

QUEEN OF CITIES

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*To Ines Faiella Prario (1926-1995), the most important
person in my life who was never able to see this work but
whose love of knowledge has always inspired me.*

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PART I

1—The Sultan: October 1452

“Constantinople is a city larger than its renown proclaims. May God in His Grace and generosity deign to make it the capital of Islam.” – (Hassan Ali al Haraway, 12th century)

Sultan Mehmed woke suddenly. His right hand knocked over the golden chalice, spilling wine on a drawing for a new siege tower. He cursed aloud. It was like this almost every night. Mehmed pulled the stained parchment to the floor and focused on a map of Constantinople, the Queen of Cities, the object of his desire. His fingers traced the gentle arc of the westward land walls, while his mind imagined a way through the ancient shield that had proved impregnable to everyone who had tried to conquer it. No man, not the great Attila, the Shahs of Persia, the Khans of Bulgaria, not even his father, had ever breached those walls. Perhaps *no* man could. His nails dug into the parchment and the map crumpled in his hand. Mehmed suddenly felt suffocated in the room. He went to a window. Outside, he saw darkness broken only by the flickering lights of the sentries’ torches along the walls. He turned around to the room; the evening candles had nearly burned away. Dawn was a few hours away, and his blood was pounding.

He took two strides to the door and threw it open. The weary guards clattered to their feet. “Mustafa!” he barked down the hallway. “Mustafa!”

His servant, roused in the adjoining room, entered the hallway half asleep. “Mustafa!”

“Yes, my lord?”

“Bring me Gülbahar!”

“Yes, my lord.”

The servant knew better than to question. Once before, when Mehmed had first become Sultan, Mustafa had questioned a command and spent a night naked sitting on

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top of Adrianople's battlements as his reward. He knocked at the heavy oak door. There was no response. He knocked again and the door opened a crack to reveal Eminé, the maid. A hint of perfume and jasmine escaped the chamber.

"Eminé, the master desires the presence of Lady Gülbahar."

Wearily Eminé answered: "I'll prepare her." The door closed. Eminé walked over to the bed, lighting candles as she went.

"My lady, his highness desires your company tonight."

A lilting voice replied, entirely awake, "I heard the knocking, Eminé."

"Come out of bed, child."

Gülbahar's fingers stroked the long black hair that had fallen to her ivory shoulders, standing out like ink bleeding into parchment.

"He would just as soon have me as I am now."

"It isn't done, my lady. I will prepare you."

"He would have me as I am now." She repeated. "Give me the mirror."

The maid nodded, handing over a jeweled looking glass.

Gülbahar picked it up and looked at herself: cheeks unpowdered, lips unpainted, body unadorned, unperfumed, hair undone. For a moment, Gülbahar's memory carried her back to her youth, to the wild hills of Albania where she had grown up, before the Turkish pasha, hunting bear, had found her and taken her as his mistress. Before then, her only mirror had been the stream where she played, ignorant of makeup and perfumes. She remembered the pasha's voice as he held a mirror in front of her for the first time:

"Do you see how beautiful you are?" And his hands had moved to touch her... Even from that first embrace, when the sated pasha had called the servants to bring golden rings studded with rubies for her fingers, and silken robes to replace her rags, she had begun to understand. After a few weeks, the pasha would bellow like a bull and whine like a

cat in search of her embrace. So it remained now. Only the man was different, but the pattern of desire, ecstasy, diffidence, and largesse fueled by renewed desire was familiar.

A small smile from softened lips, an inviting glance, an impassioned memory, an erotic dream, any of these could prompt Mehmed to demand her presence. Gülbahar's seduction summoned him as much as his desire summoned her. Almost always, she would comply. Refusing was hazardous, but it made acceptance, which invariably came, something to be savored. Gülbahar enjoyed that power, and the luxury of being the one person who could make Sultan Mehmed wait, as he was waiting now.

"My lady?"

Gülbahar's eyes snapped to her maid. "Prepare me."

The transformation began. Gülbahar's white silk night dress was replaced with thick satin robes of red and green. Her lush black hair was combed out, straightened, and left to caress her throat and shoulders. Jeweled rings sparkled on her hands. Golden earrings draped down her neck which gleamed with an emerald necklace. Finally, Eminé clasped a veil of white silk over her painted lips. Gülbahar looked at the opulence of her appearance, her costume, taking in every detail.

"I am done, my lady."

"Go back to bed, Eminé. I will see you in the morning."

