

**CAESAR OR
NOTHING**

A NOVELLA

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CHAPTER ONE

VIANA, SPAIN, MARCH 1507

‘**M**y lord! My lord! Wake up! The enemy is at the gates!’

With these words, the Captain-General of the army of Navarre was summoned from sleep in the early dawn light. He had fallen into bed long after midnight, having given final instructions to his officers for the army’s disposition about the castle of Viana, which was being held by the army of Louis de Beaumont, a rebellious subject of the king of Navarre. The royal army had succeeded in occupying the town itself, leaving only the castle’s garrison to be dealt with. Though it was a powerful place, he had good intelligence that their food supplies were running low, and he was sure that he would soon bring the siege to an end. Satisfied that he had done all that needed to be done, he had fallen instantly into sleep, as was his habit.

Sometime in those few hours, his restless mind had decided to review his life. Scenes swirled and flashed and faded before his half-conscious mind could comprehend them: the fiercely competitive childhood games he had played with his brothers; his investiture as a bishop at the tender age of fifteen, amid a swirl of pomp and incense; the heaving chaos of one of his battles, and the fiercely exultant faces of his soldiers in victory; more faces, those of men he had killed in hot and in cold blood. After all that violence he felt a moment of calm as his mind summoned his father’s big, bluff figure, the fleshy face smiling,

charming, the soft voice beguiling, reassuring him that all would be well. Then, shockingly, he grimaced in sudden pain as the fatal illness began to grip his frame. That couldn't be right, his puzzled brain told him; I wasn't with father when he died. The distant sound of heavenly trumpets came as his father's image, now beatifically calm and content, faded away.

His servant's agitated shaking dragged him back to consciousness, and to a world in which the sound of trumpets was real and urgent. It took a moment before the last shreds of his dream fled, dissolving like smoke, and he was fully awake. He was lucky: by a gift of nature, he never suffered the bleary half-aware state between sleep and life that afflicted others.

'All right, Rodrigo, all right. I'm awake now, for the love of God! You can leave off shaking me and tell me what has happened.'

'They say that a rebel army is about to attack the town, lord. Capitán Ramirez has sounded the alarm, that's why all the trumpets and bells ...'

Ramirez was an idiot, he thought to himself. No doubt he was panicking. He hauled himself out of bed and he began pulling on clothes. His steel cuirass and sword were propped in the corner of the room. Should he arm himself? Surely he was secure enough, surrounded by an army ten thousand strong, even if they did seem to be in a panic. After a moment's hesitation, he just grabbed the sword and strode out into the pandemonium of the street, where terrified citizens and confused soldiers were streaming past.

'Get my horse, Rodrigo,' he shouted above the noise, 'and bring her around here. Now!'

As the servant went off at a run to the stable down the street, Luis Ramirez, the captain responsible for the watch this night, emerged from the crowd. Seeing the Captain-General, his face lost its

frown—an expression that was habitual in a man who had been promoted, at the king's behest, well beyond his ability— when he realised that he could surrender the burden of command to his superior, who waited, hands on hips, impatience written on his face.

'Well, Luis, what has happened? Why have you raised the alarm?'

Ramirez bobbed his head, breathless.

'De Beaumont, excellency. He has relieved the Castillo!'

The Captain-General frowned. How could that be? The castle was invested as tight as could be, every approach sealed and guarded. Luis de Beaumont could not possibly have relieved the fortress overnight.

'Talk sense, Ramirez! Has the damned Count found a way to fly armies over the walls and into the Castillo? Surely, he would have had to use such miraculous means to slip past our army.'

'No, no, excellency. The Castillo is still occupied. But the Count has sent in a wagon train load of supplies...'

'How? Where were our soldiers when all this was happening?'

Ramirez looked miserable.

'I do not know, excellency. The wagons were accompanied by a strong escort, and the attempt was made in the dead of night. Our sentries should have detected them. But they did not.'

A tide of fury began to rise in him. The siege was almost done, Beaumont's garrison on the verge of surrender, and they had been given a reprieve by some stupid lazy sentries asleep at their posts. They would pay for that with their lives.

'And this escort? How many are they, that they should cause such commotion? Some thousands strong, are they?'

'We do not know how many.' Ramirez quailed before his commander's anger, apparent in the cold glare that belied the even tone of the words. 'On their way from the castle, they encountered a troop of our

men coming into the town, reinforcements from Pamplona. When they told me what had happened, I raised the alarm.'

His groom was coming down the street, leading a big black horse, restive and stamping its dissatisfaction at being dragged from the stable at this early hour. The lad had also had the presence of mind to bring Cesare's battle-helmet, a finely made piece of armour topped by a flamboyant red plume.

'You are a fool, Ramirez.' He swung up into the saddle and, grasping the reins, sawed at the horse's bit to turn it around toward the nearest gate. 'Get as many mounted troops together as you can and follow me without delay. With luck, we will catch these bastards and make them pay for their insolence!'

Horse and rider clattered off down the street, the ringing of the iron-shod hooves on the cobblestones echoing off the walls of the houses on each side. Startled soldiers and townsfolk had to jump hastily aside to make way for their grim-faced general, flattening themselves into doorways and against limestone walls. He paid them no heed, his mind busily calculating.

The great wooden gates stood open at the Puerta del Sol, with none of the accustomed sentries anywhere in sight. The short barrel-roofed passage beneath the gatehouse was half-blocked by a wagon, abandoned by some countryman fleeing in panic from the enemy army. Wrenching at the reins, he tried to drag the horse to one side so that he could pass the wagon, but the unexpected command caused the beast to stumble, and with a frightened whinny, it fell heavily on its side, throwing its rider in the process. He landed on the dusty road with a thump that drove the breath out of him.

Rolling away from the thrashing hooves, he drew a shuddering breath through protesting lungs and hauled himself to his feet. Fortunately, the horse didn't seem to be injured, and with a curse he dragged

it to its feet, where it stood trembling and snorting, eyes rolling in indignation. An excellent horseman who usually took great care with his horses, he had neither the time nor patience to coax it into compliance this morning. Instead, he climbed back into the saddle and applied his spurs with a savage kick into the beast's sides. Thus encouraged, the horse bolted forward.

In the short time left to him, the Captain-General was to regret having startled his mount to such an extent that its instinct to run overwhelmed its intelligence. For having begun, the beast soon decided that it was not going to stop, no matter how furiously its rider pulled at the reins and shouted curses in the ears that were pinned back in fear. In moments they had plunged into the dark, echoing vault of the gatehouse tunnel, startling a guard whose open-mouthed face flashed comically in and out of his vision. Then they were out into the open countryside beyond the walls of Viana.

Suddenly the sun's first rays blasted over the mountains to the east, momentarily blinding him. When the dazzle cleared, he saw a small party of mounted soldiers just a few hundred yards ahead of him. Perhaps ten men, he thought. Probably the rearguard of Beaumont's raiding party. Hearing the hooves behind them, they turned to investigate. Before he knew it, he was among them, his horse charging full tilt and by now barely under control. Instinct took over, and his sword came out of its scabbard. He crashed into them, the sword describing two deadly arcs, left and right, each of which felled an enemy in a single blow. And then he was through them, the horse careering on. But it was at last beginning to tire, the rush of adrenaline dissipating in its veins. As he gradually bought it back to its duty, he suddenly realised he was in a new predicament.

For ahead of him was the main body of de Beaumont's troops, who had turned at the sound of the clash behind them and were

waiting on a low ridge. Fifty or so mounted soldiers, his commander's eye estimated, under a banner that flapped lazily in the slight breeze, beneath which sat a tall, imperious figure who could only be Louis de Beaumont himself, the rebellious baron who he had promised King Jean he would bring to heel. Behind him, the rearguard troop that his wild passage had so disrupted was regrouping and preparing to charge up the road towards him.

He assumed that Ramirez would by now have realised that the Captain-General of the Navarrese army was missing and would be organising a force to come and find him. But there was little likelihood they would get here in time to rescue him from his folly. To the south was open country, and if he fled in that direction, he would be caught easily. So there was nowhere else for him to go except north, towards a low range of hills pierced by narrow arroyos. At least he might have a chance of finding cover, a ravine perhaps, where his enemies' advantage in numbers might be neutered. It was a slight chance, but it was the only one he had, and so without hesitation, he hauled his horse's head around once more and, applying his spurs, gathered her into a gallop.

Of course, out here in the open, his intention was immediately apparent to Beaumont, up there on his ridge. Sure enough, a dozen riders detached themselves from the main body and settled into a galloping course parallel to his own. He hunkered grimly into his saddle, his eyes searching the hills ahead for some opening. There, over a little to his left, was a cleft, marked at its foot by a stand of scrubby trees. Without a better alternative, he set his horse's head in that direction. Glancing to his right, he could see the little party of enemy riders closing steadily with him: they, too, had seen the opening ahead and had guessed his plan. Well, he thought, there was nothing left now except to ride.

He soon became oblivious to everything except the thunder of his horse's hooves and the breeze on his face. The animal seemed to have recovered its equanimity, and, as if determined to redeem itself from its earlier disgraceful conduct, had settled into a powerful loping gallop. He had been riding horses since he was a child. The unconscious part of his mind took charge of keeping him in the saddle and the horse heading in the right direction, leaving the rest of it free to contemplate his circumstances.

He was in a tight spot, no doubt of it. But he would get out of it somehow. He always had. His luck was a byword back in his Italian homeland, and it had played no small part in his career. Men had followed him because of it: you were less likely to die under a lucky leader. They had followed him as he created a kingdom out of the patchwork of unruly statelets and bandit chiefdoms of north Italy. Lord of the Romagna, they called him, and though it had required a certain ruthlessness to suppress the petty warlords who had so long made of north Italy a miserable wasteland of war, in the end he had prevailed.

And then the fates that had been so kind to him had turned, and he had lost it all. Oh, not without a struggle, and he had not lost hope that he could get it back until the final treacherous blow a few months back. That had been crushing. But just when it seemed his fortunes had reached their lowest ebb, he had found a new cause and a new career here in Navarre as the leader of King Jean's army. As he thought about it now, he had a bright future ahead. Anything was possible, even a return to Italy, where the people of his former domains were reportedly groaning under the yoke of the regime that had replaced him.

But first he had to get out of his present trouble. The thunder of his pursuers' horses was louder now, and glancing to his right, he saw they

were closing fast. Swiftly surveying the angles and estimating the speed of his own and his pursuers' mounts, he felt sure he would get to the mouth of the ravine first. After that, he was gambling that the sides of the arroyo wouldn't be too steep and that he could then abandon his horse and scramble up and out; then, he would just hide out in the scrub and await the rescue force that must inevitably be coming after him. It wasn't an unreasonable bet, for the hills hereabouts were low and gently sloped.

At last he was among the little stand of trees that marked the entrance to the ravine. His horse, almost exhausted, wanted to slow to a walk, but he dug his spurs in, forcing her onwards and through the trees. The ravine rose on each side, rather more steeply than he had expected. Then, as his pursuers burst through the trees behind him, he saw that he had made a terrible mistake. For this particular ravine was walled about with steep, unscalable cliffs. There was no way out.

He turned the horse to face his enemies. The end, he knew, was now inevitable. He was trapped in this place. His own troops might turn up and rescue him, but with that fool Ramirez leading them, he was not sanguine. Well, if he was to die, he would die in a fashion that would make them talk of him for generations. Standing in his saddle, he drew his sword with a rasp and thrust it into the air.

'Well, you carrion, what are you waiting for? I am Borgia! Kill me if you dare!'

His defiance seemed for a moment to daunt his adversaries, just a dozen of them, though he could see more emerging from the trees. They looked at each other, uncertain: they were afraid of his very name, he thought, laughing. But then they seemed by common consent to decide to attack. He settled back into his saddle and calmly awaited their onslaught.



The sun was approaching its zenith when King Jean III of Navarre rode slowly into the same narrow ravine, accompanied by half a dozen of his retinue, soldiers and servants. All about them were the signs of the passage of violence—splashes of blood on the rocks, already dried by the sun to a rusty brown colour, bushes trampled by horses, here and there scraps of clothing torn off by the thorns as their owners pressed on in search of their quarry, who had at last been brought to bay up against the cliff face of the northern wall of the canyon, and whose body lay naked stripped of every item of clothing and jewellery, bereft of armour and sword, and left lying on its back in the sun. King Jean dismounted and dropped to his knees beside the dead man.

‘Oh my Cesare, what have they done to you?’

Like so many others before him, he had been charmed by Cesare Borgia, the brother-in-law who he had not known in the years of his greatness but who had in a short time proven to be a godsend in his own desperate battle to preserve his kingdom. The handsome, bearded face on which he gazed was unmarked—the devils had left that alone, at least—and the dark eyes stared at the heavens. Yet, despite the violence done to the rest of his body, which was covered in dried blood from literally dozens of wounds, his expression in death seemed almost calm now that the frenetic energy of his life was finally stilled. Gently, the king reached over, closed his staring eyes, and then stood, looking around at the retainers standing obsequiously around him.

‘Why is he still here? Why has he not been taken back to Viana?’ The King’s voice was harsh as he glared at them. ‘This was a man of courage and honour. He deserves better than to lie here in the sun just as he fell.’

‘We did not know what to do, sire. What your wishes might be.’

King Jean looked at the speaker: Ramirez, the captain he had insisted Borgia promote, over his protests. Well, from what he had heard, poor Cesare had been right: the man was a booby. He sighed.

‘Well, now you do know my wishes, Capitán Ramirez. Cover his body, and get a party organised to carry him back to the cathedral in Viana. We will inter him there and build a monument by which to remember him. Move!’

The unfortunate Ramirez unslung his own cloak from his shoulders and draped it over the dead body, snapping commands to the nearest soldiers to collect some brush to make a hurdle on which the body could be carried back to the town. The King, looking around again at the carnage that this one man had inflicted before they finally cut him down, remounted his horse and led the way back down the arroyo.

Thus ended the life of Cesare Borgia, Duke of Valentinois and would-be King of the Romagna. He was just thirty-two years old.

CHAPTER TWO

A FUNERAL IN PAMPLONA

Brother Jorge had come to Pamplona on monastery business, a matter of negotiating a price for their olive crop with one of the city's oil merchants. But the man he had come to see turned out to be away from the city, and so he found himself in the middle of the morning at something of a loose end. He could have gone back to the monastery—it was no great distance out of the town—but he decided instead that he would first pay a visit to the cathedral. The great church had only been completed a few years ago, and he loved the coolly austere nave, with its soaring arches and delicate pillars. Half an hour of quiet contemplation, and then he would be off.

But when he arrived in the squashed little plaza that fronted the church, he found it full of people milling around and clearly waiting for something, while access to the church itself was barred by a pair of stony-faced guards. Enquiring of a young apprentice weaver, he was told that there was to be a funeral of some important person, someone so significant that the king had proclaimed a holiday so that the townspeople could bear witness to the man's interment.

'Who is this man that King Jean so honours?'

'I do not exactly know, Brother, but someone told me that it was the Captain-General of the army of Navarre who was killed in some skirmish a few days ago.' The apprentice lifted his shoulders in a shrug.

‘I care not. He could be Beelzebub himself—saving your presence, Brother—but I will be grateful to him for the day off work, for which I will raise a glass tonight in whichever tavern I find myself in.’

The youth wandered away, and, lacking anything else to do, Brother Jorge decided to take his place near the front of the crowd and watch the funeral of this mysterious Italian. He didn’t have to wait long. The approach of the funeral cortege could be heard long before it arrived at the cathedral plaza, a distant surf of sound that rose and fell as the procession wound its way through the streets, growing nearer and nearer until at last a troop of soldiers emerged from the shadows and into the bright mid-morning sunlight. Behind them came a knot of horsemen, sombrely clad in black, and then the king, a solitary rider on a high-stepping chestnut palfrey.

The coffin of the dead man came next, drawn on a cart draped in gold-embroidered black cloth, and accompanied by half a dozen chanting priests whose words ascended to heaven accompanied by the cloying smell of incense coming from a smoky censer swung by the leading priest. Almost involuntarily, Jorge mouthed the words of the prayers, though he knew nothing of the man being honoured by this splendid funeral.

The whole procession came to a shambling halt as the king dismounted, prompting the other courtiers to follow suit. For the next few minutes, the plaza was a scene of stamping, snorting confusion as the horses were handed to grooms to be led away and the royal court reformed itself around King Jean’s tall, dignified figure. Finally, another group of soldiers emerged from somewhere to lift the coffin off the makeshift hearse and settle it on their shoulders. Once satisfied that everything was in order, the king gave a curt nod and led the way into the church.

The crowd, duty done and curiosity satisfied, broke up into chattering clumps, and began to drift away towards the warren of streets that radiated from the plaza. Brother Jorge found himself alone near the steps leading up to the cathedral doors, listening to the sound of the choir's voices raised in the familiar, comforting hymns of the funeral service. Or not entirely alone, for as he turned away, his gaze encountered that of a young man who must have been standing nearby, perhaps separated by one or two people, but who, like Jorge, was now left stranded by the receding tide of spectators.

He was strong, this young man, broad shoulders straining at the seams of a worn doublet that looked as if it had accompanied its owner on many long journeys. His face was round, black hair thick and unruly beneath a wide-brimmed hat that he had evidently just jammed back on his head, and his mouth was wide and rather guileless above a deeply dimpled chin. He might have been a peasant or a labourer were it not for the dark, impassive eyes that conveyed intelligence and a certain weariness with the world that seemed odd in one so young. Brother Jorge, a man of considerable curiosity and a great deal of natural compassion, was intrigued.

'Did you know the dead man, my son?' he asked.

'I did.' The reply was clipped, as if he did not trust himself with more than a few words.

'Who was he? I was told only that he was the king's Captain-General, but no-one seemed to know anything else about him.'

