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Race of Scorpions

THE HOUSE OF NICCOLÒ

DOROTHY DUNNETT

The House of Niccolò

Race of
Scorpions

Dorothy Dunnett



Vintage Books

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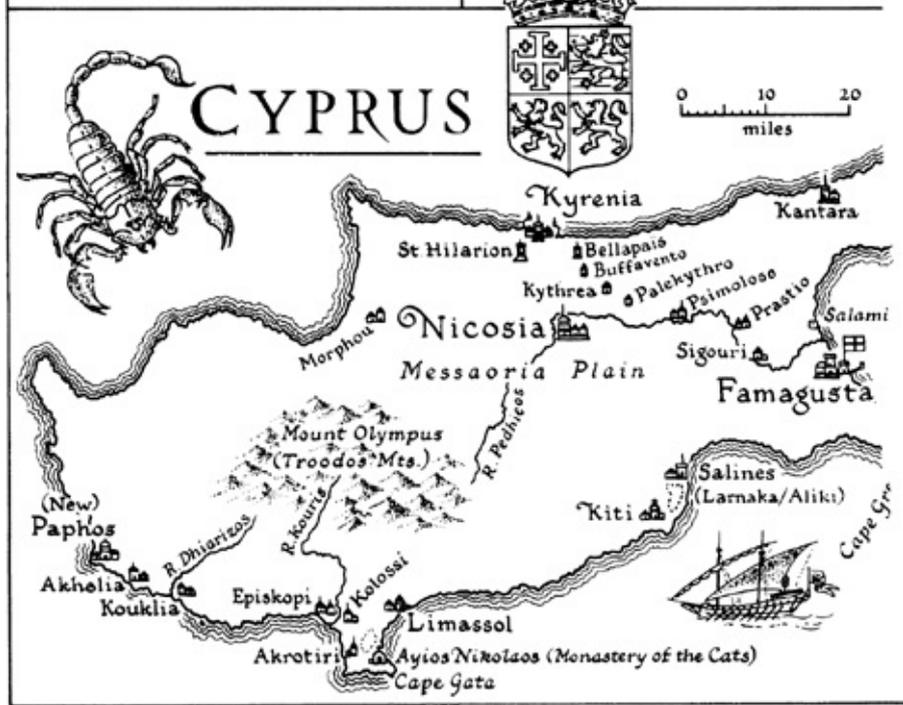
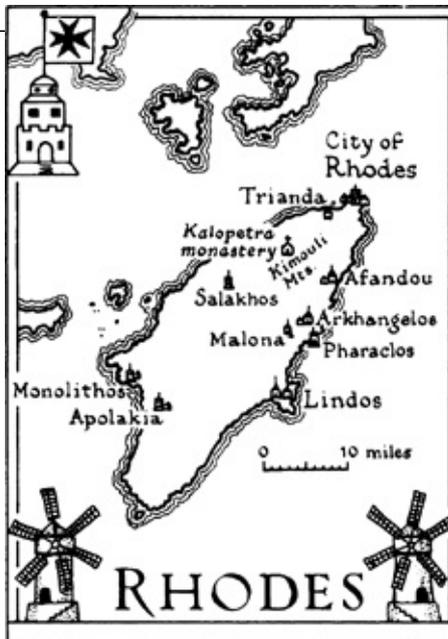
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Peter McClure 1989

THE LEVANT
 & South Eastern EUROPE

1462-4

The House of Niccolò

PREFACE

When my chronicle of Francis Crawford of Lymond ended, it seemed to me that there was something still to be told of his heritage: about the genetic lottery, as well as the turmoil of trials and experience which, put together, could bring such a man into being.

The House of Niccolò, in all its volumes, deals with the forerunner without whom Lymond would not have existed: the unknown who fought his way to the high ground that Francis Crawford would occupy, and held it for him. It is fiction, but the setting at least is very real.

The man I have called Nicholas de Fleury lived in the mid-fifteenth century, three generations before Francis Crawford, and was reared as an artisan, his gifts and his burden concealed beneath an artless manner and a joyous, sensuous personality. But he was also born at the cutting edge of the European Renaissance, which Lymond was to exploit at its zenith—the explosion of exploration and trade, high art and political duplicity, personal chivalry and violent warfare in which a young man with a genius for organization and numbers might find himself trusted by princes, loved by kings, and sought in marriage and out of it by clever women bent on power, or wealth, or revenge—or sometimes simply from fondness.

There are, of course, echoes of the present time. Trade and war don't change much down through the centuries: today's new multimillionaires had their counterparts in the entrepreneurs of few antecedents who evolved the first banking systems for the Medici; who developed the ruthless network of trade that ran from Scotland, Flanders, and Italy to the furthest reaches of the Mediterranean and the Baltic, and ventured from Iceland to Persia from Muscovy to the deserts of Africa.

Scotland is important to this chronicle, as it was to Francis Crawford. Here, the young Queen of Scots is a thirteen-year-old Scandinavian, and her husband's family are virtual children. This, framed in glorious times, is the story of the difficult, hesitant progress of a small nation, as well as that of a singular man.

