

## Chapter 1

Leon stared at the slow-moving water making its way east towards the Black Sea. It was nearing dusk but the temperature was still warm after a hot day marching through Ottoman lands. They used to be Roman but those days were gone, and like the sun sinking on the western horizon, night was closing in on Christian lands in the Balkans. It had been six weeks since Constantinople had fallen to the forces of Sultan Mehmet and Leon and his army had been allowed to leave the city and seek sanctuary in Christian lands. Karaja Pasha, Bey of Rumelia, had assigned a mounted guard to escort over a thousand men and women from the city. In the first few days, as parties of Turkish horsemen rode west back to Edirne, the capital of Rumelia that had previously been called Adrianopolis when the land was the Roman theme of Thrace, Swiss and French soldiers alike marched in full war gear and kept close to the camels and wagons that contained their tents, food, women and children. And Skanderbeg's horse archers – without horses – kept their bowstrings nocked with arrows. Fearing an ambush at any moment, Leon had ordered a slow pace so his men would always be alert. But as the days passed and it became apparent they were not going to be butchered on the road, the mood of those in the column relaxed somewhat.

Leon was informed by the commander of his escort, a slight individual with a thin beard and an amiable disposition, that he and his men were forbidden to enter any towns on their route. This was because the reputation of the *uzun mizraklar*, or 'long spears', the nickname the Ottomans had given the Swiss soldiers, had spread far and wide. No mayor wished to see them inside his town. When the column had approached Bizye, the town that had been Leon's base during the battle for Thrace, he requested Anna, Antonio's pregnant wife, be allowed to visit her parents inside the town. The request was denied because the dreadful truth was that her parents had died, along with the entire population of the town, after Leon had led his soldiers south to Selymbria when one hundred thousand Ottoman soldiers had crossed the Bosphorus. He had sent a note to Karaja Pasha informing the bey the town was defenceless and requesting the Turk send troops to garrison it. But the commander of the escort informed Leon that another Ottoman general, Zaganos Pasha, outraged that the Swiss had defeated his soldiers near a wood on the road to Selymbria, had taken Bizye first and had executed the entire population in an act of revenge. Anna had been upset that she had not been allowed to see her parents but was happy with Antonio and grateful to Leon she and her husband were allowed to leave Constantinople rather than face enslavement or death. He did not tell Anna the truth, reasoning that she would never see Bizye again anyway, as the column travelled on west and then north. Better to let her hold a vision of her parents alive and well rather than as piles of bones in a mass grave.

Leon continued to stare at the water. Further along the riverbank Swiss and French were trying their hand at fishing with crossbows and halberds, standing knee deep in the water and shooting or spearing fish as they passed, with varying degrees of success. He became aware of a presence and turned to see the Ottoman officer standing behind him.

‘Forgive the interruption, commander,’ the Turk said in Greek.

‘Not at all. How can I help you?’

‘We will be leaving in the morning.’ He pointed to the northwest. ‘We are close to Hungarian lands and if you follow the course of the river, it will bring you to the Hungarian city of Belgrade.’

‘How far away is Belgrade?’

Leon peered into the distance.

‘One hundred and fifty miles, give or take. Ten more days of travel. Serbia lies to the west and the ruler of that land is not kindly disposed to the sultan. I had orders to escort you to Vidin and then depart.’

They had passed Vidin the day before. It was a prosperous, walled town on the banks of the river and had once been ruled by a Bulgarian king who had possessed a great empire. But that king was dead, the Bulgarian Empire was no more, and the land was now ruled by Sultan Mehmet.

‘This river is the Danube?’ enquired Leon.

‘It is.’

‘And whose land is that across the river?’

The Turk stared at the far bank, at least half a mile away. ‘King Vladislav of Wallachia, an ally of the sultan,’ he said with pride.

Leon sighed. Was there no part of this region that was not owned or coveted by the sultan?

‘Well, I thank you for carrying out your duties and holding to Karaja Pasha’s wishes.’

The officer was taken aback by his words. ‘You and your men were under the protection of the bey until you reached the current frontier of Rumelia, commander. The army of the sultan is not a rabble of bandits and cutthroats.’

‘No, I regret to say it is not.’

‘I do not understand.’

Leon gave him a wry smile. ‘Had it been a disorganised rabble, I believe Thrace would still be Roman and Emperor Constantine would still be sitting on his throne.’

‘Thrace still lives, commander, for were you not made count of that place before Constantinople fell?’

The ability of the Ottomans to collect accurate intelligence was another reason for their military successes, along with their extensive logistical preparations before they embarked on any campaign.

‘I was,’ replied Leon, ‘though I am now a count with no land or stronghold to call my own.’