Delicate footsteps took her down the corridor towards the Sultan's apartments. Guards left by Mustafa escorted her. They reached the door to Mehmed's bedchamber. Gülbahar, fragrant, waved the guards away and entered his room. She moved wordlessly across the floor, a rustle of silk and satin. She smiled. Powder made her face even whiter in the candlelight. She circled Mehmed like a butterfly. He watched her—motionless—as she approached him.

"Good evening, my lord."

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She was at his side now, staring over his left shoulder at a map of Constantinople. He covered it quickly. But, just as quickly, she took a sketch for a catapult.

“Your majesty is planning for war.” He did not answer, so she continued. “At last, you are going to make the City yours.” Again he did not respond. Her hands went to his shoulders; her lips were by his ear. “I am glad. There is no greater prize for any king, no greater capital for any lord, no greater glory for any man, than Constantinople.”

And no greater risk for any army, he thought, but only to himself. Before he could reply, she spoke again. “But how will you take it? How will you overcome its immortal walls? How will you scale those towers which strain to the heavens?” She wrapped the words of war in seduction.

“I did not have you brought here to discuss tactics,” he snapped.

She smiled. “As you command, my lord. But you will not take Constantinople without careful preparation.”

“I will be ready,” he responded, resolving to her and to himself.

“It *shall* be yours. A prize no man has won. A prize never claimed by Muslim arms. A city of gold, filled with riches, the capital of the earth.”

He pulled away from her hands, now clasped across his chest, attempting to disentangle himself from her provocation.

“Do you want the City for me, or for yourself?” he demanded.

“For you, my Sultan, for you.” She followed him, her ghostly pale hands reaching out and catching him in another embrace. This time he did not resist. He could not resist. “Once you conquer the City, you will be the greatest king in the world.”

“I am already the most powerful king in the world,” he said while trying to kiss her. She pulled away.

“You know that your power is mocked by this city that stands like a sword at the center of your realm, cutting Europe from your lands in Asia.” His lips found her neck, and as his kisses flowed so did her words. “You stand ready to do what has never been done, to become a king greater than any before you. Greater than any after you could hope.”

His mouth was moving towards hers. Her lips dripped ambrosia when she spoke of Constantinople, tempting him with the pursuit of glory, but she kept him away.

“The man I love must be greater than all men.”

“You are mine already.”

“I will truly be yours when Constantinople is yours.”

She had pushed hard enough. Gülbahar released herself to his embrace and shuddered as the Sultan pinned her to the great vermilion bed. At dawn, the castle began to rouse itself for the labors of another day. Gülbahar’s hand stroked the Sultan’s chest.

“You should sleep, my lord.”

“I’m not tired.” He rose and went to pour himself some wine. Love had taken the edge off her seductiveness. “I’m going to summon Halil Pasha. Get dressed and go.”

“Are you going to tell him that you plan to make war on his Greek friends?” She was sitting up in the bed now, agitated by the thought of the ageing Grand Vizier. Gülbahar knew the politics of the court well. Halil Pasha favored peace, counseled caution, and accepted gifts of Greek gold.

“I will speak with my Vizier alone.”

“Very well, my lord. Be careful that he does not tempt you from your course. Goodnight.”

He nodded. When she was out of sight, Mehmed again called Mustafa.

“Summon Halil Pasha and bring some clothes! Bring my red jacket, Mustafa, the one with the pearls.”

It would be ten minutes before the Vizier arrived, more perhaps, if he had to be pulled out of bed away from a woman. A Greek no doubt, a fitting bedmate for “the

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accomplice of the infidels.” Suitably regal in the pearl encrusted jacket, the Sultan returned to his bed and sat up awaiting his minister, the wise Halil Pasha, his Grand Vizier, his father’s Grand Vizier, a man who would do anything to curtail his power and prevent the conquest of Constantinople. Mehmed did not wait long. Almost as soon as he had adjusted the covers, the doors to his bedroom opened and the servant announced that the Vizier had arrived. Mehmed signaled that he be brought in. Halil entered, carrying a bowl filled with gold coins above his head that clinked as he walked.

“Why do you come with gold, lord Vizier?”

“It is custom that when a servant is summoned by his master, he must not come empty handed. Accept this humble gift great king, from your most devoted servant.”

It was formulaic but appropriate. But Mehmed was in no mood for formalities. Irritably, he waved down the Vizier’s subservient words. His spies had told him that Halil had recently received gifts from Constantinople—two large fish stuffed with gold. The sight of the glittering coins in the dish made him grit his teeth.