Dorothy Dunne
Edinburgh, 199

Characters

November 1461–February 1464
(Those marked * are recorded in history)

Rulers

- * France: Louis XI
- * Scotland: James III
- * England: Henry VI, House of Lancaster, to 1461; Edward IV, House of York, from 1461
- * Flanders: Duke Philip of Burgundy
- * Pope: Pius II
- * Milan: Duke Francesco Sforza
- * Genoa: Doges Prosper Adorno, Louis and Paul Fregoso
- * Venice: Doge Pasqual Malipiero
- * Portugal: Alfonso V, nephew of Henry the Navigator
- * Ottoman Empire: Sultan Mehmet II

House of Niccolò:

ABROAD:

Nicholas vander Poele (Niccolò), son of the first wife of Simon de St Pol

Tobias Beventini of Grado, physician

John le Grant, Scots engineer

Loppe (Lopez), a former Guinea slave, major domo to Nicholas

UNDER CONTRACT ABROAD:

Astorre (Syrus de Astariis), mercenary leader

Thomas, English under-captain to Astorre

Michael Crackbene, sailing-master

Umfrid, Crackbene's accountant

Andrea, Florentine under-manager of Nicosia royal dyeworks

Galiot, French steward to Nicholas in Nicosia

IN VENICE:

Gregorio of Asti, lawyer

Merchant families of France, Scotland and Portugal:

Jordan de St Pol, vicomte de Ribérac, Scots financier and merchant in France

Simon of Kilmirren his son, co-owner of St Pol & Vasquez in Portugal

Katelina van Borselen of Veere, Flanders, second wife to Simon de St Pol

Henry de St Pol (Arigho), child of Katelina

Lucia de St Pol, sister of Simon

Tristão Vasquez of St Pol & Vasquez, Portuguese husband of Lucia

Diniz Vasquez, son to Tristão and Lucia and nephew to Simon

Flanders and Burgundy:

THE CHARETTY COMPANY:

Mathilde (Tilde) de Charetty, elder daughter of Marian, late wife of Nicholas

Catherine, her sister

Julius, notary, seconded from the House of Niccolò

Father Godscalc of Cologne, chaplain, also seconded

OTHER BUSINESS FAMILIES IN BRUGES:

* Anselm Adorne

* Margriet van der Banck, his wife

* Colard Mansion, scribe and illustrator

* Jehan Metteneye, host to the Scots merchants

* Tommaso Portinari of the Medici company, Bruges

* Isabelle of Portugal, wife of Duke Philip

* Sir João Vasquez, her secretary

* Pierre Bladelin, Duke Philip's controller in Bruges

* Michael Alighieri of Florence and Trebizond, the Duke's chancellor

Fleury, Dijon:

Thibault, vicomte de Fleury, maternal grandfather of Nicholas

Enguerrand de Damparis, friend of Thibault's second wife, Marian's sister

Yvonnet, his wife

Anjou:

* René, Duke of Anjou, Count of Provence and titular King of Naples and Sicily

* Jeanne de Laval, his wife

* John, Duke of Calabria, his son

* Margaret of Anjou, his daughter, wife of King Henry VI of England

* Roland Cressant, Scottish Archer

* Odile Spinola, widow of the King's Genoese maître d'hôtel

* John Perrot, abbot of Angers, René's confessor

Savoy:

* Louis I, Duke of Savoy

* Anna de Lusignan, his wife, aunt of Carlotta of Cyprus

* Luis, Count of Geneva, his son, husband of Carlotta of Cyprus

Naples and the Abruzzi:

* Ferrante of Aragon, King of Naples

* Federigo da Montefeltro, Count of Urbino, Papal mercenary

* Paltroni, his secretary

* Sigismondo Malatesta, lord of Rimini

* George Castriot (Skanderbeg), Albanian leader and patriot

* Moses Golento, one of his captains

* Count Jacopo Piccinino, mercenary captain

Florence:

* Cosimo di Giovanni de' Medici, head of the banking house of Medici

* Alessandra Macinghi negli Strozzi, matriarch of the Strozzi merchant house

* Lorenzo di Matteo Strozzi, her son, merchant in Naples

Bologna:

* Sante Bentivoglio, lord of Bologna

* Ludovico de Severi da Bologna, Franciscan Patriarch of Antioch

Cyprus:

* Carlotta de Lusignan, daughter of King John II of Cyprus and Helen Paleoioga

* Luis, her husband, son of Luis, Duke of Savoy and Anna de Lusignan of Cyprus

Primaflora, courtesan and Carlotta's attendant

Ansaldo, her lover; a knight of Carlotta's

* Sor de Naves, Sicilian defender of Kyrenia

* Thomas Pardo, Cypriot follower of Carlotta

* John de Montolif, Marshal of Cyprus

* Antony de Bon, major domo to Carlotta

* Abbot of Bellapaïs

* James de Lusignan (Zacco), bastard son of King John II of Cyprus

* Marietta of Patras (Comomutene or Cropnose), his mother

* Markios of Patras, Marietta's brother

* Jorgin, servant to Zacco

* William Goneme, Archbishop of Nicosia

* Sir Rizzo di Marino, Sicilian chamberlain to Zacco

* Sir Nicholas (Conella) Morabit, Sicilian vice-consul of Nicosia

* Philip Pesaro, Venetian captain of Sigouri

- * Gianozzo Salviati, a commander
- * Alexander Tarantin, Bailie of the Karpass
- * Antony di Zucco, Bishop of Limassol
- * Sir Philip Podocataro, doctor of law
- * Sir Peter Podocataro, his brother
- * George Bustron, commandant at Salines (Alik/Larnaka)
- * Thomas Carerio, Bailie of the King's Secrète
- * David de Salmeton, agent for the Vatachino company of brokers