The Turk stiffened and tipped his head at Leon. ‘I wish you good fortune in the future, commander, and hope you return to your homeland safely.’

He spun sharply on his heels and marched away to the Ottoman camp pitched a short distance from the Swiss, Albanian and French camp. Throughout the journey from Constantinople, the Ottomans had established their own camp each night, stabling their horses in the centre and posting sentries around the perimeter to prevent the Albanian horse archers in Leon’s army from stealing them. As the Ottoman officer disappeared, Henri Russell, the French master gunner and Leon’s close friend, appeared. Now fully recovered from the head wound suffered during the siege of Constantinople, he was dressed in blue civilian attire and sported a hat of the same colour decorated with a blue plume. Such ostentatiousness would ordinarily be frowned upon by the austere Swiss, but such was the reputation of the Frenchman that no one batted an eyelid at his flamboyance.

‘Our guardians are departing in the morning,’ Leon told him.

‘So, we can make plans for the recapture of Constantinople away from prying eyes,’ grinned Henri.

‘I don’t think any of us will see Constantinople again,’ sighed Leon.

‘Why so morose, *mon ami*? We are alive and free, which is more than I expected lying in bed in the Palace of Saint Anna listening to Ottoman artillery playing.’

Leon tipped his head towards the river. ‘The Romans believed the river was a male god called Danuvius, which is where the word Danube comes from. If we follow the river we will reach Belgrade in ten days, or so the Ottoman commander informed me.’

‘Which was our intention all along.’

‘But once in Hungary, we could strike west and head for Venetian territory and then Swiss lands.’

Henri was surprised. ‘You are thinking of quitting soldiering?’

Leon nodded.

‘And become what?’ asked the Frenchman. ‘A farmer? Or miller? A commission in the Venetian army would be more appropriate. Then you could focus on seeking vengeance against Francesco Sforza. I will join you.’

‘If we stay in these parts, I fear we will all die.’

‘We all die, *mon ami*. Besides, not everyone shares your new-found desire for a peaceable existence. Many in camp have unfinished business with the Ottomans.’

‘When the Ottomans leave, I will call an assembly to put the proposal to the men. They deserve that at least. What did you want, by the way?’

‘My men caught a giant catfish and are currently cooking it. They request the commander’s presence so he may savour their culinary skills.’

‘That is very generous. I accept,’ Leon smiled.

Like every evening, the wagons formed the perimeter of a large square, the sizeable gaps between them guarded by sentries. Inside the square were the horses, camels and tents, which were round and could accommodate up to ten individuals, at a squeeze. This meant each tent could accommodate a section of soldiers. The wives and women the army had collected during its time in Italy and later in the Roman Empire, now totalling above a hundred, slept in separate tents in their own area of the camp. Even those who were married, such as Anna, were kept apart from their husbands, who were soldiers and on campaign. In this way discipline was maintained and temptation kept at bay.

The mood was now very relaxed in camp, everyone, including Leon, knowing they owed a debt to Karaja Pasha for allowing them to leave Constantinople free men and women. And they were delighted when their Ottoman escort packed up their tents and rode away the next morning. After breakfast, Leon summoned a general assembly, men standing in their sections and companies and waiting for him to stand on a barrel so he could address the army. Hundreds stood shoulder to shoulder to listen to the man who had led them from Italy to the east and was now leading them back to Christian territory, a remarkable feat considering the fate of thousands of Romans and their allies who were now either dead or Ottoman slaves. It would be another warm day in Rumelia and the Swiss, French and Albanian banners hung limp in the windless air. Leon raised his arms, his mouth opened, but the people only heard the war horn sounding alarm. Hundreds scattered like rats to take up position at the camp’s perimeter, Leon jumping down from the barrel and running to where Wilhelm’s company was located. Pikemen and halberdiers were filling the gaps between wagons, while Jean de Maingre’s crossbowmen and hand gunners were taking up positions behind the wagons, ready to shoot bolts and bullets at the attackers. Henri’s gunners, now without cannon, were armed with crossbows and formed a reserve. Skanderbeg deployed his horse archers, without horses, around the perimeter. In contrast to the rest of the army, he and his men were consistently sullen over having to surrender their horses after the walls of Constantinople had been breached. Leon had promised

the Albanian leader that his first priority during any negotiations with the Hungarians regarding a contract of employment would be to furnish his men with horses.

Leon pushed through the Swiss soldiers to stand next to Wilhelm in the front rank.

‘Horsemen approaching,’ said his friend, pointing his halberd at a group of riders trotting towards the camp.

‘Perhaps the Turks have decided to butcher us after all,’ opined Rudy beside Leon.

‘They don’t look like Turks,’ sniffed Ulrich, like the others the visor on his sallet raised.

