

Chapter 1

The waters of the bay where the Catalan fleet was anchored were calm and a perfect blue, seagulls hovering in the sky as they floated on the pleasing breeze blowing from the north. Luca stared absent-mindedly at the thirty or more galleys and cargo vessels with sails furled and oars withdrawn from the water. The bay to the north of the city of Kallipolis, where the Catalan Company had made its camp prior to marching to the city of Adrianople to take part in Co-Emperor Michael's great campaign against the Bulgarians, was a beautiful spot. The surrounding hills were covered with pine and olive trees, and the many springs in the area brought fresh, cool water to the sprawling camp of thousands of soldiers and their dependents. It was an idyllic spot, a place free from Turkish *emirs*, whose lands began a short distance away, across the Hellespont that separated the Gallipoli Peninsula from Anatolia. But Luca would have gladly swapped the peninsula for Turkish-held territory following the atrocity at Adrianople. As their memories cleared, Luca and Jordi remembered being invited to the mansion of Princess Maria, sister of Emperor Andronicus, where they were given wine by the princess. That was their last memory. They had obviously been drugged by the princess and spirited out of Adrianople and taken to Gallipoli, though the motives of the woman they had saved in Constantinople in what seemed like another life was a mystery. But as the days passed and no word came from Adrianople, the awful realisation that something dreadful had happened dawned on the company, confirmed by rumours among merchants and travellers who had heard of a great slaughter at Adrianople. There were other signs something was terribly wrong. The company's horsemen – fifteen hundred Catalans, commanded by Bernat de Rocafort, plus Melek's three hundred Muslim horse archers – had been shipped to Gallipoli on the company's vessels. But their horses had been left on the Artake Peninsula, the stronghold of Count Michael Cosses, supposedly a friend and ally. But he had sent word that an imperial order had arrived, along with General Mouzalon and several hundred horsemen, for all Catalan horses to be taken north instead of being transported to the Gallipoli Peninsula. And the governor of Kallipolis had begun to insist that all trade with the company be conducted outside the walls rather than inside his city. He then issued a proclamation stating that all Catalans were forbidden from entering Kallipolis, on pain of death. Menace and impending doom hung over the Catalan camp like a huge invisible cloud.

‘Are you attending the meeting, Luca?’

He stopped his daydreaming to rise to his feet, turning to face the woman who had become the de facto queen of the company. Carla Rey, wife of Sancho Rey, had spent half her adult life accompanying her husband around Sicily when the company had been battling the French on

behalf of King Frederick of Sicily. She had lived in tents, stood by the side of her husband with a spear in her hand when danger threatened, and became the voice of the company's dependents: the women and children who were usually the faceless ghosts of a mercenary army. The years had fashioned an inner core of resilience that some would term callousness, though Luca would call it determination. She had shown him and Ayna kindness and consideration, but now the former quality was absent from her character. Just as her face had lost any trace of softness in the aftermath of her acceptance that her husband had been murdered, so had her personality hardened.

'Of course, lady, I was just gathering my thoughts.'

She did not speak as they paced from the beach, Carla staring ahead with unblinking eyes, a sword and dagger at her hip. They walked to the centre of the camp where there was a great square, in which thousands of people were gathered, most wearing the simple attire of the Almogavars – shirt, a sheepskin coat called a *zamarra*, leggings and coarse leather footwear called *abarka*.

The crowd parted to allow Carla through, men and women alike smiling and placing a gentle hand on her arm as she passed, Luca receiving firmer pats on the back and arms. A few nodded and muttered 'Black Sheep' in recognition of his nickname and status within the company. He, along with Jordi, had been saved from the massacre at Adrianople. Many accorded their survival to the intercession of God, and in the cloud of uncertainty that the company found itself in, the idea God might have smiled on two of its members was something to cling to.

In the centre of the square stood the other thing that fortified the company. A man who was as hard as granite and just as unyielding, another individual who had been spared being murdered at Adrianople on account of having lost when he and the other captains had drawn lots to decide who would miss out on the grand banquet being hosted by Co-Emperor Michael.

Hector was a tall, thin man with black hair that fell over his black, emotionless eyes, the stubble on his chin adding to his harsh features. It was fortunate, or unfortunate depending on one's point of view, that the Almogavars were now led by a man whose only true love was war and killing, with indiscriminate plunder a close second. He nodded to Carla when she stopped to stand beside him, Luca having halted at the edge of the crowd to be with his own true love: Ayna. Next to her stood the buxom Chana, the woman of his friend Jordi, who stood like a stone statue staring at his mother.

'Three hundred of our friends have been butchered by the Romans,' said Hector loudly.

'Even though we have heard no concrete confirmation it has happened, the fact our friends and loved ones have not returned to us speaks volumes.'