GENOESE CITY OF FAMAGUSTA:

- * Napoleone Lomellini, captain of Famagusta
- * Tomà Adorno of Chios
- * Cyprien Pallavicino
- * James Doria, Bank of St George
- * Babilian Gentile
- * Hieronimo Verdure
- * Nicolao Archerio
- * Francesco de Pastino

VENETIANS IN CYPRUS:

- * Paul Erizzo, Venetian Bailie in Cyprus
- * Marco Corner, sugar-grower of Episkopi and ally of James
- * Fiorenza of Naxos, his wife, princess and grand-daughter (with Valenza and Violante) of Emperor John IV of Trebizond
- * Andrea Corner, his brother, serving Queen Carlotta
- * Giovanni (Vanni) Loredano, deputy Bailie and Episkopi factor
- * Valenza of Naxos his wife, princess of Trebizond and sister of Fiorenza above
- * Ludovic (Luigi) Martini, sugar farmer
- * Giovanni Martini, his brother
- * Bartolomeo Zorzi (Giorgio), merchant refugee from Constantinople and younger brother of Nicholai Giorgio de' Acciajuoli
- * Jacopo Zorzi, vineyard owner in Cyprus, a third brother
- * Girolamo Michiel, refugee from Constantinople and ex-partner of Bartolomeo

VENETIANS ELSEWHERE:

- * Violante of Naxos, princess of Trebizond and sister to Fiorenza and Valenza

- * Caterino Zeno, Venetian merchant, her husband
-
- * Giovanni Bembo, Venetian Bailie at Modon; kinsman to Piero Bembo and to Francesco, brother-in-law of Marco Corner

Rhodes:

KNIGHTS OF THE ORDER OF ST JOHN OF JERUSALEM:

- * Grand Master Pierre-Raimond Zacosta of Castile
- * Louis de Magnac, Grand Commander of Cyprus
- * Brother William de Combort, lieutenant in command at Kolossi
- * Brother Telli, castellan of Kyrenia
- * Tobias Lomellini of Genoa, Treasurer of the Order
- * Sir Imperiale Doria of Genoa, Admiral to Carlotta
- * Merle de Piozasque of Savoy, Admiral, also serving Carlotta
- * George de Piozasque, adherent of Carlotta
- * John de Kinloch, Scots chaplain to the Knights Hospitaller
- * Patrick Scougal, Scots Conventual Brother of the Hospital

OTHERS:

Limboulaki (Boulaki), a fisherman of Apolakia
Persefoni of Pharaelos, aunt of Boulaki
Yiannis of Apolakia
Lukas, his grandson

Turcoman, Ottoman and Mameluke Powers:

- * Uzum Hasan, lord of the White Sheep tribe of Turcomans
 - * Sara Khatun of Syria, his Christian mother
 - * Theodora his wife, niece of David, exiled Emperor of Trebizond
 - * Mehmet II, Sultan of the Ottoman Empire
 - * David Comnenos, former Emperor of Trebizond, his prisoner
 - * George Amiroutzes, the Emperor's former Great Chancellor
 - * Khushcadam of Cairo, Sultan of Egypt and Syria
 - * Emir Tzani-bey al-Ablak, his Mameluke commander in Cyprus
- Abul Ismail, Arab physician with the Mameluke force

Introduction

THE ELEGANT WORKING out of designs historical and romantic, political and commercial, psychological and moral, over a multivolume novel is a Dorothy Dunnett specialty. Her first work in this genre, the six-volume “Lymond Chronicles,” suspense was created and relieved in each volume, and over the whole set of volumes; the final beautifully inevitable, romantic secret was disclosed on the very last page of the last volume. “The House of Niccolò” does the same.

The reader of *Race of Scorpions*, then, may wish to move directly to the narrative for a first experience of that pattern, with a reader’s faith in an experienced author’s caretaking; the novel itself briefly supplies the information you need to know from past novels, telling its own tale while completing and inaugurating others. What follows, as a sketch of the geopolitical and dramatic terrain unfolding in the volumes which precede *Race of Scorpions*, may be useful to read now, or at any point along the narrative, or after reading, as an indication of which stories of interest to this volume may be found most fully elaborated in which previous volume.

VOLUME I: *Niccolò Rising*

“From Venice to Cathay, from Seville to the Gold Coast of Africa, men anchored their ships and opened their ledgers and weighed one thing against another as if nothing would ever change.” This first sentence of the first volume indicates the scope of this series, and the cultural and psychological dynamic of the story and its hero, whose private motto is “Change and adapt.” It is the motto, too, of fifteenth-century Bruges, center of commerce and conduit of new ideas and technologies between the Islamic East and the Christian West, between the Latin South and the Celtic-Saxon North, haven of political refugees from the English Wars of the Roses, a site of muted conflict between trading giants Venice and Genoa and states in the making and on the take all around. Mrs. Dunnett has set her story in the fifteenth century, between Gutenberg and Columbus, between Donatello and Martin Luther, between the rise of mercantile culture and the fall of chivalry, as that age of receptivity to—addiction to—change called “the Renaissance” gathers its powers.