“Put down the bowl.”

The older man raised his eyes from beneath his bowed head, trying to contain an expression that held both surprise and fear. Mehmed’s tone was like ice.

“Do not bring me gold. *I* have gold.” The words hung ominously in the air. “*Lala*,” the affectionate term of “my uncle,” made Halil raise his head. Tenderness was foreign to Mehmed; warmth was a charade. What did he want? Almost as an answer, the Sultan spoke. “I want Constantinople.” The words were pronounced precisely, and in earnest. The Vizier kept silent. The young man’s obsession had always been known to him, but the throne could now turn such aspirations into realities. Mehmed spoke again.

“Look at this bed. I toss and turn on it all night long, from one side to the other thinking of the City. I cannot sleep; day

and night my thoughts turn to Constantinople. You must help me have it.” Halil made no response. “Do not allow yourself to be softened by seductive gold.” The eyes of both men wandered to the bowl resting on the floor. “Temper your resolve to steel and with that steel we shall fight and win the City of the Caesars.”

Halil felt himself poised above the abyss. There was nothing to prevent the plunge. Opposition at such a moment would invite rage. He thought it better to agree, but could not resist offering counsel.

“As you command, my lord. I shall do all in my power to help you as duty commands. But, I must warn you of the vastness of this task. You risk bringing the entire Christian world against us: Hungary, Genoa, *Venice*.”

Halil stressed the last. *Venice*, supreme among the Christian states, was the most powerful, the most immediate. Her fleet could strike anywhere, and against her warships the Sultan’s navy was powerless. But Mehmed cut off his Vizier as the counsel escaped his throat.

“I fear nothing, lord Vizier. My father buried the armies of Hungary! They will not rise for a generation; Venice and Genoa will never unite against me. We are going to Constantinople. Let nothing sway you from that!” They stared at each other, silent and motionless. This was not the time for a confrontation. Mehmed would get nothing further from him tonight.

Abruptly, the Sultan continued. “Goodnight, lord Vizier.” Halil bowed and left the room. Mehmed’s eyes moved through the emptiness of his room and the honeyed walls of the City rose in his imagination.

Halil walked slowly back to his apartments, his mind submerged in thought. He returned to his bed and lay down to ponder the trials the future held. Once again the armies would be assembled. Once more they would march on New Rome. Lying in bed, the Vizier repeated to himself that if the boy was successful, opposition could cost him his life. He

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must be careful in choosing the manner of his dissent. Halil feared that the determination of Mehmed might succeed in willing the army to victory no matter what the cost. Still, there were a thousand years of failure to weigh against success. The thought renewed some of Halil's confidence.

"Let him try to take Constantinople," muttered the Vizier. "It has never fallen. I shall use all my power to prevent him from taking it. When we stand before the walls there will be a thousand chances to delay him, to counsel him to a prudent course away from violence. That will give the Christians time to come to the aid of the City. Venice will come. They will sail, great and terrible from their lagoon, and strangle us from the sea. Faced with that, he will be forced to make peace. At last we will have peace. Then, defeated in his greatest ambition, he shall have more need of me than ever." Reassured, the Vizier closed his eyes.

* * *

Kings, princes, and pashas came from three continents to the Sultan's court. Marching under many flags, the proud men in their opulent robes made a fine procession from the reaches of Mehmed's empire. There were black banners engraved with holy words from the Koran, the blood red ensign of Osman with the white crescent, green colors embroidered in gold with the Sultan's monogram, and wild ox-tailed standards from tribes far to the East. They came from the sands of the Gobi desert, from the mountains of the Anatolian plateau, from the lush shores of Asia Minor, and from the gloomy banks of the Eastern Danube. In their trains rode noblemen from the conquered peoples, foes made subjects, and men of every race: Serbians, Bulgarians, Thracians, and Ionian Greeks. The Eastern pashas brought with them browned Arabs mounted on proud sleek horses and black Africans from the land beyond Egypt. Some had recruited Tartars, terrifying horsemen from the great

steppes whose ancestors had ridden with Genghis Khan. Their faces, deliberately scarred since childhood, carried no expression and their narrow eyes sent shivers through the souls of friend and foe. With deliberation, for the pashas were noble men unaccustomed to haste, the great cavalcade converged on Adrianople.