Absolute silence greeted his words, thousands of faces with rigid expressions staring back at Hector, now the elected leader of the Almogavar council and de facto commander of the Catalan Company.

‘I will make this short,’ continued Hector. ‘Having spoken with many of you to garner your opinions, I believe we should use our ships to take us to the island of Lesbos, which we will make our home. It has an abundance of food and water and we can defend it against the Romans should they decide to attack us, which I am certain they will.’

‘I would take your vote on this matter now. All those in favour of leaving this place and moving to the island, raise your hands.’

Luca, Ayna, Jordi, Chana and nearly seven thousand others did so in a massive show of agreement and solidarity.

‘So be it. We will leave as soon as the ships are provisioned. I would have your vote on a second matter,’ said Hector. ‘I am a simple soldier, but the company needs a leader who is both a soldier and a diplomat, someone who is used to trading lies and adept at dealing with nobility and other lowlifes.’

Laughter greeted his declaration, and all eyes turned to the one man everyone knew he was speaking about. Bernat de Rocafort stuck out like a sore thumb among the drab clothes, rough faces and uncouth manners of the Almogavars. Born into nobility, broad shouldered, devilishly handsome and unusually for a Catalan possessing blue eyes, Bernat was a logical choice, the only choice, to replace Roger de Flor. He had already led the company’s horsemen to victory after victory in Sicily and recently in Anatolia. Intelligent, brave and possessed of a sense of entitlement due to his aristocratic heritage, he strode forward to stand beside Hector and Carla.

How different they all looked. Hector and Carla in brown hues, Bernat in silver spurs, a mail hauberk over which he wore a magnificent scarlet surcoat. Around his waist was a red leather belt with a gold buckle, attached to which was a red scabbard holding an expensive sword with a jewel-encrusted cross-guard and pommel covered in gold leaf.

No one particularly liked Bernat de Rocafort but both his horsemen and the Almogavars respected him for his martial talents. All knew of the dubious circumstances of his birth, giving rise to his nickname ‘The Bastard’, but as the company was full of bastards, exiles and petty criminals, his parentage presented no problems. He smiled at Hector and tipped his head at Carla before stepping forward to address the company.

‘Thank you, Hector. If it is your decision that I should lead the Catalan Company, I promise you I will do everything in my power to protect you all, as well as avenging the deaths of our

friends so basely murdered at Adrianople. But first, as Hector has stated, we must move to a more secure place. Then we can deal with the treacherous Romans.'

'All those in favour of Bernat assuming command of the company raise your hands,' shouted Hector, raising his right arm.

'What do think?' Luca asked Jordi.

'I will follow my mother's lead,' said Jordi.

Hector had been a close friend of both Sancho and Carla and so the wife of the former Almogavar leader had no problems when it came to accepting him as the head of the company. Bernat was a different matter. But she knew Hector was not a diplomat or a man of vision. Not like Roger de Flor who had brought the company to the eastern Mediterranean to fight on behalf of the Roman Empire following the end of the Sicilian conflict. In the process he had saved the company from falling apart. But Roger was dead and if it was to survive, it needed a leader who had absolute faith in his abilities, which Bernat did in abundance. Carla Rey therefore raised her hand, prompting thousands of others to do likewise. Bernat de Rocafort thus became the commander of the Catalan Company.

The election of Bernat provided a pleasing interlude to the daily ritual of Luca and the other Almogavars: rise at dawn, a meagre breakfast, training until midday, a light meal, camp duties, followed by more training. Camp duties entailed anything from digging latrine ditches to overseeing the purchase of food and other necessities from the merchants of Kallipolis. They also included chopping wood.

Luca swung his axe twice more before taking a break. The weather was hot and dry and he was sweating profusely, the more so because the pine he was attempting to fell was proving to be a tenacious foe. He and Jordi had been felling trees, mostly young, slender pines with smooth, light grey bark. But Luca had come across a tall pine with a reddish-brown, scaly bark, indicating it was a mature tree. He was now regretting his choice, the pine having a thick trunk that was proving hard to hack. He stopped, uncorked his water bottle and took a swig. Other Almogavars were hauling the trunks of felled trees down the hillside back to camp where they would be fashioned into sharpened stakes to surmount the earth rampart that Hector had ordered to be built. Others were collecting firewood.

Jordi grinned and shook his head.

'That is one enemy you will not be able to cut down.'

It was the first time in a while since his friend had smiled. Ever since their return from Adrianople, Jordi had been wracked with guilt and had barely been able to look his mother in the eye. Conversations with Luca had been stilted and his friend had seemed distant as well as filled

with remorse. But with the knowledge they were leaving Gallipoli, the pain torturing Jordi appeared to be slowly dissipating.

Luca handed him his water bottle.

‘There seems little point in improving the camp’s defences now we are leaving.’

Jordi took a swig and gave back the water bottle.