The horsemen trotted forward and halted around two hundred paces from the wagons. Around fifty in number, they presented a somewhat rag-tag appearance with some wearing helmets, others sporting fur hats and some bare headed. Some were armed with long spears and round shields, others carried recurve bows.

‘Hardly a sight to strike fear into the hearts of their opponents,’ sniffed an unimpressed Leon.

A lone rider left the group and trotted forward, his arms extended so all could see he carried no weapons. The Swiss and French stood silent in their ranks, pikes lowered and crossbows and hand guns loaded and ready to shoot. The lone rider with arms spread wide halted around twenty yards from where Leon stood with his friends.

‘I am the envoy of the Prince of Wallachia,’ he shouted in German. ‘My lord wishes to speak to Commander Leon Muller, Count of Thrace and friend of His Holiness the Pope.’

‘Your fame has spread far and wide,’ remarked Ulrich, ‘even among thieves and roving gangs of bandits.’

‘Where’s Wallachia?’ asked Rudy.

‘Across the river,’ said Leon, walking forward until he was a few paces in front of Wilhelm’s company. He removed his sallet.

‘I am Commander Muller.’

The horseman’s arms dropped. He turned in the saddle and pointed at the other riders.

‘Would you speak with my lord, commander? He is desirous to meet the man whose name is famous throughout the whole world.’

Leon tried his utmost not to smile, though the words were pleasing to the ear. He was also curious to meet the Prince of Wallachia and ask him why he had brought his ragged band of horsemen into Ottoman Rumelia. He assumed the prince was the son of King Vladislav, but still wondered why he was desirous to speak with him.

‘I will be delighted to meet with the prince. Go back and tell him to ride into camp. Only him and a small escort, mind.’

He rode back and relayed Leon's invitation, the Swiss, French and Albanians standing to arms throughout. After a few minutes half a dozen riders trotted forward, led by a man with long, curly dark hair and wearing a short-sleeved scale-armour cuirass. Riding beside him was a woman with lustrous red hair, which raised a few eyebrows. The riders dismounted a few paces from Leon, the young man with shoulder-length hair smiling at the Count of Thrace.

'I am Vlad Dracula, Prince of Wallachia.'

His German was impeccable. Leon's eyes went to the beauty standing beside him.

'My wife, Princess Sonia.'

'It is an honour to meet you both,' said Leon in his native tongue, 'and a delight to be able to speak German so far from my homeland. Are you here at the behest of your father?'

The prince gave him a bemused look. 'My father?'

'King Vladislav of Wallachia.'

The prince was no longer smiling. His large dark eyes narrowed and his lips tightened. 'My father is dead, killed by Vladislav, commander. King Vladislav, so-called, is a traitor and usurper who holds the crown illegally. I am the true claimant to the throne of Wallachia.'

'My apologies,' said Leon. 'My knowledge of these parts is sketchy.'

'Non-existent, it would appear,' remarked the princess.

'Do not tease the commander,' the prince chided her. 'We are here to enlist his aid.'

He looked at Leon. 'Perhaps we might discuss things further in your pavilion.'

'I do not have a pavilion,' said Leon.

'Are you sure this is the famous warlord who terrorised the Ottomans and made a miraculous escape from Constantinople?' enquired the princess.

Princess Sonia was a rare beauty, with green eyes, a heart-shaped face, sizeable breasts and a narrow waist, and Leon had noticed that she carried a bow in a case attached to her saddle, with a quiver full of arrows on its other side. He could tell she was royalty because she was obviously accustomed to speaking down to people she assumed were her social inferiors. He wondered if Habsburg blood ran in her veins.

'Pavilions are large and weighty, highness,' Leon told her. 'But they do burn nicely and when alight are useful for providing illumination during night attacks.'

The prince was delighted by the answer but Sonia was not amused and looked past him to the ranks of pikemen and halberdiers, all encased in armour, the sun glinting off plate and whetted blades. A smile crept across her delightful face; she obviously liked what she saw.

The day was a warm one and so Leon and Prince Dracula, both in their armour, sat on stools under a makeshift awning in the centre of the camp with the princess seated next to her

husband, while around them tents were collapsed in preparation for another day on the road north.

‘Traders in Vidin alerted me to the presence of you and your soldiers, commander,’ said the prince. ‘You say you are marching to Hungary to seek employment.’

‘That is correct.’ Leon nodded.

‘Do not go to Hungary, commander. Instead, I offer you a contract to fight for me in Wallachia. Unlike John Hunyadi, I have full authority to enlist mercenaries in Wallachian service.’

‘John Hunyadi is no longer the regent of Hungary,’ said Sonia. ‘The kingdom is now ruled by a boy king called Ladislaus.’