'Not surprising. He only led the army for a few months. And he wasn't from Navarre; he wasn't even born in Spain, though his father was.' The young man smiled a little, as though playing a teasing game with his new acquaintance.

‘Hmmm.’ Jorge stroked his chin, thinking out loud. ‘A soldier of fortune, then. Let me see. English? Flemish? Or a German mercenary, perhaps?’

‘None of those, Brother. He was an Italian.’

‘Ah. But born of Spanish parents, you say?’

‘One was Spanish, from Valencia. His mother was Italian, from Rome.’ Another flash of even white teeth appeared as he offered his final clue. ‘And his father was a pope.’

Jorge’s brows drew together in thought. The son of a pope? The present pope, Julius II, had no progeny that he knew of, so this must be...

‘The son of the late Pope Alexander?’ Before his elevation, Alexander VI had been Rodrigo Borgia, Cardinal of Valencia. ‘Which son, then? Cesar?’

The young man nodded and clapped his hands—the soft hands of a clerk, Jorge noted. ‘Bravo, Brother. Cesar, or Cesare as he called himself in the Italian language. To whom I was bound in service for the last six months of his life.’

‘Yet from your accent, you are not yourself Italian. Castilian, I would say?’

‘Your ear is good, Brother. No, I hail from the city of Benavente, in Castile. I served the count of Benavente until I helped the duke—lord Cesare, I mean—to escape his confinement. I have been with him ever since.’

Something tugged at the corner of Jorge’s mind. The little news that made the long journey to Navarre from far-off Italy mainly came in the form of rumour and scandal. Spaniards had been proud when one of their own was crowned pope back in 1492, the same year the Catholic monarchs finally expelled the Moors from Spain. Still, in the intervening decade and a half, all sorts of unsettling tales had seeped

their way across the Pyrenees. And some of the most disturbing had concerned this warlord, Cesare Borgia.

‘He had a reputation for cruelty, this man, now that I recollect the stories about him,’ Jorge said, curious to see how his new acquaintance might react.

‘Oh, he was ruthless; that is true.’ The young man said, waving a hand in a little gesture of dismissal. ‘And from what I knew of him, capable of cruelty. But he was also a fine leader of men, who could inspire devotion. I knew him not at all when I first encountered him, but by the time they brought his body back into Viana, I had come to respect and even love him as a man. I wept at his death, and I was not alone in the army.’

Jorge nodded. Borgia must have had remarkable qualities to inspire such devotion in so short a time. And then there was this splendid funeral, organised at the command of the King of Navarre. Ordinary men did not merit such honour.

The young man regarded him with a level gaze that was a little unsettling. ‘Do you wish to know the truth about Cesare Borgia, brother? I can tell you, for we often talked when we were fugitives on the road, and he confessed much to me, lowly servant though I am.’

Before this moment, Brother Jorge had not wanted to know anything about this Italian warlord, hardly known outside his own country other than as a kind of petty tyrant. Yet there was something about this young man, an earnestness, that animated his natural curiosity. He squinted up into the sky, trying to estimate the time. Yes, he could afford to spend an hour or two satisfying that curiosity. The brothers would wonder what had happened to him, but with luck he would still be back at the monastery before it was dark.

‘My name is Brother Jorge, and I would very much like to hear more about this Borgia, master...’

‘I am no master, but my name is Garcia. Rodrigo Garcia.’

‘Then, Rodrigo, let us find somewhere to talk. Perhaps a tavern? For I find my thirst in need of slaking.’

The tavern they chose was a quiet-seeming place tucked away in a shaded street beneath the town walls. A jolly striped awning flapped lazily whenever a breath of air found its way down from the walls above and provided shade to half a dozen benches and rough wooden tables where a few early afternoon patrons sat talking and drinking from rough wooden cups. Brother Jorge and his new friend found a corner and settled down over a jug of the region’s thin red wine, delivered by the proprietor, an unshaven one-legged former soldier who stumped back and forth between the tables on his crutches with remarkable agility.

‘So tell me something of yourself, Rodrigo Garcia. You are from Castile. And you are not, I think, a mere peasant, despite your, ah, appearance.’

Garcia laughed. ‘My father is an apothecary, and I was destined to follow in his trade until chance took me across the path of the Count of Benavente. To tell the tale simply, he took a liking to me and took me into his service.’

‘I am surprised he didn’t draft you into his guard with shoulders like those.’

Another laugh. ‘I know, I know. God gave me the build of a blacksmith. But Count Antonio had other ideas. My father had taught me my numbers and letters, and he needed a clerk, so I went to live in his castle and became his confidential servant. And it was through the count that I met my lord Cesare and became his liegeman in turn.’ He inspected the inside of his cup, swirling around the dregs of wine left in the bottom, then looked up with another of his disarming grins. ‘Telling that story will make me *very* thirsty...’

Brother Jorge answered smile with smile and raised an arm to summon the tavern-keeper over. Another jug was duly delivered, and he settled back, arms crossed, and prepared to listen to Rodrigo Garcia's tale.

CHAPTER THREE

GARCIA'S TALE

One thing you must know about my former master, Antonio Alonso Pimantel, Sixth Count of Benavente: he is a schemer, who loves nothing better than a plot. Not that he is very good at it. He schemes endlessly to get what he wants by the most indirect means, never seeming to realise the straight path will oft achieve the same goal. Half the time, his plans and plots unravel faster than he can knit them up, much to the frustration of all.

Worse, he is a lover of lost causes. Particularly if the cause in question is the rescue of some man imprisoned by King Ferdinand, against whom the count has long held a grudge. If a man was confined by the king, the count insisted that his incarceration must have been unjust. If a rebel was sent into exile, he plotted to manoeuvre for his recall. All this was common knowledge in the marketplace of Benavente where we townspeople gathered to gossip about the latest rumours: one wit said that if a cat belonging to one of Ferdinand's foes found itself up a tree, the count would send a troop of soldiers to set it free.

The king had little choice but to put up with it, for Benavente is a powerful fiefdom, and he could not afford to antagonise its count, no matter how irritating his provocations. And in truth, that is all they were, for as I said the count is no genius at the art of conspiracy. His interventions would inevitably fail, and their object left in an even worse

predicament than if he had left matters alone. I think King Ferdinand knew that and was content to rely on the count's incompetence to foil his own plots.

But I am getting a little ahead of myself, for I did not fully understand the count's peculiar nature until I had been in his employ for some years. I came to join the count's household when I accompanied my father to the castle to administer some physick or another to the countess. The count, coming in to see how his wife did, seemed to take a liking to me. To this day, I don't know what prompted him, but within a few days he had summoned me back to the castle, had his household steward set me some tests to try my skill with numbers and letters, and offered me a position as his confidential clerk.

My father was not at all happy with this, for he wanted me to follow in his own footsteps. But the offer from the Count of Benavente was really more of a command, and there was little he could do to oppose it. And my own desires? They were of little interest to either man. Still, in truth, I wanted to escape the humdrum life of a tradesman that my father had picked out for me. So I was happy when I packed my few belongings into a bundle and made my way up the hill to the castle. There, I was given a chamber of my own (such luxury!) close to the count's rooms and set to work.

You might wonder, Brother Jorge, just what my duties were. And I would hard put to explain them to you. Of course, there was a certain amount of paperwork, copying out of letters and the like, and reckoning up of accounts, but in the main my job was simply to be helpful to the count as he went about his daily business. I would accompany him as he went round his properties, or on visits to neighbouring lordships, always ready to run an errand or take a message. I was diligent, and after a year or so, he began to trust me with more confidential tasks that required a little discretion and intelligence. By my twentieth

birthday, after I had been in his service for two years, I had become his indispensable right-hand man, recognised and respected by all in his household.

And so it was in that capacity that six months ago I went with the count on a visit to the town of Medina del Campo, which is a long day's ride south-east of Benavente. I only discovered the reason for our journey once we were well on our way. It was late August, it was sweltering, and the road was rather dusty, so conversation was almost impossible while we rode. It was only when we dismounted for a short break to relieve ourselves and gulp some water from a village well that he told me what he was about.

'Do you know the castle of La Mota, in Medina del Campo, Rodrigo?'

I shook my head, never having left the surrounds of Benavente.

'It is a fearsomely strong place, perched on a rock overlooking the town, impossible to assault. The king uses it to house his most prized prisoners.'

I asked the expected question, though it was more of a statement. 'You wish to visit one of those prisoners?'

'Indeed. An Italian, sent here after his domains were overthrown in a civil war. His name is Cesare Borgia.'

I must confess to some perplexity the first time I heard the name of the man for whose soul the king of Navarre is no doubt offering up prayers at this very moment. Everyone in Spain knew, of course, the surname Borgia. I was just a child when Cardinal Rodrigo Borgia was elected pope and became Alexander VI, but I remember that there was great excitement all over the town, which my father told me was because the new pope was a Spanish-born cardinal. And I knew that this pope had died just three years ago. But of this Cesare Borgia,

I knew nothing, a fact which delighted the count, who, like a child unable to hold in a secret, proceeded to enlighten me.

‘He is the eldest son—eldest surviving son, I should say, since he had a brother who died—of the late pope.’

‘And he is imprisoned in La Mota because...?’

The count shrugged. ‘The king wills it. He was a famous captain of mercenaries in Italy, but he lost all his lands when the pope died and fled to Naples. There he was betrayed, imprisoned, and shipped here to Spain. What the king intends to do with him, I know not. But his position does seem to be hopeless.’

These last words were delivered with a grin, and I knew then that the Count of Benavente had found a new quest.

We arrived in Medina del Campo as the summer sun was just setting. The count maintained a house in the town, not far from the Plaza Mayor. It was dark by the time we had found our way there, settled the horses and billeted our little escort of half a dozen soldiers. I barely had the energy to eat a hurried meal before stumbling off to bed.

The following morning the count and I made our way to the fortress of La Mota, which dominates the eastern part of the town. The count had not exaggerated when he called the fortress formidable. Approached through the town’s narrow streets, a fortified gatehouse gave the only entry across a deep ditch into a double-walled compound dominated by a massive stone keep in one corner that I thought must have been at least a hundred feet high.

Gaining admission at the gatehouse was easy enough, for the count’s name was well enough known to the guards to serve as its own passport. The governor of the castle, somewhat flustered by this grandee’s sudden and unannounced arrival, was inclined at first to refuse the count’s demand that he be allowed to visit the castle’s most important prisoner. But he was a rather ineffectual man, and he gave

way soon enough to the count's bluster. Fussily, he insisted that we wait while a servant was despatched to inform his eminent prisoner of our arrival and ask whether he was willing to receive us. All of which seemed surprisingly deferential towards a man supposedly detained there against his will.

Eventually, the messenger returned with the prisoner's agreement to our visit, and a guard was assigned to lead us up a winding stair built into the wall of the great tower until we emerged on the third floor. There we were admitted to a surprisingly large chamber, well furnished with bed, chairs, several storage chests, somewhat thread-bare tapestries hanging on the walls, and a big square table piled high with books and papers. Leaning against the edge of the table, arms folded across his chest, was a handsome, bearded man who regarded us with a look of faint amusement.

I suppose, Brother Jorge, that you want to know precisely what Cesare Borgia looked like that day six months ago when I first met him. Well, I said he was handsome, and so he was, though you could see that he had begun to suffer that coarsening common to men entering their middle age. His beard was thick and curling and somewhat in need of the attentions of a barber, his swarthy complexion was a little pallid and there was the odd strand of grey in the mane of long black hair that fell from his hat to his shoulders. But the fine bones, straight unbroken nose and noble brow suggested that he had been beautiful in his youth. He was in his thirty-first year.

As we stood at the edge of the room, Borgia briefly turned his attention in my direction. I had his full gaze for a few seconds, no more, but those moments were like confronting a hungry mountain lion. An unreasoning sense of terror seized me as the dark, unreadable eyes assessed me, calculated that I was not his principal quarry, and shifted their gaze to the count, for whom his features swiftly rearranged

themselves into a look of smiling welcome. Uncrossing his arms, he advanced a few steps towards us, and clasped the count's hands in his own.

'Welcome, my lord count. I have few visitors here, and it is always a joy to see a new face, even that of a stranger.'

His voice was silkily beguiling, and his Spanish was flawless, though it was delivered with an accent that sounded odd to my ears—a compound, perhaps, of his Italian and Andalucian roots. The count, clearly entranced with his new acquaintance, bowed with as much respect as if he were in the king's presence.

'The honour is mine, my lord duke. I hope you will forgive my arrival, all unannounced, but when I heard you were here, I was determined to meet you, for you are one of the greatest captains and statesmen of our age.' The count gave Borgia a sly, sideways look, the expression that I knew meant that he intended mischief. 'And allow me, Señor, to express my outrage at your confinement here, at the hands of the king.'

Borgia accepted this with the ease of a man used to both flattery and deference, responding with a wry smile and the tiniest nod.

'King Ferdinand will in time come to regret his decision, I am sure.' That was wry. 'And when he does, I shall find a new future, and will remember who my friends were in my time of adversity. But before we talk further, enlighten me: who is this young man?'

The lion's gaze swivelled back to where I stood, still near the door, trying to be as unobtrusive as possible. The count, glancing in my direction, waved a languid hand to gesture me forward.

'Rodrigo is my confidential servant.'

'Rodrigo? That was my father's name. You have a surname?'

'Garcia, my lord duke. Rodrigo Alonso Garcia.'

Borgia's nod coincided with a knock at the door heralding the arrival of castle servants bearing trays with wine and sweet pastries of some kind. I thought it seemed a very liberal kind of imprisonment that this Italian soldier of fortune was enduring, as the servants bustled about pouring wine and setting platters on the big table. Their task finished, they withdrew with bows, and we were left alone once more. Borgia and the count seated themselves, while I remained standing.

Borgia sipped on his wine and contemplated the count over the rim of his glass. 'So tell me, my dear count, what has been happening in the world. I hear so little in this place.'

The count, a garrulous man at the best of times, needed no further encouragement to launch into a long and rambling speech recounting the various perfidies of King Ferdinand and the political intrigues that swirled around the royal court. Borgia listened to all this with one side of his mouth dimpled into a half-smile that gave him a polite but sardonic air. Every now and then, he would interrupt with a question or observation that was so acute that it was obvious that his earlier demurs were, at the very least, disingenuous. He clearly had found the means to communicate with the world outside La Mota, and indeed to dabble in its affairs.

'...and there is famine in Castille, and the people are restless,' Benavente, beginning at last to run out of puff.

'This too, I had heard. It was reported to me that the principal cause of the shortages is the hoarding of grain by some of the nobility, who hope the people will blame the king for their woes.'

I tried to keep my face blank as the count nodded blandly at this: I knew for certain that he and his fellow barons had indeed hatched precisely that plan, and the count was one of the principal hoarders of grain in the region. If he was disappointed that his new acquaintance seemed to already possess every piece of information he had to offer,

the count didn't show it. Besides, he had one item that he had held back to the last.

'The king, as you know, is away in Naples, dealing with his affairs there. Which is unfortunate, since Philip of Burgundy is no more.'

Borgia jolted himself upright, and the cynical expression fled. 'This I had not heard. How?'

'He fell down dead in Burgos three days ago. Poison is rumoured.'

Borgia stroked his beard, and the calculating look came back into his eyes. 'So. This might change everything.'

I see, Brother Jorge, that from the look on your face that you are puzzled. No doubt you are ignorant of the political situation in Castille. It is a tangled web, but the essence is this: when Queen Isabella died two years ago, she willed her kingdom to her daughter, Joanna, who was then living in Burgundy with her husband, Duke Philip. That did not please the late queen's husband, King Ferdinand of Aragon, and he has spent the last two years trying to ensure he stayed in power. Matters were complicated by the fact that Queen Joanna had lost her wits. So it became a struggle between Ferdinand and Philip as to who should become regent for the mad queen. Then, last June, Ferdinand was outmanoeuvred, and Philip became king of Castile. Now, just three months later, he was dead.

'Philip was a friend to my cause,' Borgia went on. 'One of his first acts as king was to refuse Ferdinand's demand that I be handed over to him.'

'And now he is dead, your future is back in King Ferdinand's hands.' There was a gleam of mischief in the count's eyes. 'I am told, by the way, that the king is already on his way back to Spain.'

'You *are* well informed, count.'

The count was pleased with that. 'What will Ferdinand do with you, do you think?'

Borgia's laugh was harsh. 'Who can tell? I doubt Ferdinand himself knows, devious creature that he is. But I do know that I am nothing but a pawn to be played as he sees fit in his power games. He might keep me here to rot in La Mota. Or he might hand me back to Pope Julius if it suits his interests in Italy.'

Suddenly he was on his feet, startling us both with his sudden movement. In a few paces, he was over by the small square window—the only one in the tower—that gave a fine view across the countryside. After a few moments' contemplation, he turned back to face us with a new look of determination.

'My only hope is Navarre. King Jean is my good brother-in-law and is in alliance with Emperor Maximilian, who will do anything to stir up trouble in Italy. If I can persuade Ferdinand to allow me to travel to Pamplona, anything will again be possible.'

'And if you cannot? Do you not risk that he will refuse and simply send you back to Italy?'

Borgia stared at the count for a long moment. 'You are right. I must contrive somehow to make my own escape from this place...'

By now, the Count of Benavente was a hooked fish. The idea of bloodying king Ferdinand's nose by springing loose this prized captive was irresistible, and I knew he would do whatever he could to give Borgia his freedom.

'Rodrigo, go below and wait for me in the castle yard. I wish to have some private words with the duke.'

The abrupt dismissal startled me, and I must have stood in idiotic surprise for a moment or two before I remembered my place, bowed, and summoned the guard to let me out. I had been waiting down in the castle courtyard for half an hour or so before my master arrived. The bounce in his walk and the grin that stretched from one ear to the

other told me that count and duke had between them hatched their plot, a plan that would change my life and lead me here to Pamplona.

