

PROLOGUE

Matthias's mouth was dry, but his hands were clammy. He'd always wanted it, of course. He had plotted it. His brother, Rudolf, had been clever, but weak. But now it was a reality he, well, he feared it. Part of him wished that Henry IV of France had lived and taken this, his birthright, Holy Roman Emperor. But he hadn't. The Treaty of Augsburg was fracturing. The peace and tolerance that both his father, Maximilian, and brother, Rudolph, had pursued, was failing. Protestantism was expanding beyond the agreed boundaries, like a cancer. He looked up from the parchment on his desk, into Melchior's eyes. They showed no emotion. Bishop Melchior Klesl had been chief advisor to his brother Rudolph. If he had found a better man himself, he wouldn't have taken Melchior as his advisor. But Melchior was a very astute man.

'Your Majesty, have you given any consideration to the problem of cereal prices?'

'Melchior, much as I should like to control the weather, it seems beyond my power. I shall continue to pray for good harvests, and encourage my bishops, although I'm sure they already do.'

'It was the question of subsidy, and building more grain silos, that I was thinking of, Your Majesty.'

‘If the cities showed a little more respect, I should consider it. How could I commit investment when I am uncertain of their loyalty? Their stream of demands seems never ending.’

‘Your Majesty, concerning the unrest in the cities, and Frankfurt in particular, I recommend that the councillors be required to swear an oath of allegiance. It would be best before your coronation, rather than after it.’

‘Yes, Melchior, you are a wise counsellor. Make the arrangements.’ As Melchior bowed and turned to leave, Matthias felt the sudden urge to make his own mark. ‘Make it clear that if they don’t so swear, then they will lose their rights and privileges.’

‘Of course, Your Majesty.’



The chamber of the Frankfurt city council had three tiers of benches. They reserved the highest benches for the almost aristocratic city fathers. There were forty-three of them, their positions handed down through the families. In addition, and to show willingness to listen to other views, there were fifteen artisans, handpicked for their obedience. At this council meeting, there was an unusually large number of men in the public space. Their ringleader was well known to the mayor, Hans Friedrich. He baked the bread and, particularly the gingerbread, the mayor enjoyed so much.

‘Very well, Herr Fettmilch, say your piece. But please keep it short. We have important business to conduct.’

‘What are you doing about grain prices?’

‘We have appealed to the emperor for subsidy and investment in grain silos. We shall have to wait and see what his decision is.’

‘The people can’t wait. The harvests have been so variable, and the current situation helps nobody. Farmers like Andreas Bauer, here, need to know what prices they are going to get. Don’t you, Andreas?’ There was a cheer from

Bauer in the row behind Fettmilch.

‘Millers like Franz Müller here need to know what they’re going to pay for grain.’

‘That’s right,’ yelled the man beside Fettmilch.

‘All the bakers, not just me, but Ernst Hartmann and Victor Krause here, and the others who couldn’t come today, need to know flour prices. What are you doing about it?’

‘As I’ve already said, we have appealed to the emperor for assistance.’

‘Why can’t the council do something? You’re wealthy enough. You’re all here on the council because your rich fathers were, and their fathers before them.’

‘Herr Fettmilch, you won’t get anywhere with such accusations. The governance of the city has been laid down in the charters for centuries. Now, is there anything else, or can we move on to more important matters?’

‘Yes, there is something else. What about this oath of allegiance for the new emperor? What we want to know is what these rights and privileges are, that we’re going to lose if we don’t swear allegiance.’

‘Well, they are all set out in the charters.’

‘So read them to us. We have a right to know what they are,’ Vincenz Fettmilch demanded, to appreciative murmurs from the surrounding mob. Victor Krause, a younger man with curly red hair, stood beside him and slapped him on the back.

‘That’s right. Read them to us!’ Krause shouted.

‘We will do no such thing,’ Mayor Friedrich retorted. The councillors and artisans around him nodded.

‘Is that because you’re taxing us too much, and raking off a cut from the fees, you let the Jews extort from us, when we borrow the money to feed our children?’ Fettmilch shouted above the chorus of approval from the mob. ‘Expel the Jews!’

‘The Jews were granted the right to live in the city by the Holy Roman Emperor. So it is not within our power to

expel them, even if we wanted to.'

