towards him, putting a finger to her lips. He put his dagger away and smiled at her. She smiled back, stood and let her nightshirt fall to the floor. His loins stirred as she stood naked before him. She fell to her knees, skilfully untied the drawstring on his trousers, pulled them down and then removed his braies. He pulled off his shirt, closed his eyes and groaned with delight as she went to work on his manhood with her tongue. Not wishing to be selfish, he returned the compliment, making her moan with ecstasy. Then they kissed hungrily and she laid on the mattress so he could enter her.

They made love for what seemed like hours, exploring every inch of their bodies, all the time her father snoring his head off below. She gasped and moaned and he groaned with ecstasy when he came inside her, collapsing on the mattress beside her. And, just like he had done all those years ago in the bedroom of Emma Steiner, he fell into a deep sleep.

He awoke to the sound of cockerels crowing and people stirring below. She was gone and Leon was alone. When he had dressed, washed and shared a breakfast of hot porridge with his hosts, while sharing affectionate glances with the woman he had made love to the night before, he went in search of his men. He found them already mounted, waiting for him.

‘Sleep well, lord?’ enquired Dragos.

‘Like a baby.’ Leon smiled, hauling himself into the saddle. ‘I love this land.’

Leon and the others eventually reached Hunyadi County, a region of gorges, spectacular waterfalls, mountains and fertile valleys. The mountains were rich in iron ore, which provided the weapons and armour for the soldiers of the man who ruled Hungary like a king.

‘So this is the lion’s den,’ said Leon, looking around at the wide valley they were riding through.

‘The regent owns over a thousand villages, lord,’ said Dragos.

‘Makes me look like a pauper,’ reflected Leon.

‘It is a great honour to be invited to Hunyadi Castle, lord,’ said Dragos. ‘Only friends and allies of the regent are welcomed.’

‘Do you want me to shoot another stag, lord?’ asked Skanderbeg behind the pair. ‘So we can give it as a present to Hunyadi when we arrive at his castle? It worked with the village headman.’

Leon smiled at the memory of the night he had spent making love to the headman’s daughter.

‘Best not slaughter the regent’s livestock,’ cautioned Dragos. ‘He is the owner of everything you see in this region. Besides, they might object.’

He was pointing at a group of riders in plate armour and carrying lances cantering towards them. A great banner among them showed a four-quartered flag, in two quarters a red lion rampant on a white background, in the other two quarters a black raven with a ring in its beak on a blue background.

‘Our escort to the castle,’ commented Leon. ‘The banner is Hunyadi’s coat of arms.’

He remembered the last time he had seen it: on the battlefield outside Krusevac where it had been surrounded by a host of Ottoman banners. The Hungarian party was led by none other than Vazul Arpad, the knight Leon had unwisely duelled with at the trading post of Pitesti on a bitterly cold winter’s day. Arpad had bested him but the Hungarian had been saved from certain death at the hands of observing Swiss soldiers on Leon’s orders. It had been Arpad who had ridden back to Hungary after the raid on Pitesti with an offer for John Hunyadi to buy back the valuable spices Leon had captured in the raid, spices that belonged to Hunyadi in the first place.

‘Welcome to Hungary, lord,’ said Arpad. ‘I trust your journey was uneventful.’

‘Nothing to report,’ smiled Leon. ‘It is good to see you again, Arpad, and in much happier circumstances and more pleasant surroundings. I trust your lord is well.’

He liked Vazul Arpad, a man of honour who was also brave and straight-talking, unlike many knights and nobles he had encountered in Italy and what had been the Roman Empire before it fell to the sultan. He was glad he had saved his life and even happier Arpad had not killed him during their duel. They swapped small talk for around half an hour before arriving at Hunyadi Castle.

Leon had seen many strongholds during his campaigns in Swiss lands, Italy and the Roman Empire. Nothing had compared with the Theodosian Walls of Constantinople, certainly not the austere, simple strongholds that dotted the Swiss cantons. Originally built by Austrian or German lords, they had gradually been captured and then occupied by Swiss forces. Italian

castles were larger and more impressive, their interiors often lavishly decorated and furnished. But Hunyadi Castle was in a category of its own.