Her hero is a deceptively silly-looking, disastrously tactless eighteen-year-old dyeworker-artisan named “Claes,” a caterpillar who emerges by the end of the novel as the merchant-mathematician Nicholas vander Poele. Prodigiously gifted at numbers, and the material and social “engineering” skills that go with it, Nicholas has until now resisted the responsibility of his powers, his identity fractured by the enmity of both his mother’s husband’s family, the Scottish St Poles, who refuse to own him legitimate, and his maternal family, the Burgundian de Fleurys, who failed his mother and abused him and reduced him to serfdom as a child. He found refuge at age ten with his grandfather’s in-laws, especially the Bruges widow Marian de Charetty, whose dyeing and broking business becomes the tool of Nicholas’ desperate self-fashioning apart from the malice of his blood relatives.

Soon even public Bruges and the states beyond come to see the engineer under the artisan. The Charetty business expands to include a courier and intelligence service between Italia

and Northern states, its bodyguard sharpened into a skilled mercenary force, its pawn-broking consolidated toward banking and commodities trading. And as the chameleon artificer of all this, Nicholas incurs the ambiguous interest of the Bruges patrician Anselm Adorne and the Greco-Florentine prince Nicholai Giorgio de' Acciajuoli, both of whom steer him toward a role in the rivalry between Venice, in whose interest Acciajuoli labors, and Genoa, originally home of the Adorne family. This trading rivalry will erupt in different novels around the same different, always highly symbolic commodities: silk, sugar, glass, gold, and human beings. In this first novel the contested product is alum, the mineral that binds dyes to cloth, blood to the body, conspirators to a conspiracy—in this case, to keep secret the news of a newly found deposit of the mineral in the Papal States while Venice and her allies monopolize the current supply.

Acciajuoli and Adorne are father-mentor figures Nicholas can respect, resist, or join on roughly equal intellectual terms—whereas the powerful elder males of his blood, his mother's uncle, Jaak de Fleury, and his father's father, Jordan de Ribérac, steadily rip open wounds first inflicted in childhood. In direct conflict he is emotionally helpless before them. What he possesses superbly, however, are the indirect defenses of an “engineer.” The Charette's business partners and others who hitch their wagons to his star—Astorre the mercenary leader, Julius the notary, Gregorio the lawyer, Tobias Beventini the physician, the Guinean slave Lopez—watch as a complex series of commodity and currency maneuvers by the apparently innocent Nicholas brings about the financial and political ruin of de Fleury and de Ribérac; and they nearly desert him for the conscienceless avenger he appears to become, especially after de Fleury dies in a fight with, though not directly at the hands of, his nephew.

The faith and love of Marian de Charette make them rethink their view of this complicated personality. Marian, whose son was killed beside Nicholas in the Italian wars, and whose sister married into his family, is moved towards the end of the novel to suggest that Nicholas take her in marriage. It is to be platonic: her way of giving him standing, of displaying her trust in him and his management of the business, and of solacing him in his anguish. Once married, however, she longs despite herself for physical love, and Nicholas, who owes her everything, finds happiness also in making the marriage complete.

That marriage, however, sows the seeds of tragedy. The royally connected Katelina van Borselen, “characterful,” intelligent, and hungry for experiences usually denied a genteel lady, has refused the vicious or vacuous suitors considered eligible, and seeks sexual initiation at the hands of the merry young artisan so popular with the kitchen wenches of Bruges. Against his better judgment, Nicholas is led to comply, for, however brusque her demands, she has just saved his life in one of the several episodes in which the St Pols try to destroy him. Two nights of genuine intimacy undermined by mismatched desires and miscommunicated intentions culminate in Katelina's solitary pregnancy. Unaware of this, Nicholas enters his marriage with Marian, and Katelina, alone, fatalistically marries the man in pursuit of her, the handsome, shrewd, and fatally self-centered Simon de St Pol, the man Nicholas claims is his father. Sickened at what she believes is Nicholas' ultimate revenge on his family—to illegitimately father its heir—Katelina becomes Nicholas' most determined enemy.

Simon de St Pol, the overshadowed son of Jordan de Ribérac, husband of the bitter Katelin, father of the secretly illegitimate Henry, has clearly had his spirit poisoned long since by the powerful and malignant de Ribérac, and is as much pitied as loathed by Nicholas vander Poele, who sees in Simon something of his own deracinated brilliance. Looking to find a sphere of activity where Simon and Nicholas can no longer injure each other, Marian de Charetty, now the wife of Nicholas, persuades her husband to take up an exciting and dangerous project: to trade in Trebizond, last outpost of the ancient empire of Byzantium.

It is less than a decade since Sultan Mehmet took Constantinople, and the several forces of Islam—Mehmet's Ottomans, Uzum Hassan's Turcomans, Kushcadam's Egyptian Mamelukes—ring the Christian outpost while delegates from the Greek Orthodox East, led by the very earthy and autocratic Franciscan friar Ludovico de Severi da Bologna, scour the Latin West for money and troops to mount still another crusade. With Medici backing and Church approval, Nicholas sets out for Trebizond to trade as Florentine consul, bringing his skilled mercenaries as a show of support from the West—a show that will soon turn real as the Sultan moves against the city more quickly than anyone had anticipated.