CHAPTER FOUR

ESCAPE FROM LA MOTA

The following morning I found myself standing with the count outside the walls of the castle of La Mota, trying to look as though we were out for a leisurely stroll. The count was far too well known in the town to make any effective disguise feasible, but we had donned large hats against the sun's heat, and he had borrowed some plain homespun clothes from one of his servants. By these minimal means we hoped to allay any suspicions from the soldiers manning the castle walls as we made our circuit.

The purpose of our reconnoitre was to familiarise me with the layout of the fortifications, since I would need to understand them thoroughly to carry out the plan the count had laid out for me the previous evening after we returned to his house. It had seemed then, and still seemed that morning, to be pure madness.

'It's simple,' he had said excitedly. 'We will let down a rope from his window, so that he can climb down into the outer bailey and escape through the eastern postern gate to freedom.'

As we stood gazing at that tall keep tower, all my objections came back to me. For a start, the drop from Borgia's window was a good hundred feet or more down to the ditch between the inner castle wall and the new outer fortifications. That would require a lot of rope, which would somehow have to be smuggled into his room undetected.

Then he would have to make his way to the postern gate undetected, and once there he would have to hope that it had been left unlocked (not unusual, but there was always the chance that someone had been more zealous than usual). Once outside, he would have to make his way through darkened streets to one of several gates in the town's outer walls.

'I know what you are thinking,' the count said. 'La Mota is a strong fortress. But there are keys to every lock, and the key to this one is complacency.'

It was the argument he had used the previous evening. The governor of the castle was, he said, an ineffectual man more devoted to drinking and eating than to his duty. The guards were slack and poorly paid, leaving them vulnerable to bribery. Moreover, the fortress had not been subjected to assault in living memory, and the usual security routines were enforced haphazardly.

'Yes, my lord,' was all I could say, having already exhausted all my arguments the night before.

We kept walking along the edge of the shallow ditch that surrounded the outer wall of the castle, until we came to a little postern gate which, sure enough, was wide open. The gate was used for all sorts of small domestic purposes—disposing of night soil from the governor's apartments, receiving private supplies for the garrison's use, allowing servants out on private errands whenever the governor wanted to avoid the scrutiny of the guards at the main gate, that kind of thing. Peering across the ditch, it was apparent that the wooden door to the entrance was hanging at a drunken angle, half off its hinges. So it was likely that it was rarely if ever closed, which meant that this part of the plan would likely work.

But first, we had to get Borgia out of his tower, and for that we needed to find a way to smuggle the rope into his apartment. The

count was very vague when I asked him how we would achieve that aim, airily waving his hand and saying that he had set things in motion that would make everything possible. Now, as we looked at the castle, it seemed that he was finally prepared to enlighten me.

‘The castle chaplain is in my pay,’ he said, with the rather child-like grin that always appeared on his face when he revealed one of his intrigues. ‘Two days from now, he will ask me to send him some books. You will take them to him in the early evening. And then he will show you where the castle’s stores are kept—the main storeroom is next to the chapel—where you will no doubt find the length of rope you need.’

I remembered that, as we were leaving La Mota the day before, the count had spotted the castle chaplain, a tall, ungainly fellow with a big, hooked nose, and detained him for some minutes in conversation; clearly, this mad plan was the fruit of that conference.

‘The rest is easy,’ the count hurried on, knowing that objections were already forming in my mind. ‘Posing as a servant, you will take the rope up to the duke’s apartment.’

My mouth dropped open. Until this moment, I had no idea that I was to have an active part in this plot. My mind raced through all the things that could go wrong. Everything depended on there being a suitable length of cord in the storeroom. Then I was supposed to just waltz up to Borgia’s apartments with the rope in my hands and ask the guard, pretty please, to let me in. And even supposing I got that far, what was I supposed to do once Borgia had made his escape?

Before I could voice any of my doubts, the count grasped my arm and turned us away, giving a jaunty wave to a guard on the battlement who had been watching us all the while. We made our way back through the streets of the town’s little Jewish barrio, crossed the bridge that spanned the river and headed back to the count’s townhouse near

the Plaza Mayor. I said nothing on the way until we were back in the cool patio of the house.

But I was soon disabused of any notion that I might have a say in matters, let alone be allowed to wriggle my way out of the role the count had assigned me. My objections were brushed aside. Of course the storeroom would have the length of rope we required: they were always doing repairs and hauling things up and down the walls, so it stood to reason that what we needed must be there. And as for getting the rope up to Borgia's apartment, he trusted that Father Lorenzo would devise a plausible plan.

'But, my lord, what am I to do once the duke has escaped?' My greatest worry was that I would be left to face the wrath of the castle guard alone.

The count looked at me with astonishment. 'My dear Garcia! Surely you don't think I would throw you to the wolves? You will climb down the rope too. Besides, the duke will need a guide to lead him out of the town and find the horses I will have left tethered for you on the riverbank.'

Which meant that the count himself was not going to be anywhere on the scene of the escape. I realised that made sense from his point of view, but I couldn't help but feel that he had arranged matters to leave me completely exposed.

'And where are we to go, once we have found the horses?'

'To my manor at Villalón. From there, he can travel to the coast and take a ship for Navarre.'

He seemed so confident that it would all work that I could see there was nothing I could say that would dissuade him, and so, with as long a face as I thought I could get away with, I surrendered my defence, feeble as it was, and accepted my fate.

The following two days passed slowly. The count sent me up to the castle once or twice on made-up errands so that my face would become familiar to the gatehouse guards, but otherwise there was nothing for me to do except sit around and worry. And then, finally, in the early evening of the second day, the expected note arrived, and I was despatched off with a couple of randomly chosen books under my arm. The gate guards waved me through, barely interrupting their conversation, and then I was in the chapel being greeted by an effusive Father Lorenzo.

‘Now we wait,’ he said happily, gesturing to the pews. He was, I saw, as much addicted to conspiracy as the count. ‘If anyone comes in, we shall pretend I am taking your confession.’

At that point, I would have confessed to being the son of Lucifer himself if it would have relieved me of any further part in this mad scheme. But no such intervention seemed likely, and so we sat there in awkward silence for another half hour or so until the sun had disappeared entirely and the chapel was in near darkness, before making our way out into the castle courtyard. Thankfully the yard was deserted, and we made our way the few yards along the dark colonnade that ran beneath the wall-walk to a big oaken door, which Father Lorenzo unlatched and pushed open.

‘It’s not locked?’ I couldn’t keep the surprise from my voice.

‘It is supposed to be, but they are lazy. They forever need to take things out or bring them in, and it is all too much trouble to go and find the castellan every time they want something. Now, let us see whether they have what we need.’

It was dark inside, and the small chamber smelled of all sorts of things, sawn wood, aromatic oils, paint and pitch, combining to make that odour familiar to most storerooms. We dared not light a torch, but a vestige of light came through a small slit window at one end,

enough for us to see the vague outlines of the jumble of boxes, tools, barrels and jars that were piled all over the place. And there, in one corner, almost as if it had been laid out for us, was a coil of rope. It was surprisingly light when I picked it up and seemed rather thin for the task we had in mind. But it was the only rope in the room, so it would have to do.

‘Do you think it will be long enough?’ Father Lorenzo whispered.

‘I don’t know.’ I hefted the coil in my hands, as if that would reassure me. ‘We will have to take the chance. How do we get it up there?’

Father Lorenzo smiled, a rather disturbing contortion in a face that was naturally immobile and forbidding. ‘Follow me to my chamber. I have that all worked out.’

The chaplain’s chamber was next door to the chapel, and we made it without incident. Once inside, he pointed at a basket that seemed to be filled with linen.

‘Take all that out and put the rope in the bottom of the basket.’

I did so, and was then instructed to put the linen back, all neatly folded, on top of the rope. Father Lorenzo then took a hooded cape hanging on the wall, draped it over my shoulders, and flipped the cowl over my head so that my features would barely be visible to anyone I might encounter.

‘Now you take the linen up to the tower. If anyone questions you, just say that the duke has requested a change of sheets.’ He tossed one of the books I had brought up with me onto the top of the linen. ‘And he wanted something to read, as well.’

I stared at him. ‘Surely the guard will recognise me? Or at least realise that I am not one of the castle’s servants?’

‘Fortunately for us, they changed the guard yesterday. He is a new man, just joined the garrison, so he won’t know his backside from his

elbow just yet, let alone who should or shouldn't be bringing linens to the prisoner. As soon as I knew that had happened, I conceived this little ploy.'

So off I went, lugging the basket, which was much heavier than I expected with the weight of both linens and the rope in the bottom. But as you have observed, Brother Jorge, I was endowed with broad shoulders, so it was no great burden.

When I eventually emerged from the winding stair, the guard was a pimply youth, uncertain of his own authority, and he made no demur when I told him my errand. I could barely restrain myself from letting out an audible exclamation of relief when he unlocked the door and pushed it open.

Borgia told me later that he had no inkling that his escape was planned for that night, for the count had been unable to fabricate a way of informing him of the details. All he had known, communicated by means of a cryptic note, was that an attempt was planned for some time soon. So he was a little startled to see me standing at the door.

'The new linens that my lord has asked for,' I announced loudly for the benefit of the guard, who I could sense was hovering behind me.

Borgia came over and peered into the basket. 'Ah. And I see that Fra Lorenzo has also sent me a book.' He picked it up and turned it over in his hands. '*The Great Men of Castille*. An interesting title.'

'It is by our late chronicler Hernando de Pulgar. Father Lorenzo through that it might be of some interest.'

'And do you know this work, Brother...Rodrigo?'

I did not, but that small fact did not matter in the circumstances. 'I have read it, yes. Most enlightening.'

'Then perhaps you might stay a while and talk to me of its contents.' He raised his eyes and sent a commanding look toward the guard.

‘Thank you, Pedro, that will be all for now. Brother Rodrigo will be staying for a while. So see we are not disturbed.’

Though a little confused, the hapless youth did as he was bid and closed the door with a click.

Borgia put his finger to his lips, an entirely unnecessary precaution. Silently, I pulled the linen out of the basket and tossed it aside, revealing the coiled rope beneath.

‘Well done!’ Borgia quietly said, picking up the coil and testing the cord’s strength. ‘Will it be long enough, do you think?’

I shrugged. ‘I do not know, my lord. But it was all that we could find.’

‘Well, we will find out soon enough.’ The smile broadened into a grin, and the dark eyes sparkled in a look I would come to know well whenever Cesare Borgia was about to take some hideous risk. He was a man who lived for excitement and thirsted for action. I could hardly imagine what the months of being imprisoned here and elsewhere must have felt like to such a one.

He looked around the room, trying to find somewhere to anchor the rope. There was nothing obvious, no hooks or rings to which the rope’s end might be attached. After a few moments of puzzlement, his brow cleared, and he pointed at the table. Very quietly, we picked it up and moved it until it was directly beneath the window. Then he took one end of the rope, and tied it securely around one of the table legs. I instantly saw what he was doing. Once the coil was tossed out of the window, our weight would pull the table against the wall and provide a secure anchor point.

Borgia would, I think, have flung the rest of the rope out then and there, and led the way down the tower wall. But I laid a restraining hand on his arm.

‘Let me check that all is clear, my lord. And I will go first to make sure the rope is long enough.’

Why I decided to take the lead like this, I do not know. But I suppose I was so fully committed to the enterprise by now that I was determined to make sure that it was a success. And there was something infectious about Borgia’s sense of adventure. Somehow this hare-brained scheme with all its follies and risks had been transformed into an escapade, a high-spirited trick that we were playing upon the king of Spain, rather than a desperate escape from confinement by a political prisoner.

I peered cautiously over the window ledge. By now it was completely dark, the only light coming from the town beyond the ditch, where a few citizens—and the town watch, probably—were walking abroad, their way lit by flickering, wavering torches. The barely visible ground below seemed a long way off. Taking a deep breath, I picked up the coil of rope and tossed it out. It uncoiled noiselessly and hung there, waiting to receive my weight. I swung around, gripped the rope in my hands and began to swarm my way down the wall.

It seemed at first that it would be easy. After giving a protesting creak, the cord seemed to hold and tighten as I climbed, hands moving smoothly one over the other and feet pressed against the wall’s stones. Oddly, I felt no fear, even though I had not climbed like this since I was a boy (and even then, it had been a childish prank upon a wall that was a quarter the height of this).

Then disaster struck. I sensed rather than felt the end of the rope approaching and, taking a look over my shoulder, realised that there was still a considerable drop to the ditch below. I hung there for a moment or two, wondering what to do. The obvious solution was to climb my laborious way back up to the window, abandoning the

attempt until we could come up with another plan. That seemed a little craven, but I couldn't see what alternative there was.

The duke, without knowing he was doing so, made my decision for me. For some reason, he had decided not to wait until I reached the ground before climbing out of the window himself. So, just as I began my climb upwards, the rope started to swing wildly as he descended. I could not call out a warning for fear of alerting the guards, so I took the only other course open to me: I let go.

Seconds later, I landed with a thump that drove every ounce of breath from my lungs, and I lay there, too stunned to move for what seemed an eternity, though it was probably not more than a minute. Struggling dazedly to my feet, I knew that I must somehow warn Borgia of the peril that he was in. Looking up, I could just make out his form as he made his way down the wall in the same fashion I had used. Then I heard a loud shout from the window far above, and I knew we must have been discovered.

By this time, Borgia was perhaps three-quarters of the way down the length of the rope. He froze and hung there, looking up at the white face of Pedro, the guard. This pimply youth, it turned out, had more presence of mind than we had given him credit for. Leaning out, he raised his sword and hacked it through with one slash.

Borgia didn't have time to scream, and his fall was twice the height of mine. He landed awkwardly, and I heard a grunt as he rolled over and over, and then lay still. He must be dead, I thought: surely he couldn't have survived a fall like that. Dropping onto my haunches, I turned him over onto his back and went to feel for a pulse, snatching my hand back again as his eyes opened and he gave a great, shuddering gasp.

His eyes focused on me. 'Christ, what a drop! So the rope wasn't long enough after all.'

Even in extremis, his sardonic sense of humour had not deserted him. But I was too anxious to be amused by that fact. ‘Can you move, my lord? They have discovered us, and we must shift ourselves quickly if we are to get away.’

He levered himself up onto his elbows and gasped with pain. ‘A cracked rib, I think. And my hands hurt like hell. I must have fallen on them. Here, help me up.’

I seized him by the shoulders, levered him up to a sitting position, and then, with a heave, onto his feet. He swayed for a moment and then gestured to me to lead on. We set off, following the line of the walls, concealing ourselves as best we could in their shadows. The ditch beneath our feet was uneven, and it was overgrown in places with tough little bushes whose thorns caught on our clothes so that our passage was awkward and stumbling. The outer bailey wall-walk above our heads seemed deserted, strangely, which made things a little simpler. Eventually, we found ourselves at the little postern gate.

Which was closed. I stared at it in disbelief. Why, tonight of all nights, had the castle guard remembered to close it? But we had come this far, and I was not about to give up now. Without thinking about it, I simply charged the door with my shoulder, fully expecting the effort to be futile. Instead, the wood gave way with a splintering crack, for it was so rotten that a child could have punched a hole in it. The force of my charge had shattered it completely, and we slipped through the remains of the doorframe as daintily as a courtier stepping onto the dance floor.

It could not be long before the castle garrison worked out what had happened, so we had very little time. Crossing the shallow ditch where I had stood with the count a few days before, we made our way into the blessed darkness of the streets of the Jewish barrio. The nearest gate was just a few minutes’ breathless walk away, and once there it

seemed that the tide of our luck had turned decisively, for the gate itself stood open and unmanned. We slipped through its arch, out onto the banks of the river, and made our way south. A soft whinny revealed the presence of the horses that had been left for us, loosely tied to a bush.

Borgia winced and let out a low moan as he tried to grasp the reins in his shattered hands.

‘Help me up,’ he muttered.

I managed somehow to heave him into the saddle, but it was evident that he could barely stay on, let alone control the beast. So I would have to lead it, slowing us down considerably. But there was no help for it, and in a few moments, we were off, and on our way to Villalón.

CHAPTER FIVE

VILLALÓN

I remember little of that ride from Medina del Campo to Villalón, some sixty miles across the open Castilian plain. The cloudy night made it slow going at first, as we tried to follow the road without light from either moon or stars, but by dawn we had reached Tordesillas and the crossing of the Douro River. The light revealed a Borgia whose face was a grey mask barely disguising the pain he was in, exhausted from clinging to the saddle with his knees alone, his ruined hands unable even to grasp the pommel of his saddle.

We clattered across the bridge, our horses' hooves sounding unnaturally loud in the early morning quiet, and then skirted the still-silent town on our way north. The count had provided food and wine in the saddlebags of one of the mounts, and Borgia's spirits revived somewhat when we stopped north of Tordesillas for a short while. After that, it was another five hours of grim riding at a slow canter, the best we could get out of our tired mounts, before the walls of Villalón emerged at last from the haze before us. By this time, Borgia was barely conscious and muttering with delirium.

The count's stronghold was a small place, little more than a stone-walled courtyard with a single three-story tower placed in one corner, more fortified manor than castle. Still, it was secure enough against all but the most determined of assaults, and to our eyes was

the most welcome sight in the world. We were not expected, since the count had not managed to send a message that we were coming, but the castellan recognised me from previous visits and without any fuss led us into the tower and up a couple of flights of stairs to the main bedchamber. A competent man, he sent out for the salves that I asked for, arranged for the stabling of our horses, set the servants to boiling water with which to clean off the dirt of the road, found new clothes from somewhere in the count's clothes chests, and organised food and wine to satisfy our hunger and thirst.

A doctor came up from the town and inspected Borgia's injuries, muttering and stroking his beard as he did so, to the evident irritation of his patient.

'Come on, man, out with it. When will I be able to ride and draw a bow again?'