When all the great men had arrived, Mehmed's heralds called them together. They stood waiting, impatient to hear the young Sultan's words, to hear the reason for their peremptory summons. Heads bowed in reverence as the Sultan appeared before them on horseback. From beneath their lowered brows, the lords judged Mehmed. Many were seeing him for the first time. He was young, but a fire burned in his eyes. The same fire burned in his voice when he spoke.

"Men of my empire! It pleases us to see you, to see the strength and greatness of our realm, that empire won in battle, defended by your courage, and passed in an unbroken succession from fathers to sons and handed to me by my father, the great Murad! No prince could consider himself more fortunate than I to rule over subjects so loyal, a nation so proud, or an empire so powerful. We must prove ourselves worthy successors to our forefathers, to increase their glory and emulate their triumphs. No people have ever been as fearsome in war, or as generous in peace.

"Now, we stand at the dawn of a new age, ready to achieve what our ancestors could only dream of, the conquest of the Queen of Cities and the establishment of our unchallenged power over Europe and Asia. For generations this city has stood alone, against us. Its riches have mocked our austerity; its lies have mystified our honesty; its pretensions have parodied our power. Sitting at the center of our realm, this city of unbelievers is an arrow threatening our heart in Europe and our soul in Anatolia. How long will we allow it to insult our pride and to plot our destruction? It considers itself the capital of the world while its mayor styles

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himself King and Emperor of the Romans. But we know these Romans well! Our armies have driven them out of Cappadocia, Lydia, Caria, Bithynia, Thrace, Macedonia, Bulgaria, and the Morea. Their mantle, as rulers of the world, is our mantle and their capital, their city, should be our city, and our capital. They claim they are the true faith—they lie! They claim their God is the true God, but they worship idols and deny that only God is God! They defend ancient memory with ancient walls and hope by deception to keep us from the victory promised us by the Prophet!

“We are the future! That future will be shaped by our strength and will not live in the shadow of the past. I can no longer imagine an empire without this city. If we conquer it, you may be sure that all our possessions will be secure. Without it, nothing we now possess, and nothing we will ever win, can be safe. We must attack with conviction, accept any suffering, overcome all obstacles, knowing that we shall never withdraw until we conquer the Queen of Cities!”

Cheering erupted throughout the assembly. Their fiery young sovereign had stirred the blood of the pashas to war. Eagerly, their hands reached for the long curved blades hanging at their sides. The forest of banners waved wildly as the cheers of affirmation rang out.

Shouts rose above the din: “War! War!”

“Death to the infidels!” “On to the City!”

Halil Pasha shivered. He closed his eyes and thought of war. His vision was not the magnificent combat that the zealots clamored for, filled with triumph and glory, but the unadorned face of battle where bravado cries were mashed to pulp by enemy axes and drowned in fire and blood. Nothing he said would make a difference now. Mehmed had set their course—war—and the objective, the Queen of Cities.

2—The Throat Cutter: *November 1452*

Word of a disaster reached the city, and Constantinople began to buzz. A Venetian galley had been sunk by the Turks while trying to bring the city grain. Rumors spun around; the crew had been tortured, murdered in cold blood, drowned with the ship. The Sultan was demanding ransom, threatening war with Venice, planning to starve Constantinople to death. Word quickly reached the *bailò** of the Venetian colony in Constantinople, Girolamo Minotto. He received the news without expression. Two weeks earlier, Mehmed's fortress north of the city had tried to sink a different Venetian galley. Now, the Sultan's gunners had succeeded, and a ship flying the Lion of St. Mark was at the bottom of the Bosphorus.

"We must have news about the crew." *Signor* Fabrizio Cornaro, a member of one of Venice's most powerful families discussed the situation with Minotto.

The *bailò*, serious, pragmatic, precise, listened intently. In his mind, he touched each course of action, discarding the rash, the impotent, and the impossible. "We must negotiate with Mehmed for their release. I cannot leave Venetian citizens prisoners of the Sultan."

"Our honor demands war if those men are harmed."

Minotto closed his eyes. "I cannot be sure of that. Nor would I have my actions push our Republic to war. The honor of Venice is delicate. It will not be served by provoking even greater reprisals against our interests in the East."

"The provocation is the Sultan's, master *bailò*." Cornaro's voice hardened at the prospect of Venetian weakness.

"We must uncover the reason for this provocation. And bring the matter to a close."

* Mayor.

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“There is no reasoning with ambition or with cruelty,” countered Cornaro, his voice rising.