Nicholas' rival, and in some ways alter ego, is the gifted, charming, and amoral Pagano Doria, trading for Genoa, gaming with Venice's Nicholas in a series of brilliant pranks and tricks which include, terribly, the seduction of the thirteen-year-old Catherine de Charetty, one of Nicholas' two rebellious stepdaughters. Pagano, who is secretly financed by Nicholas' enemy Simon de St Pol, has invited the adolescent Catherine to challenge her stepfather, and no pleas or arguments from Nicholas, her mother's officers, or the new figures joining the Company—the priest Godscalc and the engineer John le Grant—can sway her.

In Trebizond, Nicholas deploys his trading skills while he assesses Byzantine culture, one spiritually and politically supreme, now calcified in routine, crumbling in self-indulgence. Nicholas must resist the Emperor David's languidly amorous overtures while he takes the lead in preparing the city for, and then withstanding, the siege of the Sultan. The city, however, is betrayed by its Emperor and his scheming Chancellor, and Pagano Doria suffers his own fall, killed by a black page whom he carelessly loved and then sold to the Sultan. Nicholas has willed neither fall, yet has set in motion some of the psychopolitical "engineering" which has triggered these disasters, and he carries, with Father Godscalc's reflective help and the more robust assistance of Tobie and le Grant, part of the moral burden of them.

The burden weighs even during the triumphant trip back to Venice with a rescued if still recalcitrant Catherine and a fortune in silk, gold, alum, and Eastern manuscripts, the "golden fleece" which this Jason looks to lay at the feet of his beloved wife. A final skirmish with Simon, angry at the failure of his agent Doria, ends the novel abruptly, with news which destroys all the remaining dream of homecoming: Marian de Charetty, traveling through Burgundy in her husband's absence, has died.

Judith Wilt

Chapter 1

THAT NOVEMBER, God sent snow to north Italy, to the inconvenience of all who had to travel on horseback. The way between Porretta and Bologna became choked, and only the robust cared to use it. Among these was the friar Ludovico de Severi of Bologna who set out from Porretta one evening in a mood of ferocious good humour. The snow had brought him good luck. He had located the souls he was looking for.

The silly woman was there in Porretta, and about to ride north in the morning. The man, bless his heart, was on that identical road coming southwards, but storm-stayed in the hamlet of Silla. The two were certain to meet. The friar couldn't see how, happily, they could avoid one another. The woman (for a woman) was redoubtable. The man was a cheeky young profligate, and Carlotta would eat him for supper. Through the white gloom of dusk, Friar Ludovico plodded on mule-back to Silla, producing psalms from the caves in his chest so that the clouds fell from the trees and the tracks of hares melted the snowfields. He arrived late at Silla's one tavern, stabled his mule and his serving-man and was granted a mattress to sleep on. Rising early next morning, he took the squelched track to the latrines, broke the ice in the tub, and obtained punctual news of his quarry. 'He's in there,' volunteered one of the travellers. 'Big as a gallows-tree, and the age of my grandson. Niccolò, he answers to.'

'That's him,' said Ludovico da Bologna. 'Used to be an apprentice called Claes. Where's the common-room?'

Unaware of this conversation, Nicholas vander Poele idled in an inadequate seat by the window, keeping himself to himself and resenting many things, but most of all the fact that he was sober.

The storm of snow had packed the hostelry with many travellers. In the roaring hell of the common-room, he could make out five different languages. There was a group of seraphic blond courtiers from Poland, freshly blessed and addressed by Pope Pius. There were established merchants from Milan and Ferrara; Adriatic agents and runners with business in Pisa, or Florence, or Rome. Representing Bologna was a noisy south-riding squadron of the first citizen's cavalry, led by an unshaven captain who had quickly drunk himself torpid. Nicholas emptied his parsimonious jug into his niggardly cup and sat staring at it.

Being virtually alone, he could do as he pleased. The two muleteer-guides and a house-maid had been hired in Venice by Thomas, his only companion. Thomas had dropped into silence some days ago. The massive cargo he, Nicholas, had brought from the East had long since been dispersed, along with the men from his voyage. He himself, delayed by affairs, was on his way to the place where his wife had died. It was the first time, since he had had news of her death, that he had had time to fill. He found he disliked the journey, and dreaded the end of it.

For this excursion, he needed no bodyguard. The brigands who preyed on rich merchants were unlikely to connect him, as yet, with the Niccolò who had emerged with a fortune from the ruins of Trebizond. Or if they knew so much about him, they would know that his wife, the head of his company, had died in his absence, leaving her business elsewhere. Leaving

him, at the age of nearly twenty-one years, embarked on a pointless journey to Burgundy. And then another one, to the dyeworks in Bruges where he had married her.

There was no hurry, since the journey was pointless, to leave the tavern when the snow persisted through the night and into the following morning. He sat, the empty jug at his elbow, throwing dice against himself as the wind threw grey thrumming smuts against the yellow horn window. The young woman who had wished to get into his bed came again and then went, and two of the archers from the Bentivoglio troop invited him to join in the gaming. One of them had tried to get into his bed as well. They went away. Nicholas threw his dice steadily. Thomas came to his side and peered through his window. Thomas said, 'There's that monk again. He came late last night. The road from the south must be passable.' He waited hopefully, but was vouchsafed no comment. Thomas was tired of the inn, and of Master Nicholas vander Poele, the youngest banker in Venice.