That fierce glare ended the doctor's prevarications. 'You have several injured ribs, your hands are badly bruised, and I suspect there are broken bones in both. The salves your good servant here has chosen will help to deal with the bruising, but the bones will take some weeks to heal. You must keep them still, and you must stay in your bed until they do. The rest is in God's hands.'

This was not a welcome diagnosis for Borgia. Every minute that he was immobilised here was a delay that he could ill afford, for King Ferdinand would be back in Spain any day. Once he learned of Borgia's escape, he would no doubt scour the countryside looking for him.

Sensing his frustration, I did my best to reassure him. 'The doctor is right, my lord. It is clear that you cannot move. But this is a quiet, peaceful part of Castille, and the castellan will ensure that no word of your presence here leaks out. You will be safe for some time yet.'

With this, he had to be satisfied. As for me, it now seemed that my life was tied to his. A message came from the count a few days later

telling me I was to stay by the duke's side and do everything necessary to facilitate his escape to Navarre once his hands were healed. It was impossible to tell how long it would be before that escape could be arranged. Weeks, the physician had said, perhaps even a month.

Though he had been at Villalón for just a few days, Borgia was already restless and impatient at his enforced confinement. Having recovered his senses, he demanded that I fetch pen and paper and sit by his bedside while he dictated letters to his wife, the lady Charlotte, at her chateau in Feusines, and to her brother, King Jean of Navarre. Telling them that he had escaped Ferdinand's clutches and that he was safely housed somewhere whose location he would not disclose, he swore that he would soon be free and make his way to Pamplona where, he hoped, his good brother-in-law would make representations to enable his early return to France and the resumption of his position at the French court.

He also wrote to King Louis of France, and to his chief minister, Cardinal Georges d'Amboise, the Bishop of Rouen. These letters adopted a more wheedling tone, protesting his loyalty to the French king and offering his services in whatever capacity the king might see fit. He reminded the king that he had been of great service to him in the past and, once he had achieved his own liberation, would do so again.

Most of this meant little to me at the time, for I knew almost nothing of the politics of these great states. Slightly amazed that I, the son of a mere apothecary, should be writing letters that would eventually find their way into the hands of kings and bishops, I simply scribbled down the words as accurately as I could, writing them out in a fair hand afterwards, and then a third time to make a copy for the duke to keep in his travelling satchel. Signed and sealed, the originals

were despatched to their destinations, carried by trusted men of the count's household.

Thus by default I became the confidential servant to a new master, Cesare Borgia, Duke of Valentinois—Valentino, as they called him in Italy. And, using the skills that I had learned at my father's knee, I also became a kind of nurse, applying salves to his wounded hands every day, carrying away the old bandages and replacing them with new ones, and generally making sure he was comfortable and rested. I was with him almost daily, and we gradually became at least amiable companions, if not friends.

One day, as I was winding new linen bandages around his hands, he began to tell me something about his life. I think he was a little bored and restless and had no one else to talk to.

'God is playing games with me, I think, by sending me to Pamplona,' he began, in a musing tone of voice, as if he was a little annoyed at the Almighty. I looked at him expectantly, and he gave me one of his wolfish little grins. 'You see, I was invested as Bishop of Pamplona when I was just fifteen. It was the first step in the career my father had planned out for me, a career following in his footsteps as a prince of the church.'

'You must be looking forward to seeing it again, then,' I replied and was startled by his bark of laughter.

'I've never been to the place, though I received its tithes for years. I was still living in Italy, where I was born. No, Pamplona was just a stepping stone, as I said. When my father became pope, just two years later, I succeeded him as Archbishop of Valencia, and a year after that, I had my red hat.'

'You were a cardinal?' I was incredulous.

'Does it seem so improbable?' He adopted a saintly air, his face tilted heavenward, his eyes soulful; if he could have moved his hands, I'm

sure he would have clasped them in prayer. The whole vision seemed so ludicrous that I could not help laughing.

‘No, you’re right,’ he said, laughing too. ‘I was never made to be a churchman. I hated every minute of it. Discarded my robes whenever I could and spent my time hunting and drinking with my friends. Father was not all that pleased, but there was little he could do to restrain me.’

I was curious about something else, and, feeling that he had granted me a certain liberty, I decided to ask. ‘Do all the popes have children? I thought priests were supposed to be celibate.’

Another laugh. ‘Ah, you are an infant lost in the woods, Rodrigo. No, not all the popes have children—the present pope, whose very soul I detest, has no progeny that I know of. None that he has acknowledged, anyway. But some have, though they usually make out they are their nephews and nieces. But such evasion was not for my father. He was proud of us, Juan, Lucrezia, Joffre and I, and he was determined that we should have all the benefits he could bestow upon us.’

‘Like any father, I suppose.’

‘Yes, but not many fathers are as ambitious as Cardinal Borgia was as he made his way to the throne of Saint Peter. By the time he got there, he had marked out paths for all of us. We were all to serve his ambition. As a cardinal, I was to help him with the government of the church. My brother Juan was to be a soldier and lead the papal armies. My sister Lucrezia was to be married off to whoever was politically useful. My youngest brother Gioffre was likewise to be found a bride who brought money, land, or both.’

There was no bitterness in his words, just amusement, as if it were all just a game. As perhaps it was, though one with high stakes.

‘So how...?’

‘How did I wriggle out of my clerical robes? Well, I tried pleading with father, telling him I should be a soldier like Juan. But he would just reply that he needed me in the College of Cardinals, where I could keep an eye on their plots and intrigues, and that was that. There was little I could do. And then Juan died, and everything changed.’

He shifted his weight in the bed and nodded towards the nearby wine flask on a small table. I poured him some wine and held the glass to his lips so that he could drink. It is an intimate act, feeding a man who cannot do so for himself, and Borgia hated the necessity for it. I had learned to anticipate when he wanted food or drink, as on this occasion, and I tried to look after him with as little fuss as possible. It was one of the things that created a bond between us.

‘Do you have any brothers, Rodrigo?’ he asked when he had finished sipping his wine.

‘No, my lord, though I do have a sister.’

‘Ah. Then you don’t know that strange bond that nature forges between brothers. I loved Juan, and I hated him. We were inseparable as children, but as we grew older, we became rivals for everything—girls, power and prestige, even our father’s affections. It became worse when father became pope. I was then seventeen, Juan sixteen. That was when it was decided that I should become a cardinal and Juan should be given the position of Gonfaloniere.’

‘Gonfaloniere?’ I asked.

‘In Italian, it means “flag bearer”, and it is the title given to the commander of the Papal Army.’

‘Which was what you wanted to be?’ It seemed a reasonable thing to say, but I was surprised by his response, which was accompanied by a bark of laughter.

‘No, not at first. Father made it clear that he wanted me to be his chief councillor, and his eyes and ears inside the College of Cardinals.

He trusted few of them, particularly the old Roman families who thought the papacy was theirs by divine right. So I had power, lots of power. But it was a life bounded by the council chamber. After a while, I began to be envious of Juan's freedom, his days spent in the saddle and on the hunt, while I was closeted with secretaries doing paperwork.'

He stopped again and closed his eyes. I thought that perhaps he had fallen asleep, for though we had been at Villalón for a week by now, his strength had not yet fully returned. I was about to get up and leave him to his rest when his eyes snapped open.

'I had nothing to do with Juan's death,' he said, giving me a glare of such ferocity that I started back in alarm.

'My lord, I, I...'

He frowned and shook his head as if recollecting where he was. 'I am sorry, Rodrigo: I've startled you. The Venetians started that rumour years after Juan was killed, trying to make mischief, and I have never been able to shake it off. It even invades my sleep.'

'My father used to tell me that great men are ever the subject of speculation, and that one should always be sceptical of the unfounded rumour heard in the marketplace.'

This piece of homespun wisdom seemed to cheer him. 'My father said much the same, though I expect he had more occasions to remind himself so than yours.'

'It is true that an apothecary does not attract as much attention as a pope,' I replied, smiling. 'But you were telling me, lord, how you went from cardinal to warrior...'

'Ah, yes.' The dark eyes blinked shut, and then opened again accompanied by a sigh. 'I said that I envied Juan, and so I did. But more than that, I was frustrated by him, because, unlike my father, I could see his flaws and how dangerous they were. He was headstrong,

determined to go his own way, and heedless of advice. He had a talent for making enemies. Worse, he was hopeless as a soldier, which became obvious when he was sent off to deal with the Orsini rebels and came back defeated. None of which reduced his standing in the pope's eyes, who kept making excuses for my brother's failures, blaming instead the duke of Urbino, who was Juan's second in command.

'Not long after that, it was decided that he and I should go to Naples to represent the pope at the coronation of their new king. The night before we were due to leave, our mother arranged a farewell feast at her villa outside Rome. It finished in the early evening, and we headed back to the city. Just outside the walls, Juan decided that the night was yet young and that he was going off to find some further entertainment. I knew what that meant: he wanted a woman. So we parted. He went off with his groom and some fellow wearing a mask I had never seen in his company before, and I made my way home. It was the last time I saw him alive.

'When he failed to return to the papal palace the next morning, father became worried. I told him he should not be concerned, for I knew Juan's ways and thought he would turn up eventually. But he didn't, and an urgent investigation was set in train. Eventually they found a man, a boatman, who had witnessed a party of men arriving at the Tiber's bank with a body, which they threw into the river. Father sent men to drag the river, and they found Juan's body.'

'He had been murdered?'

'Yes. His hands were tied, he had been stabbed over and over, and his throat had been cut.' He shook his head at the memory of it. 'I tell you, Rodrigo, I will never forget the sight of that mangled corpse, lying there on the riverbank. I had seen dead bodies before—corpses are common enough in Rome—but seeing my own brother, my own

flesh and blood, so desecrated roused a fury in me that I could hardly contain.'

I murmured something sympathetic, I don't know what, though he hardly seemed to hear me.

'My father was prostrate with grief, so I ordered an investigation to find out who had done this bloody deed, but my inquisitors found nothing. They ruled out robbery as a motive, for Juan still had his purse and jewels on him when he was found. That made everyone think it was probably a political murder. The Orsini were suspected for a while, but Juan had made so many enemies that it seemed that half of Rome had a reason to want him dead. Including me, if you believe the Venetians!'

'Because his death cleared the way for you to take his place?'

'That is the accusation. But these scandal-makers don't know that father had already realised that Juan would never be a successful soldier and that he was planning to send him off to Spain to look after our interests here. He told me so the day before the banquet. So I had nothing to gain by his death.' He shrugged as if to say that this closed the matter. 'People will believe what they wish to believe. For myself, I think it is just as likely that he was killed by the family of whichever woman he was bedding that night: he was never discreet. Anyway, as soon as Juan was buried, the pope started the machinery to enable me to renounce the cardinalship. Within a few months, I was the new Gonfaloniere.'

The memory brought a smile to his lips. 'That caused a stir, I tell you. There aren't many men in Rome who have willingly given up the comforts and privileges of the Cardinalate, let alone swapped them for the discomforts of military command.'

With which remark, seeming to have talked himself out, he sank back onto his pillows, feebly waved a bandaged hand to indicate that I

was dismissed, and promptly fell asleep. I busied myself tidying up the room and then left, quietly closing the door behind me.

CHAPTER SIX

CAESAR AUT NIHIL

The next day, when I went to the duke's room, it seemed at first as though our previous evening's conversation had never happened. I busied myself with the usual morning routines of changing his bandages, applying salves, and helping him with a rudimentary wash—he was a fastidious man who hated being dirty—through which he said very little. We settled down to some more letter writing until the midday meal was delivered by one of the servants, and then I was dismissed for the rest of the day. I spent that afternoon in the town, meandering from place to place, talking and listening to shopkeepers and innkeepers and passing travellers, keeping an ear to the ground for word of any pursuit. But there was none, and we seemed to be safe for the moment.

That evening Borgia decided that there was another letter he wanted to dictate, to someone named Michele di Corella, asking for news and intelligence about the current attitude of the Florentine government.

'Who is this Don Michele?' I asked as I finished sanding the letter. You might think that sounds impertinent, Brother Jorge, but I felt by now that Borgia trusted me and that we were on the easier terms that are usual between a lord and his confidential servants. In any event, he was not in the least put out.

‘Don Michele—or Miguel, since he is really a Spaniard—was my most trusted lieutenant in Italy. We have been companions since my youth, and he has ever been loyal. But he paid for that loyalty when I fell from power: the pope imprisoned him and had him tortured. Then, when he revealed nothing Julius could use against me, he was released, and he fled to Florence. Machiavelli persuaded the Florentine government to employ him as captain of their militia.’

I suppose that by now I ought not to have been surprised by anything Borgia told me, but I was shocked by the idea that the Holy Father would sanction torture.

‘It surprises you that a pope would go to such lengths?’ Borgia said, reading the expression on my face. ‘Power is power, Rodrigo, whether it is exercised by a king or a cleric, and it makes its own demands. Now, where is my signet?’

Since he could not wear it on his finger for the present, he kept his signet ring in a little box on the desk. I retrieved it and imprinted its image into the soft wax that sealed the letter. When I was done, Borgia bade me to read aloud the words carved into the centre of the seal.

It was hard to make them out in the dim candlelight. ‘*Caesar aut Nihil*. What does it mean?’

‘In Latin, it means “Caesar or Nothing”. I adopted it as my motto when I started my campaign in the Romagna, to tell the world that I would never compromise.’

It was also the motto of a gambler, a man for whom the choices were only ever black and white, everything or nothing. A man who would rather lose everything than accept second place. Those three words by themselves spoke volumes about Borgia’s character.

He shifted in the bed, pushing himself up with his elbows so that he could sit a little straighter, and gave me a little sideways look. ‘Caesar

or Nothing. Well, it looks like the coin has come up with Nothing for now.'

He looked so bleak that some impulse moved me to try and cheer him up. 'Coins can be tossed again, lord.' I thought about the letters we had sent off the day before. 'When we get to Pamplona, I am sure King Jean will welcome you with open arms.'

'My good brother-in-law? We'll see. It depends on what my wife writes to him.'

'Surely she will support you?'

'I cannot be sure of that. I haven't seen her since we married eight years ago. But she has always been loyal and looked after my interests at the French court as best she could.'

The idea that someone could marry and then not see his wife again for so long seemed outlandish to me. But then again, I should not have been surprised, for my years with the count of Benavente had taught me that how the rich and powerful conducted themselves was very different from the lives of humbler folk like you and me. Still, I was curious.

'How did you meet her, lord?'

I knew I was presuming again on our relationship, and for a moment I thought I might have offended him. But he just laughed.

'You remind me of Niccolò Machiavelli, the Florentine envoy who followed me around in my campaigns. He was never shy about asking impertinent questions, either.' He paused as if marshalling facts in his head. 'My father sent me to Chinon to see the new French King Louis XII. We wanted his support, you see, for our plans in Italy. To make a long story short, in exchange for a cardinal's hat for his chief councillor Georges d'Amboise, and certain promises of money and other aid, he made me Duke of Valentinois and betrothed me to Charlotte d'Albret, a princess of the royal blood—and sister of the king of Navarre.'

‘King Louis must have greatly favoured you, lord,’ I murmured.

‘Oh, Louis was besotted with me.’ Borgia’s face wore that smile of smug complacency common among men who know they can charm the birds out of the trees. ‘He would do anything for me by the time I left Chinon. And when I got home, father welcomed me as though I were a conquering hero. After all, I had done what Juan could never have done: won France’s backing for our plans for the Romagna.’

‘The Romagna, lord? Where is that? And why is it important?’

By now, I was genuinely intrigued and eager to learn more about Borgia’s story. But it seemed that the flame of the duke’s energy was once again flickering, for he sank back on his pillows and closed his eyes.

‘I am tired, Rodrigo,’ he said, eyes still closed. ‘But come back tomorrow, and I will tell you everything.’

True to his word, the next morning he launched into the tale of his Italian campaigns. I will confess that I found him hard to follow at the time, for he was talking of places and people of which I knew nothing. But fortunately, I have a retentive memory, and much later, when we arrived here in Pamplona, and I had the opportunity to look at one of King Jean’s maps of Italy, I was able to piece it all together. Nor did he tell me the whole story in one sitting, for he was still very weak, and his ribs hurt when he breathed, so he could not sustain a conversation for very long.

Let me summarise, as best I can, what he told me.

To begin with the basics, Italy was—and still is—divided into three regions. In the south is the kingdom of Naples, which includes the island of Sicily, and which was then ruled by an Aragonese dynasty. The north is a patchwork of city-states, some big, some small. Milan, Florence and Venice are the big fish; Siena, Mantua, Ferrara, Genoa

and a few others the smaller fry. Each city is surrounded by territory that they control with varying degrees of success.

And jammed between north and south is the land ruled by the pope, the Papal States. This is itself divided into two parts: the area between Rome and the Apennine Mountains, called the Lazio, and the region between the other side of the mountains and the Adriatic Sea, which is called the Romagna. It was this latter region that the new duke of Valentinois and his father Pope Alexander had decided was to become a Borgia fiefdom.

‘We were going to do what no pope in living memory has ever been able to do, Rodrigo,’ he told me that first morning, his eyes bright and his voice more animated than I had ever heard it. ‘You see, though the pope was supposed master of the Romagna, in practice it was a lawless waste ruled by the petty warlords. Bologna, Imola, Forli, Rimini, Urbino, Pesaro, and half a dozen smaller towns—each had its own master with his own private army, holding sway over a bit of territory in which they were the law.

‘Worse, the people were oppressed, the laws arbitrarily enforced when they were enforced at all, and what should have been a rich province was instead poor. Pope after pope has sworn to bring the Romagna to heel, but none has ever been able to do it. Not until my father became pope and set me the task. And I alone succeeded.’