‘Who is the puppet of a gang of Hungarian nobles who dislike Hunyadi,’ added the prince. ‘So you see, commander, if you travel to Hungary, you will become embroiled in a civil dispute.’

‘We fight for whoever pays us.’ Leon shrugged.

‘The Kingdom of Hungary has no money,’ said Dracula. ‘It has been fighting the Ottomans for years, a war that has exhausted its treasury. You will find Wallachia a much more attractive proposition.’

‘Wallachia is just across the river, commander,’ stated Sonia, ‘whereas Hungary is many miles away, and your welcome there might not be a warm one.’

Leon was intrigued. ‘Oh?’

‘You may be interested to know that the chief adviser to King Ladislaus of Hungary is Count Ulrich, an Austrian by birth,’ reported Dracula. ‘And I believe the Austrians are not well disposed to the Swiss.’

Leon estimated the prince and his wife were in their early twenties, both being intelligent and ambitious. He was impressed by their knowledge of Hungary and Austrian attitude towards the Swiss. Of course, they may have been lying about the situation in Hungary, but they were certainly right about Wallachia being closer. And the fact he had ridden to speak to Leon endeared him to the Count of Thrace. He was intrigued by the pair, but the decision lay with the army itself.

‘I will put your proposal to a vote,’ Leon informed them.

The princess rolled her eyes. ‘We thought *you* were the commander of this army.’

‘I am,’ replied Leon. ‘But this army is founded on Swiss principles and central to those principles is giving everyone a voice when it comes to major decisions.’

‘The Swiss have resurrected the ancient Greek idea of democracy,’ stated the prince, ‘specifically direct democracy where the people themselves meet, hold discussions and then implement policy.’

Leon was impressed. 'That is a very succinct assessment, highness. But before I proceed with the vote, I must tell you that in Italy and Thrace, we were billeted in towns, rather than living all year round in tents. The Roman emperor made me governor of Bizye and trusted me to rule on his behalf.'

'Because he had no army of his own,' said Sonia, 'which is why he is now dead and his capital is occupied by the Ottomans.'

Her barbed comments were beginning to grate on his nerves. 'He was also abandoned by his allies, lady,' said Leon. 'I was there when he informed us the Hungarians were marching to the city's aid, but no aid came. Let us hope Hungary does not suffer the same fate.'

'When will you organise a vote?' asked the prince.

Leon stood. 'Now is as good a time as any.'

He marched away and organised a general assembly, men stopping what they were doing to gather in front of Leon once again, a bemused Prince Vlad and his haughty wife standing nearby. Wilhelm's company continued to keep a watch on the prince's horsemen, just in case. Ezra Mordecai, ringlets hanging either side of his face, wandered over to listen to Leon's words, beside him standing Henri Russell and Ugo 'Scarface', his mighty sword strapped to his back. The crowd fell silent when Leon raised his hands.

'Friends, this is Prince Vlad Dracula of Wallachia,' he extended an arm to the prince. 'He has offered us employment in his kingdom, which lies on the other side of the river. He is currently fighting a war against a man named Vladislav, who is an ally of the Ottoman sultan.'

There were angry murmurs among the crowd and expressions hardened at the mention of the man who had recently taken Constantinople. The response delighted Prince Vlad, who smiled and nodded at those in the front ranks. Leon noticed his eyes lit up at seeing so many soldiers in plate armour, which made his own soldiers look like poor peasants.

'We will no longer be living in tents,' continued Leon, 'and the prince has promised horses for our horse archers and cannon for our gunners.'

The pronouncement took the prince by surprise and his wife glared at Leon, but to his credit Dracula remained stoical.

'The prince will hire us for a year should you elect to fight for him.'

'What will you do, Outcast?' someone shouted.

'Who is the red-headed beauty?' called another.

Hearty laughs and cheers greeted the enquiry, much to the consternation of Princess Sonia, who gave the veteran soldiers hateful stares.



‘Until a short while ago I had not heard of Prince Vlad Dracula,’ said Leon. ‘As you know, our original intention was to march to Hungary and offer our services to the Hungarians. But Prince Vlad made the effort to ride here and offer us employment. He has made us a firm offer and I for one believe we should accept, which, thus far, is the only one we have.’

Leon raised his right arm. ‘I vote to cross the river. What say the rest of you?’

A forest of arms shot up, prompting a broad grin to appear on the prince’s face. Even Princess Sonia was impressed and gave Leon an approving nod. Praise indeed. Leon stepped down from the barrel and extended an arm to Ezra.

‘This is Ezra Mordecai, highness. He is the army’s treasurer and will explain the terms of our contract of employment.’

The prince’s eyes narrowed as he examined Ezra’s twisted side curls. Ezra bowed his head to the prince and his wife, whose icy demeanour had returned.