Minotto looked at him quizzically. “For the sake of those men, and for the sake of Venice, I hope you are wrong. And for the sake of both, I want you to go to the Sultan and secure the release of the crew.”

Cornaro’s face turned dark.

“I do not envy you this mission. We have little to bargain with except notions of justice and mercy.”

“Justice and mercy are virtues unfamiliar to tyrants.”

“They are. But I warn you, *Signor* Cornaro do not try to bully this boy-king; he is already set towards war. We cannot encourage him, nor by timidity can we invite him to conspire at our destruction.”

Cornaro bowed politely. “I’ll climb that delicate rigging as best I can, master *bailò*. And heaven help those men if I fail.”

“If you fail, *signore*, heaven help us all.

* * *

The weather was gray as Cornaro made his journey from one imperial court to the other. There was a chill in the air. Winter was coming. The ambassador arrived with due ceremony at the dark fortress of Didimotkon, twenty-five miles south of Adrianople, to complain about the treatment of the sailors. Cornaro’s family was among the most noble in the entire Republic and the ambassador himself was regal in his bearing. He stood before the young Sultan, bowed slightly, and was given permission to speak.

“Your majesty, I am Fabrizio Cornaro, special emissary of the Serene Republic of Venice and his Excellency Doge Francesco Foscari. I have come to secure the release of Captain Antonio Rizzo and his crew.”

Mehmed did not respond as Cornaro’s words hung in the air. The Venetian continued.

“These men are free citizens of the Venetian Republic. You have confirmed the treaties of friendship made by your illustrious father. Your present actions are a direct violation of those treaties and a threat to peace. If your majesty wishes to maintain this present peaceful state of affairs, you must agree to the immediate and unconditional release of our men.”

Mehmed answered without hesitation: “Your ship, *signore*, attempted to sail past my fortress in direct violation of the protocol that had been set forth in my name, and in spite of the warnings issued by the citadel commander. Your captain is at fault for not agreeing to the reasonable demands that he lower his sails and allow his ship to be searched.”

“Our ships and their cargoes are Venetian concerns, your majesty. Will you release our men?”

Halil was whispering in Mehmed’s ear.

“We shall consider it.”

“While your majesty is weighing his actions, may I be permitted to see that the captain and crew are alive and well?”

“Very well.” The Sultan turned to one of his retainers, “Ahmed, take the ambassador to the prisoners.”

Cornaro bowed curtly, turned, and left the opulent throne room. There was a striking difference between the lavish court where he had been entertained and the stinking cell where Cornaro found the galley’s crew. The men, about eighty in all, were in a single rectangular space with thick stone walls and a single window looking up at the outside world. There was a look of enormous relief in their eyes as the solitary figure of the ambassador entered the room. His Venetian dress was immediately recognized and the crew surged forward to welcome him.

“*Signori*, I am Fabrizio Cornaro. *Bailò* Minotto has sent me here in order to negotiate with the Sultan for your immediate release.”

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The men listened attentively. One of the prisoners spoke:

“My name is Captain Antonio Rizzo, my lord. We were fired upon by the Turks on the twenty-sixth of November while attempting to sail through the straits north of Constantinople. They demanded that we lower our sails and subject our ship to search. As we were carrying a shipment of grain for the City, I refused. We were sunk with a single shot. My crew and I swam ashore where we were taken prisoner and then brought here. We have been prisoners for the past three days.”

“Are all your men alive?”

“Yes.”

“Have you been mistreated?”

“We could do with more food and clean water, but the men are all right. All except...” Rizzo’s voice broke off abruptly. He coughed.

“What is it, captain?”

“One of our crew is missing.”

“Missing?”

“Yes. The son of my clerk, Domenico di Mastri, was taken a few hours after our arrival. We have not seen him since then.”

“Why would the son of your clerk be taken?”

He answered in a whisper. Cornaro craned his head forward in order to hear. “We found out from the guards that he was taken to the Sultan.”

“To the Sultan, for what purpose?”

Rizzo paused to suppress another cough and continued. “The Sultan developed an unnatural affection for the boy and now he is in the infidel’s *seraglio*.”

“Are you sure, captain?” He asked incredulously.

“Yes, my lord. Yesterday, we received a note from the boy. The lad fears for his soul.”

“I shall do everything in my power to get you out of here, captain, and your crew.”

“Thank you, my lord. And please, do whatever you can for Domenico’s son.” The two men parted.