‘I’m glad we are leaving. I wish we had never seen this accursed land. We should have stayed in Anaia.’

Anaia, the city the company had captured in the wake of its great victory of the same name, was a clean, pleasant place in western Anatolia. The company had occupied it as a result of negotiations that had seen some of the Muslim population depart, the rest electing to stay after assurances from Grand Duke Roger they and their property would not be molested, and they would not be prevented from practising their religion.

‘We were treated better by the Muslims than the Romans, who are supposed to be Christians like us,’ complained Jordi.

‘Talking of which,’ said Luca, ‘have you had Father Ramon bending your ear about marrying Chana?’

Jordi rolled his eyes. ‘Chana will not renounce her faith and he will not marry a Jew to a Christian. So that is that.’

‘Ayna is the same, but it does not matter. She says her faith saw her through her time of trial and she will not abandon it. I admire her for that.’

‘Faith.’ Jordi uttered the word like he was spitting something distasteful out of his mouth. ‘We came to the land of the Romans in good faith and look how we have been repaid.’

Luca picked up the axe and toyed with it.

‘At night, when Ayna is asleep and the world is quiet, guilt washes over me. I should have died at Adrianople.’

‘*We* should have died at Adrianople,’ said Jordi, ‘and yet here we are. We might still die, but at least we will do so with weapons in our hands facing the enemy, and not stabbed in the back.’

Luca stood back and prepared to hack at the pine trunk once more.

‘Perhaps the Romans will leave us alone. They have had first-hand knowledge of our capabilities and they would be foolish to cross us.’

Jordi pointed at the glittering waters of the Hellespont, prompting Luca to turn away from the tree.

‘Perhaps you should have told the Romans that, my friend.’

In the bay floated the ships of the Catalan Company and approaching them from the north, their red lateen sails filled with a brisk breeze that had been blowing all day, were a dozen galleys. Each of the sails was decorated with a yellow double-headed eagle – the symbol of the Emperor of Constantinople. The ships were sailing in a long line and heading straight for the bay. The two banks of oars on each galley were dipping in and out of the water to supplement the propulsion of the wind and increase speed. Luca looked at Jordi and both knew the Roman galleys were about to attack the Catalan fleet. Those around them knew it as well, Almogavars abandoning their wood-cutting duties to race back down the hill to camp, from where horns were being blown.

During the darkest period in the history of the emperors of Constantinople, when the Latin crusaders had besieged and sacked the great city, the secret ingredients of the so-called ‘Greek Fire’ had been withheld from the Catholic attackers. Only a select few close to the emperor knew the composition of the dreadful weapon that had been invented by a Jew named Kallinikos hundreds of years before. He had been forced to flee his homeland following the Arab conquest of Syria. Kallinikos had made his way to Constantinople where he had offered his services as an architect and engineer to Emperor Constantine Pogonatus, who willingly accepted his offer, which included the revelation he had invented a new weapon.

A concoction of naphtha, pine resin, sulphur, lime and bitumen, it was called ‘Greek Fire’ by the Latin crusaders because the Romans of the east spoke Greek. The Arabs, whose ships had been incinerated by it, termed it ‘Roman Fire’, while the Romans themselves called it ‘Sea Fire’.

Admiral Andrea Morisco was a Genoese by birth but had lived in Constantinople for so long he regarded himself as a Roman aristocrat. High in Co-Emperor Michael’s favour, he had been given the most prestigious position in the Roman navy – commander of the emperor’s fire *dromons*. Propelled by two banks of oars on each side of the hull, they did not have a partially submerged bronze bow-ram to slow them down. They also did not have a large complement of soldiers on board, their crews comprising in the main rowers and operators of the pumps that shot Greek Fire.

The pumps feeding narrow bronze syphons were mounted on the bows and on gunwale-mounted swivels, two men operating each pump and another aiming the syphon. The pumps drew the inflammable liquid from large vats, forcing it into the syphons and pressurising it so when released by means of a trigger, it produced a narrow stream of fluid that shot from the syphon. And as the liquid emerged from the tube, it was ignited by a flame just beyond the end of the nozzle. The result was a stream of fire dozens of feet in length arching through the air.

The crews who operated the Greek Fire pumps and syphons were highly trained specialists and their skill became apparent as Admiral Morisco's lead *dromon* sailed into the stationary Catalan fleet. Short discharges of Greek Fire spat from the bow and sides of the vessel, the rowers dipping their oars in the water in perfect unison to drive the vessel forward. The two *dromons* following also began spitting fire at the Catalan ships, the other nine fire *dromons* circling the idle ships to set more of them alight.

The rowers in the admiral's *dromon* strained every muscle to power the vessel forward as quickly as possible to reduce the time any archers or crossbowmen in the Catalan ships had to respond to the attack. Not that the crews nearest the *dromons* would be thinking about retaliation against the Roman galleys.