Over the next few hours, he explained in great detail the three years of marches and counter-marches, sieges and counter-sieges of his campaigns. I am no soldier and even today I can only remember half of what he told me. What I do remember is the look on his face as he told me of some manoeuvre or another, using a set of chess pieces that he made me move around on the table to represent the various towns, castles, armies and units. It was as close to ecstasy as I have ever seen

any man. If I had not known it before, I knew then that Cesare Borgia was a man made for war.

Even to me, it was clear that he had a talent for it, taking his soldiers on forced marches to surprise his enemies, turning potential disasters into triumphs with unexpected manoeuvres, and inspiring his soldiers to impossible feats of arms. But another side to him shocked me when he first revealed it. He was boasting about how he had seized the city of Urbino, whose young duke Borgia despised.

‘Guidobaldo da Montefeltro is the weak and effeminate son of a great soldier. I would never have dared to attack Urbino if the old man was still alive. But his son was easy to fool, and I took his town from him without a blow.’

Urbino, he told me, is an all-but impregnable city, perched on a rock and heavily fortified. What is more, the dukes of Urbino have always been loyal papal allies, so there was no reason for Borgia’s armies to attack. Nor is the duchy of Urbino a part of the Romagna, lying well outside its boundaries. So when the pope’s son requested permission for his army to cross Urbino’s territory in pursuit of some other objective, Duke Guidobaldo saw no reason to object and went off to have a picnic in the park of a monastery not far from the city.

Borgia was positively gleeful as he told me what happened next. ‘When I was informed that this stripling was away from his city, I decided to take a chance and turn my column towards Urbino. We made a forced march, and before I knew it, we were at the city’s gates. There I learned that Guidobaldo, in a panic at my approach, had fled and left the city to its own devices. I had but to bring a few cannons up for the garrison to decide that surrender was better than resistance.’

A brilliant manoeuvre, even I could see that. But it was also an act of great treachery, and Borgia must have seen the distaste on my face.

‘What, you think I was behaving dishonourably, Rodrigo?’ he said, grinning at me without a hint of contrition. ‘Well, perhaps by some lights I was. Even my father was taken aback when he got the news, or so I am told. But remember this: success is its own justification. Any man who tells you otherwise is a fool.’

I could only nod and agree with this sentiment, for what did I know of statecraft? In Spain, such trickery would be despised as being against all the codes of chivalry. I could only suppose that things must be different in Italy.

By the end of our third week at Villalón, the duke’s ribs had almost healed, and the swelling had gone down in his hands, so that they had practically resumed their normal shape. However, the bones within, though they had begun to knit, were still painful and had no strength. We kept them bandaged, but he could at least pick up a glass or write rather shakily with a pen. Gripping the reins of a horse, though, caused him great pain, as we discovered when news came that caused us to flee.

I was drawing water from the well in the middle of the courtyard one morning when one of the count’s trusted retainers arrived, his horse lathered and steaming. Sliding off the beast’s back, its rider staggered a little and then looked around, an anxious look on his face which cleared when he spotted me.

‘You’ve had a hard ride, Julio,’ I said, going over to him.

‘That I have, Señor Garcia. The count commanded me to deliver this into your hands without delay.’

I took the proffered packet, slapped him on the shoulder and told him where he could stable his horse and get something to eat. Then I went back inside and slit open the package. Two minutes later, I was knocking on Borgia’s door. He was up and about, standing by the open door that led out onto the gallery overlooking the courtyard.

‘That fellow brought serious news, judging from the look on your face, Rodrigo,’ he said.

‘Yes, my lord. The count has had a visit from one of King Ferdinand’s officials. It seems that he was enquiring as to whether the count had any knowledge of your whereabouts. All of Castille is being scoured in search of an answer to that question. Therefore, he urges you to continue your journey as soon as you are able, as he does not think that you will be safe here for more than a few days.’

The effect of this news on Borgia was remarkable. Over the last few days, it was as if his spirit was ailing more than his body. He had been listless, uninterested in the news and gossip I brought back from the town, and he had ceased talking about the future. Now, confronted with the necessity of action, his face brightened, his broad shoulders seemed to square themselves, and he gave me his pirate’s smile. I am sure he would have if he could have rubbed his damaged hands together.

‘Find me a horse, and we will be away within the hour.’

I gaped at him. ‘But my lord, your hands...’

‘These?’ He held them up and inspected them as if he had never seen them before. ‘My body has ever been servant of my will, and these claws are not exempt from that law. Come, man, don’t stand there. We have much to do!’

We were ready to depart within the hour, horses stamping and snorting in their impatience to be away, meagre saddlebags filled with the clothes and effects we would need for the journey, and a couple of wineskins slung across our shoulders to sustain our spirits on the road. The duke was still grinning like a boy. Still, his bravado couldn’t entirely disguise the pain as he tried to grip the reins, having first been hoisted into the saddle with some help from me and Diego, one of the household lads who was accompanying us as a servant. But with grim

determination, he got the horse under control—it was a high-spirited animal, I realised, and not, perhaps, the best choice for an injured man—and without a backward glance, led us towards the gate and out into the countryside to begin our ride northwards, towards the coast.

CHAPTER SIX

THE ROAD TO SANTANDER

You might wonder, Brother Jorge, why we were going north rather than riding across country to Pamplona. That would, it is true, have been more straightforward and more direct, although longer. It is a good three days ride, whereas it would take two days to get to Santander. Then we would have to find a ship to take us along the coast to a Navarrese port, from whence we could finish our journey to the capital. The trouble is, between Villalón and Pamplona lies the substantial city of Burgos, where we risked being apprehended by King Ferdinand's officials. So going north would take longer, but we reckoned it would be safer, since it was more sparsely populated.

We had taken what precautions we could to disguise ourselves, dressing the duke in the robes of a rather shabby merchant, draping him in a threadbare black cloak and an old hat of the count's that was a little battered and had clearly seen better days. His injured hands we hid in a pair of worn leather gloves that we had to slit down one side to accommodate his bandages, a procedure that had caused him to gasp out loud at the pain. But it was necessary, for it was known that the duke had suffered injuries when he fell from the tower of La Mota (how, I did not know, but I guessed that the count had let something slip), and we could not risk some over-observant innkeeper or passing official making the connection.

And so we rode, grim-faced and silent, across the northern plains of Castille, our faces covered with scarves against the wind and dust from the road that contrived to get between every gap in our clothing and left our throats dry and choking. Even had we wanted to pass the time with talk, doing so was all but impossible except when we stopped to meet the needs of nature or to swallow a few mouthfuls of water and a hunk of bread with some cheese by way of lunch. I heaved a sigh of relief when the little town of Herrera de Pisuerga came into view, where we had planned to stop that night.

A tidy place of neat houses enclosed by the usual wall and dominated by a fine church in its centre, Herrera is a regular stopping place for travellers going north, and it possesses half a dozen good inns. Not wanting to draw attention to ourselves, we chose one on the edge of town, close up against the wall and not far from the southern gate. Diego was sent off to find stables for the horses and somewhere to sleep for himself while the duke and I negotiated a price with the innkeeper for a room.

At first, it seemed that my efforts to disguise Borgia had been a little too successful. The innkeeper, a burly man of a suspicious disposition, looked us up and down in disdain. Dusty and dishevelled, our plain clothes looked even more villainous than they were, and it was clear that he was dubious that we could pay our way. Still, he was affable enough at the start.

‘You look like you have travelled a long way this day, Señores,’ he said from behind the counter that ran across the back of the inn’s main public room, which was filled with early-evening drinkers who had barely registered our arrival. ‘Perhaps some wine to wash the dust from your throats?’

‘The wine can wait, fellow. I require a room for myself and my servant. And hot water and food.’ Borgia’s tone was imperious, that of

an aristocrat commanding obedience, and the innkeeper immediately bristled.

‘And perhaps I can also send you a brace of dancing girls and a lute player to while away your evening, your lordship,’ he laughed.

Sensing he was being mocked, Borgia’s face went dark beneath the grime, and his hand went to his sword. Daring much, I laid a restraining hand on his arm and tried to give him a warning look, but he shook me off.

‘Do you bandy words with me, fellow? You do not know who you are dealing with.’ His voice was loud enough to still the conversation in the tavern and cause heads to turn in our direction.

‘A down-at-heel trader in something-or-other with hardly a coin to his name, from the look of you.’ The innkeeper was not in the least intimidated. ‘Anyway, we’re full.’

‘Please, Señor, leave this to me,’ I whispered to Borgia, and was rewarded with a curt nod and the sound of his sword rasping back into its scabbard.

Leaning across the counter, I spoke in as confidential a voice as I could manage. ‘My master is, I promise you, a man of substance. But we have had a long ride, Master Innkeeper, and it has tried his temper. We do not mean to offend, and I promise you we have the money to pay whatever you ask. But we must have a room for the night.’

He looked at me, calculating, glanced across my shoulder at the duke, and then gave the smallest of nods. ‘I have one room, with one bed and a truckle. Over the stable.’

I thanked him as if he had offered us a suite of rooms in the finest part of the house, and nor did I demur when he asked an exorbitant price for what I assumed was probably the worst accommodation in the whole inn. Probably in the whole of Herrera, for all I knew. Thankfully we followed a potboy across a little courtyard, up some

rickety stairs and into a tiny room with barely enough space for the bed and the truckle the boy pulled out from underneath it. The stink of horse-dung seeped up through the floorboards from the stable below, where Diego was bunking down for the night in a corner on some straw. At least the mattresses were reasonably firm and the linen free of vermin.

Borgia sank onto the bed with a grunt, and his face was pale with exhaustion. Very gently, I eased the gloves from his hands, removed the rags of linen bound around them, and inspected the puffy, bruised flesh. Another week, I reckoned, and he would be whole again.

‘That was foolish of me,’ he said, flexing his fingers and looking at them with annoyance, as if they were reluctant soldiers refusing to go into battle. ‘It’s not as if I have never travelled in disguise before. I should have known better than to let that fellow provoke me.’

‘No matter, my lord duke, it ended well enough.’ I said, applying ointment to the wounded hands. ‘I will go down shortly and give him some silver to keep his mood sweet.’

‘You really are a remarkable young man, Rodrigo. Thank you for your loyalty.’

It was a simple statement, delivered with a grace that I had never before seen in him, and at that moment I think I would have done anything he asked of me. I bowed my head in silent acknowledgement and busied myself with some trivial tasks before going back downstairs, armed with silver, to talk again to the innkeeper.

That gentleman’s mood improved considerably when I placed some coins on his counter, and he poured me a cup of thin, sharp red wine, and another for himself.

‘He’s an odd one, your master,’ he said without preamble after we had downed the wine.

‘How do you mean, odd?’

‘Well, for a start, he’s not Spanish, is he. His accent is foreign, I can tell.’

I laughed. ‘You mean he’s not Castilian? There are lots of kinds of Spanish, my friend.’

‘No, no, it’s not that. I can tell Basque from Galician: we get travellers from everywhere here. No, he’s definitely foreign.’

‘I promise you, he’s as Spanish as you or me,’ I lied. ‘But I know what you mean. He does speak with an odd accent, but it’s because he spent many years travelling all over Europe.’

The innkeeper seemed to accept this rather lame explanation, though his curiosity wasn’t quite satisfied.

‘What is his business, that takes him far and wide?’

When we had decided to travel disguised as merchants, it had not occurred to me that we should know what *kind* of traders we were supposed to be.

‘He deals in wheat cargoes,’ I said the first thing that came to mind. ‘We are on the way to Santander to negotiate a big deal, which is why he was so agitated earlier. Our horses went lame two days ago, and we had trouble getting more, so we have been delayed.’

The innkeeper nodded: it was a common enough story. His inquisitiveness seemed to evaporate, and he poured me another wine. We chatted for a few more moments about local conditions—the wheat crop was going to be bad this year, brigands had been spotted on the road to Santander, and fewer travellers were coming through than last year—and then I bade him farewell, and returned upstairs, having first extracted a promise that someone would bring hot water up so that we could get ourselves clean, along with some food.

Feeling human again after washing off the dust of the road, we sat down at a little table under the window to consume a dinner of roasted chicken and vegetables, accompanied by a thin, sour-tasting red wine.

We were both hungry, and finished the meal in silence. When we were done, Borgia seemed once again in the mood to talk.

‘You said you had a sister, Rodrigo, did you not?’

‘Yes, lord. She is younger than me by five summers.’

‘As is my sister Lucrezia. I remember when she was born, Juan and I jostling each other to look at this new addition to the Borgia family as she lay in her crib. Juan soon lost interest in her, but I have loved her all my life. I often think that we are twin souls, for she understands me better than anyone else on earth.’

‘What is she like?’ I was curious about this Italian duchess to whom he had sent letter after letter with instructions as to how she could advance her brother’s interests; there had been nothing tender in those missives, whose tone was that of a commander issuing orders, with not a hint of affection.

‘She is beautiful. She has a perfect complexion, hazel eyes, golden hair that falls past her waist when unbound, and a fine figure with a full bosom. She is the most graceful of creatures—she moves with such perfection that she seems almost to be walking on air.’

I remember shifting uncomfortably in my seat as I listened to this paean to the virtues of his sister, couched in terms that might have made a lover blush. To disguise my discomfort, I laughed a little and replied with a commonplace. ‘Then her husband the duke must be a happy man, to have such a paragon as a wife.’

Borgia’s scowl was unexpected. ‘Alfonso d’Este is interested in only two things: his cannons and the artists who are drawn to Ferrara like moths to a flame. My sister is but a brood mare to him, and I like him no better than I liked any of her other husbands. But for now I need him, and Lucrezia will make sure that he sees the benefits in aiding me.’

‘She has had other husbands?’

Borgia looked amused. ‘Of course she did, Rodrigo. Like everyone in our family, she served our father’s ambitions. He married her off to a minor Sforza lordling, Giovanni, the lord of Pesaro, because he wanted to strengthen his influence with Giovanni’s cousin, the duke of Milan. She was just thirteen, and I quarrelled with father over it. I thought she was too young to marry a man twice her age.

‘I needn’t have worried: when father’s strategy shifted, and we didn’t need the Sforza connection any longer, he blackmailed the poor boob into accepting an annulment on the grounds of non-consummation.’ His laugh had a sharp edge of contempt. ‘That meant he had to say he was impotent if he wanted the gold we offered him. But at least he got off with his life, which is more than can be said for Alfonso of Aragon, her second husband. We had to have him strangled to end that marriage.’

You can imagine, Brother Jorge, my astonishment at these words, a reaction I couldn’t keep from showing on my face.

‘I have shocked you again, Rodrigo,’ Borgia said, reaching for the wine jug. ‘But it was a simple matter of policy. Father had decided that we must ally with France—that’s why I was sent there with a cardinal’s hat and a bribe in return for a wife and a title—and the king of France was determined to take Naples from Spain. So Lucrezia’s marriage to the bastard son of the Aragonese king of Naples was inconvenient. She was pregnant with their child, so we couldn’t have the marriage annulled. Which left only one solution.’

‘But...but...the pope *approved* of this?’

‘Oh, after the event, yes. He had to profess shock and horror for form’s sake, but he was relieved to have a problem solved.’ He frowned. ‘Lucrezia was upset for a time—I think she probably felt something for her husband, even though he was mad.’

‘Mad?’

‘Well, perhaps not completely mad, but certainly unstable. He once fired a crossbow at me when I was walking in a courtyard of the Vatican palace with Lucrezia. The idiot was jealous of me, I think.’

I was beginning to feel sorry for this sister. To be married off to advance the interests of her family was no novelty—my own sister’s future was disposed of in a similar fashion when she was married off to a doctor in Benavente, who sent my father much business—but to have two husbands disposed of so arbitrarily, and in the case of Alfonso of Aragon quite brutally, was behaviour I never had in my life heard of. Even more troubling was the duke’s attitude to the whole business. Up to this moment I had seen him as a clever if ruthless soldier, prepared to defy convention, as in the case of Urbino, but still essentially honourable. The revelation that he could arrange a murder so casually and with no apparent remorse chilled my soul and made me wonder what kind of man this Borgia was.

These thoughts fled through my mind in a fraction of the time that it just took me to relate them, along with the realisation that I would gain nothing in his eyes by allowing my distaste to appear on my face.

‘To be jealous of a brother and his sister does indeed suggest lunacy, my lord. And to miss your target with a crossbow bolt might also suggest incompetence.’

My little joke seemed to surprise him for a moment, and he just blinked at me. Then he laughed and shook his head. ‘True enough, and for that alone, he deserved his end. What’s that noise?’

The disturbance in question was the sound of a horse whinnying in the street below, accompanied by a series of low curses. Placing a finger on his lips, Borgia blew out the candle so that we could not be seen from the street and then gestured at the window. Looking out, we saw in the gloom of dusk a man swinging his legs over a restive horse that snorted its disdain for the rider even as its bit was hauled

savagely back to bring it under control. Then, with a swift kick, horse and master bolted off at a noisy clattering canter down the cobbled street, evidently in something of a hurry.

‘A messenger, do you think?’ Borgia asked.

I nodded. ‘Wait. I’ll see what I can find out.’

Leaving him in the room, I made my way down the stairs, into the deserted bar room, outside and around the back of the building to the stables below our own chamber, from whence the horse and its rider had just issued. I wasn’t surprised to see a tousle-haired and yawning Diego clambering down from the hayloft at the rear of the stable space.

‘Someone was in an awful hurry, master,’ he said, correctly guessing the reason for my sudden appearance.

‘Did you see who it was? The innkeeper, perhaps?’

‘No, it wasn’t him that was riding the horse. But I did hear his voice, from up in my hidey-hole, talking to someone—the rider, I suppose...’

‘Did you hear what they said?’

‘Nay, master. They were talking too quiet. The only word I made out was “Burgos”. The innkeeper said it twice, the second time more loudly, as if the other wasn’t understanding him.’