The rectangular stronghold, constructed from local limestone, sat atop a cliff overlooking the River Zlasti. The many circular and rectangular-shaped towers that extended from the castle walls enabled the occupants to rake any attackers with flanking fire. All were all topped with cone-shaped roofs. The castle sat like a brooding stone monster above the river, every tower topped by fluttering Hunyadi banners. As Leon and the others trotted across the narrow wooden bridge resting on three stone pillars that spanned the river, the drawbridge at the far end lowered to allow the riders to enter the courtyard. A line of trumpeters blew a fanfare to welcome the Boyar of Craiova, stable hands walking forward to take the bridles of Leon's horse and those of Skanderbeg and the others. Leon saw the regent of Hungary standing on the wide stone steps giving access to the castle. Dressed in simple hose and red doublet, he descended the steps and smiled at Leon, extending his hand. Leon shook it.

'Welcome to my home, count,' said Hunyadi, whose hair appeared to have thinned since his brush with defeat at Krusevac. 'Where is your baggage?'

'I have none, lord,' answered Leon. 'I like to travel light.'

Fresh, clean clothing was made available to him after he had been shown to his bedroom, one of fifty rooms in the castle. It may have been a stronghold, but the accommodation in Hunyadi Castle was airy, bright and furnished with chests, comfortable beds, desks and plush chairs. Walls were plastered and painted in light colours and large windows ensured rooms were not dingy. Leon was provided with a clean red doublet and white hose, which he found strange to wear after his years in the East where he had worn loose trousers.

He felt oddly self-conscious as Vazul Arpad escorted him to the so-called Knight's Hall for the official feast given in his honour. The hose was tight fitting and accentuated his muscular and shapely legs, and the doublet with puffed sleeves made him feel slightly ridiculous as the pair walked along a marble-tiled corridor with white-painted walls to the hall, guards snapping to attention as they passed. More guards opened the heavy oak doors to the Knight's Hall, which, Arpad informed Leon, was reserved for feasts. It was a large, rectangular chamber with a buttressed ceiling and decorated with marble pillars and Hunyadi banners. There were also stone carvings of ravens above the doors, in case there was any confusion as to who owned the castle.

When Leon and Arpad entered the hall there was another fanfare of trumpets and the guests assembled at tables arranged at right angles to the top table stood and applauded the Boyar of Craiova and Count of Thrace, causing Leon to blush. Arpad showed him to the top table where the Hunyadi family were assembled.

The hall was full of men and women wearing a mixture of satin, velvet, damask and silk. Hunyadi himself was dressed in a long robe of dark-crimson velvet lined with ermine. He smiled and extended an arm to Leon as Vazul Arpad took his leave and seated himself at another table beside his wife. For some reason, even though he himself was now a noble, Leon bowed his head to Hunyadi. But then the regent of Hungary was a king in all but name, a man who exercised huge power and the warlord who stood between Christendom and a rampant Ottoman Empire. Hunyadi put an arm around his shoulder and they walked in front of the top table so the regent could introduce his family. Leon's eyes lit up when he beheld his wife, Elizabeth.

She was obviously older than Leon but her long cream gown highlighted her voluptuous figure. She had piercing blue eyes, flawless skin and a beautiful oval-shaped face framed by long, lustrous brown hair. Leon bowed his head to the mature beauty, trying not to stare at her magnificent chest.

'It is an honour to meet you, lady.'

'So this is the young man who kept the Ottoman hordes at bay, has defeated and humiliated King Vladislav of Wallachia and saved my husband from either death or Ottoman enslavement. We are in your debt, Count Muller.'

His chest swelled with pride, though it paled into insignificance compared to Elizabeth's splendid assets.

'Your servant, lady,' he replied, bowing to her again.

There was a ripple of approving murmurs from those seated at other tables, which pleased Leon and Elizabeth. Leon would have liked to stare at Hunyadi's beautiful wife for the rest of the evening but the regent was eager to introduce his sons. The oldest, Laszlo, in his early twenties, was an angry young man. He nodded to Leon curtly, whereas the youngest son, Matthias, was a boy with a serious face who smiled at Leon when they were introduced. Hunyadi then led Leon to his place beside the regent so the feast could begin, Hunyadi's personal chaplain requesting everyone rise so he could say prayers. The Catholic priest asked the Lord to bless the Hunyadi family in its fight against the infidels, also praying for the long life of Pope Callixtus who had replaced the recently departed Nicholas. Leon said a silent prayer for the late pontiff, a man he had liked and who had been a huge help to his efforts to create an army in Wallachia. He hoped the new Pope would be just as generous.