'The emperor wanted their money, just like you do. You're all the same. Show us the charters!'

'We will not. You cast a vile slur on our integrity. Go back to your homes.'

'We won't, will we, brothers?' Fettmilch turned to the mob for approval. They cheered and waved their fists. 'We'll form a committee. We'll come here for every council meeting, and every trial, until you show us the charters. We demand to know our rights.' Councillor Gottburger whispered in Mayor Friedrich's ear. They both nodded.

'Very well, we will show you the charters. But if we do, then you become as responsible as we are for the governance of the city. If any city property is damaged, you will pay your share of the repair. You will answer to the emperor and the bishop, just as we have to. All of you will have to pay,' Mayor Friedrich said, pointing his finger along the rows of citizens who were suddenly quiet. 'No, I thought not. Now go to your homes.' The crowd dispersed. Vincenz Fettmilch pleaded with them to stay, but as the last one sidled out, he turned back to face the councillors.

'You haven't heard the last of this.' Then he turned and left, too.

CHAPTER ONE

Bellezza reared at the barking and Antonio reined her in and stroked her mane. ‘Don’t be silly, it’s only Luther. What’s the matter, Luther?’ he asked as he swung his right leg out of the saddle and climbed down. The German herding dog was still barking and trying to jump over the dry-stone wall. Antonio opened the gate and led Bellezza through, with Luther leaping up at him. Once he’d secured the gate behind him, he stroked Luther. ‘What’s the problem, Luther?’ he asked, as Luther turned and ran to the farmhouse door. Antonio followed him up the track and tied Bellezza to the rail outside. Luther pushed open the kitchen door, which was ajar, and scampered inside. Antonio followed him. Luther was nuzzling at his master’s body, crumpled on the floor. ‘Niccolo!’ Antonio called out as he dropped to his knees beside the body. He felt for a pulse, but from the pallor of the skin, he knew it was pointless. There was dried blood on the side of the head. He looked up at the kitchen table and saw a bloodstain on the corner. On the floor there was a broken bowl and flour spread over the flagstones. There was a smear of butter by

Niccolo's feet. 'I'm sorry, Luther. I'm afraid your master is dead. You should come and stay with us. Papa will tell me what we should do about Niccolo. Come on, you look like you haven't eaten for a day or two,' he said, as he gave Luther a hug and got to his feet. Luther followed him outside. Antonio shut the kitchen door, untethered Bellezza, and led her down to the gate with Luther following them. He shut the gate behind them, climbed into the saddle, and rode back up the lane to the Standen vineyard, with Luther trotting along beside him.



'Papa, Niccolo Rosso is dead,' he called out as he opened the door.

'Dead! How?' His father, Sir Anthony Standen, asked, stroking Luther who had run to his side.

'I was riding back from town and Luther was going berserk. I found Niccolo on the floor of his kitchen. He looked as if he's been dead for at least a day, maybe two. It looked as though he was making bread, dropped the bowl and slipped on the butter, then cracked his head on the corner of the table. Either that or he had a seizure and dropped the bowl. What should we do, Papa?' Anthony got up from his chair.

'Are you sure it wasn't the plague again?'

'I'm sure, Papa.'

'I'll go over and have a look for myself. You should ride into town and report the death to the mayor and the priest.'

'What's happened?' Francesca asked as she came into the kitchen.

'It's Niccolo. He appears to have had a seizure and died, darling. Have we got some beef or lamb for Luther? The poor thing looks half starved.'

'Of course. I can't say I'm surprised. When the plague took his wife and children, it broke his heart. Where are you going?'

'I'm going to have a look myself. I'll make sure the

place is secure. Antonio is going into Frascati to report the death.'

'I'm making a stew, so we can eat when you're both back. William will be pleased. He's been pestering us about getting a dog.'