‘I will draw up a contract immediately, highness,’ said Ezra.

‘I will examine it in my palace in Severin,’ sniffed the prince.

‘How far away is that?’ asked Leon.

‘A mere ten miles to the north,’ replied Dracula. ‘I will leave you a guide to show you the way. I look forward to seeing you in my capital, commander.’

Leon saluted the prince, ignored his wife and then the pair took their leave, returning to their horses and galloping north with their escort.

‘Interesting individual,’ remarked Ezra. ‘Is he fighting his father?’

‘Not as far as I know. Why do you ask?’

‘His name is Vlad and he is fighting a man called Vladislav. Just a thought.’

‘You are embroiling us in a civil war, *mon ami*,’ commented Henri, ‘the worst type of conflict.’

‘But at least you will have cannon and Skanderbeg will have horses,’ said Leon.

The guide led his horse on foot as he walked beside Leon at the head of the column as the mercenaries headed north alongside the Danube. He was a talkative individual who provided Leon with much background information about Prince Vlad. His father had also been called Vlad, though his second name was Dracul, signifying his membership of the Order of the Dragon, an organisation dedicated to fighting the Ottomans and preventing the expansion of their empire. Leon learnt that Dracula meant ‘son of the Dragon’. He also discovered that the prince and his brother were once held hostage by the sultan to ensure the loyalty of their father.

‘The prince was educated by the Turks, lord,’ the guide informed Leon proudly. ‘He is a master of languages, war and all types of learning.’

The guide explained that the prince and his brother had spent five years as ‘guests’ of the sultan, after their release joining their father to fight for the crown of Wallachia. But King Vladislav killed the prince’s father and brother and Vlad barely escaped with his life. The guide informed Leon that John Hunyadi had vacillated between supporting the prince’s father and Vladislav, playing off one against the other, all the time trying to halt the seemingly inexorable Ottoman advance.

‘And is Hunyadi an ally or enemy of the prince?’ asked Leon.

‘After the fall of Constantinople, lord,’ he shrugged, ‘all are united in the fight against the sultan. But now we have you on our side, all will be well.’

‘It will?’

‘The sultan fears you, lord – you and your men. It is well known, for why else would he allow you to leave Constantinople and freely go to Christian lands? We have heard much about how the “long spears” strike fear into the hearts of the infidels.’

Leon did not have the heart to tell him that he and his men had failed to hold Thrace, had been cornered like rats in a palace in Constantinople and had escaped from the city only because of the mercy of the Bey of Rumelia. The legend was certainly different from the reality, but Leon did not feel the need to inform the guide of the truth. Reputation was a weapon that if employed correctly could achieve much.

The army made the short journey north to the city of Severin, or rather a spot opposite the city where Prince Vlad’s capital had been built on the northern side of the Danube. The river was wide but at Severin there was an island in the middle of the waterway named Simian, which made crossing the river much easier. The distance between the riverbank and the island was still around four hundred yards, but the prince had arranged for large rafts to be ready to ferry his newly hired mercenaries to the island, after which they would be transported to the northern bank. The day was warm and windless, the current of the river slow, which made the crossing unexceptional. The conditions might have been ideal but it still took the rest of the day to ferry seven hundred Swiss, two hundred and fifty Frenchmen and two hundred Albanians to the island, to say nothing of the womenfolk, wagons, camels and horses. Tents had been erected and campfires lit when Leon and Wilhelm’s company, the last to leave the southern bank, stood on a raft and watched its crew strain at ropes to pull the vessel to the island. During the relays of rafts earlier, ropes had been secured to the riverbank and island, but ropes tied to trees on the riverbank were untied to leave the river obstacle free when the last raft made its final journey.

‘There used to be a bridge across the river here in ancient times,’ the guide informed Leon. ‘It was built by the Romans but collapsed many decades ago. Since then, the only way to get across the river is by raft or boat.’

The next day the second leg of the journey was carried out, more rafts on the northern shore of the island being used to ferry the mercenaries across the river. Prince Vlad and his wife were waiting for them, along with a sizeable number of horsemen in an interesting collection of mail and scale armour and open-faced helmets. Some were bare headed, including the prince and his wife, behind which was a standard bearer holding a large black flag with a red dragon in the centre. The design was repeated on the shields of the horsemen either side of Vlad. The prince was in an ebullient mood when he jumped down from his horse to greet Leon.

‘Your soldiers look magnificent, commander.’

‘Thank you, highness.’

The prince was correct in his assessment. Every pikeman and halberdier was in full plate armour and wearing sallets, the armour burnished and gleaming in the sunlight. Jean de Maingre’s hand gunners and crossbowmen all wore plate cuirasses and helmets, and even Henri’s gunners wore clean blue uniforms, their officers wearing blue plumes in their hats. The only group that presented a somewhat disorganised appearance were Skanderbeg’s horse archers, who still did not have any horses.