They themselves were bound south, on a detour to the medical baths of Porretta. Sante, the ailing lord of Bologna, wished to discuss a matter of silk. He might expect to place further commissions, which Nicholas would have to refuse since, of course, he was no longer working from Trebizond. Thomas spoke, still peering out at the snow. 'There. The monk's waving. You'd think that he knows you.' He spoke in soldier's Flemish, with a gross English accent.

Nicholas said, 'Maybe it's the lord of Bologna come to hunt for his late household cavalry. I hope not. The captain's still sleeping.'

He didn't listen. That was what irked Thomas mostly. He said, 'I said a friar. A Franciscan friar built like a barn, with an old goathair cloak and his habit hitched up to his knees. He's coming in.'

Nicholas flung down the dice. The door burst open. A bulky man stood on the threshold in a pool of fresh snow and strode forward, striking his cloak from his shoulders. His bare feet encased in wet sandals, had tufts of black pelt on each toe. He said, 'Messer Niccolò vander Poele. Remember me, boy?'

Nicholas heaved a great sigh and rose slowly. He said, 'I could never forget you. Thomas Fra Ludovico da Bologna, the man who means to drive the Turks out of Europe. Did you collect the money you needed?'

'Have your joke,' said the monk, undisturbed. He hitched up a stool with the sole of his sandal and sat himself down with a clang of his crucifix. 'You look as if you could do with one. That the Bentivoglio cavalry?'

He gazed across the room at the soldiers. Their livery was easy enough to identify. So was their high degree of intoxication. Nicholas sat and said, 'Yes. On their way to Porretta to collect a guest of their lord. The snow and the wine delayed them.'

'And I'll wager,' said the friar, 'that you know the name of the guest of Bentivoglio. Mention her in Venice, am I right? Refused what she offered you, am I right? And you're hanging about here trying not to meet her again, am I right? Of course I am. You didn't tell Thomas she was here, but I know your games.' A serving-girl came across and he said, 'Well, my girl. Say your prayers this morning?'

'Yes, brother,' she said, retiring circumspectly and stopping, since Brother Ludovico had retained her crucifix in his grasp like a halter.

'I doubt it,' he said. 'Kneel there, and hold that. That's what it's meant for.'

She clasped her cross obediently under her chin, then shut her eyes as he raised his voice.

over her. In two minutes he had ended, blessed her and given her a poke in the ribs, which made her drop her hands and open her eyes. 'That'll protect you from here to the kitchen,' said Fra Ludovico da Bologna. 'Now I'll have a jug of well-water. And tell your owner there's a humble friar here ready to call down God's grace on his house for any morsels his table can spare.' He turned. 'Well, Messer Niccolò, I have news for you. The lady from Porretta is coming here. If her escort didn't arrive, she planned to set off with her household without it. She should pass the door any time.'

'So long as she passes it,' Nicholas said. He watched the girl run away.

The friar contemplated him. His hair was so black and so plentiful that even when shaved his crown and his jowls were as blue as fish-hide. He said, 'Well, you're giving thought, I can see, to your fellows in trouble. You would let the lady ride without extra help to Bologna while these fellows risk the wrath of their lord, sleeping here while she went by unknowingly.'

'I probably should,' Nicholas said. 'But it's going to be all right, because you'll tell the captain.'

'Well, the lieutenant,' said the friar. 'The captain is not wholly in touch with his intelligence.' He was watching the road. It struck Thomas that he was watching the road quite intently.

Nicholas said, 'Is there something wrong?'

The friar redirected his gaze. 'Wakened up, have we?' he said. 'I don't know. I thought I saw something.'

Thomas looked out of the window. He said, 'There is something. A man. Riding this way from the south.' He got to his feet. He said, 'A man wearing livery, wounded.'

Nicholas rose, and so did the friar, as if their interlocked gaze had been hefted. The wounded rider came nearer. He was shouting. The tavern door opened, and two of the soldiers ran out, accompanied by three of the Poles. Nicholas said, 'You knew this was going to happen.'

Fra Ludovico da Bologna would never, surely, look gratified. He said, 'Am I a necromancer? But that's the device of the lady. And thieves and cut-throats love travellers. That man has been sent here for help.'

Now there was a crowd of people in the yard, helping the man from his horse. The lieutenant passed out of the room at an uncertain run. By the hearth, the captain lay snoring. Nicholas said, 'Then isn't it lucky that there's a whole squadron of horse here to help him?'

'With no captain,' said Ludovico da Bologna.

Thomas looked from one man to the other, and out of the window, and across to the hearth. He said, 'Someone's been attacked on the road. Did you hear that? There's a mob besieging a farm with some travellers in it.'

The friar smiled, still looking at Nicholas. Nicholas said, 'So it seems.'

It puzzled Thomas. He said, 'Then shouldn't we rescue them? I don't mind.'

'There you are,' said Ludovico da Bologna. 'There speaks the professional soldier. Will you let him go? You don't appear to want to go with him.'

It seemed to Thomas that his employer was being accused of something. He said, 'Master Nicholas can handle himself in a fight.' He paused and added, 'Nowadays.' Outside, horses were being brought and men were mounting, and running back and forth with helmets and swords. They included the Poles, and quite a number of other men who were not soldiers.

Nicholas sighed again. He said, 'I never thanked you for what you did in Florence, did I? Well, let me thank you for everything now. Thomas, get the grooms and the arms and let them go.'