Anthony opened the door of the Rosso house and stepped inside. Niccolo's body was lying, as Antonio had described it. There was no sign of foul play. He went through into the living room. Against the wall there was a wooden chest. He tried the lid, and it wasn't locked. It was packed with blankets. He took one out, went back to the kitchen and draped it over Niccolo's body. He returned to the living room. Most of the surfaces were covered in dust. Poor Niccolo had obviously given up after his wife, Cecilia and their children, Filippo, Luigi and Anna, had fallen to the plague the summer before last. At the end of the room, by the window, there was a desk. There was a leather-bound book lying closed on the desk. Its spine was split, and stitches had been sown to hold the book together. He opened it. The first page was dated 21st September 1505, almost a hundred and six years ago. Below the date there was a column of the produce harvested, the weights, and the sale value made at the market. Anthony kept turning the pages and found that someone had religiously kept the records right up until the year that scythed the Rosso family. He found they had transformed the farm into a vineyard between 1508 and 1530, maintaining a generous kitchen garden to support the family. One at a time, he opened the desk drawers. There were quills and a dry ink bottle. In the bottom drawer, he found a parchment. His attention was drawn to the signature and wax seal at the bottom. Both were familiar to him. Cardinal Pietro Aldobrandini had signed it.



The sun was slipping towards the horizon when

Anthony heard footsteps approaching the house. He closed the book and got up from the desk. As he stepped into the kitchen from the living room, Antonio led Mayor Neretti and Father Battista in through the kitchen door. The mayor nodded at Anthony and pulled back the blanket from Niccolo's body. Father Battista made the sign of the cross, knelt beside the body, and recited a prayer as he closed Niccolo's eyes.

'It's quite clear that Signor Rosso slipped and struck his head,' Mayor Neretti said.

'I don't think so. There would be more blood,' Anthony said, stroking his beard. 'I think his heart failed, then he fell and struck his head.'

'Yes, I see what you mean. But either way it's natural causes, don't you agree, Anthony, Father Battista?' Anthony and Father Battista both nodded. 'Good, then we can get his body on the cart and Father Battista can make the funeral arrangements.'

'Would you let me know when the funeral will be, Father? I'd like to attend. He was a good neighbour, and I don't think there is anyone else.'

'Of course, Anthony,' Father Battista replied.

'The Aldobrandini family leased the vineyard to Niccolo's great-grandfather. The lease and the vineyard account book are on the desk through there,' Anthony said, pointing. 'Would anybody mind if I took them away with me?'

'I know the cardinal thinks highly of you, Anthony,' Father Battista replied. 'There was that matter of the priest burnings that you cleared up a few years ago. It makes me shudder just thinking about it. Why do you want them?'

'The land adjoins ours...'

'Papa, do you think we could buy it and expand our production?'

'Hold your horses, son. Perhaps, but I'm not promising anything. Cardinal Aldobrandini would have to agree to start with. Then I want to have a closer look at the

accounts. We need to be sure it would be profitable.’

‘I see no reason why you shouldn’t take them with you, Anthony,’ Father Battista said. ‘The cardinal will have his own copy of the contract. Now let’s be going while it’s still light.’



William, Anna, and Catherine were already eating when Anthony and Antonio got home. Luther was lying on the floor by William’s feet. Francesca appeared from the kitchen with warm plates, and Maria followed her with the pot of stew. Anthony and Antonio hung up their coats. Anthony placed the contract and the record book on the sideboard, and they both sat down at the table. Francesca ladled the food onto their plates and everyone continued eating. When he thought Francesca wasn’t looking, William picked pieces of meat from his plate, and slipped them to Luther.

‘What is it you need to check in the accounts, Papa? The land adjoins ours and the vines are even more well established than ours. Are you trying to find reasons for getting a better price from Cardinal Aldobrandini?’ Antonio asked.

‘Not him again,’ Francesca exclaimed. ‘I hoped I’d heard the last of him after he nearly got you burnt alive. He’s not got you involved in something else, has he?’

‘No, my dear, he owns the Rosso land. I thought we might try to buy it and expand our vineyard. Perhaps not the house though. Poor Niccolo’s let that slip into a bit of disrepair.’

‘Of course, the house too. Who else would buy a house with no land? You don’t think that Aldobrandini devil is going to let you buy the land and leave him shouldered with a house without land? I hate the man, but he’s clever and cunning.’

‘You’re right, but what would we do with it?’

‘It won’t be long before Greta finishes her medical studies. When does she graduate, Antonio?’ Francesca

asked.

'I believe she finishes her studies this summer,' Antonio replied between spoonfuls of stew.

'Well, there you are then. What will she do then? If she starts work in Bologna, or returns to help with her father's practice in Turin, what will you do?'