Burgos. So the damned inquisitive innkeeper hadn’t been satisfied at all, and was sending a messenger to the nearest royal authority, no doubt to report the presence of a suspicious stranger in the town.

‘Well, at least he is going south, in the opposite direction to us,’ Borgia said when I gave him my report. ‘By the time any word gets back here, we will be long gone.’

‘Of course. But if that bloody innkeeper suspects something is amiss with us, why didn’t he find the local authority? There must at the least be a constable in the town.’

Borgia shrugged. ‘Maybe. Perhaps the constable is away on other business. Or perhaps our innkeeper is hoping to curry favour with a

higher authority in Burgos. But either way, we should get away early tomorrow, eh?’

Once the lights were out, the duke seemed to fall quickly asleep, a habit no doubt acquired from a lifetime spent on the road or in military camps. But I had trouble persuading my mind to drift away into that blissful state of unconsciousness in which we are granted a temporary reprieve from all our worries. What with all that Borgia had told me that evening, and worrying about that mysterious messenger and his errand, and even the possibility that the innkeeper might, after all, betray us to some unknown local authority, my poor brain could not bring itself to a halt. And so it was the early morning before I finally exhausted myself and fell asleep.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ON TO NAVARRE

It was well before dawn when we left Herrera, leading our horses quietly through the dark streets until we reached the town's main gate, already open to allow entry for farmers coming to market. A sleepy guard paid no attention as we passed through and, once outside, finally mounted. Moments later we were flying along the road north at a gallop, heedless of the welfare of our horses in our desire to put as many early miles between us and that rascal of an innkeeper as possible.

By late afternoon we had crossed the mountains of northern Cantabria and were following the road that led eastwards to Santander, whose cathedral tower came into view after another hour's riding. A straggling road led to the town gates, lined with dilapidated houses, each with the day's washing hanging to dry from its balcony. The guard, an alert-looking young fellow, gave us a moment of anxiety as he demanded our names and business, but my quick explanation—that we were merchants, here to find a ship to take us to Castro Urdiales—seemed to satisfy him.

Beyond the gate, we found ourselves in a wide plaza shadowed by the bulk of the cathedral and, a little further on, a powerful-looking fortress that overlooked a deep bay filled with shipping lying at anchor. It must have been a market day, for the plaza was buzzing with the noise of shopkeepers dismantling their stalls, the day's trading

having been done. Dismounting, I asked one of them for directions to a reputable inn. The town was full, he said, with barely a bed to be had. I produced a gold coin and flipped it in his direction, and his weather-beaten face broke into a gap-toothed grin as he suddenly 'remembered' that his cousin had some rooms in the lower town, and stabling too.

So we made our way down the hill, across a three-arched stone bridge that spanned one end of a narrow man-made inlet lined by warehouses and into the jumble of houses beyond. The place we were looking for was one of a dozen or so that overlooked a small beach curving around the northern side of a large harbour that lay between the town and a long mole further to the east. Fishing boats lined the beach, and shipping of every type filled the port itself.

'Well, at least we won't have any trouble finding a ship,' Borgia said, surveying the view with hands on hips and a broad grin on his face.

The owner of the house, an older, more grizzled version of his relative in the upper town, was at first suspicious of us, but another coin soon dispelled his reservations, and we shortly found ourselves in a fine first-floor room equipped with—luxury of luxuries—two good sized beds. Throwing open the shutters to let in some air, we were treated to a fine view of the harbour and the town's cathedral and castle across the other side of the expanse of water. It had been a long and anxious ride, but for the moment, our most immediate worries seemed over. Once we found ourselves a ship, we would be away, and Borgia would be out of the reach of King Ferdinand.

'Well, there is no time like the present. Let's go down to the harbour and find our passage.'

'Now, lord?' It was getting late, and I had assumed that we would do nothing until the morning. But Borgia, as if he could smell his imminent escape but was afraid that it might slip away from him at

the last minute, was adamant that we should go and find a shipmaster willing to take us aboard on the morrow.

The last rays of the setting sun were lancing between the mountain peaks as we made our way out onto the mole, where half a dozen small vessels were moored. Three of them were deserted, their crews presumably enjoying themselves in the taverns and brothels of the town, but the fourth had only lately arrived, and her crew was still busy unloading a cargo of olive oil. We watched for a moment as three big barrels, lashed together with stout tarred rope, swayed their way between ship and shore with the assistance of a small crane, their progress marked by shouts and oaths from the sweating seamen.

‘Have you business with the *Esmeralda*, Señores? Or are you just passing the time of day?’

The words came from a short, swarthy man with a great spade of a beard supervising the quayside operations. There was an edge of arrogance to his tone that I feared might trigger the duke’s temper, a possibility I forestalled by taking the lead.

‘We are looking for a passage along the coast. To Castro Urdiales. Perhaps you are going that way?’

‘And you have sufficient gold to pay for your passage?’

‘Of course, Señor.’

A yellow-toothed smile showed through the beard. ‘Then you are in luck, my friends. Castro Urdiales is our next port. We leave the day after tomorrow, and we have room for a couple of passengers.’ He swept his arm around and bowed a little at the waist. ‘Enrique Batistero, master of the *Esmeralda*, at your service.’

‘Rodrigo Garcia, of Benavente; this is my uncle, Cesar.’

‘Benavente? Where is that? Not sure I have ever heard of it.’

‘In Castile, Señor, province of Zamora.’

‘Then you are a long way from home. What brings you to the coast?’

‘We are traders on our way to Castro Urdiales to buy a cargo of wheat.’ I thought it best to stick to the story I had used the day before in Herrera.

The shipmaster’s curiosity seemed satisfied, which was just as well because I could sense that the duke’s impatience with this chit-chat was running out.

‘And how much would the Señores be prepared to pay for their passage?’ This question was directed to Borgia—naturally enough, since as my ‘uncle’ he would presumably be the senior—but it sent a tremor of alarm through my mind. Would an Italian duke have any idea what was a reasonable price to offer for a short passage along the coast?

‘Eighty Reales,’ Borgia said without hesitation, ‘and another ten if you sail on tomorrow’s tide.’

The way Batistero’s black eyebrows climbed up his forehead told me instantly that the duke’s offer was much too generous, a feeling confirmed by the shipmaster’s instant acceptance, without any bargaining.

‘Well then. That seems sufficient. You have the money with you?’

The duke gestured to me, and I counted out a dozen coins. The shipmaster’s grin grew wider with each coin until I thought he would split his face in two. We parted with strict instructions to be on the quayside no later than nine the following morning.

Back in our lodging, the duke seemed unconcerned about the exorbitant price that we had just paid over. ‘It matters not. As far as I am concerned, I would have paid over twice as much to be free of this place.’

I forbore to say that it was the count’s money that the duke was spending so gaily. That would be a matter between him and my master. Leaving him sitting in a chair by the window watching the lights of the

town across the harbour, I went down to arrange victuals for the night and make sure that young Diego had been accommodated; he would be returning home the following day, accompanied by our horses.

When I returned to our room, Borgia had a surprise for me.

‘Rodrigo, I have been thinking,’ he said as soon as I had closed the door behind me, ‘there is really no need for you to board that ship tomorrow if you don’t want to.’

‘Lord?’ I said, confused. ‘But the count...’

He cut me off with a curt chopping motion of his hand. ‘Antonio expected you to get me to safety, no more. And once I get on that ship tomorrow, I will be safe, from Ferdinand, whatever the future may hold.’

I might, there and then, have taken him at his word and gone home to Benavente and my familiar place as the count’s respected and trusted servant. But something tugged at me—fate, perhaps, or maybe just a lust for adventure of the kind I had never felt before. So I turned his offer down.

‘I cannot leave, lord.’

‘You can’t? Why not?’ His eyes regarded me with some amusement at the novel idea that I, a mere servant, might disobey him.

‘For one thing, you just paid an exorbitant price to that damned sea-captain for *two* passages to Castro Urdiales. In all conscience, I cannot allow the count’s money to be wasted.’

‘And for another?’

‘For another, having observed my lord’s skills in negotiating with the lesser class of men—men like myself—I doubt that he will actually get to Pamplona without being skinned of the rest of his cash long before he arrives.’

He stared at me, considering my impertinence, and I thought for a moment that he would explode in rage. But instead, he chuckled, throwing his hands into the air.

‘I am defeated! All right, come along if you wish it. I like your spirit, lad, and I will be glad of your company. What my future holds, I know not, but I promise you it will be more exciting than anything you have ever experienced in the back blocks of Spain!’

And so the following day, we were up early, preparing for our journey. After extracting a few essentials from our baggage to take with us and sending the rest off with Diego, we sat ourselves down at a table outside the house to eat a hasty breakfast of hard cheese and fresh bread before we went out onto the mole to find our ship.

‘Here’s trouble,’ our landlord said as he picked up our plates, gesturing with his head toward the town.

Looking up, we saw a small party of men making their way along the broad strand, now empty of the fishing boats that had crowded it yesterday. The man in the lead was a gaudily dressed fellow with a big, wide-brimmed hat from which a single long white feather bobbed about in the slight breeze. The two behind him were soldiers from the look of them, helmeted and wearing worn leather cuirasses.

‘Who is it?’ I asked.

‘The acting Mayor. Our proper mayor is away in Burgos on business. This fellow is a pompous idiot. But be careful of him; he can make a lot of trouble for you if he wants to.’

‘Thanks for the tip,’ I said under my breath, just as the three men arrived at the house.

‘Good morning, Señor Olivares.’ The landlord’s greeting was cheery and tinged with impudence. ‘What brings you here so early on a fine sunny morning? Did you fancy a morning constitutional?’

‘Do you think I would bring an armed escort if I was just out for a morning walk, you fool?’ The words were contemptuous, but I detected in the high voice a slight quaver, as if he wasn’t entirely sure of his own authority. ‘It is your guests that I wish to speak with. You are Señor Garcia?’

‘I am,’ Borgia replied, not deigning to rise from his bench. ‘How can I be of service, Señor... Olivares, was it?’

The acting Mayor’s eyes narrowed, seeming uncertain whether or not he was being insulted.

‘You have booked passage on the *Esmeralda*, I believe?’

‘Yes. What of it?’

‘It has been reported to me that you offered the captain of the vessel an enormous sum for the price of your passage. A hundred Reales, I was told.’

‘You were misinformed. It was ninety, to be exact.’ Borgia was laconic. ‘What is it to you, how much I paid?’

‘I don’t know who you are, Señor Garcia, but as any merchant would know, no ship leaves or arrives at the port of Santander without my permission. And I am considering withholding approval for your ship to sail because I consider your action in offering so much money—for a passage that would normally cost one-tenth as much—to be suspicious in the extreme.’

Borgia shot me a quick glance and then, returning his gaze to the acting Mayor, gave a sigh and spread his hands in deprecation. I had never seen him adopt such a humble expression and almost gave the game away by laughing out loud, an impulse I suppressed with difficulty.

‘Señor, let me be honest with you. As I am sure you have been informed, my nephew and I are traders in wheat. Waiting for us in Castro Urdiales is a man from Donostia who has a valuable cargo to

sell. We were on our way to meet him before we were delayed. He will not wait for more than another day or two at most, and the cargo he is authorised to sell is worth many, many times the price of our passage.’ He gestured in my direction. ‘My nephew told me that I was being rash in offering so much, but my anxiety to get to our destination as soon as may be perhaps clouded my judgement a little.’

Acting Mayor Olivares was sceptical. ‘Why could you not take the road to Castro? You could buy half a dozen horses for what you paid to go by ship.’

That was a good question, and we would have been hard-pressed to answer it. Fortunately, our temporary landlord rescued us with a snorted laugh and a shake of his head.

‘You really are a fool, Olivares. The coast road has been closed for weeks, remember? Ever since the bridge at Colindres was washed away.’

The acting Mayor frowned in annoyance. ‘Watch your tongue, peasant, lest I have it torn out.’ This threat had no effect on our landlord, who just stood there leaning on his broom with a triumphant grin on his face; clearly, he enjoyed baiting the acting Mayor.

‘Señor Olivares,’ I said, causing three heads to swivel in my direction. ‘I have heard that in many ports, there are special funds that are set aside for the welfare of sailors and others who have fallen on hard times. Is there such a fund in Santander?’

Olivares looked puzzled. ‘Yes, there is such a fund. It is used to maintain the hospital, among other uses.’

I took a few coins from the purse at my belt. ‘Then perhaps you might do us the honour of accepting a small donation?’

The look of avarice that appeared on the acting Mayor’s face told me that I had guessed aright. The twenty Reales I held in my palm, far

from being a small donation, was probably worth a week's stipend for a man such as Olivares.

'That is most generous, Señores. Most generous.' He pocketed the coins and, now all smiles, bowed slightly. 'I think in the circumstances that we need to detain you no longer. I wish you a safe and speedy passage.'

With which he turned on his heel and began to walk towards the strand, only to find his way blocked by the two guards who had been taken aback by this unexpected about-face.

'Out of my way, idiots!' Olivares snarled, pushing between them. We watched as the little entourage made its way along the beach, the acting Mayor's feather waving jauntily away, until they disappeared into the town's streets.

'Well done, Rodrigo,' Borgia said through his laughter. 'How much of that twenty Reales will find its way into the hospital fund, do you think?'

'Less than half, I should imagine, lord.'

Our landlord snorted. 'If that much. Olivares is greedy as well as a fool.'

'Well, it was worth every scudo.' Borgia nodded at the landlord. 'Thank you for your hospitality, but I am sure you will understand when I say that I hope never to see you again!'

With which we made our way out onto the mole, where the *Esmeralda* seemed on the verge of departure. I wondered who had told the acting Mayor about our over-generous fare. The ship's captain did not seem a likely culprit, for he had nothing to gain from such a disclosure. But there had been plenty of idlers on the dockside the day before, so perhaps one of them had overheard us. None of which mattered in the least once we were finally aboard, and the little ship was busy with the business of casting off and hoisting sails. In a few minutes, we had

slipped away from the quayside and were heading for the gap between the mole and the town, the gateway to the broader bay and the open sea beyond.

It was a fine, sunny day with a good breeze that was fair for our destination. I don't know whether you have ever made a sea journey, Brother Jorge, but if you have, you will know the sense of liberation that being at sea can bring. It is as if, with each mile, our everyday cares dissolve into thin air as a mist dissipates under the gentle heat of the morning's sun. Perhaps that is because, for a space at least, we have no control over anything. Our safety is in the hands of God and the mariners, and we can forget all our worries until we land. Or perhaps it is just the intoxicating effect of the sea air; its briny smells like a more potent drug than any of the potions that line my father's shelves.

Whatever the reason, we both felt elated as we stood at the ship's rail, watching the coast go by and the gulls wheel and swoop around our wake in the sure knowledge of their breed that titbits of food would sooner or later be thrown over the side for their delectation. The duke was in an expansive mood, excited about his future.

'We will see what news awaits us when we get to Pamplona, but if King Louis has heeded my appeals, there will be a place for me at his court. Once there, I am sure I can convince him and that devious chancellor of his, d'Amboise, to give me the troops to return to Italy and take back the Romagna. After that, I'll turn on Florence and force her to my will; their government is rotten to the core, a republic run by old women. And since they were foolish enough to employ Michelotto, I have an agent within their ranks who can undermine them from within while I assault them from without....'

'Michelotto?' The name was not familiar.

'Miguel de Corella. In Italy, we call him Don Michele, or just Michelotto.'

‘Ah. The man that the pope had tortured.’

‘The same. He has taken employment at Florence for the present, but I do not doubt that he will join me when my fortunes turn again.’ He smiled at some recollection. ‘I first met him at Pisa when I was studying there. We shared a girl, a courtesan of sorts, a voluptuous redhead. I remember we took turns fucking her one night—the poor girl could hardly walk by the time we were finished with her.’

Don’t look so shocked, Brother Jorge. I certainly wasn’t. Wealthy young men have behaved thus since the beginning of time. It is a kind of rite of passage for them, I suppose. In any event, in this case, it was the beginning of a strange bond between the two men. Borgia was always the master and Corella the servant, but he was a servant whose service had no boundaries. As the duke related stories about him, the picture that he painted, whether he meant to or not, was of an utterly ruthless and cruel *consigliere*, to use the Italian word for a trusted lieutenant.

‘It was Michelotto who disposed of Alfonso of Aragon. First, he set some toughs to attack Alfonso in front of St Peter’s, but they botched it, so he had to finish the job himself. Strangled him in his sick bed.’ Borgia spoke with an odd detachment, as though it had nothing to do with him or his father. ‘It was a service that neither my father nor I ever forgot, though of course we could never acknowledge that he was acting on our orders.’

I said nothing, sensing that the duke was in one of his talkative moods.

‘That was the first of many services that Michelotto has done for me. We became very close over the years and never more so than during the campaigns in the Romagna. It got so that I had but to nod or wave a hand, and he knew exactly what I needed him to do. Then he would

go and do it, and no matter the outcome, good, bad or indifferent, he never complained or resiled from the consequences.

‘But it was in the rebellion of the *condottiere* that he proved his worth to me, for he stayed loyal throughout, though I am sure they tried to tempt him away from my side, and he was there at the moment of triumph.’

It is a strange word, this *condottiere*. A *condotta* is the Italian word for a contract, and so a *condottiero* is, literally, a contractor. But in truth they are mercenary captains, many of them powerful lords in their own right, some masters of great swathes of territory, and part of Borgia’s army was really a coalition of these warlords.

‘So some of them decided to rebel?’ I asked after he had explained all this to me.

‘Yes, and at the worst possible time from my point of view. You see, by then—this was five years ago—I had almost finished the pacification of the Romagna. I was its duke, I had appointed a respected jurist as its administrator, new laws had been promulgated to settle the countryside, and I was popular among a people who were only too glad to see the backs of the petty tyrants that I had displaced.