The cloud disappeared from his companion's face. Thomas said, 'Well, it's the right thing to do. Especially if it's a lady. Who's the lady in trouble, Master Nicholas?'

'She's not a lady,' Nicholas said. 'She's a Queen called Carlotta.'

At the time of the attack, Carlotta by the grace of God Queen of Jerusalem, Cyprus and Armenia was twenty-four years of age; small, and trim, and sharp as a triple-split needle. Setting out from Porretta, she could have wished herself back in the warm baths, except that she was out of temper already, over days wasted in Rome and further days of fruitless wheedling in Florence. At Porretta, the Pope's fifty horsemen had left her, but very soon she would meet her next escort. Messer Sante had begged her to wait for them, but she was tired of old men's advice. Of any advice. If she had listened to Luis her consort she would never have won free of Cyprus. He was still besieged on the island, complaining about lack of fresh food. He should be pleased now. The Pope was sending him grain, if the ship ever arrived, and if Luis had the gumption to mill it.

In any case, she was not unescorted. With her, since she landed in Italy, were the chief of her courtiers from Cyprus, and her personal household, and enough soldiers to guard the roped boxes that contained all she had left to barter. Since they held neither ducats nor jewellery, she had not looked for trouble, but had ridden vigorously. The Greeks and the high-born, as ever, were the women who snivelled and faltered. She gave them the edge of her tongue. The others kept up, as expected. Carlotta believed in professionalism.

The attackers came from a copse. But for the snow, she would have seen them more quickly. She was riding so fast that the flying flakes made a tunnel, obscuring everything. Then she saw racing towards her a crowd of glittering shapes; the long Roman noses of horses; the studded ellipses of shields. She screamed a warning and dragged her horse round as the others jostled behind her. The wagons halted askew. And she saw, far behind, another troop of alien horse, approaching fast and spread to encircle her.

She turned her horse round and round, alarmed and angry. The snow, lifting, showed the wall of a steading with behind it an orchard, a byre and a big, solid house with closed shutters. Through open gates, the yard showed the slush of much recent trampling: there was a child's swing in a corner, and a hobbyhorse. The Queen of Cyprus said, 'There!' and, with her hand working, set her mare to make for the gates. Her women followed. She heard the voices of de Bon and Pardo organising the rearguard to hold off the attackers while the wagons drove through. They jolted round the side of the house and disappeared, led by a group of Ansaldo's men. Outside, arrows flew and swords clashed as Pardo and the rest began to retreat into the yard and force the gates shut. She waited to see that, before she marched up to the door of the house and struck it with the butt of her whip. 'Open!' she said. 'We are the Queen of Cyprus, and we command your assistance.'

It opened. Doors always did, for Carlotta. There was a hubbub. Then Pardo came in and said, 'We're secure. Madama, don't be distressed. I've sent someone to Silla for help: there will be men: there's a tavern. And meantime, the archers are ready.' He turned to the farmer and his servants, crowded into the end of the room. He said, 'The Queen thanks you, and we'

show her gratitude. The rogues outside have hackbuts, and might fire through the windows of the door. Is there a secure room for the Queen and her ladies?’

They took her to a room at the back, along with the women. One of them was snuffling. The others knew better. One was missing. She knew which one that would be. She said, ‘There are brigands? How many?’

De Bon had answered. ‘There are fifty, madama. Mostly at the front, but some here at the back where the other gates are. They won’t storm the walls: there are too few of them. You are safe. And the wagons.’

The wagons. She said, ‘Ansaldo is with them?’

‘In the barn,’ said her major domo. ‘He will protect them with his life.’

He left. The Queen stayed, biting her thumb, while the farm servants snivelled and her own ladies huddled together like hens. All but Primaflora, who would be watching the barn, not her Queen, because her lover Ansaldo was there. Court women! Imbeciles! Or if they were not, it would seem that they became so. Primaflora spoke Greek, as she must, but she was a Savoyard like Luis, and a worker. She had been thrown to Ansaldo to keep Ansaldo happy: it was her duty; she knew it perfectly; she had never given trouble before. So why act like a hen when the cock struts? The Queen marched up and down the small room, kicking her skirts, hearing the shouting outside, and the increase in noise from the front of the house. It sounded ominous. She found and slapped her page and said, ‘Go! Tell me what is happening.’ She pulled her dagger out of its waist-sheath, just in case, and saw the woman nearest her flinch. Idiot.

She had seen those assailants outside. They were encased in helms and plate armour, with no markings to tell who they were. Brigands wore a patchwork of armour if they could get it, but more often jacks of light leather. Knights who could afford complete harness could afford, as a rule, to be identified. So these must be mercenaries. But paid by whom? The Genoese? The Milanese? The Venetians? She grew impatient with the snivelling page and striding to the front of the house, found and grasped Thomas Pardo. Pardo the Cypriot, whose skin was so dark that he never looked frightened. He said, ‘Go back, madama. Every now and then, they try to storm the gates, climb the walls. We will pick them off.’

‘So long as you have arrows,’ she said. ‘What then? They could set fire to the buildings.’

‘Then they would lose what we carry,’ said Pardo.

‘They could demand our goods for our lives,’ said the Queen. ‘If they know who we are, they may demand our person in return for your safety. Have you considered this?’