'I don't know. I enjoy working the vineyard. I'm not sure what else I could do.'

'Why are you worrying Antonio so much, darling? Let him eat his dinner in peace,' Anthony added.

'I'm being practical. If she and Antonio marry, they'll need a place of their own. It'll be perfect for Antonio to work the vineyard, and we'll be nearby.'

'I'm not sure Greta will want to live out here, Mama,' Antonio said. 'The population isn't large enough to support a medical practice.'

'Nonsense. Frascati's growing all the time, and we're only a three-hour ride from Rome. She could work a few days a week in Rome and I'll help with the babies when they come along.'

'I'll discuss it with her when I next visit. Anyway, we got distracted. What was it you wanted to study in the account book, Papa?'

'Well, I want to look at it in more detail, but from what I've seen so far, crop yields were increasing until around 1560, then they started falling.'

'Do you think the nutrients in the land are exhausted?' Antonio asked.

'I don't think so. Yields have risen again, just in the last few years.'

'Well, perhaps things improved from one generation to another,' Antonio suggested.

'I don't think it's that, either. Although yields dropped, the income from the market stayed around the same. That means that prices must have risen, which suggests something more widespread.'

'I can explain that,' Francesca said. 'While your father

was rushing around between Scotland, Constantinople, Spain and Italy, he didn't stay anywhere long enough to notice the seasonal changes. It's true, my grand-mother talked of much warmer weather when she was young, and kept complaining about how it seemed to get colder every year. I even remember the Arno freezing over. It was difficult to get food in the markets. We all had to work so hard just to put food on the table. I thank the Lord every day that it's been getting better. But it's still much colder than it used to be. Now that I think about it, you seemed to bring the warmth with you, darling.'

'So now that you've saved the world, Papa, what about buying the land and expanding production?' Antonio asked.

'I don't know? How can we be sure we can sell the extra wine?'

'Why don't you sell further afield?' Maria suggested. 'When I was in town on Monday, Giovanni, the tailor, was telling me about his cousin who had just come back from the trade fair in Frankfurt. Apparently it's huge. He said something about it being at the crossroad of trade routes. You can buy and sell anything there, even books. Why don't we take our wine and brandy there? You're always saying how good it is, Papa. You even said it's better than anything that Venetian wine merchant you worked for sold, and he was selling to all the embassies in Paris and the royal palace.'

'That's true, so I did,' Anthony said, stroking his beard. 'It's too far, though, Frankfurt. I'm not as young as I was.'

'You don't have to go. Antonio and I can go. Isn't that right?'

'Yes, and I could visit Greta on the way. I can talk to her about your idea, Mama.'

'Can I come too?' Charlotte asked.

'No, sweetheart. I know you're growing, but you're still only six,' Francesca said. 'And now that you've finished your dinner, it's time for bed, and you, Anna, come along.'

'I don't have to go to bed yet, Mama, do I?' William pleaded.

‘Not just yet. You should take Luther outside and let him do his business. Maria, Antonio, can you clear the table while I put Charlotte and Anna to bed, please?’



It was only a few days later that they held the funeral in Frascati’s new cathedral. The first mass had been held only a year ago. There were pitifully few people at the funeral, just the Standen family and half a dozen members of the congregation, who Anthony suspected the bishop had asked to remain after mass. The bishop did an excellent job of reminding them how close they were to death, and how vigilant they should be for the devil working in their midst. When they emerged into the daylight again, Anthony kissed each of his children, and then Francesca.

‘I’m not sure how long I’ll be, Francesca. If Cardinal Aldobrandini is in Rome, I may even be back this evening. But if he’s away on business, I shall have to decide whether to wait for him.’

‘Well, if you have to wait, why don’t you spend the time finding out how many physicians there are in Rome? And whether they’re any good?’ Francesca suggested.

‘Good idea, Mama,’ said Antonio.

‘All right, I’ll do what I can. Antonio, can you get the blacksmith to check the wheel bearings on the cart before you return to the vineyard? If you have to take a load of our best wines and brandy to Frankfurt, I don’t want the wheels falling off the cart.’

‘I will, Papa.’

Anthony untethered Lightning from the rail and climbed into the saddle. He blew them all a kiss, then turned and set off on the road to Rome.