After prayers, food was served. Leon reckoned he and his army ate well in Wallachia but this feast was gluttony on a vast scale. Servants in Hunyadi livery served great quantities of beef, mutton, capons, partridges, sausages and a curious dish Hunyadi informed him was black pudding, all washed down with red and white wine. Leon sat between Hunyadi and his lovely

wife, Leon keeping his eyes ahead rather than letting them wander to Elizabeth's chest. Her husband stabbed a black sausage and put it on Leon's silver plate.

'Ever tasted black pudding?'

'No, lord.'

'You are in for a treat. It's good.'

Leon probed the black sausage with his fork.

'What is it made from?'

'Pork mixed with oatmeal, herbs and pig's blood. Try it.'

Leon did so and found the pudding rich and velvety. He sipped red wine from his silver cup surveying the hall, filled with chatter and laughter. But despite the amount of wine being consumed, the guests did not become rowdy.

'A fine meal, lord.'

Hunyadi tipped his cup at the guests.

'Many of these men have fought beside me for years. They ride in my bodyguard and have titles and lands of their own. And now their sons fight in my army.'

Leon finished his wine, the cup instantly being refilled by a hovering servant. He reached over and took a small white loaf from a silver platter on the cloth-covered table. In the homes of the rich and powerful, bread was always white to differentiate them from the lower orders who consumed coarse brown bread.

'You and your army are Christendom's best hope of avoiding defeat at the hands of the sultan, lord.'

'I agree,' said Hunyadi, 'which is why I want you to join it.'

Leon tore off a chunk of bread and shoved it in his mouth, washing it down with wine.

'I already have a contract, lord.'

'Which is worthless,' retorted Hunyadi. 'Your army is supported by the lands you rule, most notably the salt mine worked on your behalf by the Roma, and by donations from your friends and allies abroad.'

'And by stealing Hunyadi property,' added an eavesdropping Elizabeth.

Leon looked at her, admiring the fire in her eyes.

'With respect, lady, I led a raid into enemy territory and captured an enemy outpost that was filled with items of great value. I took them according to the accepted rules of war.'

'And sold them to the fat emperor, a Habsburg who detests the Swiss,' she shot back.

He was warming to this woman more and more.

‘The only reason he purchased the spices was to wound me,’ said Hunyadi. ‘Count Ulrich pours poison into his ear about me.’

‘Count Ulrich?’ asked Leon.

‘A man who is jealous of my husband and who wishes to be ruler of Hungary through the real king, a boy named Ladislaus who is controlled by the count,’ Elizabeth informed him.

‘So you see, count, you have become a pawn in the power politics of the empire,’ remarked Hunyadi.

‘I am just a soldier,’ said Leon.

Elizabeth laughed, revealing a row of perfect white teeth.

‘A very wealthy soldier. Tell me, how much money do you have in the Medici Bank?’

How did she know of such things?

‘The money in the Medici Bank, lady, supports the soldiers of my army. I am paid exactly the same as everyone else, which is the modest salary of a common foot soldier.’

‘Plus the revenues from your lands around Craiova, and the considerable sums generated by your salt mine,’ she added.

‘They too go towards the support of the army, lady.’

‘So is it true what they say about the Swiss? They share everything equally among themselves?’ asked Hunyadi.

‘That is what I choose to do, lord,’ Leon told him, ‘but it is a common practice in Swiss armies, yes.’

Elizabeth was going to say something, probably, derogatory, but Hunyadi shook his head at her.

‘Fight for me and I will make you baron of the city of Szeged. You will have both lands and a great city to rule as you see fit.’

‘Szeged makes Craiova look like a poor village,’ said Elizabeth.

Hunyadi drank more wine.

‘I will grant you exemption from customs duties, which means you will keep all the revenues generated by the town itself and the lands you will own around it.’

‘You will become rich and powerful, count,’ said Elizabeth, ‘and take your place among Hungary’s nobility.’

It appeared to be a generous offer. Leon knew nothing about Szeged or the lands around it, but he doubted John Hunyadi was trying to trick him.