Mehmed’s guards were at the door, calling to Cornaro that his time was up.

Cornaro returned to the Sultan and demanded that the entire crew be released. He read their names aloud from the ship’s register, eighty in all, including de Mastri’s, which he emphasized. The Sultan replied that he would consider his course of action with care and dismissed the ambassador. Cornaro returned to Constantinople and reported to Minotto. They would have to wait and see what the Sultan decided to do. Peace hung in the balance.

For two weeks, the prisoners remained in the dungeon. At dawn of the fifteenth day, the guards came. Hard men, they spoke in rough accents as they turned the heavy lock of the door. Light from their torches flooded in and burned the eyes of the prisoners who had become accustomed to the darkness. A strong smell of grilled meat and onions entered with the guards. The hungry sailors began to salivate. They were ushered out of the cell and taken to a courtyard against the city’s walls. The day was gray. In broken Greek, a guard ordered them to line up. Rizzo, whom they had come to know as the captain, was held aside from the line. A large man with a stick now went up the row pushing every other man two paces forward. The sailors looked at each other with fear while the count was completed. The forty who had not been thrust ahead were herded into a cluster aside from the center of the courtyard.

The lead actor of the drama now appeared on the stage. He was a towering man with massive arms. His sword was carried behind him by a smaller man. The executioner took the great blade in his hands as the first victim was forced to kneel. The sword cut through the neck with a single stroke. The head rolled onto the ground as the body remained erect for a moment before collapsing to the earth. One of the sailors, whose turn to die would come soon, vomited. The

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rest stared at the severed head and trembled in the autumn cold. Their breath was coming feverishly and streams of vapor floated from the unhappy line. Another man was pushed to his knees and the grisly ceremony was repeated again, and again, and again, until forty heads littered the courtyard.

A voice cried out to them from a tower window. "You have witnessed the power of the Sultan! Go back to Constantinople and inform your masters what you have seen here today. Tell them of the fate that awaits anyone who resists the might of the great Mehmed!"

There was now a silent terror, but also relief among the sailors. Their lives were to be spared. Captain Rizzo, whose eyes were filled with tears for the men he had lost, thought of home. Then the voice called again.

"Mohammed, impale the infidel captain!"

All eyes now shifted to Antonio Rizzo. Fear rose within his stomach crushing the breath from his lungs. Two great pairs of hands clasped his arms, wrenching him from the brink of salvation and dragging him outside the walls towards a small group of Turkish soldiers on the roadside. They were sharpening a tall wooden pole next to a small hole in the ground. The largest man in the work party stopped his task and strode over to Rizzo whose eyes were fixed to the giant spit.

"Well *gâvur*,[†] do you think your God will save you now?"

Rizzo could make no response; the words were soldered to his throat.

A huge fist crashed into his face spinning his head and sending him to the ground. Opening his eyes, his gaze fixed on the ashen sky. He started to cough. A lifetime of thoughts ran through his mind. He saw the moving clouds and thought of the prevailing wind and which tack he would choose for his ship. He saw the grayness of the day and

[†] Infidel.

thought of the mists in Venice during the celebrations for *Carnevale*. He remembered once as a little boy when his older brother Giovanni had dealt him a blow that had similarly sent him crashing to the earth. A thousand memories flooded to him, his ship, his father, his mother and the soft lips of his wife that smelled of the cinnamon he would bring her from his voyages.

The enormous hands wrestled him to his feet and stripped him. The cold December air struck him and he gave an involuntary shudder. His heart pounded from fear as his mind jerked back to reality. Surely, this could not be the end of his life, impaled like a lamb on a spit for attempting to run a blockade. It was happening so quickly. Naked, he was pushed to the ground and the guards once again took an iron hold of him. His legs were taken and forcibly spread. He shuddered and felt something sharp touch him beneath his waist. He heard someone walking forward and the loud thwack of wood striking wood. Instantaneously, a fiery pain shot up from his lower back through his entire body. He heard a voice, hoarse and ghastly that sounded like his own, vomited from the pain, and again saw the sky. He coughed and this time blood came from his mouth. His body twitched as the muscles began to spasm uncontrollably. He could not draw breath. Numbness spread up from his lower body. But in his mind, he could breathe freely again, and cinnamon filled his senses. With a jarring thud the pole came to rest in the earth, and the naked body of Antonio Rizzo hung in the air, his blood dripping from the wooden pole onto the packed earth of the roadway below.