‘I must ask you to camp outside the city for a few days,’ requested Vlad. ‘There is no room to accommodate you all. However, you and your senior officers are welcome to lodge in my castle.’

‘That is very generous, highness, but officers stay with their men both on and off the battlefield.’

‘Democracy. Yes, of course. Come to the castle tomorrow and we will discuss the coming campaign and more permanent quarters for you and your men.’

Leon glanced at Vlad’s wife sitting on a magnificent black mare, her red hair seemingly aflame in the morning light. ‘The princess looks very striking today, highness.’

The prince looked admiringly at Sonia. ‘I am lucky to have such a woman for my wife.’

The princess caught Leon’s eye and curled a lip at him.

‘Indeed, highness.’

A camp was established to the north of the walled city, though ‘town’ would be a more accurate description, and according to procedure was surrounded by a ditch and earth rampart. The camp was upstream of Severin, which ensured the water taken from the Danube was not filled with filth courtesy of the good citizens of the city. Prince Vlad sent wagons heaped with food and

wine to the camp as a welcome to Wallachia, the gesture raising morale and endearing the young ruler to the mercenaries. The next morning, Leon, Henri, Jean, Skanderbeg and Ezra rode into Severin on gifted horses to meet with the prince.

Severin was a place of narrow streets and squat buildings with tiled roofs. The streets were unpaved and so were the squares, those holding markets filled with pungent aromas of spices mixing with animal dung. It was a far cry from the civic organisation and wealth of Milan and the splendour of Constantinople.

‘This place stinks,’ complained Ezra, holding a cloth to his nose.

‘And its citizens remind me of the poorer quarters of Paris,’ added Henri.

‘Squalor and filth can be found in every corner of the earth,’ said Jean.

‘As long as this Prince Vlad has horses to mount my men,’ remarked Skanderbeg, ‘I do not care how dirty his subjects are.’

The town of Severin was unremarkable, though the castle was an impressive structure. Built next to the Danube, the water from which was used to fill its moat, it had an outer wall and inner wall with square towers along each. The castle itself was also a square structure in the centre of which was a square courtyard. Dragon banners decorated the gatehouse and towers, and the shields of the guards who stood sentry on the walls and in the castle carried the same design. The stronghold was functional if austere, the courtyard being unpaved and the interior lacking in wall-hangings, painted plaster or coloured glass.

‘It is a far cry from Milan,’ remarked Ezra as he and the others were escorted to the great hall on the ground floor.

‘Let us hope Severin is also lacking in duplicity and treason,’ said Leon.

‘You are yet to forgive Francesco Sforza, then?’ quipped Henri.

‘I will never forgive Sforza,’ growled Leon.

Vlad and his wife were waiting for the party in the hall, seated either end of a large rectangular table in the centre of the barren chamber. Leon wondered if the prince had recently taken possession of the castle as it gave the impression of being totally unfurnished. He raised an eyebrow when he saw two benches either side of the table for them to sit on. A far cry from Milan indeed.

Vlad rose from his chair. ‘Welcome, welcome, please be seated.’

Leon and the others bowed their heads to the aloof Sonia, who looked as beautiful and icy as the day before. She was wearing a long blue dress that complimented her red locks. The wine they were served was also red, which to Leon’s surprise was remarkably palatable. Ezra

removed a rolled document from the saddlebag he had been carrying and handed it to a servant, who unrolled it and placed it in front of the prince.

‘These are the terms of employment as discussed by Commander Muller, highness,’ explained Ezra.

‘We are hiring you,’ hissed Sonia. ‘Not the other way round.’

‘It is customary for the terms of employment to be agreed before mercenaries are hired, lady,’ said Leon.

‘Highness,’ snapped Sonia.

‘My apologies,’ smiled Leon. ‘Highness.’

‘This is not Switzerland,’ she sneered.

Leon looked around at the bare walls and austere furniture. ‘Not dissimilar, I have to say.’

Prince Vlad took a cursory look at the document and then smiled. ‘I can promise you victories and glory when we take the field against the usurper Vladislav. I propose we march to the city of Targoviste immediately and challenge the traitor to fight us.’

‘Well said, my prince,’ cooed Sonia, raising her goblet to him.

The mercenaries looked at each other in bemusement. Leon took a sip of the excellent wine.

‘Victories and glory do not fill bellies, highness.’

‘Or buy horses,’ said Skanderbeg.

The prince jumped from his chair and spread his arms. ‘Wallachia is full of horses; all we have to do is capture them.’

‘And cannon, highness?’ enquired Henri.