‘My father and I had agreed that my next target should be the city of Bologna, another of those papal fiefdoms ruled by a *condottiero*, Giovanni Bentivoglio. We were preparing for that when I got word that a group of my so-called captains were plotting to turn against me. Foolish, lazy, gullible and treacherous to a man, they didn’t realise they were being manipulated by others—Bentivoglio himself, and another, Pandolfo Petrucci in Siena—who were afraid of my growing power.

‘But I knew them, knew their weaknesses, and I worked on them to make them suspicious of each other. Eventually, they worked up enough courage to attack me, and I sent Michelotto off with an army to deal with them since I could not leave my headquarters for various

reasons. Poor man, they beat him in the field and sent him back to Imola with his tail between his legs. In that moment a hatred for these curs was born in Michelotto's breast that would be sated by nothing less than their deaths.

'We had a difficult time of it for a while, but eventually I tricked the leaders of the rebellion—Oliverotto da Fermo and Vitellozzo Vitelli—to a rendezvous at a town on the coast called Senigallia. Once I got them there, we separated them from their soldiers and imprisoned them. Then Michelotto had the great pleasure of strangling them both, very slowly.'

Somehow I knew, though Borgia had not said so, that he himself had been present at this grisly end to the story of the rebellion. My imagination took over, and I had a vision of the duke standing in some darkened prison cell, watching with that half-smile on his face as his chief henchman went about his work.

'You have the same green look that Machiavelli had when I told him what had happened,' Borgia laughed. 'Though, to be fair, he had just been puking his guts up in some alleyway. I had to dispose of the conspirators' guards, you see, and poor Niccolò had the misfortune to witness their liquidation.'

'It's just the motion of the ship, lord, that's all,' I lied.

He laughed again. 'Well, if that's the case, the best remedy is wine and food. Believe me, I know from experience. So let's go and find that rascal of a captain and see what victuals he will offer in return for our excessively generous fee.'

That night, as I lay in one of the two narrow bed spaces in the small cabin that the captain had vacated for our use, trying to convince my mind to go to sleep, I pondered once again the character of the man who lay snoring in the opposite bunk. That he had courage, boundless optimism, and a considerable capacity for friendship, I did not doubt.

But he had revealed to me that he possessed a ruthlessness of a kind that I had never experienced and a passionless kind of cruelty. When he talked of the execution of his rebels, or the murder of his brother-in-law, his eyes shone with excitement. It seemed almost indecent. Perhaps these men deserved to die, I don't know, but their example must have sent a powerful warning: this lord, Cesare Borgia, was no man to cross lightly, and if you are going to take him on, you'd better be sure you will win.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE ROAD TO PAMPLONA

The following morning saw us beating about off the coast, the winds that had been so favourable the day before having backed in the night and slowed our progress considerably. Eventually, with much tacking to and fro, we slid past the formidable castle that stood on a rocky promontory overlooking the bay of Castro Urdiales and found a berth alongside the narrow quay in front of the town itself. Our captain bade us farewell with an extravagant wave of his hat and a genial grin, as well he should have, considering the profit he had just made from us, and we made our way into the town to see if we could procure some horses to take us on the next stage of our journey.

Borgia had been elated as we stepped ashore onto the soil of the kingdom of Navarre. He wanted to abandon the threadbare clothing of his disguise as a wheat merchant and don the fine doublet, hose and cloak that he had kept buried in the bottom of his baggage, but I persuaded him that it might be wiser for us to be a little cautious and not reveal his true identity until we got to Pamplona. Reluctantly, he had agreed, and so it was as poor traders that we began the tedious process of looking for transportation south.

Unfortunately for us, it seemed that there were no mounts to be had anywhere in Castro Urdiales. We went from stable to stable, but

in each we were told that there were no horses for either hire or sale. By the middle of the morning, the duke's temper was beginning to fray,

'There must be some animals in this God-forgotten town somewhere,' he complained to the unfortunate ostler standing outside the fifth place we tried. 'They can't all have just disappeared!'

'It is a mystery, Señor, that is certain.' The man's indifference could not be more profound as he shrugged and turned away.

With a deep animal growl, the duke stopped him in his tracks by grabbing his elbow, spinning him around, and thrusting his knife up against the skin of the man's throat. I have never seen a man move so fast. Nor have I heard a voice quite as menacing as Borgia's as he stared into the frightened ostler's eyes.

'Well, little man, perhaps I can induce you to solve the mystery for us.' The knife pressed further into the man's flesh, drawing a thin smear of blood and causing him to yelp. 'There must be horses somewhere in this town, and I will wager you know where they are!'

'Please, Señor, please! Don't hurt me!' The man's voice came out as no more than a squeak. 'I truly do not know why there are no horses in the regular stables.' Borgia just gave him a little shake, and when a swift sideways glance at me confirmed that there was no succour coming from my direction, he returned his gaze to his tormentor's dark eyes. 'Try the convent of Santa Maria, I think that the sisters have some horses still, or so someone told me this morning.'

Borgia released his grip with a grunt, and the terrified man dropped onto his knees.

'Well, why didn't you say so before, you fool,' the duke said conversationally, slipping his knife back into its sheath. 'Where is this convent?'

'On the main road out of town, Señor, on the left. You can't miss it—a big, rambling place with an oak tree outside the front gate.'

Without another word, the duke strode off down the street, leaving me to catch up after I had tossed the poor man a coin. Ten minutes later, we were outside the convent's gate, and he was hammering on the door. After a little while, we heard a muttering voice and the scrape of a key in the lock, and the door swung open to reveal a wizened little man leaning on a staff who peered at us in suspicion.

'Go away! We've paid our dues, so you can tell the mayor to go and fuck himself.'

'Now, brother, is that any way to talk?' Borgia was amused. 'Besides, it's horses we want, not taxes. You'll have to deliver your message to the mayor yourself.'

'You aren't from the mayor's office?'

'No, just a couple of traders on our way south to Pamplona.'

'My apologies, Señores. I was expecting someone else.' The old man's rheumy eyes blinked in confusion.

'That much is obvious.' An edge of impatience crept into his voice. 'Now, will you allow us in? We need nothing except a couple of horses, for which we are willing to pay handsomely.'

He was still a little suspicious, but nevertheless allowed us to come through the gate into a small muddy yard that was walled around on three sides and enclosed by a long, low building on the fourth. Bidding us to wait, he hobbled his way inside. A few minutes later he returned accompanied by three nuns. One was young and rather pretty from what little could be seen of her face and figure beneath the severe coif and coarse homespun habit, but the other two were matronly of figure and stern of face as they stumped their way towards us.

'Good morning, Señores,' said the leading nun. 'I am the prioress here. Jacopo here tells me that you are looking to buy horses?'

Borgia offered the prioress a courtly bow that would have graced the court of an empress.

‘Yes, Mother, though your man seemed a little confused as to our intentions!’

‘We have been much troubled of late by the mayor’s officials. They demand tithes in return for protection against thieves and bandits.’ She snorted her contempt for the mayor and all his works. ‘As if we needed protection! We are a poor house with nothing to tempt these mythical bandits. But we have little choice but to pay their extortions if we are to be left in peace.’

‘You have my commiserations, Mother. I have known many such officials, men who put their own greed above the needs of the people whose servants they are.’ He gave her his most winning smile. ‘But if I might confide in you, we are not merchants at all. The truth is that we are on our way to the court of King Jean, who is a relative of mine. When we get there, I shall certainly tell him of the misdeeds of the mayor of Castro Urdiales and urge that he send messengers to chastise him.’

She considered this surprising statement, and then nodded. ‘Anything to relieve our burdens would be welcomed, Señor, both by God and us. But I am afraid I cannot help you with the horses.’

‘Why not?’ Borgia’s genial mask showed signs of cracking. ‘Without them, we cannot get to Pamplona. And, as I said to your man Jacopo, we can pay.’

‘It is not a matter of money, Señor. We simply do not have any horses for sale.’ A sly smile crept into the stern face. ‘But we do have a couple of donkeys.’

I was hard put to keep my features immobile as I watched the various looks crossing Borgia’s countenance. Surprise, followed by a flash of anger, and finally amusement. I suppose the latter was caused by his vision of arriving at the royal court in Pamplona riding a lowly donkey.

‘Beggars, as they say, must take what they are given and thank the lord for it. Show us these donkeys, and if they are fit, we will be on our way.’

When we inspected them in the little stable behind the main convent building, the animals were sound enough, though on the scrawny side. We paid generously to buy them, along with their saddles and packs, and before long we were back in the courtyard, mounted and ready to leave.

‘God speed you on your journey, Señores,’ the prioress said, patting the duke’s donkey on its rump. ‘And convey our humble greetings and God’s blessing to King Jean when you see him in Pamplona.’

From the look on her face, I was not entirely convinced that she had believed a word of Borgia’s claim to be related to the king, which was ironic, to say the least. But at least we were on our way, and the donkeys proved to be amiable and sure-footed beasts with little of the froward stubbornness typical of their kind. Borgia, whose hands had finally recovered sufficient strength to manage the reins without difficulty, cut a somewhat comic figure, for he was long of leg and his heels came perilously close to dragging on the ground. Perversely, the indignity of travelling by mule seemed to bring out the best of humour in him, and we passed the day cheerfully, talking and enjoying the sunshine.

The crude extortions to which the nuns in Castro Urdiales were being subjected had struck a chord with the duke, which, he said, reminded him of the kind of depredations that had been visited upon the people of the Romagna before he put their oppressors down.

‘The lordlings of the Romagna were experts at fleecing their citizens for every lira they could. Illegal taxes and tithes, protection rackets by which whole villages of farmers had to pay up to ensure they were not molested by the lord’s own soldiery, forced conscription of young men

into their armies, there was no end to the ways in which they practised upon their own people.

‘That’s why, once I had pulled them down, I appointed men who would rule impartially and were not corrupt, men I could trust.’

I pondered this, thinking of my own years in the service of the count of Benavente. ‘Finding such men cannot have been easy, lord. It seems to me that such corruption, once entrenched, cannot easily be uprooted.’

‘An astute observation, Rodrigo. Such a task is like the cleaning of the Augean stables, an endless and thankless occupation, and not one to which I had much wish to bind myself. So I appointed another to the job, a man I had known since my youth, Ramiro da Lorqua.’ The duke went silent for a while, and when I turned to see what was wrong, he shook his head as though shrugging off some unwelcome recollection. ‘He was a tough man and set about his assignment with great energy. The only trouble was that he was so ruthless that he soon became as unpopular as the *condottiere* themselves. So in the end I had to replace him and send him off instead to Pesaro to command my garrison there. I don’t think he ever got over the slight, and perhaps that’s why he betrayed me.’

‘Betrayed you, lord?’ As usual, I was caught up in the duke’s tale and wanted to keep him talking.

‘Yes. The damned conspirators drew him into their plot to unseat me. I had to cut his head off in the end. We dumped his body in the public square in Cesena as a lesson, not just for the conspirators, but also for the people, to show them that I could unmake powerful lords as easily as I could create them.’

I nodded. ‘In Spain, the death of such an unfaithful servant would have been much more prolonged and painful.’

‘Well, he *was* a friend.’ That was sardonic. ‘But I learned a valuable lesson, too. Machiavelli advised me to find someone to replace da Lorqua who could never threaten me but who would be respected by the people and administer my domains with justice in my name.’

‘He sounds like a clever man, this Machiavelli.’

The duke laughed. ‘Sometimes too clever for his own good. But yes, Niccolò Machiavelli is the most intelligent man I have ever met, wily as a fox, and the only man I have ever met who understood what I was trying to do. The proud lords of the Florentine Signoria don’t know what a jewel they have in him.’

‘Oh? Is he not an important man in Florence?’

‘In a way, for he is Second Secretary of their Chancellery, which means he more or less runs their foreign policy. But though his family is old, it is not wealthy, and they only respect money, do the Florentines.’ Borgia shrugged. ‘Anyway, I followed his advice and appointed a well-known jurist named Antonio di Sansavino to be President of the Romagna, a man of the greatest integrity. That was five years ago, and as far as I know he is still dispensing justice, though how he has fared under this new pope I cannot tell. But when I return to power there, I will embrace him like a brother and confirm him in his position.’

I wondered at that. The depth of Borgia’s certainty and self-belief was unfathomable: here he was, virtually friendless, making his way across the countryside of Navarre with just a single companion, and yet he was sure that he would return to Italy in triumph. That thought made me curious about something else, though I didn’t quite know how to ask about it.

‘If your government was so successful, lord...’

‘Why am I here, penniless and friendless in Spain, instead of enjoying the fruits of my success in Italy?’ The loud laugh startled his mount, causing it to shy a little. ‘It is simple, really. My father died. He

was in his seventies, so it should not have been a surprise; we even had plans for it, for we both knew how much my power depended on the money and authority of the papacy. But we didn't expect that I would be incapacitated, unable to act, at the crucial moment.'

His discourse was interrupted as, coming around a bend in the narrow road, we were confronted with a heavily laden cart coming the other way, pulled by a pair of weary-looking oxen. We had little choice but to rein in our mounts and sidle them across to stand under some trees while the cart passed, with a cracking of whips and a cheery wave from the carter.

'Where was I?' the duke resumed as we got under way once more. 'Ah, yes. I was back in Rome, consulting with my father, and we went off to a banquet given by one of the cardinals. Five days later I began vomiting with a violence that I have never before experienced and hope never to suffer again. By the evening I was bedridden and feverish. Little did I know that the pope was similarly afflicted one floor below me in the Vatican Palace. For the next seven days, I was out of my head with delirium, raving, or so they told me afterwards, and by the time I returned to myself, the pope, my beloved father, was dead.'

He fell into a silence that I was reluctant to break, since he was no doubt remembering those terrible days. But then he began to talk again, continuing in a clear and unemotional voice.

'As soon as I understood what had happened, I sent Michelotto to secure as much of the papal treasury as he could lay his hands on, and I dictated letters to Sansavino and my other garrison commanders in the Romagna to reassure them that all was well. But I was terribly weakened by the fever, and a few days later it came back, as it was to do periodically for months. But I did what I could to preserve my power. Do you know how the popes are chosen, Rodrigo?'

I frowned, trying to remember. ‘The cardinals? They get together and vote?’

‘That’s right. It is called a Conclave and must be held soon after the death of a pope. Of course, I had my allies in the College of Cardinals, and they succeeded in electing a weak old man who I was sure I could control, who took the name of Pope Pius III. He confirmed me as Gonfaloniere of the papal forces and in the control of the fortresses and towns of the Romagna.

‘But then, just twenty-six days later, *he* died. So I was back to the beginning. The next Conclave produced the worst possible result for me: the election of Cardinal Giuliano della Rovere, the present pope, Julius.’

‘Why was that so bad, lord? Was he not just another cardinal?’

‘Giuliano della Rovere has been the mortal enemy of our family since he and my father were rivals for the papacy in ’92. So of course when he finally achieved his lifelong ambition and became pope, the last thing he wanted was for a Borgia to remain as master of the papal armies and lord of the Romagna. He wasn’t secure enough to move immediately, but eventually he had me arrested and thrown into gaol. My fortresses defied him when he sent men to take control of them, and the people of the Romagna let his emissaries know that they did not want a return to the old days of papal rule, but there was little I could do. In the end, I had to surrender most of my power.’

Glancing across at Borgia, I saw that he had a grin on his face that would have graced a pirate, and I knew that there was more to be told of this story.

‘He thought to throw me into the deepest dungeons he could find, but I outfoxed him. I escaped from his custody and fled south to Naples with a few attendants. What a journey that was! It is only a hundred and twenty miles from Rome to Naples, but it took me

nearly nine days to get there, on horseback and by boat, travelling stealthily and masked so as not to be recognised.'

'Why Naples, lord? Was the king of Naples your friend?' I was beginning to feel that I was an expert in the labyrinth of Italian politics.

'No, there wasn't a king of Naples at that time, for the Spanish had taken control of the kingdom following a war with France, and King Ferdinand had appointed a man named Gonsalvo da Cordoba as his regent.'

This name I knew—da Cordoba was a renowned soldier, known everywhere as the 'Great Captain'.

'Gonsalvo and I were old allies, and he greeted me like a friend. For a while we were daily companions at the hunt and at dinner, and he provided me with three thousand soldiers as the core of an army with which I would take back the Romagna. Finally, I was all ready to leave when I suffered the greatest betrayal of all: Gonsalvo imprisoned me in the Castel Nuovo, the most impregnable fortress in Naples. It was at the command of his king, he said. Three months later, I was on a ship to Spain, Ferdinand's prisoner.'

We crested the top of a small ridge, and the town of Durango came into view, our destination for the night. One of the mules twitched its ears and brayed loudly, while the other let out a noisy fart. We both dissolved into laughter.

'And that, my young friend, is as fair a judgement on my situation as you are ever likely to hear,' Borgia said, wiping the tears from his eyes. 'But I've been in tighter spots before now. Another throw of the dice, and I will be back in the game. By this time next year the Romagna will be mine once more, I swear.'

With which he kicked his mount into movement and headed down the narrow, rutted road towards the town. Our fortunes seemed to take a turn for the better when we quickly found an inn for the night

and a stable with a couple of good-quality mounts to replace our tired donkeys. The next morning, much refreshed, we set out on the next stage of our journey to Pamplona, still the best part of two days away through mountainous country. Fortunately, though December had just arrived, the weather stayed dry, and the road was passable, though in many places it narrowed to a single track that forced us to ride in single file. That precluded any serious conversation, so we spent much of the time alone with our thoughts. Even when we arrived at our overnight stop, a particularly dilapidated little roadside hostel with a sagging roof and shutters that barely kept the wind out at night, we were both too exhausted to do much more than eat and sleep.

The following day, the mountain road dropped into a broad valley that ran between soaring mountain ridges, dotted with prosperous-looking farms. And then at last, after passing through one final mountain pass, Pamplona came into view, perched above its riverbank, the towers of the cathedral yellow in the afternoon sunlight. If Borgia had any premonition that this would be his final resting place, he did not show it.