Greek Fire stuck to and burned everything it came into contact with and could not be doused by water. Very soon high-pitched screams filled the bay as sailors covered with the sticky, burning substance threw themselves in the sea, to discover they were still on fire. The only things capable of extinguishing Greek Fire were sand, vinegar and old urine, none of which was readily to hand. Both ships and sailors burned, the blue sky being filled with plumes of billowing black smoke as the Catalan ships were set alight one by one. To those watching in horror from the shore, it appeared that not only were ships burning, the sea also appeared to be aflame. They were not mistaken because Greek Fire also burned when floating on the water.

Like mythical sea serpents, the Roman *dromons* were spitting fire in all directions, the admiral's column having rowed straight through the centre of the Catalan fleet and exited the other side before the inferno engulfed them too. Morisco's galley and those following then steered around the outside of the burning vessels to join the rest of his fleet, leading it back out to sea. In the space of fifteen minutes the Catalan fleet had been reduced to a collection of burning wrecks, its crews likewise incinerated.

The Catalan Company would not be leaving the Gallipoli Peninsula, at least not by sea.

Luca stood with Jordi, Chana and Ayna in stunned silence as he watched the destruction of the Catalan fleet. Thousands of others in shock likewise stood with unblinking eyes at the dreadful sight of the ships on fire, no sounds now coming from the burnings hulks, and in the distance a fleet of red-sailed galleys heading back to Constantinople. Most of the sailors had been on land when the attack commenced, rushing to rowboats on the beach in an effort to reach their ships and mount some sort of resistance. They unwittingly rowed to their deaths as Greek Fire engulfed them, the burning liquid covering the surface of the water to surround the rowboats before setting them alight. Few returned to shore.

‘Allah have mercy on their souls,’ muttered a shocked Ayna.

‘God is not here today,’ hissed Jordi. ‘Roman bastards.’

‘They want us all dead and gone from the world,’ said Chana.

A smile crept across Jordi’s face.

‘What amuses you?’ asked Luca.

‘Now we will have to march against the Romans. We cannot stay here indefinitely and the Romans have just declared their intent to annihilate us. Good, I did not wish to run anyway.’

The Almogavars, their dependents and the horsemen without horses shuffled away from the beach to return to their duties. In the bay, burning ships broke apart and disappeared from view as their timbers were reduced to charred flotsam, dozens of blackened corpses also floating in the water among the driftwood.

The shrill sound of whistles being blown shattered the silence. Luca glanced at Jordi and they both knew the day was about to get worse.

‘To your positions. Enemy approaching.’

The words were like a bolt of lightning simultaneously going through the body of every Almogavar. Any numbness, sense of shock or betrayal vanished as instinctive training took over. Luca and Jordi rushed to their tents to don their war gear, strapping on javelin quivers, grabbing helmets, shields and spears. Luca hugged Ayna and kissed her on the lips.

‘Allah be with you,’ she whispered, placing his helmet on his head.

He checked the sword and dagger fastened to his belt, the dagger an expensive present from the emperor for saving the life of his sister Princess Maria, along with a pouch full of money, all now spent. Running from the tent, he joined dozens of others rallying to their divisions, in his case Hector’s command. A grim-faced Jordi was beside him, like him his round shield slung on the left side of his back and held in place by a strap over his shoulder, on the opposite side a quiver containing three javelins. They ran past the rows of sharpened stakes surrounding the camp to form up on the grassy plain inland from the beach. Four thousand Almogavars assembled under a hot sun

‘Form up, form up, hurry, you bastards.’

Hector was in a spikey mood. He was running up and down the division, which was forming in four ranks, each one made up of two hundred and fifty men. Behind them stood three hundred horse archers, minus horses, commanded by the dashing Melek, the Muslim mercenary who had joined the Catalan Company after being captured outside the city of Philadelphia. Behind them were Bernat de Rocafort’s Catalan horsemen – fifteen hundred riders also without horses, though Bernat himself and the other handful of knights in the company did have horses, purchased from

a merchant in Kallipolis. For nobles, it was inconceivable they should go to war on foot. There were also a dozen scouts riding old, worn-out horses who provided intelligence concerning the land around the Catalan camp. It was they who had brought news that an army was approaching from the north.

General Kassianos and Admiral Morisco had liaised closely before their fire *dromons* had attacked the Catalan fleet. Coordination between fleets and soldiers on land was tricky, but Morisco had told the general that he should launch his attack when he saw pillars of black smoke coming from the bay directly north of Kallipolis. The smoke would indicate the enemy fleet was burning and would provide a signal to the general to commence his own attack on the Catalan camp. The admiral had also been informed by the governor of Kallipolis that his garrison would sally forth from the city to complete the rout of the apostate Catholics whose presence polluted the sacred soil of the empire.