‘Just sitting there waiting to be plucked like ripe fruit,’ beamed the prince.

Jean caught Leon’s eye and shook his head.

‘Might I enquire where the city of Targoviste is, highness, how far away it is and the reason we should march there?’ asked Leon.

‘It is the capital of Wallachia, commander,’ said Vlad, ‘and is a mere one hundred and fifty miles to the west.’

He pointed his right arm in the direction Leon assumed was west.

‘Glory beckons; we must take it.’

‘He is clearly mad,’ Henri whispered to Leon.

‘And a pauper,’ replied Leon.

‘Your vision is most intoxicating, highness,’ said Leon. ‘But before we march, we must guarantee the safety of our womenfolk. We will not leave them behind in tents outside your city.’

‘They will be perfectly safe,’ Sonia assured him.

‘Nowhere on this earth is entirely safe, highness,’ retorted Leon, looking around the hall, the only decoration being a dragon banner hanging over the table.

‘Perhaps they could move into this castle.’

Sonia was horrified. ‘Impossible. This is a royal residence, not a nunnery.’

‘Then we will have to consider your proposal, highness,’ said Leon, standing.

The others did the same, bowing their heads to Vlad.

‘I will send you my answer in the morning.’

The prince’s jaw dropped but he said nothing as the group left the chamber and retraced their steps to the courtyard where their horses were stabled.

‘He has no money, we are wasting our time here,’ spat Jean.

‘This country is poor, Leon, we should leave immediately and stick to our plan to offer our services to the Hungarians,’ said Henri.

‘My men will not be happy the prince has reneged on his promise of horses, lord,’ stated Skanderbeg.

They trotted from the courtyard, Leon noticing guards leaning on their spears and chatting to each other as the group passed. ‘Rabble,’ he hissed as he passed.

Once at the town gates Ezra pulled up his horse. ‘I have heard there is a synagogue in Severin,’ he told Leon. ‘I am going to find it and seek out the others of my faith here.’

‘Perhaps you should have an escort,’ suggested Leon. ‘We know nothing about this land or its people.’

‘Well, if it has a synagogue, then there is some civilisation here.’ Ezra smiled, turning his horse.

‘I will speak to you back in camp.’

He trotted away and the rest rode back to camp. Sentries patrolled the earth rampart and others stood to attention at the entrance, whetted blades and clean plate armour sparkling in the sunlight. The riders waited until a company of pikemen and another of halberdiers marched through the entrance. Other Swiss and French companies were conducting battle drills outside the camp, a crowd of curious civilian onlookers pointing and peering at the soldiers seamlessly carrying out intricate manoeuvres. Jean tipped his head at the townsfolk.

‘Perhaps we could charge them for watching. I suspect we would get more money out of them than Prince Vlad. Did you see the state of the soldiers in his castle?’

‘And I noticed there were no cannon on the ramparts,’ added Henri.

‘We should follow Henri’s advice and leave this place and stick to our original plan,’ moaned Skanderbeg. ‘We made a mistake coming here, lord.’

‘First appearances can be deceptive,’ said Leon. ‘But if the prince cannot provide us with money and secure accommodation, then I will organise another vote to decide if we leave Wallachia.’

The weather was warm and dry, the camp had access to clean drinking water and spirits were still high because there was abundant food and everyone was delighted to be out of Ottoman territory. He walked over to where the women were billeted and where Inge Aarberg was organising laundry and cooking duties. He stood to one side until she had dismissed the others before walking over to her, Anna, the young bride of Antonio, giving him a beautiful smile as she passed him.

‘She looks happy. Pregnancy obviously agrees with her.’

‘Six others are also pregnant,’ said Inge, ‘and I expect others to follow suit now we are safe. We will soon have a camp full of babies.’

‘More mouths to feed,’ grumbled Leon.

‘The Prince of Wallachia is a generous host,’ said Inge. ‘The food he sent will last for many days.’

‘It is the days after that I am worried about. You are well, lady?’

The question surprised her. ‘I am free, healthy and my husband has a high rank in your army. Why wouldn’t I be?’

‘I had thought of marching us all back to Swiss lands, so we do not have to fight any more.’

She linked her arm in his. ‘The commander is morose, I see. You are missing Melissa?’

Melissa had been the slave girl who had occupied his bed in Constantinople. To his surprise and distress, when offered the chance to leave the city a free woman, she had elected instead to remain in the palace where she had worked as a slave all her life.

‘Perhaps, though the meeting with the prince earlier did not fill me with confidence. I am uncertain about the future, which is an unusual and unwelcome feeling.’

She squeezed his arm. ‘You are Leon Muller, beloved of the Pope, the man who has never lost a battle and the maker of miracles.’

He laughed. ‘Miracles?’