‘Others have made the same offer,’ said Pardo. ‘I know none of your servants who has been tempted, or ever will be. Madama, they come.’ She looked out of the window. The farm was ringed by blurs of fast-moving steel whose human outlines had faded under coifs and surcoats of snow. Their faces looked purple. She wanted to stay, but they persuaded her to return to her women.

The fools stood as she had left them, hugging each other. The candles guttered, and the brazier smoked. She eased back a shutter an inch and saw that new snow had already covered the wheel-ruts that led to the barn. There was a sledge, and a painted barrow, and a child with a spade stuck by a well. Beside the barn, the snow had been rolled into boulders and given eyes and noses and buttons. A household of brats. In two years, she and Luis had managed no children: another failure of Luis’.

It would be remedied. She would emerge scatheless from this, as she usually did. She was afraid of dying through mishap – one had always to reckon with that. She might be robbed for a second – a third time. Her women were right to fear rape. But as Queen, she was sacrosanct, unless attacked by ignorant riff-raff, and these men were not that. So who were they? That was what was important. That and saving, with God's help, what lay in the chests on the wagons.

They brought her a chair, and time passed. She sat with her chin in her fists, hearing the whine and whicker of arrows and the explosion of hackbuts; the thud of metal and wood, and the barking voices of men. She heard fighting orders from her own men in Greek and Italian and French, and thought – but she must be mistaken – that she heard the enemy respond in much the same languages. The snow fell. A door opened and shut and Primaflora knelt at her side.

She had been out of doors. Her cloak was soaked, its hood fallen back from the immaculate golden hair inside its immaculate coif. A wisp plastered her cheek, her tinted cheek, below the pellucid eyes and the winged nostrils and the rosebud mouth with its dimple, above and below. It was natural that Ansaldo should have been mesmerised. Primaflora said, 'Forgive me, madama. It is the chests they are after. Ansaldo says they are cutting a ram for the gate. To make an assault, they will require all their men. He says that when they begin their attack on the front, he will try to drive the wagons out of the barn, across the yard and out the back gate, and make his escape to the woods. The enemy may force their way in, but you will be safe, madama. In the field, an arrow might kill you. And if the carts are secure, you have something. When they discover their loss, they might give up.'

'When they discover their loss, they will follow him,' Carlotta said. 'Where could he hide? And does he think they are deaf, even when fighting?'

'The snow will muffle the sound,' said the girl. 'The snow will cover his tracks. He is willing to try. And if he fails, he will have drawn them off, and the illustrious lady can fly. She hesitated. 'Madama, time has passed. It may be that no rescue is coming. And we have few arrows left.'

Under the paint, the girl's face was pale. The Queen paused. She said, 'You have said what you were told to say, but I see what it is. He makes of himself a decoy, and allows us a chance to escape. He is a brave man. I agree. Go and tell my lord de Bon and my lord Pardo. Then come back to me.'

The girl did what she was told and, coming back, stationed herself at the window, her eyes on the barn, her hand tight on the shutter. Even in anguish, she kept her courtesan's grace. The Queen wondered whether, impelled by true love, she had offered to ride with Ansaldo. So, he had not agreed. The Queen understood the advantages of what Ansaldo was doing, but it seemed very likely that she was going to lose him, and his men, and the boxes, and get herself taken for ransom. This was going to cost money. Holy Bones of God, her uncle the Duke would be furious. She promised herself, blackly, to tell the lord Sante precisely what she thought of his absent troop of escorting cavalry. The Queen rose, and walked through the front room.

There was daylight here, for the windows were torn and the shutters broken and hanging. There were also two or three fewer than there had been; and in a corner a man lay on his back, cloak, groaning. They were apportioning the last of the arrows and passing orders, low

voiced. She didn't interrupt them. The archers were in the room above: she could hear the footsteps. Through the window, she saw the bodies of men lying now in the yard, and beyond the gates a cluster of snow-coated helmets, white as pebbles. As she watched, they moved backwards, and the noise of their voices increased. Then they began rushing forward.

Before the ram struck the gate, Primaflora called. 'Madama! The wagons are leaving!'

The ram crashed into the gate. Pardo smiled, and gave her a salute with his sword. He said 'Courage!' and opened the door, his men round about him. The ram withdrew. A flight of arrows from over her head arched down over the wall and fell on the shields of the assailants. The ram faltered, then its bearers closed up again. Pardo dashed into the yard. Ahead, a bugle blew somewhere. Behind, a whistle shrilled. The Queen found her arm grasped by Primaflora. The girl said, 'They've seen the wagons. They left a watcher. They'll follow them.'

'Wait!' said the Queen. The trumpet flourish sounded again. Outside the gate, the ram's movement had stopped. The timber fell. The men who had carried it were running for horse. Swords flashed and men shouted commands. A banner appeared through the snow. She had seen its device in Porretta. The banner of Bentivoglio. There were also a number of fair-haired youths in green silk, with quivers of Libyan bearskin. She had seen these before, too. The Queen turned to the woman Primaflora and said, 'We are saved!'

And Primaflora said to her fiercely, 'But Ansaldo is not! Or the boxes! They are following him!'

Acute annoyance crossed the Queen's face. 'Then we must save them!' she said. 'Tell the Bentivoglio! The Queen's favour to all who assist her!'

She watched the girl run, and wondered what quality of men Sante of Bologna employed and whether they were sober. She had no great hopes. She had long ago concluded that the world would be a more efficient place if managed by women.

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