‘Here we are, Rodrigo,’ he said in a low but excited voice. ‘This is where my destiny begins.’

CHAPTER NINE

A LAST THROW OF THE DICE

Afterwards, someone told me that Cesare Borgia's sudden appearance at the court of King Jean was like the sudden strike of lightning out of a fair sky, so unexpected was it. The remark made me smile, for I knew that the duke had gone to some lengths to make his entrance as startling as possible.

To begin with, his first and foremost concern was that we should appear as magnificently clad as possible. I say 'we' because he was insistent that I should be as finely dressed as him to do him honour and make it seem that our journey to Pamplona had been accomplished in style. So, instead of going to the royal palace, we stopped at an inn just outside the town, where he fished out his best court clothes and sent them to be cleaned and pressed. Then we went to the nearest tailor and had him make, in double fast time and at a considerable cost, a new doublet for me. A hatter was the next stop, to buy fine caps for both of us, and lastly a visit to a saddler, where we purchased new saddles, bridles, bits and saddlecloths for our mounts so that they, too, would look their best.

Of course, we could not simply bowl up to the palace gates and expect to be let in, so while we were waiting for my doublet to be made, the duke dictated a note addressed to the king, and I sent it off in the excited hands of the innkeeper's son. I don't know what went through

King Jean's mind when he got this missive, but he did not dither, for an answer was back with us in an hour, welcoming his brother-in-law cordially and inviting him to the palace the following morning.

So, resplendent in our new clothes, we rode to the royal palace accompanied by a small honour guard of half a dozen mounted men, causing a stir as we made our way across the Arga river and into the city. The king met us as we dismounted in the palace courtyard, warmly embracing his sister's husband and bestowing a few quiet words of welcome upon me. I must say, Brother Jorge, that I liked your king from the moment I laid eyes on him. You have perhaps only seen him from afar, but close up he is a fine, tall and handsome man, impeccably courteous and imperturbable of manner.

We were conducted to a suite of rooms on the third floor of the palace, overlooking the river and with a fine view of the mountains we had just crossed, which was to be home for the next few months. Borgia's room was large and airy, with a big bed, a roaring fire in the fireplace, and a broad desk at which he could work. My own apartment was adjacent, with a connecting door; it was smaller but still well furnished, with what was for me a great luxury—a four-poster curtained bed.

We were left to our own devices for the rest of the day, but a messenger came from the king late in the afternoon, inviting the duke to meet with him. I came along as a matter of course, as his confidential servant. When we arrived in the royal apartments, we found the king, attended by half a dozen courtiers, and a man who, judging from his travel-stained clothing, must have just arrived. I assumed this man was a mere courier, so I was surprised when the duke's eyes lit up and he strode over to embrace the man, caring nothing for the dirt that was transferred to his fine court clothes.

'Federico! You are a sight for sore eyes!'

‘As are you, my lord.’ He fished into the breast of his doublet and withdrew a packet of letters tied together with a piece of string. ‘I have come directly from France with letters from the duchess Charlotte.’

Borgia took the letters and handed them to me. ‘Thank you, Federico. Their news will bring me great joy, I am sure. But you have had a hard ride from the look of you.’ He turned his face enquiringly towards the king. ‘Perhaps, brother, we might find some refreshment for this faithful servant of mine?’

As though by magic, a door opened, and servitors appeared bearing jugs of wine and platters of food, which they set down on a long table in one corner of the room.

‘You see, Cesare,’ the king laughed, ‘you have been here less than a day, and already your wish is my command! Let us all eat and drink, and then we can hear the rest of your news, Federico.’

A few minutes later, everyone having filled their glasses and taken some food from the platters, we were all seated around the table. The king and duke exchanged a few remarks about the quality of the hunt around Pamplona, to which everyone else listened politely while they ate and drank. Then the king rapped the table, as though calling a meeting to order.

‘Federico told us when he arrived, Cesare, that before travelling to the court of our beloved sister, he was in Italy, from whence he has much news.’

Federico—who I later learned was one of the duke’s most loyal secretaries, having served with him throughout the Romagna campaigns—drained the last of his wine.

‘Indeed, sire.’ He turned and addressed himself to Borgia, seated at the king’s side. ‘The news of your escape from La Mota has set the Romagna into a ferment. The people rejoiced to hear of it, and there

were demonstrations in Imola and Forlì. The pope, it is said, was most displeased.'

'Where is Julius? In Rome?'

'No, lord, he was in Bologna when I left. He has occupied the city with his army.'

'He is proving something of a general, this pope. Go on.'

'Your sister, the Duchess Lucrezia, has been diligent in applying to the pope for your release from incarceration, though His Holiness has so far ignored her letters.'

'She does not know that I am free?'

'Not when I last saw her, lord, though the news may have reached Ferrara by now. I also called on Don Michele in Florence before I left for France.'

'Ah. And what did Michelotto have to say? I assume he is happily employed by the Florentines.'

'Indeed. They have him training their new militia army. But he is also in the confidence of the Second Secretary, Messer Machiavelli, and he told me that the Florentine government was much disturbed at the news of your escape, and that they are worried that you will return to stir up the Romagna once again.'

Borgia laughed. 'Fears that will prove entirely justified if I have any say in the matter. Which I intend to. They and the Venetians will rue the day they acquiesced in my downfall.' He turned to the king. 'Brother, I have much to ponder, and of course there are the letters from my wife to peruse, so with your permission I will withdraw. But first, if I may, a quiet word?'

It was the signal for the impromptu meeting to break up. I left with the rest and went back to our apartments with Federico, where the duke joined us after a half hour had gone by. He was excited.

‘Your news is excellent, Federico,’ he said, warming his hands by the fire. ‘Now, go and get some well-earned rest, for I will be sending you off on your journeys again tomorrow, with letters for my sister and others.’

If Federico was dismayed by this, he did not show it, bowing himself out to go and find somewhere to sleep. Meanwhile, Borgia told me to gather pens and paper, and make myself ready to write.

By the end of the day, five letters were ready in draft form, ready for me to copy and seal. The first was to the duke’s sister, telling her of his escape and arrival in Pamplona, and urging her to continue to look after his interests in any way she could. A separate letter to her husband, Alfonso d’Este, Duke of Ferrara, was more formal in tone, asking in a general way for his support in Borgia’s future plans, though he was vague as to what those plans actually were; he would not, he said, commit them to paper for fear that they might be intercepted, but would apprise him of them when they finally met in person. A similar missive, equally vague, went to Francesco Gonzaga, Marquis of Mantua, whose territory, Borgia explained, bordered that of Ferrara.

The most important letter of all was addressed to His Majesty King Louis XII of France. The duke had appealed to him before, from Villalón, seeking to have his status as Duke of Valentinois reaffirmed and asking for pledges of support. Now, he wrote again, repeating his request and advising him of his arrival here in Pamplona. He also asked, most respectfully, that the king provide him with soldiers and a safe-conduct through the territory of Milan, which the French controlled, so that he could resume his rightful position as Duke of the Romagna.

Poor Federico was despatched the next morning on his long journey through France and Italy, after which there was little the duke could do except settle down and wait. To fill the time, he went almost

daily on hunting expeditions with various of the king's courtiers, and occasionally with the king himself, charging across the hard ground in search of deer or wild boar, or else taking out some of the king's fine falcons to hunt for fowl or rabbits. Evenings were spent drinking and playing dice, at which the duke's luck was remarkably consistent. Cards were another pastime, and even the occasional game of chess with the king, who seemed to enjoy the battle of wits with his brother-in-law.

I, too, found some diversions, having little work to do for the moment. Pamplona is not the most licentious of cities, but there are one or two well-appointed brothels, and I amused myself at least once a week with a visit. No doubt you disapprove of such activity, Brother Jorge, but I am a young man who had been deprived of any form of sexual congress for many months, so you must excuse my excesses. I also made some friends among the younger members of the king's court, with whom I drank and also played dice (though without the same success as the duke).

In between these activities, the duke talked ceaselessly about his plans whenever we were alone together.

'If what Federico said was true—and I do not doubt him—the pope's rule in the Romagna is as unpopular as that of the *condottiere*. It will take nothing for my cities and fortresses to come across to me once I am there to lead them. I just need an army. Jean can't help, the kingdom of Navarre is all but bankrupt, and he has his own rebels here to deal with, but I am certain that Louis will give me enough soldiers to do what I need.

'Then, when I am secure, I will engage Mantua and Ferrara to join me in a league to eject Florence from Tuscany. Michelotto will help me there. Once the Florentines have been humbled, their government will

fall apart I can take the city itself, and I will be master of all northern Italy in everything but name.'

By now, I had had the opportunity to look at the maps in the king's library, and I understood much more clearly what he was talking about. It seemed extraordinarily audacious for a man who was, at that moment, virtually penniless and utterly dependent on the decisions of others. Yet so certain was he of his destiny, he made it all sound eminently logical and readily achievable. I was beguiled, so much so that I too came to believe that this man was one of those rare giants of history, to whose star I would willingly attach my humble self.

But as you know, Brother Jorge, the fates had other plans for Cesare Borgia. Christmas passed with the usual celebrations, and then, in the first week of January, the first blow fell. News came that his faithful Federico was dead, executed by pope Julius in Bologna after he had been caught on the road. We had no way of knowing whether he had succeeded in delivering his letters to Ferrara and Mantua, nor whether their contents were now known to the pope.

Then another courier arrived, carrying among his other papers a letter addressed to Duke Cesare from his faithful Michelotto. The pope, he said, had finally succeeded in suppressing the rebellions in the Romagna, and the citizenry had been forced into surly obedience to his regime.

Neither blow was fatal, though the first did make the duke very uneasy, for though he had never spelled out the detail of his grand plan in his letters, there was enough material in them to enable even the densest of popes, which he assured me Julius is not, to put two and two together without the risk of arriving at any number other than four.

It was the letter that arrived in February that ended any hopes that Borgia still harboured for a return to Italy. It was from King Louis.

Far from confirming Borgia in his French titles, he accused his former favourite of treachery, claiming that when he fled Rome to Naples he had done so intending to ally himself with the Spanish against him. A second letter that accompanied the first, from Georges d'Amboise, the Cardinal of Rouen and Louis' chief adviser, explained that 'the king is most wrath with the duke, and has lost all patience with him.' Further, d'Amboise said, 'His Majesty was intent upon stripping you of all your titles, though I dissuaded him from this course, out of the old affection that I bear you.'

'That bastard,' Borgia said bitterly. 'He speaks from both sides of his mouth. He has always hated and feared me, even though I put a Cardinal's hat into his hands. I doubt he tried very hard to persuade Louis to my cause.'

Hardly surprisingly, neither letter said anything of safe conducts or troops, and it seemed clear that all of Borgia's hopes must now drain away into the sand.

CHAPTER TEN

A SOLDIER OF FORTUNE

The sun had long gone, and the little tavern was lit by a dozen candles on the tables and wall sconces. All the other patrons had long gone, and the tavern keeper was busying himself behind his counter, washing mugs and goblets and doing an inventory of his bottles. Every now and then he glanced across at the priest and the young man still huddled over their wine, talking. It was late, but not so late that he felt the need to evict them just yet, so long as they had silver to pay for their drinks.

Brother Jorge prompted the young man opposite to continue his tale, as he had several times over the last few hours, whenever his new friend had fallen into a silence to recall the events of his story and arrange the facts in his mind.

‘This series of blows, delivered over the space of a week or two, would have sent any man into despair, and Borgia, for all his energy and optimism, was no different. For a week he kept to his room, saying nothing to anyone, not even me, beyond the necessities of daily living. He would lie on his bed for hours, staring at the ceiling, or else pace back and forth, muttering to himself. Eating little and drinking nothing, he ignored the various messages from the king’s apartments, sending their bearers away with polite but firm refusals to join in

whatever distraction the king was trying to temp him with. I have never seen a man so depressed.'

'Hardly surprising,' Brother Jorge said, pouring them more wine. 'It is a thing I have seen before, when a man's hope is finally denied him.'

'That was the case for Borgia, without a doubt. He, a man who had spent his entire adult life pursuing power, had no future or prospects. But then I came up with an idea that gave him the hope he needed—though it ended up here, with his death. That I did not foresee: I might have stayed silent if I had.'

'None of us can anticipate God's will, my son, and it is foolish to reproach ourselves for failing to do so.' Brother Jorge was impatient. 'But go on with your story.'

Garcia nodded. 'Well, I had not been entirely idle over the time we spent at the palace. My new friends told me a lot about the political situation here in Navarre. You see, King Jean might seem to be serenely in control of his destiny, but this kingdom is beset with threats from many sides. Both France and Spain would happily swallow it up, or divide it between them, so the king must constantly play them off against each other.

'To make matters worse, he faces a rebellion among his own nobility, stemming from feuds that go back fifty or more years. But this, I assume you must know.'

Brother Jorge nodded. Every Navarrese knew the history of the civil war between the houses of Beaumont and Agramont. For a dozen or more years the two families had struggled for supremacy; eventually, the Beaumonts lost, but never really surrendered their claim. Then last year the head of the clan, Louis de Beaumont, Count of Lerin, had gone into rebellion against King Jean.

‘What my friends told me was that, though the king is a fine man and a refined scholar, he is not a man of war. Navarre has kept its independence through diplomacy, and he is skilled at that, but as far as leading troops into battle, I was told—or rather it was hinted, since these are men loyal to the king—that he was, not to put too fine a point on it, hopeless.’

‘Oh, I see. You suggested that Borgia propose himself as the king’s war leader?’

‘It seemed obvious: here was a man skilled at leading troops, brave and resourceful, but with no army to lead, while the king possesses an army but lacks the ability to lead it. When I put the idea to the duke, it was as though I had administered one of my father’s tonics. Nothing would do but that we should go straight to the king and put the proposal to him.’

‘Which he accepted with alacrity?’

Garcia laughed. ‘He’s a sly one, your king. You see, he had decided to offer Borgia command of his armies the day he arrived in Pamplona. He knew that King Louis would turn him down, so all he had to do was wait until the duke’s fortunes were at their lowest before making his offer.’

Brother Jorge was puzzled. ‘He knew that the French would abandon Borgia? How?’

‘I don’t know for sure, but I think he had letters from his sister. She might have been the duke’s wife, but the bond of siblings is thicker than that of marriage.’ Garcia shrugged. ‘Be that as it may, the appointment as leader of the army of Navarre gave Borgia what he needed, a new purpose in life and the possibility that he might build a platform from which to exercise power here in Spain. First, he would defeat the king’s enemies in Navarre. Then, using his knowledge and

experience of the courts of Europe, he would become the king's chief councillor. He even thought he might be king himself one day.'

'How could that ever be? The king holds his throne in right of his wife, and they have a son...'

'Yes, but he is only three years old. Children can die, as can parents, necessitating a regency. Far-fetched, I agree, but ambition, once reignited in the breast of Cesare Borgia, was never going to be limited to mere military command.' Garcia shook his head. 'Do not misunderstand, Brother Jorge: I think these were just musings on his part, one evening when he had been drinking. His real focus was building up the king's army and leading them to victory.'

'And did he achieve that aim before he died? My knowledge of matters military is scant.'

'As it should be for a man of the cloth,' Garcia smiled. 'Was he a success? In some ways, yes, for in the last three months, he has brought the king's army to a state of military discipline that it never had before. You should have seen him: he was everywhere, reorganising, appointing new captains, arranging for supplies of weapons and victuals, buying cannon and gunpowder, laying out campaign plans. I have never seen a man so consumed in his craft, nor one who had a surer touch with men. After a month, they would have followed him into hell's mouth if he had asked it of them.'

'By the end of February, all the preparations were complete, and we marched out to lay siege to Louis de Beaumont's stronghold at Viana. For a month we squeezed it. The town fell after a couple of weeks, and all that Beaumont's army had control over was the castle. It was when Beaumont tried to relieve his garrison and get some supplies into them that Borgia met his end.'

'With the castle still untaken?'

‘Yes, but it will fall soon, of that I am sure. And I will wager that king Jean will finally put this de Beaumont down using the fine army that his brother-in-law left him.’

The innkeeper came waddling over to collect their now-empty jug of wine. ‘I must close, Señores, else the town watch will be fining me...’

Garcia settled their account, and they made their way out into the darkened street.

‘Where do you sleep this night, my son?’

‘I have not thought on it. There are no rooms here, and in any case I am short of cash. So I suppose it will be a hayloft above the stables somewhere.’

‘Come with me to our house; it is but an hour’s ride from here. Then tomorrow you can be on your way, rested and fed on our humble fare.’ Brother Jorge was not entirely confident that his brothers at the monastery would welcome an additional mouth to feed, but that was a bridge he would cross when they got to it.

‘That is kind of you, Brother.’ Garcia frowned. ‘Though I know not where I will go on the morrow.’

‘Back to Benavente? No doubt your master the count will be glad to see you back.’

That had, indeed, been Garcia’s intention. But now that Brother Jorge had put it into words, he realised that he was not keen to return to his old life, not for now anyway. King Jean, in his kindness, had offered him a place at his court, though precisely what that place would be he had left unspecified, and the idea that he would spend the rest of his life hanging about a foreign court, dependant on the goodwill of the king, did not much appeal either. There was something else he needed to do, and as he stood there, drawing his cloak tighter against the breeze, he knew what it was.

‘I will go to Italy, to Ferrara. Of all the people in the world who were close to him, it seems to me that his sister Lucrezia had the most cherished place. If the king allows me, I will take the news of her brother’s end and tell her the story of his last months and his brave end.’

Brother Jorge nodded wisely, as if he had known all along that this was what his new young friend would do. ‘I can think of no better emissary to bring the sad news to a bereaved sister. Now, let us find my donkey and we will be on our way.’

THE END

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