‘When Constantinople fell and we were trapped in the palace, everyone accepted they would either die or be enslaved, and the women knew they would be raped whatever their fate. But you saved us, which was a miracle. There is not a woman in this camp who does not love you for what you saved her from.’

‘Including you?’

She kissed him on the cheek. 'Including me. Now I'm sure you have some duties to attend to, unless you want to stay here and help with the laundry.'

Leon had a spring in his step and a smile on his lips when he left the delightful Inge, not only due to being in her company but also her mention of miracles.

'Miracles.' He chuckled.

He was not particularly a man of faith. He believed in God and tried to adhere to the teachings of the church, give or take, but divine intervention was an alien concept to him and as far as he was concerned miracles only occurred in the Bible. But miracles came in all shapes and sizes, and later that afternoon Ezra rode back into camp in the company of a small, slight individual with a wispy white beard dressed in a long-sleeved blue tunic and a blue hat. Leon was standing sentry on the earth palisade surrounding the camp when the pair halted their horses behind him. It was a balmy afternoon and Leon was sweating in his armour and sallet. He shoved up his visor and peered at the pair.

'I have brought someone to see you, Leon,' called Ezra.

'I'm on guard duty,' replied Leon. 'If you want to speak to me, you will have to come here.'

Ezra turned to his companion and spoke to the older man, whereupon both dismounted and walked up the fresh earth bank to stand next to the commander.

'This is Isaac Shor, Leon, a member of the Jewish community in Severin.'

Leon estimated him to be sixty at least, with small hands and piercing blue eyes. His tunic was silk, his boots expensive brown leather, and around his waist was a white belt with a metal buckle engraved with the Star of David.

'I am delighted to meet you, commander,' said Isaac in a slightly high-pitched voice. 'Ezra has informed me of your predicament.'

'Predicament?' queried Leon.

'Your employee having no money to pay you. A most unfortunate state of affairs.'

Leon gave Ezra a black look. 'I do not condone idle gossip.'

'It was a private conversation, one Jew to another,' Isaac assured him.

'Isaac has some information that may prove beneficial,' said Ezra.

'The young prince is determined to seize the crown of Wallachia and become a great Christian warrior, perhaps one who will lead a crusader army to recapture Constantinople itself.'

Leon cracked a grim smile. 'He will quickly become a dead Christian warrior if he attempts to do that.'

'But to achieve his aim,' continued Isaac, 'Prince Vlad needs money. He has approached my community for a loan but was refused as he has no collateral to secure against such a loan.'



‘This is all very interesting,’ said Leon, Isaac telling him nothing he did not know already.

‘But Isaac believes there is a solution to the prince’s problem, and ours,’ interrupted Ezra.

Isaac looked around at the Danube and the surrounding verdant terrain. ‘This is a rich land, commander.’

‘Is it?’ queried a sceptical Leon.

‘It is rich in white gold, commander.’

‘White gold?’

‘Salt,’ explained Ezra.

‘Sixty miles to the west of here is the town of Craiova,’ said Isaac, ‘which has its own salt mine. I have been there. The mine is worked in a haphazard nature, far below its true potential, and is used to support the indolent and immoral lifestyle of the local boyar, a tyrant named Nicolae Golescu.’ A boyar was the name given to members of the nobility in Wallachia.

‘If the mine was worked efficiently, it would not only pay for your own army, but would also allow Prince Vlad to swell his own ranks,’ explained Isaac.

‘Prince Vlad knows of this town and its mine?’ asked Leon.

Isaac nodded. ‘He knows, but Nicolae Golescu is an ally of King Vladislav, has a sizeable number of men under his command and would intercept and crush the prince’s paltry army before it even reached Craiova.’

‘But perhaps not the man who held off the Bey of Rumelia for two years with a greatly outnumbered force,’ said Ezra.

Leon was intrigued.

‘You take Craiova, you will be able to purchase horses, artillery and ammunition with ease,’ stated Isaac.

‘And should I decide to strike at Craiova, what do you want in return for suggesting this course of action?’ enquired Leon.

‘To be the merchant who arranges the purchase of the weapons, armour and gunpowder you will need in the coming months,’ he replied instantly.

‘There are no cannon foundries in Wallachia, Leon,’ said Ezra. ‘Or armouries making plate armour.’

‘And your fee?’ asked Leon.

‘Twenty percent of the purchase price,’ said Isaac.

‘Ten,’ Leon shot back.

‘Eighteen,’ insisted Isaac.

‘Fifteen,’ replied Leon.

A triumphant Isaac extended his hand. 'Done.'

The next morning, before dawn, seven hundred Swiss and a hundred and fifty Frenchmen marched out of camp and took the road west while the citizens of Severin slept soundly in their beds.