'You honour me, lord,' acknowledged Leon, drinking some more wine. 'But I have to tell you I am currently employed by Prince Vlad to put him on the throne of Wallachia. Until that is achieved, I cannot in all conscience accept another contract of employment.'

Hunyadi chewed on a piece of black pudding.

'When he was released from Ottoman captivity, Prince Vlad had no money, no lands and no soldiers.'

'He was a beggar in all but name,' remarked Elizabeth bitterly.

'He came to me, in this very castle,' continued Hunyadi, 'begging for soldiers to fight for the throne of Wallachia. I gave him money and soldiers because it served me to have King Vladislav focused on troubles within his own kingdom rather than invading Transylvania or Hungary. But all the prince achieved was the capture of Severin, after which he did nothing.'

'His fortunes only improved when he recruited you and your men, count,' said Elizabeth, a drop of wine falling from her cup onto her chest.

Leon's eyes took on a life of their own as they studied the small red dot on her wonderful chest. He resisted the temptation to dab her robe with his napkin. He prised his eyes away from her breasts but caught her knowing stare as he did so.

'Count?' said Hunyadi.

'They are magnificent,' sighed Leon.

'What?'

Leon made a great sweep with his arm.

'A magnificent feast, lord.'

A perplexed Hunyadi looked at him.

'What about Prince Vlad?'

'Oh, he will become King of Wallachia either this year or next,' remarked Leon casually. 'Even with Moldovan aid, Vladislav will be unable to preserve his rule. The fact he has allowed me to create an army at Craiova is testament to his impotence.'

A female servant was dabbing Elizabeth's robe with a damp cloth. How Leon envied her.

'Whereas you have proved yourself to be the very opposite of impotent,' teased Elizabeth.

'Indeed, lady,' Leon smiled.

'But Prince Vlad and that silly young wife of his will be unable to keep Wallachia after you have gifted it to them,' added Elizabeth. 'They believe they have a divine right to rule.'

'Isn't that what all kings believe, lady?' queried Leon.

‘Kings must have the support of the church and nobles of their kingdoms to survive,’ she replied. ‘Once you have put him on the throne, will you stay in Wallachia to continue to serve him?’

Leon chewed on some black pudding as he considered his answer. In truth, he found being a powerbroker in Wallachia very agreeable. He was answerable to no one and was playing a major role in the kingdom’s fate. When he had fought in Italy and in Thrace he had been a mercenary and no different from thousands of others who sold their swords for money. But in Wallachia he was the master of all he surveyed and commanded an army that answered only to him. In truth, he was reluctant to relinquish such power.

‘I had not given the matter much thought, lady,’ he answered evasively.

‘When the sultan launches his great offensive, I need you and your army by my side,’ Hunyadi told him.

‘We will not let you down, lord,’ pledged Leon.

Hunyadi and his wife said no more on Prince Vlad, who they obviously both viewed as a lost cause, useful as a thorn in the side of King Vladislav but little else. Leon tried to engage Elizabeth in light conversation after they had talked of more weighty matters, but she was uninterested in small talk, excusing herself and withdrawing to her private quarters before the feast ended. Leon had the sense he had been a disappointment to her, which was confirmed the next morning when he left Hunyadi Castle to ride back to Craiova. Neither Elizabeth nor her two sons were present to bid him farewell, though John Hunyadi stood at the foot of the grand staircase that led to the courtyard to bid farewell to Leon. The sun was shining on Hunyadi Castle, a slight breeze ruffling the banners flying from the stronghold’s towers. Hunyadi extended a hand to Leon.

‘Think about my offer. I fear Wallachia will soon be swallowed whole by the sultan, regardless of whether King Vladislav lives or dies.’

Leon took his hand.

‘You have my friendship and allegiance, lord. When the sultan launches his great offensive, I promise I will march to fight by your side.’

The promise pleased Hunyadi, who smiled at Leon and wished him safe journey back to Craiova. A stable hand brought his horse and Leon hauled himself into the saddle, Skanderbeg, his men and Dragos already mounted and waiting for his orders. He nodded to Hunyadi, nudged his horse forward and trotted from the castle. As he rode back across the long wooden bridge, his mind was filled not with thoughts of the coming battle for Wallachia or when Sultan Mehmet

would launch the might of the Ottoman Empire against Hungary, but rather with the magnificent chest of Elizabeth Hunyadi.

